
Volume 18

Number 1 *Himalayan Research Bulletin: Solukhumbu
and the Sherpa, Part Two: Ladakh*

Article 8

1998

Local Pilgrimage to Uomi Tsho

Eberhard Berg

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya>

Recommended Citation

Berg, Eberhard (1998) "Local Pilgrimage to Uomi Tsho," *Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 18: No. 1, Article 8.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol18/iss1/8>

This Research Article is brought to you for free and open access by the DigitalCommons@Macalester College at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.

The Sherpa Pilgrimage to Uomi Tsho in the Context of the Worship of the Protector Deities: Ritual Practices, Local Meanings, and This-Worldly Requests

Eberhard Berg
University of Zurich, Switzerland

The Sherpas are a small, ethnically Tibetan group in Solukhumbu, northeastern Nepal, who are adherents of the Nyingmapa tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. Despite changes associated with their secular encounters with modernity¹, Sherpas continue to devote a considerable part of their resources to traditional religious purposes. Pilgrimage has historically been a flourishing religious practice in Sherpa culture and society, and remains so today. However, despite being one of the best documented ethnic groups in the Hindu Kingdom of Nepal, the Sherpa practice of pilgrimage has been largely ignored.²

In this essay I will first discuss the Tibetan pilgrimage system of which Sherpa pilgrimages are a part. The sacred places of the Great Buddhist Tradition are not directly related to the distinct Little Traditions in the High Himalayas; the latter have emerged as sites which are sacred only in the context of local cultures. As A. W. Macdonald (1987a: 9) reminds us, the study of a particular ritual isolated from its local historical and cultural context is devoid of its specific meaning.

The local pilgrimage described below attracts people from the whole region leads to the glacial lake of Uomi Tsho (Tib.: *o ma mtsho*; Nep.: *dudh kunda*, Engl.: Milk Lake) at the time of the August full moon. This sacred lake is located at the foot of Shorong Yulha ((Nep. Numbur, 6,959m) or Tashi Palboche (*bKra shis dpalpo che*, Engl.: big rich blessing or good fortune), the holy mountain of the Solu district. Thus, this sacred site combines two divine places: a sacred mountain and a holy lake. The ritual aspects involved in this pilgrimage are part of the old Tibetan ritual complex of worshipping protective deities dwelling on

mountain tops and in lakes. I will describe those ritual contexts in which the deities in question occupy a central role in local culture and give a detailed description of the ritual practices I witnessed while participating in the sacred journey to Uomi Tsho. Finally, I will explore what makes this place an important Sherpa pilgrimage destination and for whom in particular, Uomi Tsho is important.

Pilgrimage in the Tradition of Tibetan Buddhism

Most Western visitors to Tibet have been highly impressed by the marked religiosity of the Tibetan people. One of its typical features is the ritual practice of going on pilgrimage; aptly described by A. M. Large-Blondeau (1960: 203) as the "*fait national au Tibet*" (fact of life in Tibet).³

In Tibetan Buddhism the historic origin of pilgrimage is associated with holy journeys to sacred places in India and Nepal.⁴ Those sites, sanctified by events in the life of Buddha Sakyamuni, are of crucial importance to all adherents of Buddhism, as they symbolize the very origin of the doctrine. The four main sites, Lumbini Grove, Vajrasana at Bodhgaya, the Deer Park at Sarnath, and Kasia (Kushinagar), are all situated in the Gangetic Plains and represent the places of Sakyamuni's birth, enlightenment, first preaching to his five disciples, and death.⁵

¹ According to V. Adams' lucid and new ethnography of Himalayan encounters (1996: 17) in the particular context of the Khumbu Sherpas the 'encounter with modernity' is shaped by three decisive factors: trekking tourism, development aid, and anthropology.

² See K. Buffetrille (1993; 1994) and E. Berg (1994).

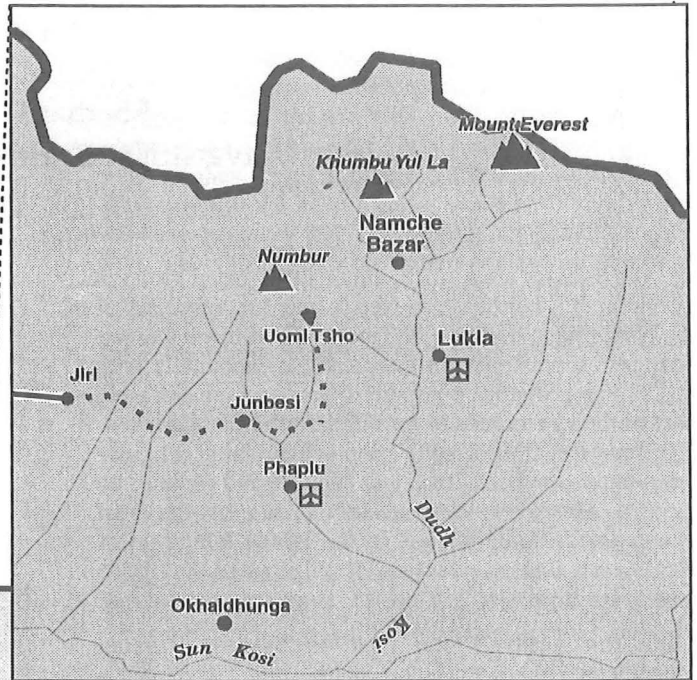
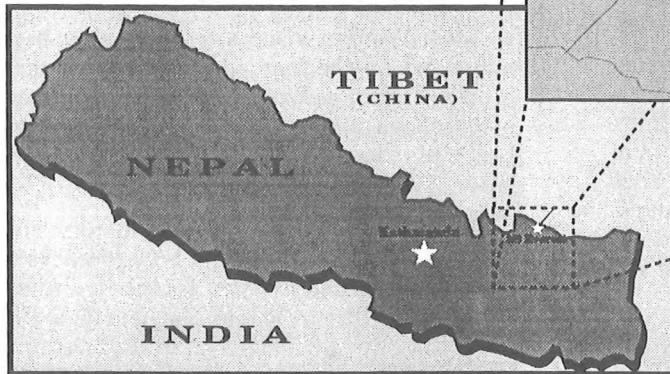
³ G. Tucci (1949: 152-3) noted that "visits to sacred places are a necessary discipline, an edification of the spirit which cuts men off from life's allurements."

⁴ According to A. M. Large Blondeau (1960: 218) the pilgrimage to India constitutes the Buddhist 'pilgrimage par excellence.' On Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage and its history see A. M. Large Blondeau (1960); M. Stablein (1978); N. Dak-Pa (1987).

⁵ D. L. Snellgrove (1987: 9-11).

Local Pilgrimage to Uomi Tsho

"Uomi Tsho" (Sherpa)="Dudh Kunda" (Nep.)="Milk Lake" (Eng.)
 "Numbur" (Nep.)="Shorong Yulha" (Sherpa)



map by Matthew Hampton, after Chr. Enri

According to Buddhist tradition it was the Buddha himself who, prior to his parinirvana, referred to the four great pilgrimage sites and encouraged the practice of going on holy journeys.⁶

The Muslim invasion of Northern India in the 11th and 12th centuries ended the flourishing culture of Indian Buddhism. Many Buddhist scholars sought refuge in Tibet and carried with them the holy scriptures, statues, and paintings which contributed to the growth and spread of the doctrine in Tibet. Tibet itself became the centre for the propagation of Buddhism.⁷

The Tibetans adopted from Buddhist India the ritual practice of going on pilgrimage to holy centers and even transferred a great number of Indian sacred sites to their own country.⁸ Many of the Indian Buddhist scholars were venerated by Tibetan Buddhists as saints and many of those sites and remote cave-hermitages where these siddhas and yogins meditated also became places of pilgrimage for the Tibetan population. The prototype in this process is Guru Padmasambhava. This Indian saint and tantric master is venerated by Tibetan Buddhists, especially by the 'Unreformed' or 'Old School' (*rnying ma pa*) tradition, for introducing Buddhism into the "Land of Snows" in the second half of the eighth century. With his powerful magic all the indigenous 'area gods' or 'local demons' (*bdud*)—in the perspective of the Buddhists hostile to the new doctrine—were subdued each in the course of a dramatic fight, bound by oath into the service of the Dharma, and finally incorporated into the Buddhist pantheon. Moreover, it is believed that Guru Padmasambhava personally indicated all holy sites of Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage, with his footprints, hand prints, body prints, etc.⁹ These two doctrines—worship of the Buddha and veneration of Indian pandits and siddhas—have given Tibetan High Buddhism its specific shape. At all holy sites associated with either the Buddha or a

⁶ According to his favorite disciple Ananda, the Buddha was said to have encouraged the practice of pilgrimage in the following words: "All those who make pilgrimages to these shrines and die in faith will after death be reborn in heaven." (In E. J. Thomas 1992: 151).

⁷ Snellgrove (1987, chapter V); D. L. Snellgrove and H. Richardson (1986) on the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet.

⁸ One of the most comprehensive investigations on the transference of holy places from India to Tibet in the context of the development of Tantric Buddhist pilgrimage sites is T. Huber (1990).

⁹ According to the *Padma Thang Yig*, transl. by G. Ch. Toussaint (1933) as *Le Dict de Padma, "il enonça les lieux propres a l'evocation. Tous ces grands lieux ou j'ai marche vent pour l'evocation les plus nobles places"* (Chant XCV, 398-399).

saint a pilgrim may articulate a specific request and (or) encounter the resident divine presence. However, the practice of pilgrimage to both types of holy site is motivated primarily by the concept of gaining spiritual merit (Tib.: *bsod-nams*), to better the chances for a favourable rebirth approaching the state of Buddhahood (Tib.: *sangs-rgyas-nyid*). Tenzin Gyatso, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, in a short note on 'The meaning of pilgrimage' (1990: 139) has recently emphasized that Tibetan Buddhist pilgrims are ". . . undertaking hardship for no material reward."

In Tibetan Buddhism there also exists a third category of pilgrimage site of local origin and tradition which, according to the Dalai Lama (1990: 140), is ". . . related both to Buddhism and to the special character of Tibet's environment." Tibetans have populated their natural environment with a vast host of deities and spirits upon whom they feel dependent for their mundane existence.¹⁰ A pilgrimage site can be the representation and (or) abode of a mountain deity regarded as a regional protector, or it can be the dwelling place of one of the countless divinities and spirits who live in rocks, trees, rivers, springs, lakes, or ponds. Often, however, the place of pilgrimage combines a sacred mountain and a holy lake.

The overwhelming importance attributed to these divinities in mastering everyday problems has given rise to elaborate ritual practices for the worship of these divine and spirit beings including, in many cases, an annual local pilgrimage. On this occasion pilgrims may direct personal requests concerning health, wealth, and progeny to the divinity. In other words, in comparison with the first two categories of holy places of the Great Tradition, the local pilgrimage to regionally sacred mountains and lakes is motivated primarily by mundane goals. Conversely, if the devotee is motivated mainly by spiritual goals he or she will most probably undertake a holy journey to a place of pilgrimage which is associated either with a central episode in the life of the Buddha or with some great miracle that has been performed by one of the numerous Buddhist saints.

Sherpa Pilgrimage: Its History and Distinct Character within Tibetan Tradition

The Sherpas left their original homeland in Salmo Gang, a district in Khams in Eastern Tibet, about four centuries ago.¹¹ After a long migration with several stops along their way at important religious sites like Lhasa and Samye Monastery, they arrived and settled in

¹⁰ This is dealt with by Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1993); Large-Blondeau (1960: 227); R. A. Stein (1987: 129-157); T. Huber (1994: 25), G. Samuel (1993: 113; 158-170).

¹¹ M. Oppitz (1968; 1973).

Khumbu.¹² Later some groups moved southward into Solu and there took possession of the high pastures and fertile lands.

Pilgrimage is ancient in Sherpa history. One of the most important Sherpa documents, *The Ruyi or Account of the Bones*, which concerns the succession of clans on their migration south, makes mention of Thimmi Zangpo Tashi, the ancestor of the Thimmi clan, and his pilgrimage to Wu T'ai Shan, the sacred 'Mountain of the Five Terraces,' one of the most important Buddhist centers in China.¹³ Later, after having moved into their new homeland in Solukhumbu, the Sherpas continued to undertake pilgrimages to the sacred sites in Khams, to the monasteries and temples in and around Lhasa and Shigatse, and to sacred mountains such as to Kang Ti-se (or Kailash) in the southwest, to Tsari in the southeast and to Tsibri in southern Tibet.

Among the Sherpas the process of appropriation of their new land paralleled the dramatic process of 'Buddha-isation' and 'Lama-isation' (A. W. Macdonald 1987b: 57; 1990) in Tibet. It was played out in the local landscape by Buddhist saints such as Guru Padmasambhava as noted above,¹⁴ and Milarepa.¹⁵

Thus, until the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1959, the Sherpas, like other ethnically Tibetan groups in Dolpo, Mustang, and other interior valleys along the Himalayan border, firmly maintained their traditional religious, cultural, and economic bonds with Tibet. For many of the ethnic groups of Tibetan culture in Highland Nepal the closing of the Nepalese-Tibetan border had disastrous consequences. This led to a collapse of the traditional orientation of Sherpa culture towards the centres of Tibetan civilization in the north and a redirection of their religious orientation towards the ancient Buddhist sanctuaries and the various

¹² In oral tradition this extended migration is remembered as a kind of pilgrimage undertaken in a time of political pressure and in deliberate search for new land to settle. According to various Sherpa lamas the itinerary of the Sherpas' migration into what nowadays is part of the 'Hindu Kingdom of Nepal' took place via Nangpa La down to Thame. There the migrants dispersed. From there one group went up to Rolwaling and settled there as far down as Charikot. The other section took possession first of Khumbu and finally of Solu (the latter process took place in the middle of the 17th Century).

¹³ In M. Oppitz (1968: 33).

¹⁴ This has been investigated extensively by R. A. Stein (1995) and summarized in A.W. Macdonald (1990), and T. Huber (1990).

¹⁵ The famous miraculous contest in the course of which the poet-saint Milarepa defeated the Bon-priest Naro Bhun Chon on Kang Tise is recounted in G. C. C. Chang (1962: 215-224).

established monastic centres of Tibetan Buddhist learning located in Nepal and India.

Despite the loss of pilgrimage centers in Tibet, the practice of going on pilgrimage remains an important institution in Sherpa Buddhist culture. The Sherpas' network of holy places is part of the tripartite network which Tibetan Buddhism has developed in the course of its history. In short, like Tibetans Sherpas undertake pilgrimages of three types: a) to traditional Buddhist sacred places in India and Nepal associated with the Buddha; b) to holy places in the Kathmandu Valley, to the Maratika caves at Halase in the Khotang District of Eastern Nepal, and Muktinath, associated with Guru Padmasambhava, and to Laphyi Chuwar close to the border between Tibet and eastern Nepal, associated with Milarepa; and c) to certain mountain lakes regarded as the sacred abodes of powerful wish-fulfilling deities.

Lumo Karmo in Context: Ritual Worship of the Local and Regional Protector Deities

In Tibetan culture the physical world is believed to be populated by a vast multitude of deities and spirits.¹⁶ Many of these who play an active role in human affairs must be worshipped properly in religious ritual.¹⁷ Thus, owing to an existential necessity there is always a close exchange between the host of protective deities and humans. According to the Sherpas' view there exists a close relationship between meritorious action (Tib. and Sherpa: *bsod nams*) such as prayers, offerings, going on pilgrimage, which could be termed as a kind of necessary ritual investment, and the specific reward or fruit (Sherpa: *phayin*) of such endeavour. If one prays for example, ". . . the gods will help you with the good things you want to do."¹⁸ Moreover, it is believed that through prayers to the gods one may even influence important events.¹⁹

The highest of the local gods in the Sherpa pantheon are two male mountain gods who preside over the Sherpa country and belong to one of the numerous

¹⁶ T. Huber (1994: 25-30). Concerning the history of this phenomenon, G. Tucci (1980: 208) elaborates on the 'indissoluble coexistence of pre-Buddhist and Buddhist elements'; Chr. von Furer-Haimendorf devotes an article on the question of pre-Buddhist elements in Sherpa society (1955).

¹⁷ Of course, Buddha, Sakyamuni, the Bodhisattvas, Guru Rinpoche and the numerous saints have to be worshiped properly as well; however, as S. B. Ortner (1978b: 266) points out, ". . . the higher the god the less he is expected to do anything in return."

¹⁸ Tengboche Rinpoche in N.T. Zangbu (1988: 14).

¹⁹ Zangbu, N. T. (1988: 4).

categories of Tibetan protector and guardian deities.²⁰ Khumbu Yulha and Shorong (i.e. Solu) Yulha, both impressive mountains seen from afar, are the two gods (*lha*) of the 'inhabited land' (*yul*)²¹ who are concerned with the care and protection of the general well-being of the whole region. In Tibetan Buddhist iconography the *yullha* is depicted as a man who, riding a white horse and wearing armour, holds a bow and an arrow in his hands. For fear of disturbing the gods and goddesses who dwell there no Sherpas climbed Himalayan peaks before they were recruited by Westerners as guides and porters for their expeditions.

Closely connected with the mountain-gods are, among others, the serpent divinities called *lu* (Tib. *klu*) who represent the Sherpa version of the old Indian naga spirits. These *lu* inhabit lakes, streams, and springs. The old Indian concept of the snakelike *lu* and its connection with kingship had already played an important role in early Indian folk Buddhism.²² Within the later²³ Tibetan Buddhist pantheon the *lu* deities represent the category of aquatic and underworld divinities; when the Sherpas moved into what nowadays is called Solukhumbu they adopted the concept of the *lu*.²⁴

Lu spirits are paramount among a great variety of stream, lake, pasture, and mountain spirits and guard the purity of soil and streams, household hearths, and villages in general.²⁵ All of them are closely concerned with humans and the profane problems related with mundane life. To them the Sherpas turn for aid and protection in carrying on the enterprises of worldly existence. All of them require 'many gifts and favours' as the Sherpas put it. This means that all *lu* need regular periodic feeding in the context of ritual worship and prayer.²⁶ They accept only pure offerings and it is only through religious acts on the part of both the

households and the community as a whole it is possible for the humans to keep them in good mood as well as at bay. Otherwise these spirits feel offended through negligence, become angry and cause grave retributions on the people and their natural resources (fields, pastures, cattle, etc.) through sickness, drought, hail, landslides, etc. and the withdrawal of their protection against a host of evil demons.

The focus of the remainder of this essay is a pilgrimage to the sacred lake of Uomi Tsho which is one of the countless abodes of Lumo Karmo (Tib.: *klu mo dear mo*; Engl.: White Female Serpent Deity). She is also called Tshomen dung kyongma (Tib.: *mtsho sman dung kyong ma*; Engl.: Lake Goddess Protective Conch Shell). Lumo Karmo is imagined to occupy the first rank among the host of *lu* deities. These *lu* deities are thought to exist in families like humans. Thus, Lumo Karmo's father is believed to be the god Lhachen—another venerated protector deity residing on a mountain—whereas her mother is also a *lu* deity (whose name unfortunately seems to be forgotten in local memory).

As both Shorong Yullha and Lumo Karmo guarantee vitality, power, long life, and success to the Sherpa communities of the whole region they are regarded as the most important protective deities in the area. Theoretically it is primarily these deities upon whose powers, help, and protection the Sherpas' worldly existence depends. Provided that these deities and all those subordinate to them are propitiated properly in ritual and prayer, and duly satisfied through various offerings, they secure the general welfare of the people and protect them from hostile forces.

However, from the Solu Sherpas' point of view, in practice there is a crucial difference between these two main protective deities. This difference is clearly mirrored by their abodes. Shorong Yullha, the most important of the country gods, resides on a high and fairly remote mountain where he oversees all the other gods and goddesses as well as humans. Inaccessible to humans, yet visible from afar within the whole region, his abode represents a symbol of his general protective power. The numerous abodes of Lumo Karmo, however, geographically scattered between villages and the summer high pastures in the Uomi Tsho area, are all located within the 'cultural domain' and thus, are easily accessible. In daily life therefore it is Lumo Karmo, the 'White Female Serpent Deity' who occupies the central role in the numerous rituals in worship of the protective deities and spirits. It is she whose power is most intimately related to the problems of mundane life and the well-being of humans in the matters of wealth, children, and health. Moreover, she takes care of good weather, sends the rain when it is needed, offers protection from hail, drought, landslides, earthquakes, and protects men and cattle from any kind of sickness. Representatives of the clergy regard her as a deity that offers protection from any kind of danger.

²⁰ On the Tibetan protector and guardian deities see R. de Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1993, chapters XIV-XV), in particular on mountain and local protective deities.

²¹ Das on *lha* (1989: 1331) and on *yul* (1989: 1140).

²² On Buddhism and the naga cult in early India, L. W. Bloss.

²³ R. A. Stein (1987).

²⁴ A. W. Macdonald (1987c: 69), however, notes that "according to local tradition" *lu* worship occurred in Solu prior to the arrival of Buddhism.

²⁵ On the concept of *lu* among the Sherpas see S. B. Ortner (1978b: 278-80); F.W. Funke (1969: 27-38).

²⁶ In her detailed inquiry into offering rituals to the gods, spirits, and demons in Sherpa belief S. B. Ortner (1978a: 128-156) gives a full description of the various aspects involved.

Lumo Karmo is the guardian of springs, streams, lakes, and the protectress of trees. Shrines dedicated to her are built at many water sources. Related *lu* are guardians of the household who are believed to reside in the hearth and protect its purity from any kind of defilement (*grib*). In Buddhist iconography Lumo Karmo's white body is depicted half anthropomorphic, half snake-like: the upper part of her body is that of a woman, whereas the lower part is that of a serpent. She is dressed in white garments and is seated on a crystal throne. In her right hand she holds a vessel of blessed water (*phumpa*) and in her left hand she holds a jewel (*nor-bu*). Her divine entourage consists of a host of snakes. Moreover, she is believed to be tremendously rich.

Lumo Karmo has neither a permanent abode nor a fixed time schedule. What is known for sure among the Solu Sherpas, however, is that the White Serpent Deity comes to Junbesi for the first time within the annual cycle for the *Dumji* festival there.²⁷ *Dumji* is considered by the Sherpas as the most important religious festival within the annual cycle. The elaborate religious celebration combines two different aspects: on the one hand it recalls and enacts episodes of Guru Padmasambhava's victory over demons hostile towards the introduction of Buddhist doctrine in Tibet. At the same time the *Dumji* festival is regarded as the main *puja* performed in worship of Lumo Karmo. Thus, the spectacular public enactment of the *Dumji* in the village temple of Junbesi represents the most important festive occasion in Solu, where the Tibetan Buddhist Great Tradition and the Little Tradition meet. The religious text, which is read on occasion of the Junbesi *Dumji* is called *phurba*.²⁸ It contains five small parts in which Lumo Karmo is worshipped and then asked for her help and protection.

The deity's arrival at the beginning of the warm season signals new plant growth and cultivation of the fields. Because of the central importance of the Lumo Karmo as the deity of fertility, prosperity, and general well-being, the local population performs special rituals and prayers addressed primarily to Lumo Karmo, but also, among others, to Shorong Yullha, the sacred mountain. The *lu wan*, i.e. her dwelling place, which ideally has to be in a pure and safe environment is

²⁷ There is only one published article on a *Dumji* festival in Solukhumbu. R. A. Paul (1979) gave a description as well as a psychoanalytical interpretation of the religious celebration which occurs every April in the Junbesi temple. **Dumje: Paradox and Resolution in Sherpa Ritual Symbolism**, an account of the same event at the same site by F. Funke (pp. 115-138) is somewhat different. This is attributed to Funke's specific scientific approach, a product of diffusionism and is subject to its biases.

²⁸ *Skr. kala*, a three-bladed ritual dagger mainly used in rituals of exorcism which is an important aspect of the *Dumji*.

adorned with pieces of cloth in five colours. The White Serpent Deity is believed to appear mostly to the people in dreams at night telling them something of importance that has to be done by them. A ritual calendar exists minutiously prescribing when the *lu* are to be worshipped by humans, valid both in Tibet and among the diverse adherents of Tibetan Buddhism in Highland Nepal.²⁹ On all of these occasions the *lu puja* is held, if possible, both in the *gompas* and in the households. Specific offerings to her are fresh cow milk, incense, rice, small coins, *serkem* (a kind of aged cottage-cheese), pure water, butter lamps, and *kha-btags* (ceremonial scarf usually made of silk). She wears clean garments, consumes only pure things, fears defilement, does not like eggs and meat, and abstains from alcohol. If she is angry, it is assumed she will send hail or other bad weather.

In worship of their local and regional *srungmas*, as well as their clan-deities, Sherpas celebrate a special *puja* called *kangso*.³⁰ This elaborate celebration highlights a collection of old texts which are part of the Rinchen Terzod, *Jewel Treasury of Dharma* (Tib.: *rin-chen gTer gyi mDzad*) from which the majority of texts about ritual enactments in Sherpa culture are derived. The *kangso* aims at both offering and renewing the help and protection of the deities which the local population had enjoyed in the preceding year in view of the next annual cycle. Marking both the beginning of agricultural growth and the herds' departure for the highest pastures, the *kangso* reflects the two main economic spheres upon which traditional Sherpa society was built.³¹ In the course of it all the protective deities and spirits are given special offerings (wheat, barley, corn, chang). Lumo Karmo, however, does not like chang, only those 'pure' things mentioned before.

²⁹ According to this calendar in the first Tibetan month a *puja* must be performed on only one day (the twenty-fifth). In the second month one must be performed on the seventh; in the third month on the eighth; in the fourth month on the tenth; in the fifth on the thirteenth; in the sixth on the tenth, in the seventh month on the eighth, in the eighth month on the twentieth; in the ninth month on the ninth. In the tenth month the *lu* deities remain in their abodes asleep, therefore no *puja* is performed in this month. In the 11th Tibetan month all *lu* leave their abode on the fifth. The cult of the *lu* is widespread in the Himalayas. S. R. Mumford (1989: 93-116) gives a detailed account of *lu* worship among the Gurungs of northwest Nepal.

³⁰ Das (1989: 121) in Tib.: *bskang-gso*: to make copious services to the tutelary deities, angels, guardians, and the guardian spirits of the ten quarters. For more on this ritual among the Sherpas see R. R. Kunwar (1989: 221-223).

³¹ Indirectly included in this ritual complex are activities concerned with long-distance trade which constitutes the third economic sphere of Sherpa society.

The term *bskangs* means "full to the brim."³² Within the course of a year the offering bowls containing gifts to the protective deities and spirits become empty. In performing the *kangso-puja* their offering bowls are refilled 'to the brim' so that the gods and spirits may continue to offer their help and protection in the year to come. This ritual is structured into three distinct phases: first a *puja* for all *srungmas* is held; then a *puja* is performed for all Tibetan *srungmas*; and finally the *srungmas* of the locality are worshipped.³³

The *kangso puja* is held both in households and in *gombas* (Tib.: *dgon pa*), i.e. in village temples and monasteries.³⁴ In the latter it is performed once a day. This is usually done by the *konyer* (Tib.: *sku nyer*), i.e. the one in charge of a temple and its images of the gods. In the village temple and in the monasteries it is performed every day, sometimes even twice or three times over the year. In households, however, the *kangso* is celebrated only once, but in an elaborated form in the months of May or June.³⁵ The *kangso puja* is performed by either a lama and a group of monks or by the *snags-pa*, the married village lama who is assisted by a group of local men with at least a minimum of religious education. Religious life in Sherpa culture reaches a peak within these two months. It is a typical feature of the Sherpas' religious life that during this time all lamas, monks, village lamas, and those men who once had undergone religious training, but then had become married, are kept busy with performing the *kangso puja* in the households.

Why Lumo Karmo Came to Solu

The history of Lumo Karmo constitutes an integral part of Solu Sherpa history. In particular, the deity is intimately connected with the Sherpas' gradual appropriation of and settlement within their new territory. According to the Sherpa **chos byung** (compiled and written by Sherpa scholar Khempo

³² Das (1989: 121).

³³ In the context of this last phase *puja* prayers are directed to all regional *yullhas* and to the Lumo Karmo. On the altar there are nine *tormas* (sacrificial dough cakes) representing all of Solukhumbu's *srungmas*: Tsheringma, Gyalpo, Yullha (Solu, resp. Khumbu-Yullha), Pike, Thrangkar (masc. and fem.) above Tongnasa, Lumo, Lhachen, Tsomo, and Tsho yum.

³⁴ As opposed to Tibetan, in colloquial Sherpa there is no difference between a village temple and a monastery that is built at a peaceful site remote from mundane life (Das 1989: 27).

³⁵ K. March (1977: 91) notes that in its course "... the herds, their owners' families, household goods and lineage segment are symbolically classed together as the divinities, protection is invoked for all simultaneously."

Sangye Tenzin in collaboration with A. W. Macdonald at the end of the 1960s),³⁶ this is her story:

Phakdze and lama Tsunchung, two disciples of the fully initiated Tantric lama Sangwa Dorje³⁷, in search for a better place, decided to move farther south into the Solu area, accompanied by their families and pupils. This small group of Sherpas traveled via Lumding Kharka located just north of Numbur and Uomi Tsho to a place close by Lumiteng called Chaurimkharka. Lama Pakdze and his followers decided to stay at this place because it seemed highly suited to their needs as yak breeders and cultivators. However, they came to realize that unfortunately there was no *lu*. Because of this critical absence lama Phakdze invoked the Lumo Karmo by performing many offering *pujas* for her. All this he did deliberately to invite the Lumo Karmo to come and stay in the Sherpas' new area of residence in order to secure her help in obtaining fertile cattle and good harvests, protection from bad weather, especially from hail.

In response to this appropriate worship of her, Lumo Karmo eventually appeared at Lumiteng. As she was pleased by lama Phakdze's religious celebration performed in veneration of her, the serpent deity assured the lama of her decision to stay with them. However, she gave her consent only on condition that from then on the Sherpa people would never forget to pay her duly reverence and gratitude for the overall help that Lumo Karmo would bestow upon them in the days to come.

In search of a suitable place of their own, Lama Tsunchung Tashi's group kept moving southwards. Their migration finally came to an end at a place called Thraktobuk (rock high corner). As in most places in Solu the people of Thrakto venerate Lumo Karmo. When she is present she resides at a quiet place of her own situated not far above the small hamlet just below a high rock formation.

After lama Phakdze's death his son lama Dorje Zangbu moved on and settled in a fertile valley below. It was he who is said to have founded both the temple and the village of Zhung (Nep.: Junbesi). He established a special place for Lumo Karmo in a grove with a spring. This grove has been regarded as holy

³⁶ This text was originally published with the Sangs-rgyas bstand-'dzin's *rnam-thar*, i.e. religious biography, by Junbesi & Nanterre in 1971 as **Documents pour l'étude de la religion et la organisation sociale des Sherpa**, Vol. I by Laboratoire d'Ethnologie and A. W. Macdonald. Its English title is **Sharpa-Book: On Sherpa Religious Origin and the History of Ancestor Lineages**, which solely was available for me. Tulku Padma Mtharphyin translated it for me into Nepali.

³⁷ Lama Sangwa Dorje is considered a mythical hero who had performed many miracles and who was among others, the founder of the first Sherpa *gomba* in Solukhumbu at Pangboche.

ever since. Apart from the village lama and a few laymen with a religious education no humans are allowed to enter it. It is believed that Lumo Karmo sleeps at her place in Junbesi during the three winter months. The other nine months of the annual cycle the deity is supposed to spend in the Uomi Tsho area predominantly at a place called Lumiteng. This is the center of the *yersa* (high summer pastures) which belong to the Lama clan of Junbesi. The event of her arrival as well as her departure from Junbesi is heralded by the wind.

In Lumiteng owners of naks and dzum (female hybrids of yak and cow) of the Lama clan from Junbesi celebrate the *yerchang* (summer beer) festival.³⁸ The performance of the *yerchang* is always presided over by the village lama. All the local protector divinities are invoked for the protection of the herds and the owner's family and household goods. Again Lumo Karmo figures prominently in this religious celebration.

The sacred space formed by Shorong Yullha and Uomi Tsho, however, is part of the *yersa* of the Salaka clan of Thraksindo area. According to the village lamas the *yerchang* of both clans is held just a few days before the Uomi Tsho pilgrimage. This is to make sure that the sacred site is pure and undisturbed, so that the deities invoked in ritual worship are easily pleased and will fulfill the requests of the people.

When Dorje Zangbu died he ordered a stupa for his relics to be built in close proximity of Lumo Karmo's holy grove. Both exist today. In local oral tradition, however, there is a slightly different version of the story of how Lumo Karmo came from Tibet to Junbesi. When the Sherpas finally arrived in Junbesi, after a long migration, they realized that when leaving their homeland in Khams in search for new land they had forgotten to invite Lumo Karmo. So it was Dorje Zangbu and not his father, who returned and invoked her properly. She gave her consent on two conditions. Should the Sherpas forget to worship her for her help and protection she would withdraw her help causing droughts, hail, landslides, and all kinds of sickness and other evil. Dorje Zangbu also had to promise that in the new environment he would always remain close by her. As she used to live in the Lands of Snow, Dorje Zangbu offered her two different abodes. Since then in the three cold winter months she sleeps in the spring of the holy grove in Junbesi. In spring when it begins to get warm again, just at the time when the *Dumji* festival is held, she wakes up. Then she moves back up to the Uomi Tsho area where she stays during the warm season. Old people still remember the loud noise used to indicate her departure from Junbesi; they do not forget to emphasize that because of the defilements typical of our modern era this noise cannot be heard anymore.

³⁸ Fürer-Haimendorf has described a Khumbu *yerchang* (1964: 208-210).

As a consequence of the many powerful miracles (Tib.: *rdsu-hphrul*)³⁹ he performed, Dorje Zangbu has been regarded by Solu Sherpas as their mythical hero. Since the time Lumo Karmo took her abode in Junbesi, the *pujas* in worship of Lumo Karmo in particular, with the exception of the *yerchang*, are performed in Junbesi instead of at Lumiteng. Moreover, Lumo Karmo is venerated by all Solu Sherpa clans. The tradition according to which Lumo Karmo is worshipped as the clan deity of the Lama Serwa clan had been already established by lama Phakdzé.

The Pilgrimage to Uomi Tsho at the Full Moon of August

The pilgrimage to Uomi Tsho takes place on Janai Purnima, the full moon of *saun* (in August). Actually, this is also an auspicious date for many Hindu areas of Nepal to begin pilgrimages to holy sites in similar settings, i.e. the combination of the sacred mountain and the holy lake.⁴⁰ On the northern side of Shorong Yullha is Lumding Tsho, the main pilgrimage place for the Sherpas from Pharak and western Khumbu. In southwestern Solu there are two more important pilgrimage places of the same kind (Jeta Pokhari and Panch Pokhari) which, however, attract far more Hindus than Sherpas.

Contrary to Hindu belief, Sherpas like all Tibetan Buddhists do not know of any pilgrimage that is undertaken on a fixed date.⁴¹ According to the information I obtained on this topic from Solu lamas and monks the pilgrimage to Uomi Tsho on August fullmoon represents an event sacred to Hindus, not to Buddhists. Buddhist lamas and monks visit the holy place preferably in the dry months in spring and in October and November. When planning to go there on pilgrimage they explicitly try to avoid the time they call 'the Hindu *mela*' which is considered to be the cause of severe defilements.

Sherpas are free to go on pilgrimage whenever they feel like it but traditionally they go to Uomi Tsho during the warm season from spring until fall. Spring, however, is the preferred season as it is the time of

³⁹ Das (1989: 1058).

⁴⁰ See for example, S.J. Miller on Jhankris and Kalingchok Jatra (1977); A. W. Macdonald on Janaipurnima and Gosainkunda (1984: 297-308); M. Gaenzle on Rai jhankris and Salpa pilgrimage (1996).

⁴¹ In the last two decades, however, new pilgrimages have developed around the persons, places, and festivals of leading incarnate lamas of the Gelugpa school. Among the Nyingmapa it is mainly the 'Monlam Chenmo' or 'Great Prayer Festival' held annually in February since 1985 in Bodhgaya. The event was initiated and still is sponsored by Tharthang Tulku and presided over by Penor Rinpoche and other high dignitaries of the 'Old School.'

growth. Although in Sherpa culture there are many communal religious celebrations, on no occasion does the Sherpa population of a particular area get together in order to make a pilgrimage in the form of a communal procession.⁴² Generally Sherpa pilgrimage is the affair of small groups related by family and/or local bonds.

Why then does the holy journey of the Sherpas described in this article coincide with a Hindu pilgrimage event? Usually Sherpas offer the same reason they undertake a pilgrimage to the Uomi Tsho at exactly the time of the Hindu *mela*: they want to "meet other people up there" or simply, "other friends go up there, so I/we go there, too." Thus, these comments clearly indicate that Sherpa pilgrims to the Milk Lake are interested in combining their holy journey with the prospects of profane amusement. In the light of descriptions obtained by older people this phenomenon seems to represent a new aspect which can be regarded as part of the process of modernization. One might assume that this profane interest could have negative consequences for the pilgrims' particular aims. According to the Dalai Lama, however, this new attitude seems to be fully consistent with the concept of Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage ". . . so long as their primary motivation is pilgrimage." (1990: 139)

Uomi Tsho: The Place Holy to Hindus, Shamans, and Sherpa Buddhists Alike

The sacred lake of Uomi Tsho is a temporary seat of Lumo Karmo. This glacier lake is at an altitude of 4,560m, just below the sacred peak Shorong Yullha.. This site combines two different elements: a mountain god and an aquatic and underworld goddess, believed to be husband and wife.⁴³ The sacred place relating Shorong Yullha and Lumo Karmo appears to structurally correspond with the Tibetan tradition that links the concepts of the sacred mountain with that of the sacred lake.⁴⁴ What is striking to the first-time visitor is the central characteristic of this holy place: no temple, no shrine, no stupa. Apart from a rock cairn and some windhorses fluttering in the wind on a huge

⁴² W. S. Sax (1991) has given a detailed description of such an event in the Hindu context. Also see K. M. Erndl (1993).

⁴³ This is quite different in the case of Khumbu Yullha as the latter is believed to be the husband of Tamosermu, the goddess residing on Mt. Tamserku (N. T. Zangbu 1988: 7).

⁴⁴ On sacred mountains in the Tibetan context see Stein (1987: 137-144); R. de Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1993); J. Reinhard (1987); J. Snelling (1990); F. Meyer (1987); on the association of sacred mountains and Tibetan kingship, G. Tucci (1949: 727-30) and J. R. Kirkland (1982); P. A. Berglie (1980) on the combination of the sacred mountain and the holy lake. The most famous sacred places of the latter category are Gang Tise (Mt. Kailash) and Mapham Tsho (Lake Manasarovar).

rock formation high above the lake, there is no indication of the existence of a sacred site.

Today, the sacred event at Uomi Tsho or Dudh Kunda attracts several hundred pilgrims.⁴⁵ At the holy place three different traditions meet. The smallest section is made up by high caste Hindus, mainly Chhetri, but only very few Brahmin; all come from villages in the Okhaldunga and Ramechap area in the middle hills of eastern Nepal. They have to travel four days or more each way. If possible they stay only one night. Their motivation for coming to the mountain lake is to ask for progeny, health, and a good harvest. Brahmin men also come to change their sacred thread (*ianai*). Many Sherpas laugh at the activities of the scantily-dressed Hindus, who while taking their ritual bath are shivering from the cold.

The second section consists of jhankris (shaman) and their entourage of between twenty and thirty young men of their own ethnic group. They belong to various ethnic groups: Gurung, Tamang, Rai and Limbu (both being the absolute majority) and to the low caste Kami (blacksmith). Contrary to other information in this text I never met any Sherpa jhankri with his following.⁴⁶ Just as do the high caste Hindus, the various jhankri groups come from the eastern middle hills. Jhankris undertake this pilgrimage to Uomi Tsho in order to ask the deity for power (Nep.: *teal magnu*) used up in the course of their ritual services during the preceding year.⁴⁷

Sherpas constitute the third section of the pilgrim congregation and come from nearby places in Central Solu. From childhood they are used to walking in a difficult mountainous environment, coping with difficult weather and living under simple conditions. Contrary to both the Hindus and the jhankri groups who make their pilgrimage up to this lake from the middle

⁴⁵ In 1992 I counted about 600, in 1993 only about 450 (mainly because of bad weather and a Tamang festival which was held at the same time), and in 1994 about 650 on the day of the full moon. This is far less than what was noted by K. S. March in her dissertation (1979). There she writes that "thousands of people from all the ethnic and caste groups in the region congregate at the fullmoon at the end of the summer monsoon to perform a variety of distinct ritual actions" (1979: 111). Her figures have been confirmed by the information I have obtained from many people in the area, both Sherpas and Hindus. Unfortunately I do not know of any particular reason for the decline in the number of pilgrims in this context.

⁴⁶ Compare K. S. March (1979: 111). Probably the absence of Sherpa shamans is because of the current general decline of Sherpa shamanism which has been analysed by S. B. Ortner (1995) in a recent article.

⁴⁷ For a recent description of shamanic pilgrimages to the Salpa lake among the Mewahang Rai see M. Gaenzle (1996).

hills in the course of three or four days, Sherpa pilgrims need only one fairly long day to reach the sacred site of Uomi Tsho. Thus, for Sherpas this pilgrimage takes place in the familiar realm of their own territory. However, the arduous journey, the humid weather in the midst of monsoon and the uncomfortable living conditions because of rain, cold, snow, wind, and frost, confront all the pilgrims with a highly strenuous, sometimes even dangerous adventure.⁴⁸

These three components of the congregation share the same sacred space, the circumambulatory circuit, and many sacred spots at the same time while projecting different religious discourses onto the sacred site.⁴⁹ Despite these crucial religious differences, all pilgrims present seem to be interested in keeping an atmosphere of peaceful coexistence. One has to add, however, that the dancing and singing accompanied by the beat of the *jhankri's* drum clearly dominates the event. It is this seemingly exotic performance which the Sherpas like to watch with great curiosity from a distance.

Like many of the other pilgrims, most of the Sherpa arrive at Uomi Tsho on the evening of the full moon. There they enjoy all-night drinking, singing, and dancing. They are joined by a good many of mostly young Rais, Limbus, Tamangs, Gurungs, and Kamis. This profane entertainment takes place in the existing herders' huts by the sacred lake which belong to the *yorsa* of the Thraksindo Sherpas of the Salaka clan. For this occasion five to eight huts made of stone and covered by a large sheet of plastic are transformed into 'hotels.' They are run by young girls and boys of the Thraksindo Sherpas with the aim of making some extra money.

This is in obvious contrast to what older Sherpas say about how they used to approach the holy site. Instead of arriving at the sacred site on the eve of the full moon Sherpas preferred to spend that night dancing, singing, and drinking at a place called Beni, which is part of the *yorsa* of the Thraksindo Sherpas situated about two hours walk below Uomi Tsho. Very early in the next morning when it was still dark they used to proceed upwards to the holy site. If at all, the weather in monsoon season is fine only in the early morning at high altitudes. It is only then that the sacred space combining both mountain and lake can be seen as part of the white mountain scenery against a deep blue

morning sky. As Lumo Karmo is associated with supreme purity, the Sherpas wished to experience their encounter with the divine presence in the early morning hours. At this time the solemn silence and solitude that usually reigns at the divinities' abode is still unbroken. For the same reason, pilgrims often refrained from eating and drinking in order to 'see' the deity in a condition as pure as possible. This was done not only out of sincere respect but also to make sure that anything which might arouse the anger of the deity and therefore spoil the wish-fulfilling purpose of the holy journey was avoided. Just as today it consisted of the following three categories of requests that were to be directed to Lumo Karmo: health, wealth (good harvest, cattle, good business), and a good spouse or progeny.

Ritual Procedures in the Context of Circumambulating the Milk Lake

The focus of the Sherpa pilgrims' religious activities is the *kora* (Tib.: *bskor-ba*), the reverential ceremony of circumambulation of the sacred lake, the abode of the powerful wish-granting goddess. This ritual procedure must be performed at least one time. But being considered a highly meritorious act, pilgrims are often eager to accomplish it three, seven, or even more times.⁵⁰

The circumambulation is always undertaken in the company of the group one has come with. The atmosphere that usually reigns over this is characterized by a mixture of happy and relaxed conversation, and the individual performance of the ritual acts. When a pilgrim stops for a while to pray, contemplate, make an offering or direct her or his request to the divinity, this is quietly respected by the fellow members of the pilgrimage group. They either wait patiently for their own turn to come or continue moving towards the next place of ritual importance.

In the early morning hours Sherpa pilgrims clad in clean festive clothes go to the lake and splash water on their face, hands, and feet. Only then do they start their ritual procedures by making offerings such as fresh milk, butter, curd, and *serkem*. Other offerings consist of fruits, corn, small coins, and incense. After these initial offerings the Sherpa pilgrims start the ritual circumambulation of the holy lake, walking clockwise. The ritual circuit follows the western shore of the lake. This part does not seem to bear any religious meaning for the Sherpa pilgrims, as there is no spot where pilgrims stop to perform any ritual act.

Those pilgrims who have come to Milk Lake in order to ask for a spouse leave the trail on its northern side, climb up a ridge a short distance to reach another but far smaller lake situated about two hundred meters

⁴⁸ For example, during the pilgrimage in 1992, two Hindu pilgrims who must have been unfamiliar with this mountain area slid just before reaching the sacred site and fell down the slope bordering the wide moraine just below the lake; only one survived the accident.

⁴⁹ A. Bharati (1978: 82) notes that "... the superimposition of two mythologies on the same site and maybe their mutual lack of recognition ... represents a typical theme of the Indo-Tibetan interface in the circum-Himalayan region."

⁵⁰ A detailed account of the various forms of ritual circumambulation performed in the Tibetan context is given by R. Ekvall (1964: 226-250).

above Uomi Tsho. There one directs their request for a good wife or husband to the divinity. This is done by meditative contemplation after a *sang* (aromatic smoke) offering of juniper smoke has been performed. Those pilgrims who have come here with other kinds of requests continue their circumambulation of Uomi Tsho until a massive rock formation blocks the easy route by the shore of the lake. Just below this rock formation is a place by a spring where the pilgrims, in the course of a short fumigation ritual, ask for good health and overall protection. Thereafter one has to make a steep ascent on slippery stones through an impressive crevice in the big rock.

At many places water comes out of the often thinly layered rock formation which becomes a small stream that flows down the crevice. At a height of about fifty meters above the lake there are three springs. From the first two springs pilgrims take sips of water which is considered holy (*tshe-chu*, life water) and collect some in a special receptacle; usually a bottle made of wood, bamboo or, nowadays, glass. This water filled bottle is taken back home where it is stored in a special place on the altar of the household chapel (*lhakang*). Occasionally some of it is given to close relatives. If the pilgrims are owners of a herd of yaks or naks, some of the holy water is given to them and another part is sprinkled on the fields. This is done to ensure the fertility of the cattle as well as the growth of the crops. At the third spring they ask for a good harvest while offering grains of rice, corn, or buckwheat by throwing them up in the air.

The next place of ritual importance is located on top of the rock formation. On a platform high above the lake is a small bowl shaped hollow in the rock filled with water. It is here that whoever desires wealth makes the respective request. Those asking for wealth put their right hand in the pool of water, and while making their request, take what is found at that moment. The local legend has it that *mkha'-gro-ma*, a sky-going *dakina*,⁵¹ once came to this area.⁵² During that mythical time the lake was filled not with water but with pure milk which according to Sherpa lore owes its origin to Shorong Yulha.⁵³ When she saw Milk

51 A specific class of deities: *aka* is a male space-farer who embodies awareness, whereas a *akina* is a female space-farer who embodies emptiness. Many beings venerated by Tibetan Buddhists as *dakina* were once a female partner of Guru Padmasambhava in Tantric practices; see e.g. K. Dowman (1984). On the *akina* see the description by D. L. Snellgrove (1957: 157) and Beyer (1973: 45-47).

52 It is interesting that in Sherpa folk religion this *akina* is not called by a specific name. Sometimes it seems as if laypeople when describing this particular divinity fuse her with Lumo Karmo.

53 The Hindus recall the same origin of the name of the holy lake, however, there is a slight difference; in their perspective the milk is attributed to Mahadev.

Lake, she was so pleased to find a place endowed with natural abundance that she performed a dance on this very rock platform. Accordingly the Sherpas remember the site as the place of the *dakina's* dance (*mkha'-gro-ma 'cham*) *mkha'-gro-ma 's* footprint (Tib.: *zhabs-rjes*), which reminds today's devotees of that episode, can still be seen on this spot. Conscious of that event the Sherpas dance there as well after having articulated their request for cattle and wealth.

As one proceeds on the circumambulatory trail, one eventually reaches a small rock cairn (*lha tse*) that serves as an altar to the mountain god. This is the highest point on the route and is the only place for the worship of Tashi Palboche. In addition to the cairn there are two big poles adorned with windhorses (Tib.: *rlung rta*, Eng.: prayer flags). As is done at numerous other sites of religious importance the pilgrims attach white ceremonial scarves to one of the stones in the rock cairn or to one of the two poles in honour of the deity. Apart from that, a *sang* offering to the deity is performed on this spot.

From there the trail leads down to the next place of ritual significance at the bottom of the rock formation. Below a protruding rock a wish for long life can be directed to the deity. Not far from there is the spot (about two meters above the lake) where those who wish for a child can articulate their request. In that case the couple is supposed to come together to experience the encounter with the divine. Usually they first perform a fumigation ritual with juniper twigs. After meditative contemplation either the husband or the wife puts a clean right hand into the lake and grabs what it can get hold of in the water.⁵⁴ Usually this is a stone. According to the gender of the desired child the lucky finder must address him or herself to it by saying, "This is my son," or "This is my daughter." The couple often carries a cradle with them. Without looking at the found object the finder wraps it in a ceremonial scarf or some other clean and meaningful material and puts it in the cradle. If they do not have a cradle, the object is kept among the few personal valuables brought along on the pilgrimage. Later, back at home it is deposited in a safe and pure place. It is attributed special symbolic significance as it is regarded as the 'soul-stone' (Tib.: *bla rdo*; the dwelling place of a human soul) of the child not yet born.⁵⁵ After the child has been born

54 My informants emphasized that this procedure can be performed either by the husband or by the wife. Thus, it clearly does not seem to be a male privilege. Unfortunately it still remains unclear to me how the decision as to who has to perform it is reached among a couple.

55 For a general discussion of *bla* see G. Tucci (1980: 190-3), Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1993: 481-3). S. G. Karmay (1987) wrote an illuminating article on the concept of the soul in Tibetan popular beliefs. As the soul is regarded as essential to human life, its separation from the body is often the cause of illness or even of death. Because of this

it is regarded as the moral obligation of the parents to go on another pilgrimage to the Uomi Tsho. There the newborn child must be presented to Lumo Karmo and offerings to her must be given in gratitude for the help received from the divinity.

The circumambulation of the lake reaches its end at the place where the Beni Khola originates from the lake. Depending on the number of stops, ritual actions, etc., one round of circumambulation of the holy lake takes between one and a half to two and a half hours. According to their particular desires the pilgrims either continue to make further circumambulations or they leave the sacred site and start their return journey without any formal farewell.

A short way downwards the pilgrims pass by a small lake which attracts attention because of its dark colour and negative connotations. In Sherpa oral tradition this lake is called Demon Lake (Tib.: *baud kyi mtsho*, Nep.: *kalo pokhari*, black lake). This lake is located on the right (eastern) side of the trail so one can safely pay a look at it. However, when descending from the holy place one should not look at that dark lake in fear of the dangerous demon who devotes his negative energy to preventing the pilgrim's wish from becoming fulfilled. Illustrative of this legend's message is the story which older Sherpas like to tell: Once a Gurung shepherd came up with his herd to this site surrounded by rich pastures. Later, on his way down, he is said to have looked at the Demon Lake. When he turned back to look for his herd he was struck with the fact that it had mysteriously disappeared.

Who Goes Up There and Why? Some Characteristic Features of the Local Sherpa Pilgrimage to Uomi Tsho

If they can Sherpas avoid being on the road alone. Thus, most Sherpa pilgrims to Uomi Tsho travel in the company of fellow pilgrims. Usually a group of pilgrims consists of family members and/or friends of the same age-group from the same village or locality. Older people generally remain with pilgrims of their age; if others are absent, an older person prefers to walk quietly by him or herself behind the group that her or his daughter or son is part of. At the holy site, however, he or she, if there is any, helps care for a small baby brought up for its first encounter with the deity.

Only once in this rugged glacial moraine terrain at Uomi Tsho did I meet an older Sherpa lady who was on pilgrimage alone. She wore a dress which resembled the robe of a Tibetan Buddhist *ani* (nun). While worshipping the deities and circumambulating the sacred lake she seemed eager to avoid all contact with her fellow pilgrims. Some days later, however, I came

belief Tibetans developed elaborate rituals for the soul's protection and recapture from demons.

across her again when she was on her way to see a highly venerated Tibetan lama at a famous monastery. When I took the chance to ask her about her motivation for visiting Milk Lake she revealed the following: her husband had died just a few months ago. All her children were married and even well off; in other words, the old lady had fulfilled all her this-worldly obligations. Because of these circumstances she felt free to change her life's course by becoming a sort of female ascetic. She took a personal vow to devote herself fully to performing virtuous deeds aiming at a good rebirth. Accordingly, she had her hair cut, dressed in a robe similar to that of a nun, left her home and family and went on a special pilgrimage. In the course of this holy journey she intended to visit all sites sacred to the Sherpas.⁵⁶

The majority of Sherpas on the pilgrimage to Uomi Tsho are young females and males. Most are at the threshold of becoming full adult members of their local community. According to them the pilgrimage to Uomi Tsho constitutes a pleasant break in the routine which governs their normal everyday village life. This is not the only cause for the festive atmosphere, which on the part of the Sherpas, characterizes the whole pilgrimage from its beginning to its end. It is here at Uomi Tsho that the individual request for a good husband or wife, for children, for health, wealth, and protection from sickness is directed to the deity. Several of these categories of request correspond to the specific needs and expectations of an age-group that ranges from those still unmarried to those newly married. Apart from this, for the young and in many cases unmarried Sherpas, the pilgrimage to Milk Lake provides a social space far beyond the local community where they can interact free from the constraints which are typical of normal village life. In other words this religious event provides a rare opportunity for young Sherpa women and men to spend time together. The night before the full moon usually culminates in a lively party among the young Sherpas present. On this occasion they are joined by many young people from the other sections of the congregation present.

⁵⁶ Some months later I met her again at the Tibetan lama's monastery. There her pilgrimage of old age had come to a good end and she commented her solitary experience. Just like many Tibetans of old age eventually do, she had moved to that monastery in order to spend the rest of her life in close proximity to the highly revered Tibetan lama. It happened that a close young relative is a nun at that monastery. In her small house the old lady had found her last place to stay. Nowadays this has become a common practice also among aged Sherpas. Because of this new trend among the Buddhist laity the number of constant inhabitants of the Tibetan monastery, which were built only for three hundred monks and nuns, has risen extraordinarily in the last few years. Consequently clerics feel that they have to rebuild the place as they cannot handle their affairs properly any more.

For young women who carry a new-born or very young baby on their backs, there is good reason to be happy and relaxed while being on pilgrimage to Milk Lake. They may travel together with other young mothers from their locality or even from their extended family, who while being on pilgrimage, collectively take care of the young babies. She may be accompanied by her mother, father, and/or younger sister so that she is not all alone on pilgrimage. In many cases, it is the young husband who is absent on occasion of the pilgrimage to Uomi Tsho. Generally his absence from a religious event so important for the well-being of his nuclear family mirrors the fact that he is busy earning money in the trekking business centered in and around Kathmandu. After having performed the religious part of their holy journey, the young women including only a few husbands, take great pleasure in the mundane part of this religious event by joining the joyous drinking, dancing, and singing parties.

The presence of young mothers at Uomi Tsho clearly indicates that their specific request for a child directed to the deity at this sacred site in one of the preceding years had really been accepted by the Lumo Karmo. Having returned to Uomi Tsho it is the mother's desire to show the new-born proudly to the deity whose help had been instrumental in fulfilling her request. In Sherpa tradition it is also considered her duty to express her heartfelt thanks to the deity for this 'gift' by means of prayers and offerings on the next possible occasion which is usually the pilgrimage in the following year. Neglect of this duty may result in illness for the child.

A young mother whom I had met once at Uomi Tsho on occasion of the pilgrimage several months after that sacred event revealed to me why she had gone on pilgrimage to the Milk Lake. She had gone there in the company of her two-year old child that had fallen severely ill at home in the weeks before. In a dream Lumo Karmo appeared reminding her that the deity had fulfilled her request for a healthy son, directed to her three years ago. On the same occasion the mother had promised to show the 'gift' to the deity and to have it blessed by her. Later, as everything had turned out so well for her, the ungrateful mother had forgotten about her promise. It was because of her own neglect, the young mother herself commented in retrospect, that her baby had been afflicted. Some time later I learned from her that the child had fully recovered. According to the mother this was possible only as a consequence of both her pilgrimage to the Uomi Tsho and the appropriate prayers and offerings to Lumo Karmo.

On occasion of the pilgrimage to Uomi Tsho one meets only a few members of the middle generation. It is even more seldom that one comes across older people. The reason for their absence was explained to me in the same way by lamas and lay people alike. According to both sides when getting old, the 'inner-worldly' character of the requests directed to the

Uomi Tsho deity gives way to concern for liberation from *samsara*, i.e. the cyclical existence of sentient beings who suffer through the round of rebirth. These concerns are more properly met by pilgrimage to the first two categories of Buddhist holy places, therefore the overwhelming majority of Sherpa pilgrims to Uomi Tsho will be young people who are at the threshold of adult life.

Conclusions

"The meaning of pilgrimage lies beyond the movements of pilgrims . . ." (G. Bowman 1985:4)

The holy site of Uomi Tsho constitutes a space which is capable of peacefully accommodating diverse religious meanings and practices. It does not seem to represent, however, any "arena for competing discourses" (J. Eade and Sallnow, M. J. 1991: 2). All pilgrims hold their own cult within the same sacred space at the same time. Contacts with other groups, apart from the nightly dancing, drinking, and singing in the Sherpas' 'hotels,' are kept at a minimum.

Sherpa pilgrims are well informed about the sacred locale and the deities associated with it, on what to expect and which ritual to perform at which place and have no need for the guidance of a lama or monk. They received their knowledge via the diverse channels through which local oral, but not the written, Great Tradition is transmitted. This widespread knowledge mirrors the fact that the history of the sacred place and the deities associated with it are constitutive not only of Solu Sherpas' history but also of their communal identity.

The holy site and its history, which is also the history of Lumo Karmo in the Solu region and of the pilgrimage to Uomi Tsho, were neither imposed upon the local population through the agency of Tibetan Buddhism nor through any kind of state power. The ritual complex described above was generated by the Sherpas' own local culture. This process followed an established Tibetan pattern but it was moulded to the specific needs which arose from their new environment.⁵⁷ It is the cult of the *lu* practiced among the Sherpas and "their greatly increased importance in comparison to Tibet proper" (G. Samuel 1978: 108) that seems to lend Sherpa religion its distinctive attributes within the realm of Tibetan Buddhism. Uomi Tsho as an abode of Lumo Karmo and the pilgrimage to this sacred locale thus constitutes an integral part of Solu Sherpas' history. This history, however, is the history of Sherpa immigration into and their appropriation of the land called Solukhumbu which took place about four centuries ago. These can be considered as decisive factors that have given—and still give—shape to the communal identity of Solu Sherpas.

⁵⁷ In this context G. Samuel (1978: 99) emphasizes that Sherpa religion is ". . . quite within the mainstream of Tibetan religious practices."

As such, the pilgrimage to Uomi Tsho is reflective of a particular Solu Sherpa tradition of its own which is different from that of Khumbu Sherpas.

Addendum

Textual Part concerning the Ritual Invocation of Lumo Karmo in the Kangso-Pja⁵⁸ (length: 3 folios in block print):

*"You and your servants have come here,
For you we want to perform this offering
puja,
So please come and help us.*

*Rest on this comfortable throne,
Which we made for you.
Ndga Rdja Dharmapdla⁵⁹
What do you like to consume:7*

*Now we want to perform the offering puja
for you.
As a drink we have mixed extra fine
medicine[like yoghurt -EB] with very clean
water.
For your nose we have arranged flowers and
pure incense.
For you we light butter lamps
Smelling like sandalwood.
For you we have prepared very special food;
For you we play music and sing.
To you we present medicine⁶⁰, colourful
clothes and canopy.
Your tormas has been prepared delicately
With milk, yoghurt, butter, honey, brown
sugar.
You and your entourage [of serpents acting
as her servants - EB],*

*Please feel comfortable, help yourself and
eat.
Please give overall protection to the Buddha
Dharma, Help to protect the representatives
of the Dharma, Don't send any pain to the
living beings, Always give us happiness,
please.*

⁵⁸ This text was translated into Nepali by the young lama of gSer-logs dgon-pa, the highly learned Tulku Padma Mthar-Phyin.

⁵⁹ Dharmapala, Sanskr.: 'Protector of the Dharma' as opposed to the Lokapala, the 'Protector of the Region.' Lumo Karmo, the White Serpent Deity, belongs to the category of Dharmapala.

⁶⁰ The *lu* beings are imagined to be suffering permanently from sickness. Therefore the humans, in addition to their various offerings and prayers, present medicine, i.e. the fumigation of juniper.

*Way back in Sindhu Ocean[where he had
tamed and bound her by oath - EB]
You have given this promise to Guru
Rinpoche. Please do remember this
promise now. We are the followers of
Guru Rinpoche, indeed! Please do care for
prosperity and growth in this world.
Neither send us frost nor hail nor sickness.
Please take care that peace always governs
our world. In case we need rain please send
it to us.*

*To those who do bad things to the Dharma
send eighteen sorts of elephantiasis and all
forms of dangerous sicknesses like rain
falling from the sky. To us send
well-being and prosperity all around. With
those[who do bad things to the Dharma -
EB] We do not want to have anything to
do, Please keep them far away from us.
These requests we have presented to you,
So please do fulfill them - give us!"*

Author's Note

This investigation is part of a research project on Sherpa Buddhist pilgrimage that was sponsored generously by the Swiss National Science Foundation from Dec. 1991 until May 1995. I am particularly grateful to Tulku Pema Tharchhin Lama; special thanks to Chr. Erni for designing the map [missing from this version -ed]. Karma Tshultrim, Ngawang Jimba Lama, Lama Tenzing, Karma and Ang Kinchi Sherpa, Kaji and Ang Chokpa Lama, R. Burghardt, F. K. Ehrhard, M. Gacszle and V. Maria deserve great thanks. (Submitted December 1996.)

References

- Adams, V. 1996. *Tigers of the Snow and Other Virtual Sherpas: An Ethnography of Himalayan Encounters*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Berg, E. 1994. *Sherpa Buddhists on a Regional Pilgrimage: The Case of Maratika Cave at Halase*. In *Occasional Papers in Sociology and Anthropology* (Volume 4). Journal of Central Dept. of Anthropology. Kathmandu: Tribhuvan University. pp. 124-145.
- Berglie, P. A. 1980. *Mount Targo and Lake Dangra: A Contribution to the Religious Geography of Tibet*. In Aris and Kyi, eds., *Tibetan Studies in Honour of Hugh Richardson*. Warminster: Aris and Phillips. pp. 39-44.
- Beyer, S. 1973. *The Cult of Tara*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bharati, A. 1978. *Actual and Ideal Himalayas: Hindu Views of the Mountains*. In Fisher, ed., *Himalayan Anthropology: The Indo-Tibetan Interface*. The Hague: Mouton. pp. 77-82.
- Bowman, G. 1985. *Anthropology of Pilgrimage*. In Jha, ed., *Dimensions of Pilgrimage*. New Delhi: Inter-India Publishing. pp. 1-9.

- Buffetrille, K. 1993. *Preliminary Remarks on a Sherpa Pilgrimage. The Pilgrimage to the Milk Lake in the District of Solu (Nepal)*. In Toffin, ed., *The Anthropology of Nepal: From Tradition to Modernity*. Kathmandu: French Cultural Centre. pp. 97-113.
- Buffetrille, K. 1994. *The Halase-Maratika Caves (Eastern Nepal): A Sacred Place Claimed by both Hindus and Buddhists*. Pondicherry: Institut Francais de Pondichery.
- Chang, G. C. C. 1962 (ed. and transl.) *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa (Volume 1)*. New York: University Books.
- Dak-Pa, N. 1987. *Les pelerinages bouddhiques au Tibet*. In Chelini and Branthomme, eds., *Histoire des Pelerinages Non Chre'tiens*. pp. 264-77.
- Dowman, K. 1984. *Sky Dancer: The Secret Life and Songs of the Lady Yeshe Tsogyel*. London: R and KP.
- Das, S. C. 1989 (Orig. 1902). *A Tibetan-English Dictionary with Sanskrit Synonyms*. New Delhi: Asian Ed.
- Eade, J. and M. J. Sallnow. 1991. *Introduction*. In J. Eade and M. M. Sallnow, eds., *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage*. London and New York: Routledge. pp. 1-29.
- Ekvall, R. 1964. *Religious Observances in Tibet: Patterns and Function*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Erndl, K. 1993. *Victory to the Mother: The Hindu Goddess of Northwest India in Myth, Ritual, and Symbol*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Furer-Haimendorf, Chr. Von 1955. *Prebuddhist Elements in Sherpa Belief and Ritual*. MAN, Vol. 61.
- Furer-Haimendorf, Chr. Von 1964. *The Sherpas of Nepal: Buddhist Highlanders*. London: John Murray.
- Funke, F. W. 1969. *Religioses Leben des Sherpa [Reihe Khumbu Himal 9]*. Innsbruck and Munchen: Universitatsverlag Wagner.
- Gaenszle, M. 1996 (in press). *Shamanic Pilgrimages. Encounters of Traditions in East Nepal*.
- Huber, T. 1990. *Where Exactly are Caritra, Devikota and Himavat? A Sacred Geography Controversy and the Development of Tantric Buddhist Pilgrimage Sites in Tibet*. *Kailash* 16 3-4): 121-165.
- Huber, T. 1994. *Putting the Gnas Back into the Gnas-Skor: Rethinking Tibetan Buddhist Pilgrimage Practice*. *The Tibet Journal* 19(2): 23-60.
- Karmay, S. 1987. *L'ame et la Turquoise: un Rituel Tibetain*. *Rituels Himalayens (numero special de L'Ethnographie* 83: 97-130.
- Kirkland, J. R. 1982. *The Spirit of the Mountain: Myth and State in Pre-Buddhist Tibet*. *History of Religions* 21: 257-71.
- Kunwar, R. R. 1989. *Fire of Himal: An Anthropological Study of the Sherpas of Nepal Himalayan Region*. Jaipur and New Delhi: Nirala Publications.
- Large-Blondeau, A. M. 1960. *Les Pelerinages Tibetains*. In *Les Pelerinages (Sources Orientales III)*. Paris: Ed. du Seuil. pp.199-245.
- Macdonald, A. W. 1984 (orig. 1971). *Nepalese Notes: the Janaipurnima and the Gosainkunda*. In *Essays on the Ethnology of Nepal and South Asia (Volume I)*. pp. 297-308.
- Macdonald, A. W. 1987a. *Avant-Propos: Rituels Himalayens (numero special de L'Ethnographie* 83: 3-13.
- Macdonald, A. W. 1987b (orig. 1980). *The Writing of Buddhist History in the Sherpa Area of Nepal*. In *Essays on the Ethnology of Nepal and South Asia, Vol. 2*, pp. 54-66
- Macdonald, A. W. 1987c (orig. 1980). *The Coming of Buddhism to the Sherpa Area of Nepal*. In *Essays on the Ethnology of Nepal and South Asia (Volume 2)*. pp. 67-74.
- Macdonald, A. W. 1990. *Hindu-isation, Buddha-isation, Then Lama-isation or: What happened at La-phyi?* In Skorupski, ed., *Indo-Tibetan Studies*. Tring, United Kingdom: Institute of Buddhist Studies. pp. 199-208.
- March, K. 1977. *Of People and Naks: The Meaning of High Altitude Herding among Contemporary Sherpas*. *Contributions to Nepalese Studies* 4(2): 83-97.
- March, K. 1979. *The Intermediacy of Women: Female Gender Symbolism and the Soical Position of Women among Tamangs and Sherpas of Highland nepal*. Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Anthropology, Cornell University.
- Meyer, F. 1987. *Des dieux, des montagnes et des hommes*. *La lecture tibetaine du paysage. Etudes Rurales* 107/108: 107 -27.
- Miller S. J. *Faith-Healers in the Himalayas: An Investigation of Traditional Healers and Their Festivals in Dolakha District*. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis. Kirtipur: CNAS, Tribhuvan University.
- Mumford, S. R. 1989. *Himalayan Dialogue. Tibetan Lamas and Gurung Shamans in Nepal*. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Nebesky-Wojkowitz, R. 1993 (orig. 1956). *Oracles and Demons of Tibet: The Cult and Iconography of the Tibetan Protective Deities*. Kathmandu: Tiwari's.
- Oppitz, M. 1968. *Geschichte und Sozialordnung der Sherpa (Khumbu Himal, Vol. 8)*. Innsbruck and Munchen: Universitatsverlag Wagner.
- Oppitz, M. 1974. *Myths and Facts: Reconsidering Some Data Concerning the Clan History of the Sherpa*. In Furer-Haimendorf, ed., *The Anthropology of Nepal*. Warminster: Aris and Phillips. pp. 232-243.
- Ortner, S. B. 1978a. *Sherpas Through their Rituals*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ortner, S. B. 1978b. *The White-Black Ones: The Sherpa View of Human Nature*. In Fisher, ed., *Himalayan Anthropology: The Indo-Tibetan Interface*. The Hague: Mouton. pp. 263-285.

Ortner, S. B. 1995. *The Case of the Disappearing Shamans, or No Individualism, No Relationalism*. *Ethos* 23(3): 355-390.

Paul, R. A. 1979. *Dumje: Paradox and Resolution in Sherpa Ritual Symbolism*. *American Ethnologist* 6(2): 274-305.

Reinhard, J. 1987. *The Sacred Himalaya*. *The American Alpine Journal* 29: 123-32.

Samuel, G. 1978. *Religion in Tibetan Society: A New Approach*. *Kailash* 6(2): 99-114.

Samuel, G. 1993. *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies*. Washington and London: Smithsonian Institute Press.

Sangye, T. 1972. *Sharpa-Book, on Sherpa Religious Origin and the History of Ancestor Lineages* (Title in English, written in Tibetan).

Sax, W. S. 1991. *Mountain Goddess. Gender and Politics in a Himalayan Pilgrimage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Snellgrove, D. L. 1957. *Buddhist Himalaya. Travels and Studies in Quest of the Origins and Nature of Tibetan Religion*. Oxford: Brono Cassirer.

Snellgrove, D. L. 1987. *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism: Indian Buddhists and their Tibetan Successors*. London: Serindia.

Snellgrove, D. L. and H. Richardson. 1986 (Orig. 1968). *A Cultural History of Tibet*. Boston and London: Shambala.

Snelling, J. 1990. *The Sacred Mountain: Travellers and Pilgrims at Mount Kailash in*

Western Tibet and the Great Universal Symbol of the Sacred Mountain. London and The Hague: East-West Publications.

Stablein, M. 1978. *Textual and Contextual Patterns of Tibetan Buddhist Pilgrimage in India*. *Tibet Society Bulletin* 12: 7-38.

Stein, R. A. 1987 (Orig. 1962). *La Civilisation Tibetaine*. Edition Definitive. Paris: L'Asiatheque.

Stein, R. A. 1995. *La Soumission De Rudra Et Autres Contes Tantriques*. *Journal Asiatique* CCLXXXIII(I): 121-160.

Tenzin Gyatso, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. 1990. *My Tibet*. Photographs and Introd. by Galen Rowell. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Thomas, E. J. 1992 (Orig. 1927). *The Life of the Buddha as Legend and History*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publications.

Toussaint, G. C. 1933. Transl. of *Le Dict de Padma. Padma Thang Yig. Ms. de Lithang*. Paris: Ernest Leroux.

Tucci, G. 1949. *Tibetan Painted Scrolls* (volume I). Rome: Libreria Dello Stato.

Tucci, G. 1980 (Orig. 1970). *The Religions of Tibet*. Transl. from German and Italian by G. Samuel. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Zangbu, N. T. and F. Klatzel. 1988. *Stories and Customs of the Sherpas*. Kathmandu: Khumbu Cultural Conservation Committee.



Ladakhi bus traveler (Kenneth Hanson)