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Niels Gutschow and Charles Ramble

## UP and DOWN INSIDE and OUTSIDE

Notions of Space and Territory in Tibetan Villages of Mustang

Landscape is not sheer objectivity. Landscape is part of us. We are not without landscape. Landscape is not without us. Landscape is not in front of us as an objective datum. Landscape is not just “inscape”, a merely subjective mood either.

(R. Panikkar. There Is No Outer Without Inner Space.  
In: *Concept of Space*, 1991.)

### Foreword: Places and People

The following considerations<sup>1</sup> are based on fieldwork in Lower Lo, otherwise known as Baragaon, in Nepal’s Mustang District. Although this name suggests an area comprising “twelve” villages, the area actually contains nine. Out of these, five (Dangardzong, Kag, Dzong, Dzar and Samar) are referred to as “capitals” (*gyalsa*) because of their special political status in the past. Another five villages – the Shöyul – form a distinct entity in terms of language and cultural patterns. Neither the area, nor the four villages (Kag, Khyinga, Dzar and Te) whose cosmic positioning will be discussed below, represent a homogeneous natural or cultural space. Although the building traditions in the area basically follows rammed earth techniques, the settlement pattern demonstrates diversity. The processes in Kag, Khyinga and Dzar seem comparable as the villages have developed immensely over the past decade in the wake of growing tourism, for which Baragaon was opened up in the seventies. Although Te is only

five hours up the Kali Gandaki it did not experience the same processes for two main reasons: first, the northern part of Baragaon, where Te is situated, was closed to tourists until the early nineties, and even now the village receives few foreign visitors; secondly, and more important, the rigid social network of the community controlled the settlement process and excluded the import of the new building types. Te’s conservatism enabled a great settlement to survive, although only fragmentarily. The pattern of Thangka, the oldest of the four sections of Te, allows us to imagine how Khalung, the ancient mound of Khyinga, might have looked when it was abandoned in the course of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. From 1991 to 1999 excavations were carried out by the “Kommission für allgemeine und vergleichende Archäologie (Bonn)”, covering 450 square metres of settlement areas with series of strata up to 6 metres. On the basis of these continuous excavations Hans-Georg Hüttel was able to work out a settlement sequence supported by C-14 and import data. According to Hüttel, “that site sequence covers and records some 1500 years of settlement history”. Based on building stratigraphy, “the beginning of the earliest settlement can be traced back to the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, while the third and last period of settlement came to an end, under not yet known circumstances, in the 15<sup>th</sup> century AD” (Hüttel 1998: 11).

Kag belongs to the Chügyü group of Yulkha Nga, literally “the five villages along the river”. The village lies at the confluence of the Dzong Chu and the Kali Gandaki rivers. The confluence is considered sacred as it carries the waters of Muktināth, a famous pilgrimage

<sup>1</sup> Charles Ramble, anthropologist and Tibetologist, started his fieldwork in Baragaon in 1980 and completed his DPhil dissertation titled “The Lamas of Lubra: Tibetan Bonpo Householder Priests in Western Nepal” in 1984. Niels Gutschow, architectural historian, joined him in 1992, when both of them joined the “Nepal-German High Mountain Archaeology Project”, which until 1997 was sponsored by the German Research Council with the specific aim to gather informations about the settlement process by way of interdisciplinary research. While Ramble’s work focusses much on scriptural evidence, Gutschow’s work is based on the survey of Kag, Te and Khyinga. Both spent time working together in Kag in June 1994, in Te in July 1996 and finally in Dzar in February 1998. Maps are based on joint fieldwork with Robert Kostka in Kag in October 1991, on maps of Kag and Te (1996) by Robert Kostka and of Khyinga (1996) by Erwin Heine.

All maps are drawn by Niels Gutschow, while visual representations of *rigsum gönpo* and the Lords of Place were drawn by Bijay Basukala and Anil Basukala. Nyima Dandrul and Angye Gurung were not only vital in fieldwork but remain much-loved friends.



site four hours walk up the valley. Besides the modern administrative capital of the district, Jomosom, and the royal capital of Lo Monthang in the North, Kag is the largest settlement in Mustang, and until two generations ago its densely built-up core area preserved the largest clustered settlement of Mustang and even Nepal. The castle and the settlement that developed around it were located on the fan of the Dzong river at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century to occupy an important link road between the Gangetic plains and the high plateau of Tibet. The castle probably served to protect a tax station and continued to be used by the governors of the Rana regime until 1951. The village witnessed a dramatic change in settlement pattern with the arrival of a nobleman from Jumla, who placed his two-storeyed house, with its courtyard, beside the existing settlement in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. That house turned out to be the nucleus of an independent settlement cluster, which was named the "outside" cluster in opposition to the cluster "inside", that is inside the two gates that provided access to the old core area. A third cluster of courtyard houses developed north of the core after 1920 and is continuing to expand. An equally dramatic change took place in 1974, when the settlement expanded south across the river. This new settlement of detached houses, which lies beyond the complex designated by "outside" and "inside", developed almost exclusively to serve tourism.

As early as the seventeenth century a chronicle refers to Kag having sixty estates (*drongba*), that is, households with certain rights and duties in the village assembly. In 1998 only 57 estates are listed. Of these, only 41 are manifest as actual households. Six have been extinct for quite a time, while 10 have been absorbed by other estate holders.

Apart from these estates there are households that are classified as "hearths" (*meptra*). While the term *meptra* may be used in a general sense to signify any category of household, including an estate, it is also used in this specific way to denote a household that, by implication, has a hearth and nothing else. Hearths are exempt from the payment of most taxes and the provision of personnel for civic duties on the grounds that they possess little or no land. This is true of ten of the hearths: eight are occupied by widows and two by low-caste artisans, respectively a family of blacksmiths and a family of tailors. The eleventh is the landed estate of the lord himself which, in spite of its prosperity, is classified as a hearth since its owner is not subject to the payment of local taxes or the tenure of village office. There are, then, altogether 52 hearths, loosely defined. Four leats irrigate the cultivated area which forms five clusters on both sides of the Dzong river. The area includes orchards but no grassland.

Khyinga belongs to the Dzar-Dzong group of Yulkha Druk, literally “the six villages centered on Dzar and Dzong”. The village is located some five kilometres up the Dzong river, about 150 metres above the river bed. The history of the settlement, according to Hans-Georg Hüttel, dates back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century. The main site of activity was Khalung mound, which witnessed almost continuous settlement until the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. After a hiatus of about hundred years a new settlement developed some 500 metres west of the mound, although the remaining structures, which are all in ruins now, suggest a 19<sup>th</sup> century origin. This “old” settlement of Khyinga, which is referred to as Nang (“inside”), has been deserted since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Not all the 18 estates (*drongba*) of the old settlement moved

directly to the “outside” (Phi) settlement, that developed as a two-storeyed cluster incorporating courtyards. The last household left Nang in 1991 in order to build a new house along the road leading from Jomsom to Muktināth. Since 1981 fifteen more households have decided to leave the settlement “outside” in favour of detached “modern” houses. Including those households that were only recently granted land rights, Khyinga counts 36 hearths in 1998.

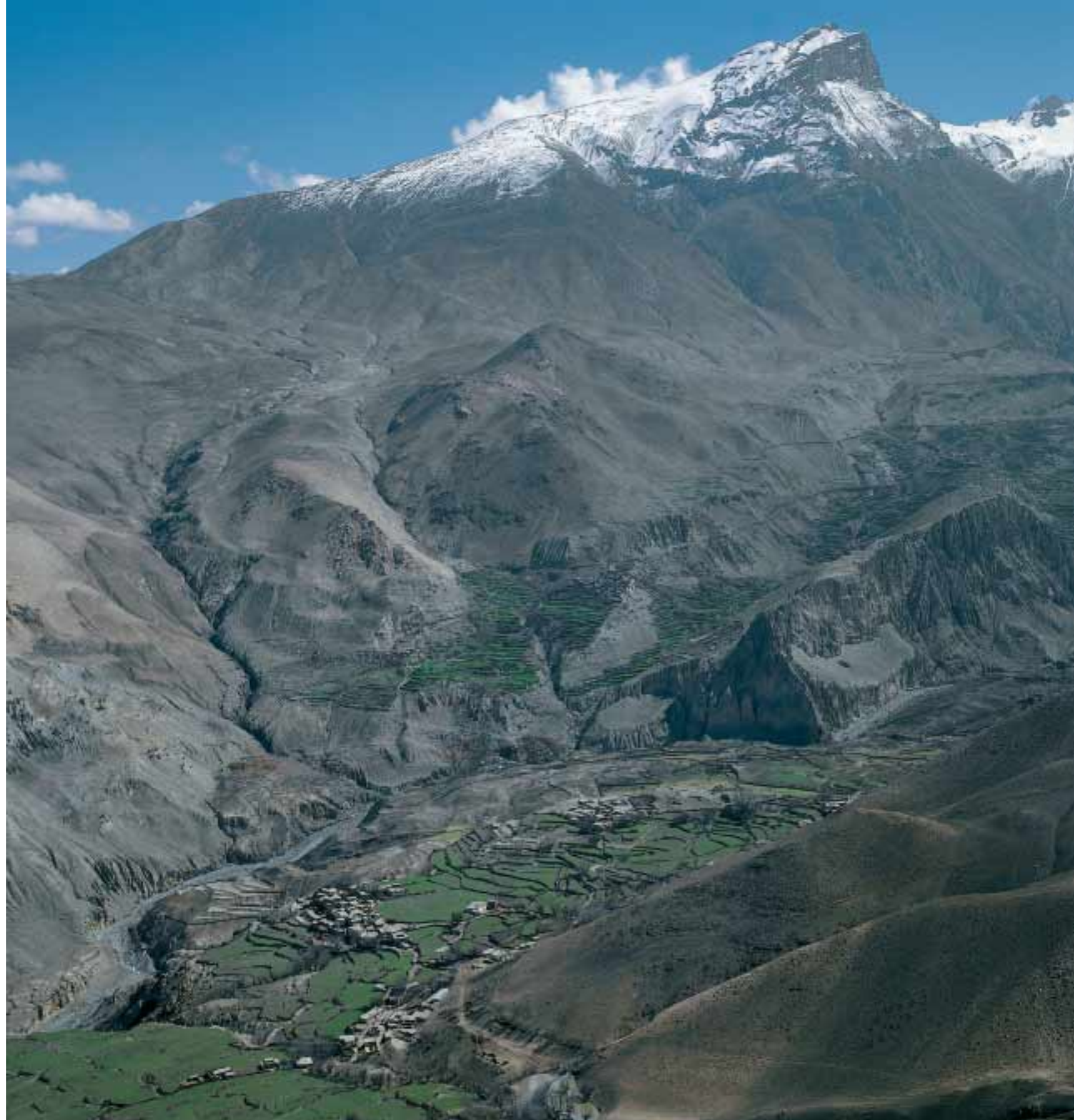
The mother-leaf of Khyinga originates 3 kilometres away below Purang and passes 5 sluices before it reaches a large reservoir. The barley area is irrigated through the sluices, while the wheat area is irrigated from the reservoir. As in Kag, the cultivated area is concentrated into two clusters, incorporating small orchards but no grassland.



*Kag: view from a helicopter, photo  
Robert Kostka, 31 October 1991*



*Khyinga: view towards north with  
Dzong Palden in the back, photo Robert  
Kostka, 5 May 1997*



**Dzar** represents the centre of the three villages which form the southern half of the Yulkha Druk, the six villages of the Muktināth Valley. The castle crowns a prominent ridge in the valley at a height of 3520 metres. The settlement developed along this ridge in a strip below the castle. At the northern end stands the Chöde and at the southern end are two impressive palace-like buildings of two noble families. The main trail to Muktināth runs south of these houses across a saddle that marks the end of the ridge. If – as Dieter Schuh (1995: 53) suggests – the dukes of the Muktināth Valley were Tibetan noblemen who established their rule there in the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, we may assume that the castle of Dzar was built not much later than that of Kag. In contrast to Kag and Khyinga, Dzar retained

a unique continuity of its settlement until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when individual houses came up below the ridge. A nunnery and two temples existed on the slope south of the village. One of these two temples, Tshultrim Gompa, moved to a new location near the village two decades ago. Dzar has a total of 70 hearths, which include 25 estates and 9 noble families. The households of the latter are exempt from village duties and therefore, as in the case of Kag, do not count as estates.

The cultivated land of Dzar is scattered over a large area which includes as much pasture and barren land as irrigated fields. Where the fields are adjacent to the cultivated area of Purang, they are fed by canals that carry water from the Muktināth springs. The entire



*Dzar: view from the east towards the valley of the Kali Gandaki, photo October 1991*



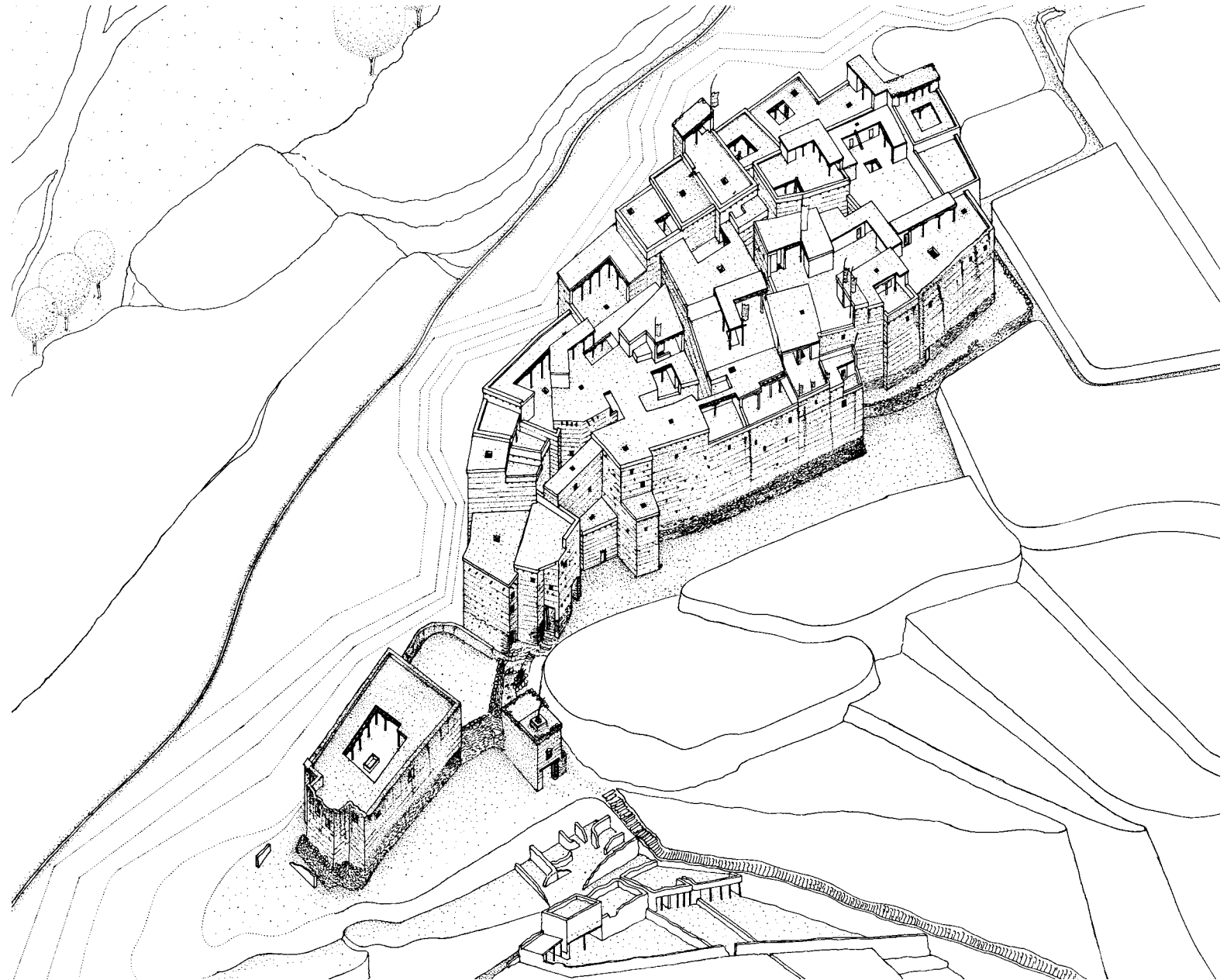
western part of the fields is fed by rivulets that originate on the slope of Yakgawa mountain. The water is collected in a series of reservoirs and distributed along a system of small canals.

Te is one of the Shöyul Nga, literally “the five low-lying villages” forming the third of the groups that make up Baragaon. Although we

know very little about the early history of Te, one document from the village archive (see Ramble/Seeber 1995) tells us about the origin of the six clans that came to reside in the “White Garuda-Fortress” of Te (Teyul Khyungdzong Karpo), the first sector of the settlement. Centuries ago – possibly at the time the Khalung mound of Khyinga was deserted – the first two clans came from Kog, which was abandoned

*Te: reconstruction of the oldest of the four clusters, Thangka. Axonometric view from the south, drawn by Bijay Basukala, November 1996*

*Opposite  
Te: view from the northern ridge into the valley floor, photo Jaroslav Poncar, August 1997*









following the collapse of the irrigation system in heavy rain. Another clan originated in Butra. The name Butra appears in an early document from Te as a synonym for Putra, a small village on the opposite side of the Muktināth Valley to Khyinga. While it is likely that the name Putra is nothing more than a modern pronunciation of the same name, “Butra” is now reserved for a settlement – or a part of the same village – that was long ago destroyed in a landslide. Following the disaster, the Butra clan is said to have spent a period in Tshethang Dzong, a ruined settlement that stands on Te’s territory just north of the Muya La pass.

We assume that at a certain stage of development, 31 estates – which are recorded in an early document – were located in the Garuda-Fortress some hundred years ago. Then a second cluster was set up on a neighbouring plateau, possibly Sumdu, then the third cluster, Töpa, and finally Yangba. Probably three or four generations ago the 31 estates were split up into 48 (including two estates which today are in village ownership): an auspicious number, which at a certain time must have been equally shared in dozens by the four sectors of the village. Among other civic tasks, the care of one of the four Rigsum Gönpo (Triple Protectors – see below) has been allocated to each sector.

Te lies within easy reach of Kag or Dzar, following either the Kali Gandaki valley or crossing the Muya La pass, which marks the boundary between the Yulkha Druk and the cultural and linguistic enclave of the Shöyul. Located in the valley of the Narsingh Khola, the four settlement clusters are surrounded by an extensive cultivated area at a height of 3000 to 3100 metres. Two leats originated from the Narsingh river until recently. One leat was destroyed beyond repair only a decade ago, while the second leat was repaired by the Non-Government Organisation “Care Nepal” in 1997, using modern building materials. The main leat, which irrigates more than two-thirds of the fields is brought from a far source high up in the mountains to be split into eleven sub-canals.

## Inside and Outside

### Introduction

Seven years ago the philosopher Panikkar made a statement that has to be considered before we present the material that illustrates various levels of inner and outer space. Panikkar said: “There is no outer without inner space”. Referring to human beings, he states that “the dichotomy between inner and outer space corresponds to the

opposition between subject and object. The outer space is considered to be ‘over there’, it is ‘objective’, even if all objectivity were to be a projection of the mind. ... The inner space, on the contrary, is supposed to be within us, it is ‘subjective’, it belongs to the inner structure of the knower, the human being” (Panikkar 1991: 15).

If we address the level beyond the human being, the space “over there” would correspond to the space of the settlement while the inner space is the house as a shelter. Not particularly in Mustang, but in neighbouring regions the house is equated with the human body: threshold, stacked storeys and roof are seen as feet, body and head. Windows are stylised to such an extent that their symbolic role as eyes does not allow for any functional use – they are in fact blind. The interior is in some cases even equated with the uterus as the place of origin, which represents the ultimate refuge. On the following level the settlement itself, which in Mustang until recently was a collective shelter, a built cave with many individual rooms and passages, becomes the inner space. Another step beyond would include the cultivated area, which is inseparable from the settlement. It is sustained by the irrigated fields, which in an oasis culture reflects the amount of available water. Beyond the cultivated area lies the barren land, which is, in the perspective of the settlement, the outer space. Yet on another level, this outer space is again identifiable as an inner space: the surrounding mountains define a valley with grazing grounds for goatherds and forests which supply firewood. Beyond such a natural space lie larger entities which are culturally or politically defined. Baragaon, for example, represents a political entity and even the villages of Chügüyu, Shö Yul or Dzar-Dzong mirror political entities based on century-old traditions.

The following discussion focusses on the village and its surrounding cultivated area as the inner space as opposed to an outer space that is wild. The inner space is not only clearly defined by processions, but also protected on various levels. The Three Protectors clearly guard the inner space against those evil influences that originate outside. And on the occasion of rituals the Lords of Place are invited to reside in the inner realm, the *maṇḍala*, that ideally represents a circle and a cross oriented to the four directions of the universe. While the four sets of Three Protectors govern the horizontal level, the Lords of Place guard the inner space along a vertical axis, defining the Zenith – usually a male god representing the mountain – and the Nadir – usually the female Lady of Water.

Katia Buffetrille recalls (1996: 85) in the context of “flying mountains” that *stūpas* built in the four directions of a place or territory function not only as a means of “bringing a territory under subjugation





*Te: Thangka, the first settlement cluster called metaphorically the 'Garuda-Fortress', photo April 1992*

tion", but they fix such entities to the ground to prevent them from flying away. She assumes that the four *stūpas* are boundary markers that "define a protective enclosure, a closed world where society is in order and which the gods protect".

We are trying to go a step further, documenting with four examples exactly what the "protective enclosure" encloses. But do the Lords of Place define an axis that can be equated with the pillar and the cosmic axis? If so, the set of Protectors would serve as the pegs of a pyramidal tent with the Pholha on top: an interior space is created, a collective shelter.

Inside (*nang*) and outside (*phi*) as terms to denote the historical sequence of a settlement's spatial development

When used in the context of a village the terms "inside" and "outside" reflect a process of growth and change. "Inside" defines the area one enters once one passes the gate, which used to be shut at night. Traces of such gates can still be seen in all four villages that are presented here. The gates were just added to the entrance passages which were nothing more than a hole left in the cluster of houses. The outer ring of houses provided the outer walls, which were of a defensive



*Kag: the lanes within the 17<sup>th</sup> century settlement cluster are almost entirely covered, photo April 1992*

character. The first settlement cluster of Te was thus called metaphorically the “Garuda- Fortress”. Such clusters not only represented something “inside”, but also something essentially “interior”, as the passages were almost entirely covered. Light came into the uppermost floor from above, while the rest was left dark like a cave. Obviously, an interior space was intentionally created in opposition to the vast expanse of the outer space with its glaring sun.

The cluster of Kag developed continuously over a period of 250 years. In contrast to the other village clusters, an open space was left at the entrance to the castle, and this served as the stage for ceremonial dances. Like the concentric layers of an onion, Kag expanded until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when a nobleman from Jumla arrived,

bringing with him a new building tradition. He set his house and those for his retainers beside the existing cluster, thus establishing the nucleus of a cluster of houses “outside” the gate and away from the core. After 1920 a move from the enclosed core to the new “outside” started. By 1998 this move had resulted in an almost complete desertion of the cluster, which has become a symbol of backwardness. The global move from darkness to light, from an interior to an exterior had reached Mustang as the architectural ideals of the wider world became more familiar: sons of the second and third generation have been trading in the lowlands, engaged in the gold trade from Singapore and Hong Kong, and are now working in Korea and Japan. The four-storeyed rammed-earth structures have been razed to the ground to salvage timber for new constructions. Ironically, the first move back into the core area occurred in 1997, when a low-caste woman from Kag married a Chettri from the hills beyond the Annapurna who had served in the village as a labourer for a couple of years.

In Khyinga the division of “inside” and “outside” into two distinct spatial entities also represents an established pattern. It refers to the gate (*gyego*) which once provided entry to the “old” settlement which was located above the steep slope that leads 160 metres down to the river Dzong Chu.

Although located at the southeastern corner of Nang (“inside”), together with a few more elements vital to a settlement, the gate has, as in so many other Tibetan villages, to be understood as a focal point. South of it there was once a passage rather than a formal gate. Above the passage a large prayer wheel was meant to bless those who were just passing into the village. Next to it is still a *chörten* on a square base, more of the nondescript two-stepped type than assignable to one of the eight prototypes known in a Tibetan context. Near the gate stands a huge poplar tree and almost woven into it a Rigsum Gönpö, the protective *chörten*-triad that is often found as a marker of space, invariably defining an “inside” in opposition to an “outside”. These five essential elements are so near to one another, that one might well speak of a centre that combines the symbols that stand for a Tibetan village. More of a concrete border between “inside” and “outside” is formed by a narrow alley. The name Tsangkele Harak, lit. “nest”, vividly expresses the confinement of the alley, only 140 to 200 cm wide, a kind of leftover between the two entities of the settlement.

Although most of Nang is in ruins, traces of the former walls can still be identified. Only in 1991 did the last household leave the old settlement, thus putting an end to a process that began in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Exact information cannot be obtained. But Khamsung, for example, remembers that the house of his family in Nang col-



lapsed in 1920. The walls of the neighbouring houses show similar signs of age. Long ago all the walls were taken down in order to salvage beams and joists for the new house that was built “outside.” Eight out of the 18 *drongba* had more than one “house” – a situation that does not differ from other settlements in the region. Some houses were exclusively used for cattle on the ground floor level and to store grass and straw. In 1998, eight houses, representing in fact half of the 18 *drongba*, still retain their roofs and are actively used for storage purposes. In 1991, when the last household of *drongba* status decided to leave Nang, the old village *gompa* with its neighbouring kitchen quarter located in the centre of the 19<sup>th</sup> century cluster was demolished to salvage timber for the construction of a new *gompa* southeast of the village.

Of the 18 formal *drongba* constituting the village community, the only *drongba* that is found in Phi is owned by Palsang Phura. No doubt this is the oldest house in Phi. The villagers admit that the house “must be more than a hundred years old”. With the establishment of this house, the development of Phi might have started at the beginning of the century. Surprisingly, this house is built on top of one of the Lords of Place, who is identified variously as Yulza Daro or Üki Dakpo. The Lord of Place emerges from the ground in the shape of a large rock, to which a small altar is added. The Lord is worshipped daily, while a pagan *lhawen* priest brings offerings on the occasion of full moon in the fourth month. A few weeks later he will climb the roof of the house: facing the high mountains he will pray for the well-being of the cattle which are taken to the high pastures on that day.



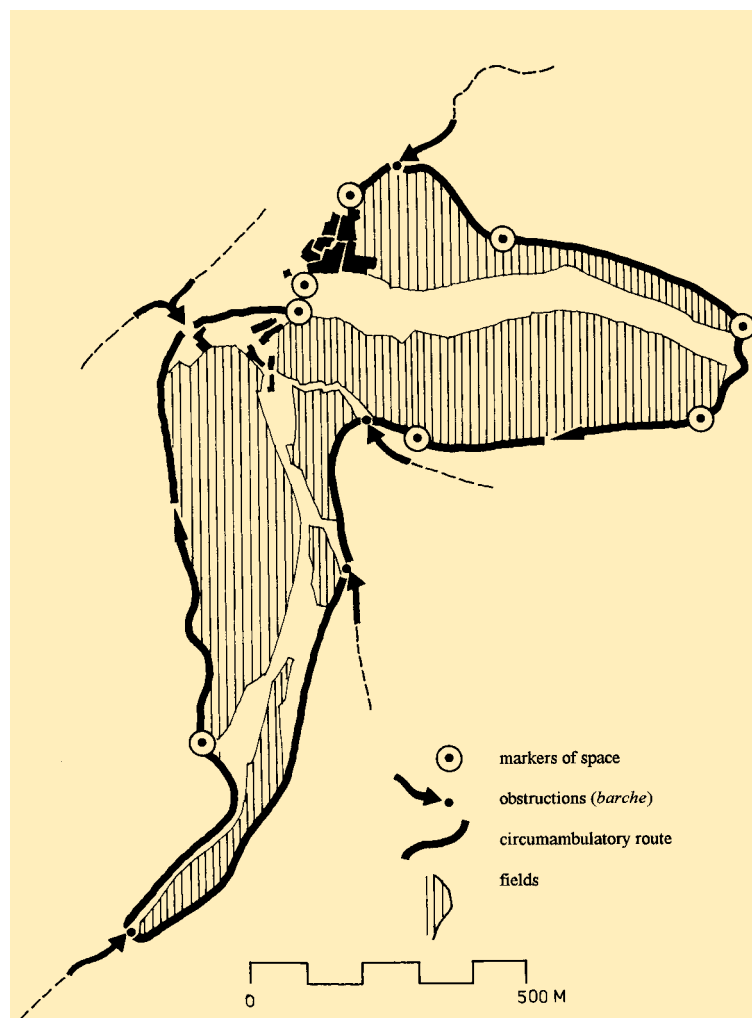
*Khyinga: the symbolic gate which once provided entry to the “old”, 17<sup>th</sup> century settlement cluster, photo July 1996*

## Circumambulatory routes

### Introduction

Circumambulations separate a particular area from its surroundings. The defined area represents an “inner” space in opposition to an “outer” area, which might constitute the “inner” area of yet a different entity or level of space. The Cār Dhām of India, for example, mark the corners of the subcontinent and a visit to each of the sites in turn constitutes one of the most extensive circumambulations in the world. The most basic circumambulation, on the other hand, addresses the sanctum of a temple or even more so the *chörten*, as the continuous encircling of the symbol of the Buddha and his Teachings represents the accepted way of worship. On the following level it is

*Kag: the ritual circumambulation of the fields (lukor) is punctuated by sixteen halting places. While three of these mark the northern and southern boundary of the village core as well as its centre, eight more are classified as markers of space. Further halting points represent obstructions against evil forces that threaten to enter the realm of the cultivated area.*



either the settlement proper or the extended habitat which incorporates the cultivated area. This is very much true for an oasis culture where the source of water and thus the extent of irrigated land is limited. It is essentially an unchangeable entity. Natural calamities can eliminate it but it cannot be extended beyond the limits set hundreds of years ago.

For the four examples presented here the habitat is clearly defined. Surplus water has been used to feed orchards but it is believed that new fields have not been claimed for generations. On the contrary, endangered terraces are frequently left unrepaired and are subsequently lost, while the rivers have destroyed main canals and eroded fields. In general one can say that irrigated land has been decreasing for at least three generations and since other sources of income have developed, farming no longer seems desirable.

When a *lhawen* priest of Dzar invites the eight Lords of Place, he explicitly invites them to the village and into its *kyingkhör* or *maṇḍala*. The priest's invocation does not clearly state what the “circle” (literally, a *maṇḍala* denotes a circle) incorporates. It can be the very place at which he officiates, but it can also be the cultivated and settled area that is encircled by the annual *lukor* procession. It is this territory for which he is asking the protection of the Lords of Place. Thus consecrated, the area “inside” the *khyingkhör* is protected from malevolent forces that try to enter the circle.

The orientation of the circle is achieved on yet another level. Only in Khyinga are the Three Protectors found along the encircling route, marking the four directions of the compass. In Te the route is punctuated by eight stops, in Kag by 16 stops. In both cases the numbers constitute a multiple of four, but it remains difficult to identify an oriented model. They are more convincing border markers, which define one area in opposition to the neighbouring one. Every “outside” can in fact be an “inside” and, as was already said, every “inside” an “outside”. In Te, for example, ritual waste is even disposed across such a border: the neighbouring “inside” of Tshug thus becomes a dumping ground, absorbing polluted material.

### Kag: *lukor*

In the fourth month of the Tibetan calendar, in May, the young people of the Chöde – the monastic institution of Kag – and practically all the young people of the village participate in a ritual circumambulation of the entire cultivated and settled area. The procession is thus called “walking around the cultivated area” (*lukor*). As the participants carry sacred books on their head, it is also called “the scrip-



ture circuit" (*chökor*). While the young people set out for the procession, the old ones proceed to the Chöde to prepare consecrated food (*tshok*), to be distributed to the participants.

On the occasion of the ritual, the constable of the village makes an early round to place piles of stones, called *thowo*, at all halting points. Later, he, three women and two old monks accompany the procession upto the third halting point. From there they return. They will meet the procession again near the reservoir at the eighth halting point.

The procession starts at the northern entrance of the village (1), the former gate that closed the extended cluster at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Facing north, an image of the protective grandfather, the *meme*, is moulded in clay against the wall in half-relief. As part of the ritual of renewal that confirms the protectiveness of the exemplary couple of "Grandfather" (at the northern gate) and "Grandmother" (near the southwestern entrance), the figure is renewed annually. The path leads north along an extended wall of mani stones and stops first at a *kudung* (2), a *chörten*-structure that serves as a receptacle for a person's remains. The halting point marks the edge of the settlement beyond the former archery field, that has been built on over the past two generations. Some 50 metres north the procession stops again at another *kudung* called Jin Chödro (3) which is placed in the middle of the road to protect the village against unnamed demons who threaten the village from the north. A similarly protective *chörten* is seen on the crest of the hill north of Kag, powerfully protecting the path leading to Lo and Tibet. At Jin Chödro the path makes a sharp turn to lead along a wall that encircles the fields called Shön. Below a meditation retreat in the cliffs the procession stops (4) to pay respect to the caves. The easternmost tip of the cultivated area which is named Tharkog is marked by a stone boulder (5), which does not represent a particular divinity. Such markers are not necessarily religious sites. They may be classified as "sub-sacred" and as such they collectively contribute to the definition of the territory. Only in a set do these markers assure the safety and prosperity of the cultivated area – the *lu*. They somehow emerge from a dormant state on the occasion of the procession, having received a stroke of red or white colour in order to be recognised. A narrow trail now leads down, crosses the river, climbs the cliff on the opposite side and there crosses the upper leat, Shango Yüra. There, a rock (6) marks the easternmost tip of the cultivated area, Tangasa. Like the boulder mentioned above this rock serves as a marker. Since 1974 the rock has been located in an orchard encircled by a wall. On the occasion of the ritual circuit a section of the wall is broken down to allow the procession to proceed



along the prescribed route. The sacred scriptures are placed upon the rock, refreshment is brought from the village, the participants enjoy songs and dance. After an hour's break the procession is resumed, leaves the orchard through a gate and continues along the edge of the cultivated area towards the reservoir (7). It is probably this important source of water that is honoured by this halt. After another fifty metres the procession stops near a rock which is not merely a marker but identifiable as the seat of Tsen Khyampo (8) the "Wandering Demon". Now the route turns south and stops where the path coming from Lubra crosses Shango Yüra, the leat that serves most of Kag's fields with water. A temporary pile of stones (9), *thowo*, is erected there, visualising an obstruction, *barche*, that bans those demons who try to enter the village. Along the southern tip of the territory, the cultivated area is reduced to a narrow strip of fields called Khalung. Another pile of stones (10) obstructs the main path that reaches the village along the Kali Gandaki – in fact the main road from the plains up towards Tibet. The route turns and leads along that main road for a short stretch before it turns down to the lowest terraced area called Nama. At the southern tip of the terrace another *thowo* (11) piled up for this occasion marks another halting point. The procession leads

*Kag: representation of the mythic grandfather at the northern gate of the village core, photo October 1991.*

now along the edge of the fields of Shung until it reaches the bridge (11) across the Kali Gandaki, where the evil spirits trying to enter the village from the west are blocked. From this bridge the route leads along the river Dzong Chu towards the bridge that crosses it. A double halt (13, 14) on either side of the bridge probably ensures the integrity of this important passage that links the core of the village to the fields south of the river. A few steps north the procession reaches the protective “Grandmother”, the *iwi* (15), who guards the southern periphery of the village core – only a generation ago there were inhabited houses south of this place. The procession finally reaches Deya (16), the village square west of the castle. In the old days the annual Shöntse dances used to be held here. In the early 17<sup>th</sup> century the first houses of Kag were built opposite the castle, thus giving shape to the square.

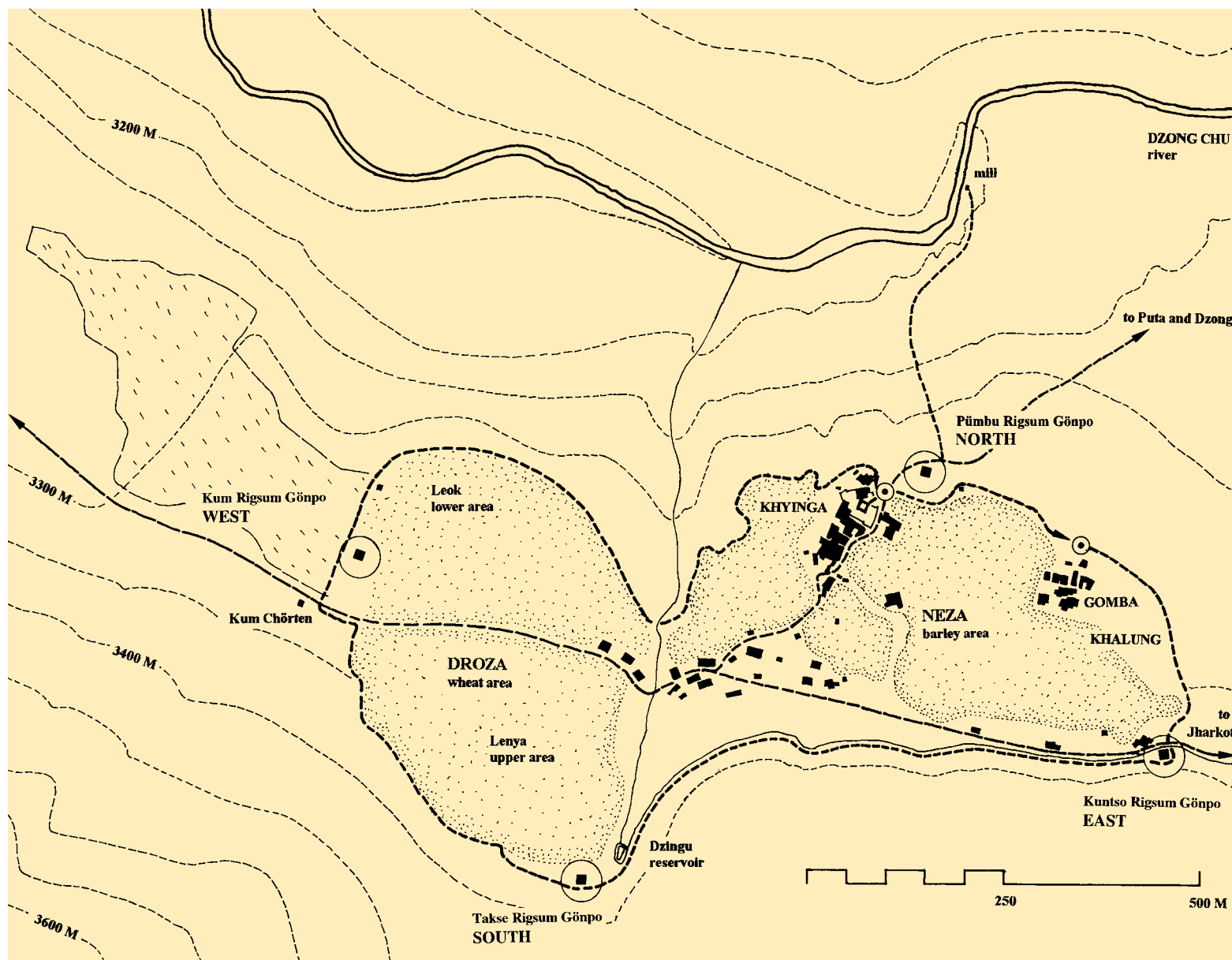
The procession clearly defines the territory of Kag on various levels. First, the clustered settlement is defined by the placement of the mythic couple, the “Grandfather” at the northern gate, where it commences and the “Grandmother” at the southern periphery. In neighbouring Dzar the couple, easily identifiable by oversized sexual organs, guards the southern entrance to the village. This constellation invites a comparison with pairs of aggressive guardians at temples in East Asia, invariably of an apotropaic nature. In this case the opposition of male/female seems appropriate to mark the line where a movement in meets a movement out. The entire cultivated area is strictly circumambulated along the edges. Halting places at the extreme ends of fields like Tharkog (5), Tangasa (6) and Khalung (10) convincingly demonstrate the purpose of the ritual in defining an area. While the halt near the path leading to Muktināth is dedicated to Tsen Khyampo’s rock (8), the four remaining roads which arrive at Kag’s territory from the Four Directions are blocked by obstructions in the form of “conspicuous” piles of stones which have to be considered as part of an invisible fence that wards off the evil influences that menace every settlement that is considered something confined and “interior”. These influences are considered to follow the roads used by humans. Obstructions have to be renewed annually to ensure their efficacy. The “obstruction” literally cuts (*che* – to be cut) the path, making the settlement inaccessible to all kinds of demons. These obstructions acquire the properties of the seats of Three Protectors, the Rigsum Gönpö, of other settlements (Khyinga, Te, Tangbe). The latter, too, are annually reconsecrated but remain as physical obstructions throughout the year. In Khyinga these Three Protectors even punctuate the processional route in the Four Directions. If the four obstructed entrances into the territory of Kag are seen as

means of defining the inner realm of a *maṇḍala*, the final destination of the procession, the village square, may be regarded as its centre. The description of the procession stresses the point that no particular category of gods is revered and no particular category of demons is fought off. Certain divinities, sacred structures and sub-sacred markers of a nondescript kind are found along the circuit. Small landmarks in the shape of piles of stones are even created for the occasion to visualise the halting places.

#### Khyinga: *lukor*

Once a year, in the fourth month, a set of sacred scriptures, the 16 volumes of the Yum (*Prajñāpāramitā*) are taken out of the village temple by the monks of Khyinga. As soon as the reading of the text is completed, the books are carried around the cultivated area in order to ensure blessings for the fields. Although a new village temple has been built a short distance from the settlement, the procession still starts at the site of the old *gompa*, which formed the central node of the old 19<sup>th</sup> century settlement called Nang – that is “inside” the gate. Only a few steps north it halts at a rock called Timbujang Dobcang, literally, the “rock north of the mortar” (*timbu*). The mortar in question is a nearby rock, containing a depression, that until recently was used by the community to grind red pepper. Incense offerings are placed upon the Timbujang Dobcang rock by those who reside in Khyinga Phi, that is “outside” the gate. After a short while the procession is continued, leading in between the stables and threshing grounds onto the small plateau north of the settlement. It passes not only the Rigsum Gönpö, that guards the northern direction, but it encloses the nearby Dhari-*chörten*, named after the stables (*dhara*) nearby. The route leads along the periphery of the fields of which quite a few have been abandoned in recent years. After some three-hundred metres a small pile of stones on the edge of an abandoned threshing ground indicates the place of the second halt. An opportunity is now provided for the people of Gomba, a small satellite settlement of Khyinga, which has served as a place of retreat since the beginning of the century, to present offerings to the books. After a short while, the procession continues, incorporating the entire mound of Khalung and meeting the main road and the main leat at Kuntso. Here, the Rigsum Gönpö that guards the East is enclosed by the circumambulatory route. For almost the entire southern line the route then follows the leat that feeds the reservoir situated between the two halves of Khyinga’s irrigated land – Neza, the barley area in the East and Droza, the wheat area in the West. After the incorporation of the southern Rig-





*Khyinga: the ritual circumambulation of the fields (lukor) is punctuated by Triple Protectors (Rigsum Gönpö) at topographically prominent locations. Map drawn on the basis of a survey scale 1:500 by Erwin Heine, 1995.*

sum Gönpö at Thaksi the procession leads along a solid wall of rammed earth that encircles the entire upper area (Lenya) of the wheat area. At the western tip of the fields called Kum the itinerary incorporates the Rigsum Gönpö that guards the western direction, but not the large Kum-chörten along the road and the large area of grassland beyond. The latter was walled around in 1982.

The lower area (Leok) is guarded by a wall only until the route leads

along the sharp edge of the slope that defines the end of the irrigated fields along the entire northern border. Having crossed the ravine Tangdzen Lungba, the route again follows the edge of fields with occasional diversions where the slope does not allow enough space for a path. The Rigsum Gönpö of Phumik that guards a ridge is not encompassed; along the edge of the “old” settlement (Nang) the procession returns to the point from which it departed.

To sum up, the circumambulatory route encompasses almost all irrigated fields of the settlement, leaving out the grassland in the west (which in the strict sense has to be subsumed under “cultivated” land insofar as it is irrigated) and the new orchards on the eastern slope beyond Khalung – all developed only within the past fifteen years. The route encompasses all stages of settlement, from Khalung, the ancient site, to Khyinga, Gomba and Ngo Dzongdzong, the new settlement, which together with a tract of dry steep slopes lies north of the leat. It is worth noting that not all the guardians of the four directions are encompassed by the procession. It seems that the guardians of space represent a second level of spatial definition and the two levels do not necessarily harmonise.

The historical dimension of the *lukor* procession cannot easily be explored. As mentioned earlier, it is likely that with the relocation of the settlement from Khalung to Khyinga after a hiatus of at least two hundred years, the “wheat area” was claimed. The marked difference in its terrace architecture leads to the conclusion that the reclamation of new land must have happened at a certain time and not continuously. It was probably an act of expansion that also needed the engineering of a main leat that feeds the large reservoir that today marks the dividing point between the two halves of the village’s irrigated areas. The present difficulties in the upkeep of the fields near Gomba at the edge of the northern slope and an increase in the number of households will eventually lead to the construction of a second reservoir at Kum in order to ensure the irrigation of at least part of the area that is now reserved as grassland. Today this grassland takes advantage only of occasional surplus water.

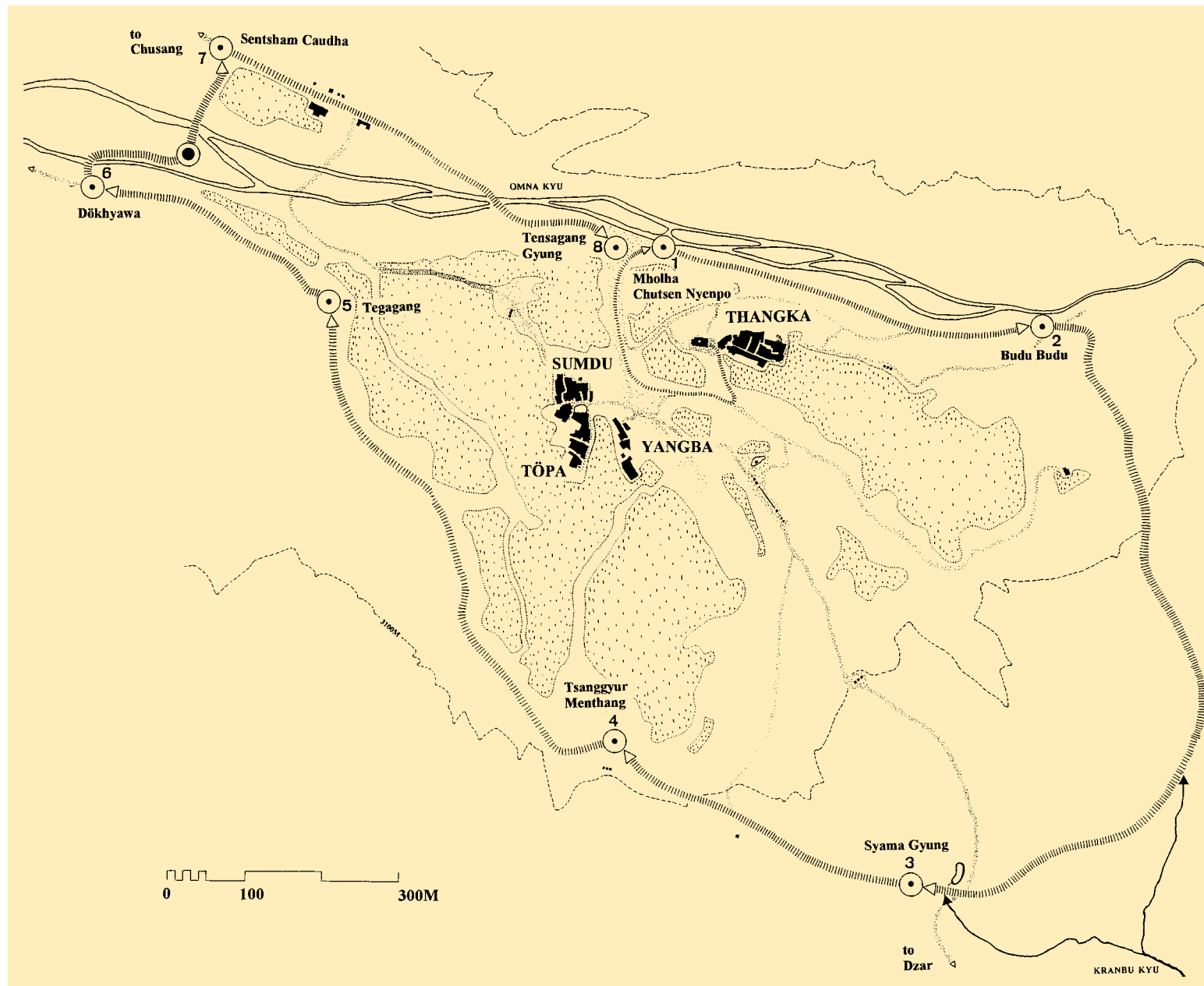
A redefined ritual may then mark the occasion when the circumambulatory route is diverted to respect the changing landscape of cultivation. The inclusion of a new area into the “defined” and “protected” territory of Khyinga will certainly be an act of cosmogonic proportions.

#### Te: *lukor*

On the occasion of the circumambulatory procession around Te, sixteen people carry sacred books around the *lu*, literally the “cultivated area” of the settlement. They are accompanied by musicians and every household sends its youngest girls and boys to participate. Altogether more than 150 people set out from the Lhang (the temple) on the spur of the plateau, called Thangka, that represents the place of the first settlement. The procession leaves through the main gate down into the Dangda Gyung, turns right, crosses one of the two meet-

ing places at the junction of the two ravines, passes below the aqueduct of the Mangtse Gyür and a *thowo* on the right side. This *thowo* is one of several piles of stones that are erected on the periphery of the settlement each year and daubed with red clay to “close” the village for the period – around two weeks – when the sweet buckwheat is in flower. Where the ravine that separates Thangka from the other three sections of the village opens up, the procession stops for the first time to bring offerings to the gods. Molha Chutsen Nyenpo, a female Lord of Place associated with water, is represented by a cube of stones, placed on a rock that emerges from the river Narshing Kyu. Besides offerings of effigies made of dough, incense and beer are given to the gods. The procession continues along the river bed to stop for a second time at a *labtse*, a heap of white stones by the side of Budu Budu, an onomatopoeically-named mineral spring. From there the procession crosses the lowest leat of Te’s irrigation system to start climbing at a white stone which serves as a marker. The path leads through a ravine, passes by abandoned fields of Baza which were once cultivated by the Lama from Gaugomba, follows the eastern irrigation canal and reaches the third stop beyond the main reservoir at Chödak Gang above the ravine called Syame Gyung. The procession has reached the highest spot, almost 200 metres above the rock of Molha Chutsen Nyenpo. The path now leads down to the *chörten* called Tsang-gyur Menthang, just below the Rigsum Gönpö that guards the southern direction. From here onwards the procession passes strictly by the edge of the cultivated area, down to the fifth stop at another set of three *chörten* at a place called Tegagang, literally the “saddle ridge”. Beyond the westernmost tip of fields, the procession continues on to reach a small spur called Dökhyawa. The name of this site refers to an annual ritual in which an exorcistic effigy (*dö*) is cast out (Seke *khyawa*) into the territory of the neighbouring community. The procession descends into the river bed to a path by an emerging rock which marks the ultimate border between the neighbouring territories of Te and Tshug. The procession does not stop here but across the river, where a pile of stones (*thowo*) coloured red indicates the border between the two territories along the main path. The path of the procession also divides Tshognam, a small settlement of only three houses that straddles two territories: “Upper” Tshognam, comprising the house and fields of the Nyingmapa *lamas* that for generations have served Te, belongs to the latter, while “middle” and “lower” Tshognam belong to Tshug. The place name Sentsham Caudha is a composite of the Seke term “border” (*sentsham*) and Nepali “rest place” (*cautara*). From here the procession turns eastward, crosses the river and reaches the last stop at Tensagang Gyung,





*Te*: the ritual circumambulation of the fields (*lukor*). It sets out from the gumpa in Thangka and then proceeds clockwise from the rock of Molha Chutsen Nyenpo (1) in the valley floor. The path is punctuated by eight halts at topographically significant places that mark the border of the territory. A rock that emerges from the river serves as a powerful marker between *Te* and the neighbouring territory of Tshug. Map drawn on the basis of a survey 1:2,500 by Robert Kostka and Erwin Heine, 1996

just opposite the rock of Molha Chutsen Nyenpo. After the eighth stop the circumambulation comes to an end. The sacred texts are ceremonially carried back into the Lhang, following the way up to Thangka, but encircling the building in order to enter the courtyard in a clockwise movement from the north. The procession is clearly addressed to the cultivated area, and follows

its perimeter at a distance. The cultivated area, however, is inseparably dependent on the source of water. That is why the path encompasses the main reservoir near the third stop, as well as the abandoned reservoir above Baza, which once served the entire stretch of fields east of Thangka. Both these main leats (A and B on the irrigation map) carry the water away from the bed of the Kranbu Kyu



*Te: a rock daubed with red colour in the middle of the Narsingh River marks the border between Te (in the background) and Tshug, photo July 1996*



*Te: a small heap of stones (thowo) defines the seventh stop of the ritual circumambulation of the territory and marks the border between Te and the neighbouring village, photo July 1996*

river that had made its way straight down to Dangda Gyung, the ravine north of Thangka. The two leats, of which one serves Thangka and the other the remaining three sections of the settlement, seem to embrace the territory defined by the circumambulatory path.

The processional path is punctuated by eight stops – indeed a meaningful figure which signifies the defined territory as an image of the oriented cosmos. This orientation serves as an image of the quadripartite cycle of the solar year: at the four nodal points of the year the sun is located in the cardinal directions on the circle of the ecliptic (Snodgrass 1990: 124). The order of directions is not clear, the numbers are not associated with a certain direction and if one were to draw two lines to connect 8 and 4 and 2 with 6, one would certainly not identify a meaningful centre. Instead, as the centre one has to consider the four sections of the settlement – again a meaningful constellation, which doubles the cosmic connotations. The starting point of the procession is defined neither by the east nor the north but by the Water Goddess. The rock of the goddess also represents the bottom of the vertical axis defined by the Place Gods. This axis represents the ninth and tenth directions, supporting the dome of the sky. The path itself has to follow topographical features that determine the possibility of arranging terraces. This means that the path represents a local feature, a tool to encompass the territory that in a ritual of renewal undergoes a cleansing ceremony: its life-ensuring qualities are reactivated.

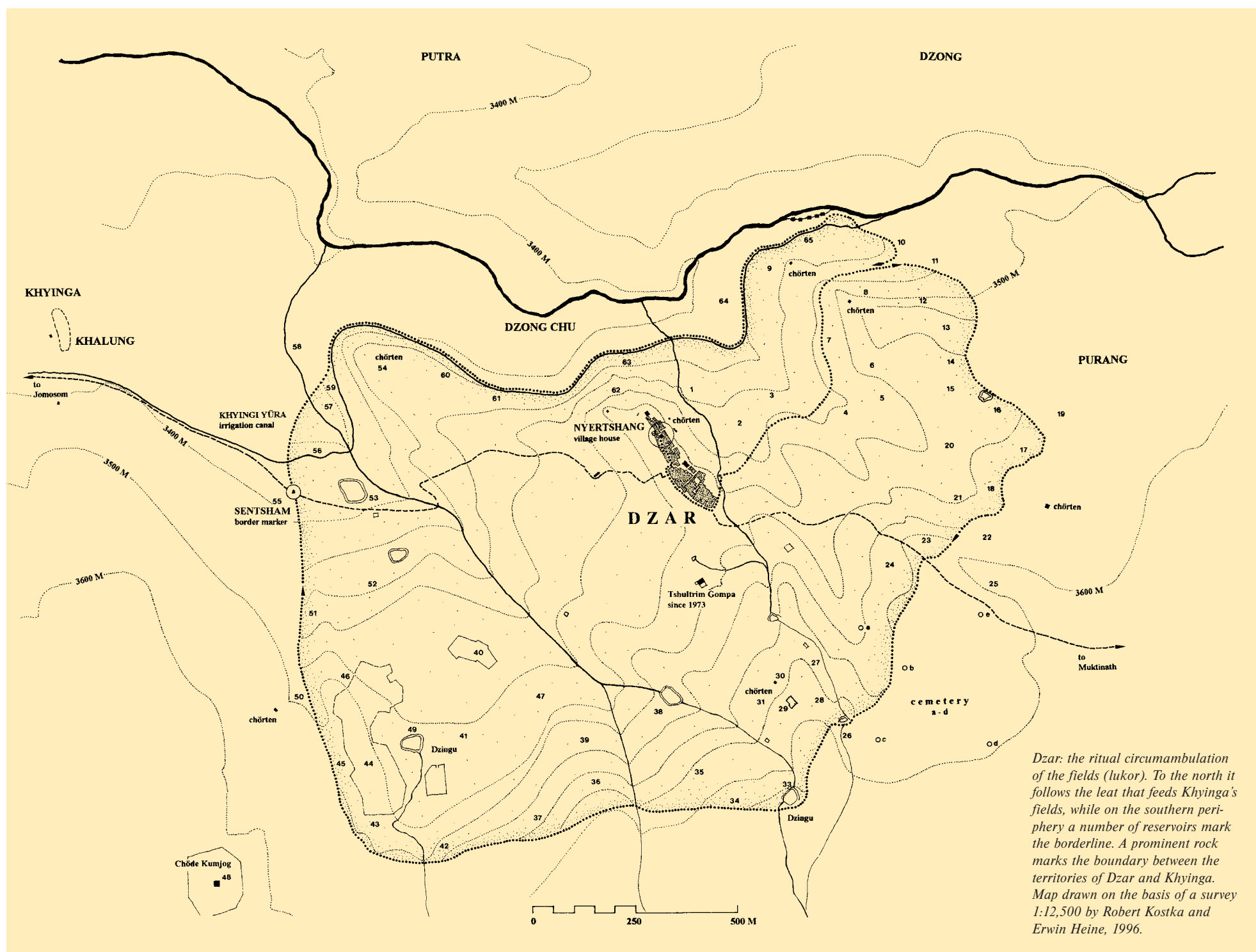
The number “eight” alone arouses cosmic associations. The four cardinal and intermediate directions have widely been considered as a means to define space, not only in the context of the Tibetan culture or in South Asia, but all over the world.

The *lukor* procession celebrates the source of life, water. It not only encompasses the fields but also the reservoirs. Extensive traces of abandoned fields can be observed along the slopes of the ravines in almost every sector of the cultivated area, especially at the head of the canals that branch off from the main leat below the reservoir. The procession incorporates all these as it incorporates the flow of water. It is most likely, therefore, that the processional route remained unchanged over centuries and might well reflect a very early institution, installed after the construction of the irrigation system.

#### **Dzar: *lukor***

As in the other villages, the circumambulation of the cultivated area is performed in the fourth month after the reading of the Yum has been completed. It starts at the Nyertshang, the village house in the

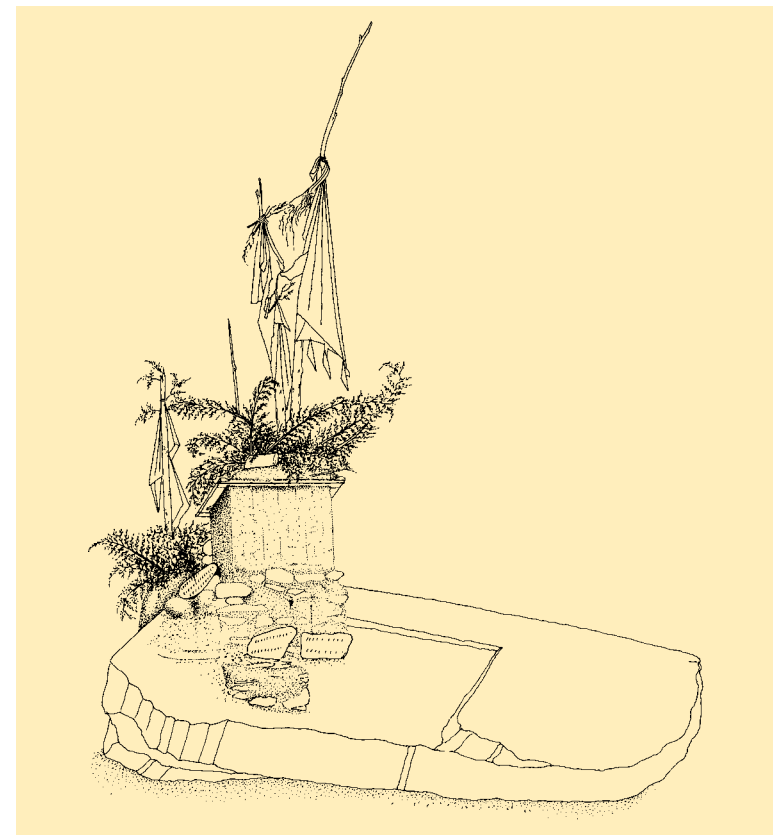




*Dzar: the ritual circumambulation of the fields (lukor). To the north it follows the leat that feeds Khyinga's fields, while on the southern periphery a number of reservoirs mark the borderline. A prominent rock marks the boundary between the territories of Dzar and Khyinga. Map drawn on the basis of a survey 1:12,500 by Robert Kostka and Erwin Heine, 1996.*

*Dzar:  
Above, left and right: the mythic "grand-  
mother and grandfather" (iwi-meme)  
pair, protecting the southern entrance  
into the village (photograph April 1992  
after the annual reconsecration).*

*Below: large rock representing the  
border marker (sentsham) between  
Dzar and Khyinga. The "inside" of one  
entity becomes the "outside" of the  
neighbouring one while passing the  
rock, photo February 1998.*



*Right: Yulza Daro as seen from the southwest. A cube in the shape of a "spirit  
house" (tsekhang) is placed on a protruding rock at the periphery of the settlement  
cluster. From its centre emerge juniper branches and sticks with flags; votive stones  
are placed on the rock, which also supports a fire pit for fumigatory offerings.*



middle of the settlement cluster and leaves the settlement through the gate with its protective images of *iwi* and *meme* moulded in clay. It then passes by Yulsa Daro, one of the eight Lords of Place, and turns around the southern tip of the cluster. The path leads through the threshing grounds and fields down to the Dzong river, where it starts to encircle an area that includes pasture and barren land. In contrast to the other three villages, the cultivated area of Dzar is scattered. There is not a main source of water that feeds a compact area, but a number of sources for patches of cultivated land. It then has to climb a steep ridge and cross the extended cemetery with five different locations where dead bodies are dismembered and left to the vultures. The subsequent part of the route is punctuated by reservoirs for storing the water that originates on the slopes of the Khatung mountain. On the western edge the route follows a ravine that forms a natural border, while in the south it follows the Khyingi Yūra, the only canal that feeds the fields of Khyinga. Where the route passes the road to Khyinga, a large rock is found which represents the border marker. The procession has its only stop on the meadow below the canal, where refreshments are served. Towards the end the route touches the Dzong river near the five mills before it leads up again and through the fields back to the village.

### The Muktināth Valley: real and narrative circumambulation

#### “Scripture-circuits” of the Valley

Although the people of each of the six villages in the Muktināth Valley circumambulate the fields of their respective settlements once a year, the circumambulation of the entire territory of the six is performed very rarely. There are seven occasions on which it is known to have been done in the last sixty years:

1. When the Kangyur was read in Chongkhor. Two circumambulations were made on this occasion. The text itself (108 volumes) was borrowed from Dzar in two parts. When the reading of half had been completed, it was carried around the valley by the people of Chongkhor and returned to Dzar. The second half was then borrowed and read, and carried around the valley before being returned.
2. A certain Pema Rigdzin, who had no sons, sponsored a full reading of the Dzar Kangyur in Chongkhor.
3. Soma Phurba (a monk) of Dzong sponsored a reading of the Dzar text in Dzong.

4. Daro of Putra sponsored a reading in his own house.
5. The abbot of Dzar sponsored a reading in Dzar itself.
6. A new copy of the Kangyur, printed in India, was brought to the monastery of Dzong. On this occasion the text was carried around the valley without having been read.
7. Chongkhor received its own copy of the Kangyur from India, and carried the text on the full circuit after a complete reading.

One significant difference between the circuit of the Muktināth Valley and the annual circumambulation of the individual villages may be the term by which each is known. The latter is usually referred to as a *lukor* “walking around the cultivated area” – that is, with the explicit intention of protecting it. Texts are also carried around, and for this reason the ritual is also known as *chökor*, “scripture circuit”. The full circumambulation of the Muktināth Valley, however, is known only as *chökor*, never *lukor*, a fact that identifies it more specifically as a Buddhist, rather than primarily agrarian, ritual.

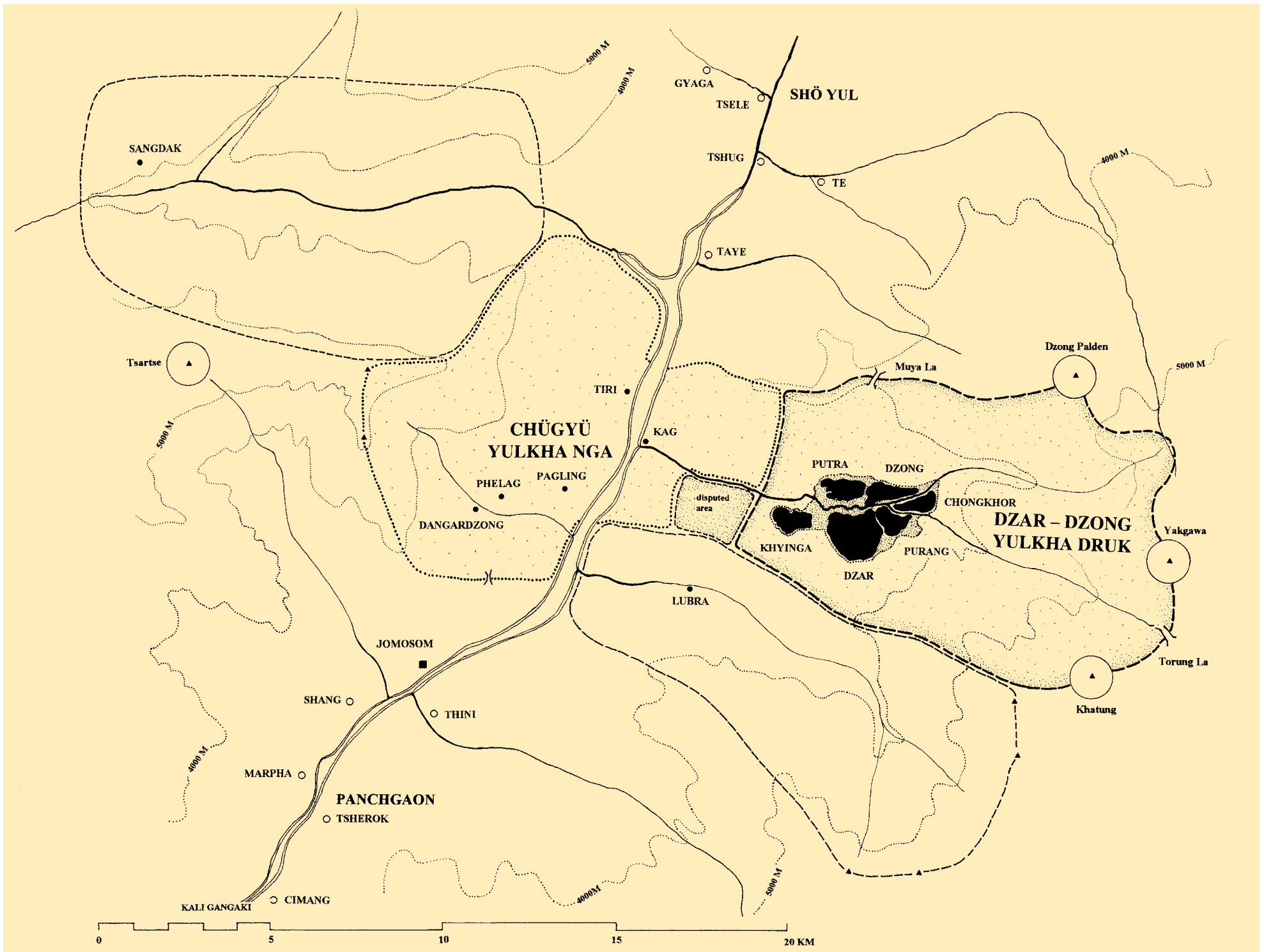
#### The invocation of the gods of the Muktināth Valley

It sometimes happens that a given territory is circumambulated in a metaphorical sense, through the recitation of a narrative journey. Such recitations are characteristic of ritual libations (*serkyem*), in which the numina of a series of named locations are invoked and propitiated. The itinerary implied in these texts usually begins far afield, and after passing briefly through vast expanses – for example, the entirety of Tibet, followed by more proximate regions – focuses on the area of immediate concern. This development has the effect of providing the area in question with an “address”, as it were, insofar as it situates the terminal point within a relevant cultural-geographical setting. Among the libation-texts that are recited in Baragaon, there is one that deals specifically with the Muktināth Valley as a whole. The invocation is performed by the Nyingmapa priests of the village of Chongkhor. There seems to be no single, authoritative version of the recitation. The summary given below is based on the version recited by one Pema Wangdrak. The invocation is divided into six parts. The locations that are named in each section are as follows:

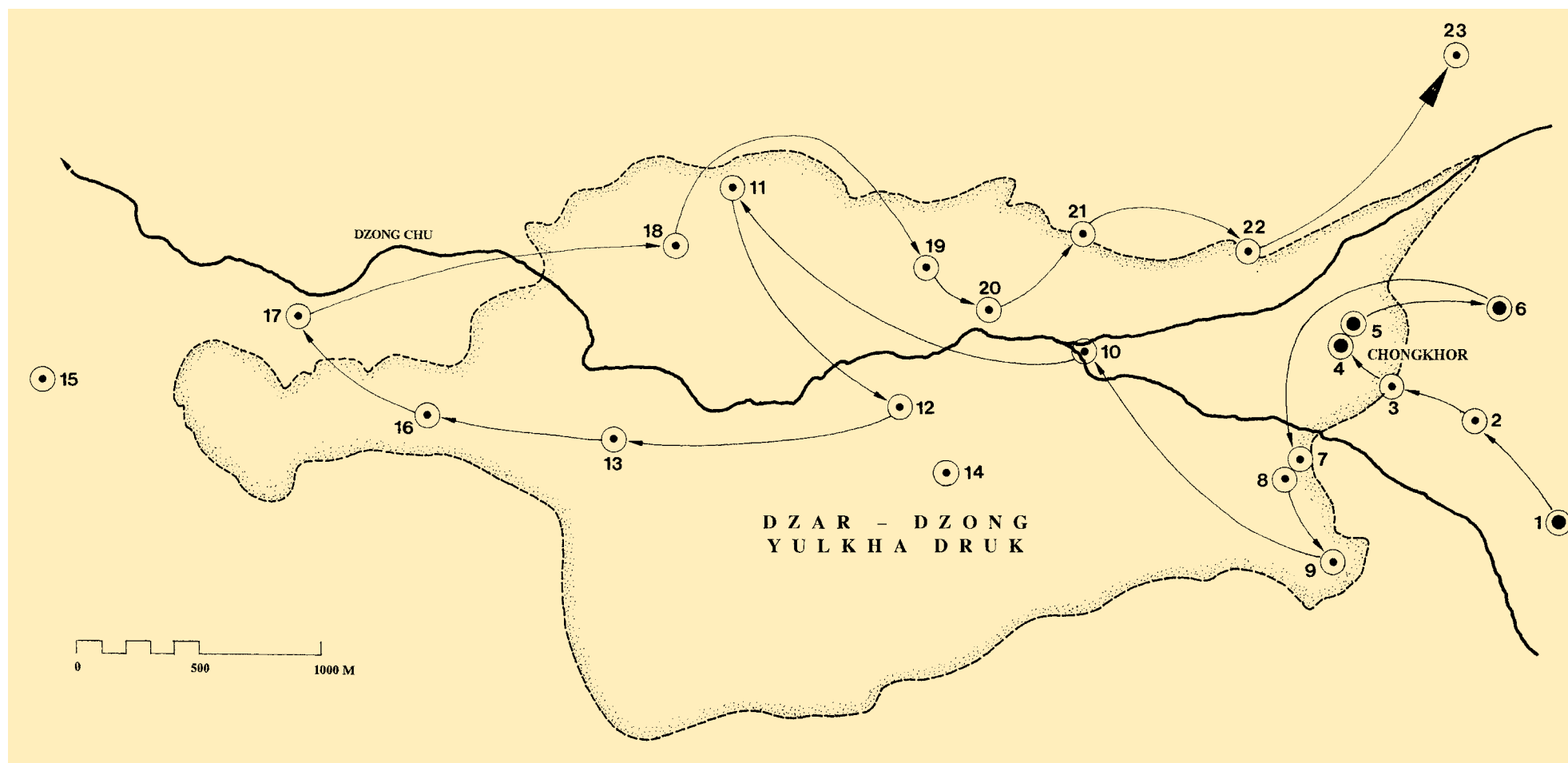
Part one: Western Tibet, Central Tibet and Eastern Tibet.

Part two: Upper and Lower Lo; Eastern Lo.

Part three: The five Shöyul of Baragaon; west of Baragaon (outside the Muktināth Valley); Panchgaon (south of Baragaon); the middle hills to the south; Dolpo to the west; Manang to the east.







*Above*

*Dzar-Dzong: ritual journey around and through the territory of the six villages (Yulkha Druk). On the occasion of the "scripture circuit" (chökor) the entire territory comprising the cultivated area of all six villages is circumambulated; an imaginary circuit, names 23 places, most of which are located within that territory.*

*Opposite*

*Muktināth Valley: territorial division into Dzar-Dzong or Yulkha Druk, the "six villages" and the neighbouring Chügü (lit. "the area in the vicinity of the river") or Yulkha Nga, the "five villages". A plateau between the two territories remains disputed. The neighbouring valleys of Lubra and Sangdak are isolated entities within Baragaon.*

Parts four, five, six: the Muktināth Valley, comprising the places that are marked on the map "Dzar-Dzong: ritual journey around and through the territory of the six villages". The numbers correspond to the following named sites: 1a. Pare Drakmar Pholha Jowo Shartsenpa, 1b. Pare ki Dütsen Nyenpo, 2. Campar phug, 3. Phawa sayi Jowo Shartsenpa, 4a. Chongkhor Göndag Nyenpo, 4b. Gompa Tsuglagkhang, 5a. Tshumbug Tingting Gyemo, 5b. Ngedro Chisu Gyebo, 5c. Norlha Yanglhamo, 6a. Kisha Lamo, 6b. Baga Shong, 7. Yangphagsa, 8. Garwa Tala, 9. Chumig Gyartsa (Muktināth), 10. Töce möce bardo

sumdo, 11. Putra Amo, 12. Dzargi Tana Gana (Tanag-go, natsog gata), 13. Hramkar Lali Gana, (14. Dzar Drugdre Sham), (15. Sarthang Alego), 16. Khyenga Lala Gana, 17. Khyendi Nana Gana (Khyenga Bon-na Goyang), 18. Putra Baza Aru, 19. Dzong-gi Dzongdag Nyenpo, 20. Ajo Jowo Zhung [la], 21. Baye Phugu, 22. Gompa Gyang, 23. Dagmo Trashi.

Note: nos. 14 and 15 are listed in an alternative version that was recorded from another priest of Chongkhor, but are not included in the recitation of Pema Wangdrak.

## Protection and blessing of the village territory through the Three Protectors (Rigsum Gönpö)

### Introduction

In order to understand the protective quality of the Rigsum Gönpö it seems useful to extend the scope of our view beyond its particular occurrence in the context of a settlement or a prominent topographical feature and even the cultural context of Mustang. Sets of three deities, worlds, symbols or mental dispositions are well-known in many religions.

In the Buddhist context, the most conspicuous and all-pervading set is

represented by the Three Jewels or *triratna* (Tib. *könchog sum*): the Buddha, the *dharma*, his Teachings, i. e. the truth expounded by him, and *saṅgha*, the followers living in accordance with this truth.

The idea of the Rigsum Gönpö – widespread in Mustang and Ladakh – probably transformed the concept of the Three Jewels into something quite different. Buddha Śākyamuni and Prajñāpāramitā were replaced by Mañjuśrī (Jampal) and Vajrapāṇi (Chagna Dorje), while Śaḍakṣari Lokeśvara (a particular form of Avalokiteśvara who incarnates as the Dalai Lama) obtained the central position. Together they symbolise the three virtues of Mahāyāna, namely wisdom, compassion and energy. While Avalokiteśvara stands for compassion and obtains the central and leading position, Vajrapāṇi is the *guhyapati*,

*Kag: location of Rigsum Gönpö on the endangered promontory between the Kali Gandaki and Dzong Chu rivers, photo October 1991*





who guards the esoteric knowledge of the adamantine vehicle of Buddhism, Vajrayāna. He holds the *vajra* in his right hand and the bell in his left hand – the two essential instruments of any tantric ritual. With a rosary-like strings of beads and a lotus in his hands he presides over those who are worshipped as his incarnation. The group of these three Bodhisattvas is found in many variations, as block prints, votive offerings like *tshatsha* or stone tablets, on *thangkas* and as sculptures in the context of Tibetan Buddhism. It is only in their manifestation in three-dimensional built form, that they are represented in an aniconic way. Only the colour allows one to identify the respective Bodhisattva. Facing the Bodhisattvas one easily identifies the central cube, as Avalokiteśvara's colour is always black. On his left a red cube represents Mañjuśrī, whose colour normally is yellow or golden. On his right a black cube represents Vajrapāṇi, whose colour in an iconographic context is dark blue or white. To come nearer to the colours of the iconographical versions of the Bodhisattvas, the red cube occasionally, as for example at the western and northern Rigsum Gönpö in Te, changes its colour to become yellow. The black cube also changes its colour according to locally available clay as in Tangye, where it becomes almost green. More decisive and somehow fulfilling the iconographic requirements, the black cube became blue in Mustang, as imported colour became recently available. A single case could be observed in Kag (no. 5 on the map), where the sequence of colour deviates from the established order as presented above. There, black appears as usual on the right side, but red obtains the central position, while white is shifted toward the left side.

When installed on the eaves of houses or at topographically prominent places to ward off evil influences or even calamities and catastrophes, each of the three cubes or *chörten* of the the Rigsum Gönpö supports a defined role: the black cube wards off ghosts (*dre*), the white one malevolent gods (*lha*) and the red cube the warrior-like demons of rocks and air called *tsen*.

Asked for the original motives for installing the Rigsum Gönpö at the edge of a roof, house-owners rarely express a definite opinion. In one case in Kag the residents of a certain house were sure that they had heard the sound of hoofbeats on the roof at night. A *lama* whom they consulted concluded that the noise was caused by a *tsen*, and advised them to erect a Rigsum Gönpö on the roof to discourage the visitor. More often, however, the Rigsum Gönpö were built before living memory, and the occupants of the house retain only a general idea about warding off harmful influences, which often come through valleys or ravines. Much more concrete is the notion about the protection of the tongue-like stretch of land between the Kali Gandaki and

the Dzong Chu river in Kag. Two Rigsum Gönpö of different size are set at different angles on the ridge to ward off the floods that represent a constant threat to the entire village. Translated into the shape of the three Bodhisattvas, these Rigsum Gönpö look towards the outside world, from which a threat might come.

There seems to be only a general and rather vague idea as to the sequence of the Three Protectors while warding off evil influences. They either “face” the external forces, or they turn their back to the outside world as in Te or in Ladakh, where they are placed in a shelter that always faces the village realm. Mistakes might in fact easily occur, as on the occasion of the annual ritual of renewal, the *lha chö gen* (lit. worshipping the gods) in the fourth month, the “owner” of



Rinam, Ladakh: the Triple Protectors (Rigsum Gönpö) placed in a shelter that faces the village, photo July 1995

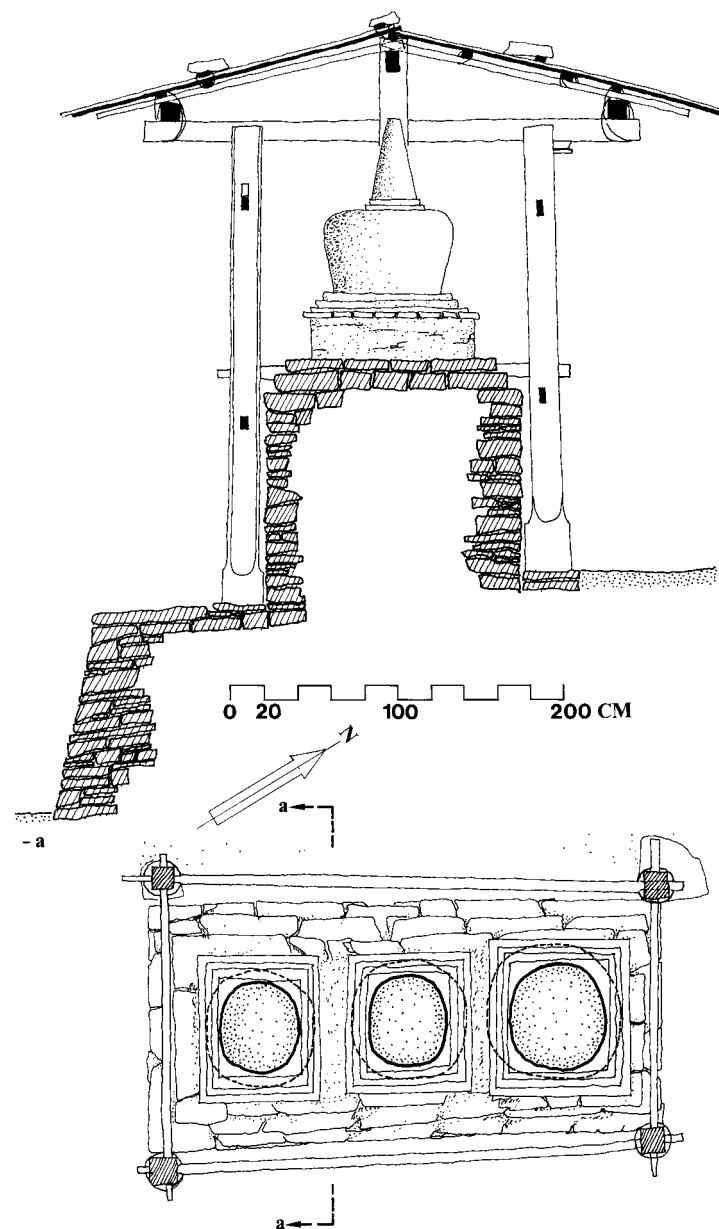
the Rigsum Gönpö or the group of people responsible for it renew the coating in clay and colour the four cubes. Only then the *lama* in charge of the ritual is called – preferably either of the two Bonpo *lamas* from Lubra or Dzar.

The Three Protectors in the shape of three *chörten* are found in Buddhist communities throughout the Himalaya. In Bhutan Rigsum Gönpö are found guarding the entrances to villages. The example from Rukubji shows three *chörten* of equal design, all following the model of the Changchub *chörten* which demonstrates the attainment of enlightenment by the Buddha, although only three steps can be counted below the bell-shaped dome instead of the required four. The cube above the dome is reduced to an almost invisible platform, while the thirteen tiers of the pinnacle are presented as a cone. The protectors are placed under a roof. Since there are no walls, the direction remains undefined – even more so as all protectors are painted white.

Dzar: the Triple Protectors (Rigsum Gönpo) in miniature form guarding the eaves of a house, photo April 1992

Architecturally, the example from Bhutan represents quite a refinement as compared with the structures in Mustang, which in most cases reveal only an indication of two-tieredness. Most of the Rigsum Gönpo in Ladakh are fully architecturally shaped, and the details of the tectonic order present yet a new level of understanding. The three protectors not only attain shape and colour, but a precise shape that makes it possible to identify them as one of the *gnas chen po brgyad kyi mchod rten* (*Aṣṭamahācaitya*). According to Nagarjuna (see Pema

Rukubji, Bhutan: plan and section of the Rigsum Gönpo, the Three Protectors of identical shape under a shed, guarding the path that leads into the village



Dorje 1996: 13) the Changchub *chörten*, which stands for the Buddha's enlightenment in Bodh Gaya, is characterised by four quadratic steps. The Yendum *chörten* has three octagonal steps and symbolises the Buddha's conquest of the heretics in Rajagriha, while the Namgyal *chörten* heralds the prolongation of his lifespan in Vaishali. While the *chörten* of enlightenment is identified with the compassion of Avalokiteśvara and thus obtains the central position, the Yendum *chörten* is identified with the wisdom of Mañjuśrī and the Namgyal *chörten* with the protection ensured by Vajrapāṇi. The architectural definition of the three protectors contributes to overcoming the nondescript and somehow aniconic shape of the cubes common in Mustang. Moreover, an iconographic level is, at least in many cases where the three *chörten* are "enshrined", presented on the wall behind: the three protectors appear in painted form to establish a relation between the shape of the *caitya* and the colour of it. In an example from Dzar (see drawing) stone tablets with faint reliefs of the three Bodhisattvas also allow an unmistakable identification of the three cubes placed behind.

In general, all three individual *chörten* of a Rigsum Gönpo structure are made of mud bricks, the layers of which in most cases are visible. The square lumps stand on a common platform and are bound together by a two-tiered frame of wooden planks. The cube pierces the frame and continues to form what for more complex *chörten* would be called a second level or "storey". On top are placed flat stones; from the middle emerges the branch of a pine tree, which ought to be renewed every year. Below the wooden frame can occasionally be seen small holes to receive small ritual offerings such as incense. A common platform below the three *chörten* can be observed through-



out Mustang; the wooden frame that binds the three entities together, however, seems to be optional and can be observed in Khyinga, Tangye and in the many miniature Rigsum Gönpö that guard the eaves of houses. Somehow, the wooden frame can be seen as a step towards the development of a solid structure. Whereas a *chörten* as the representation of the cosmos is based on a square, the Rigsum Gönpö form a wall, a ritual device of protection.

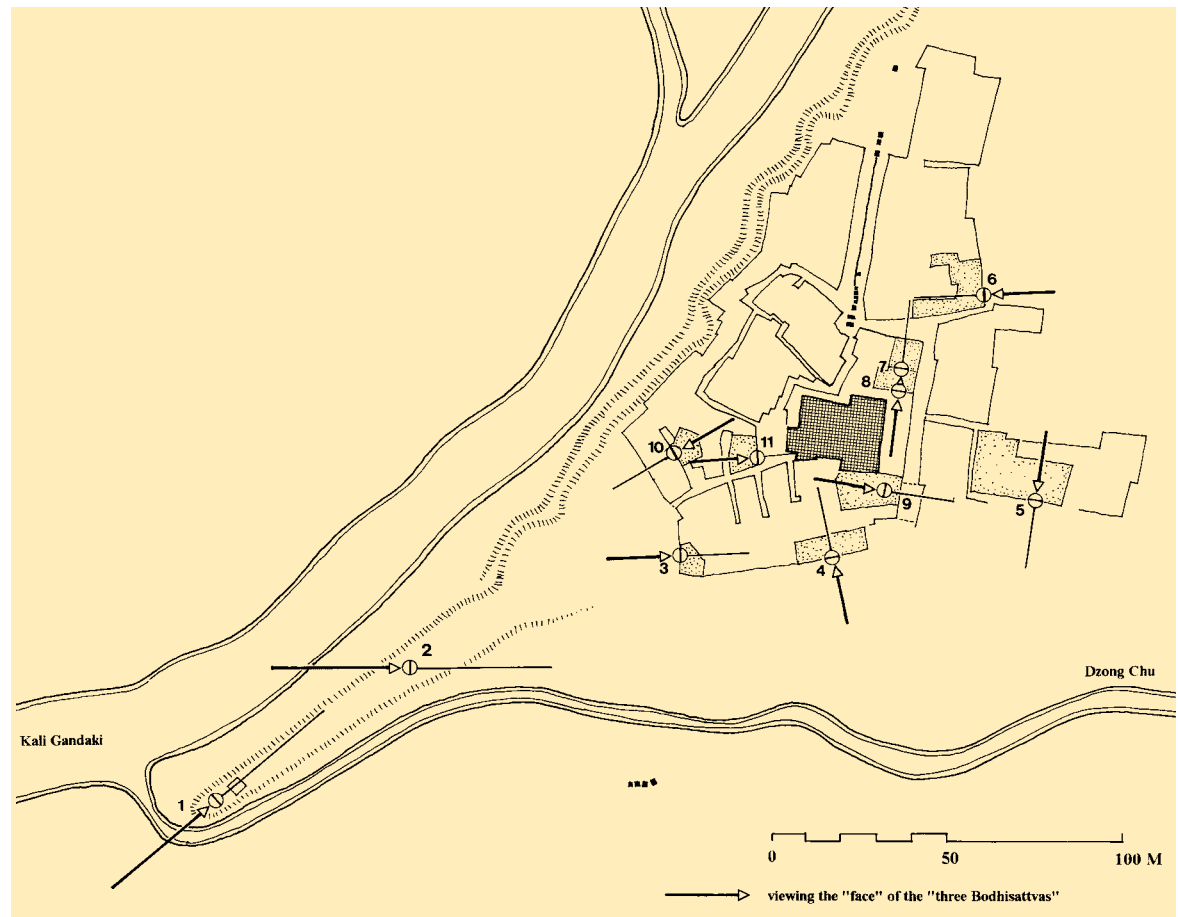
### Rigsum Gönpö in Kag

In contrast to the three settlements presented below as well as Shang and Tangbe, the territory of Kag is not protected by four sets of Three Protectors placed in cardinal directions. However, there are altogether twelve Rigsum Gönpö that serve a specific purpose. While there are two prominent examples which guard the settlement as a whole against natural hazards, the situation is less clear-cut with the remaining ten. Only in four cases are they placed on the edge of the houses facing west (no. 3), south (no. 4 and 5) or east (no. 6) on the periphery of the village, thus facing the surrounding continuum. In all four cases the houses have been built over the past generation. In four cases the Rigsum Gönpö turn away from the eaves, facing the roof (nos. 10, 11 as well as 7 and 8) and in one case (no. 9) the Rigsum Gönpö is not located on the eaves or the edge of a house, but rather in the centre of the roof. A rough comparison leads to the conclusion, that Rigsum Gönpö on the roofs of older houses turn towards the objects and bless these, while those on the eaves of newly established houses turn towards the outside and potentially hostile world, thus emphasising the role as guardians. Both qualities, to be towards inside and fierce towards outside, obviously characterise the combined energy of the three Bodhisattvas.

The structures in Kag already reveal an ambiguity concerning the direction in which the group of three *chörten* are facing. They face the outer world in order to protect the “inner” world represented by the settlement. But when it comes to the individual house, they also appear turned around as they seem to “watch” the house they are considered to protect.

### Rigsum Gönpö in Khyinga

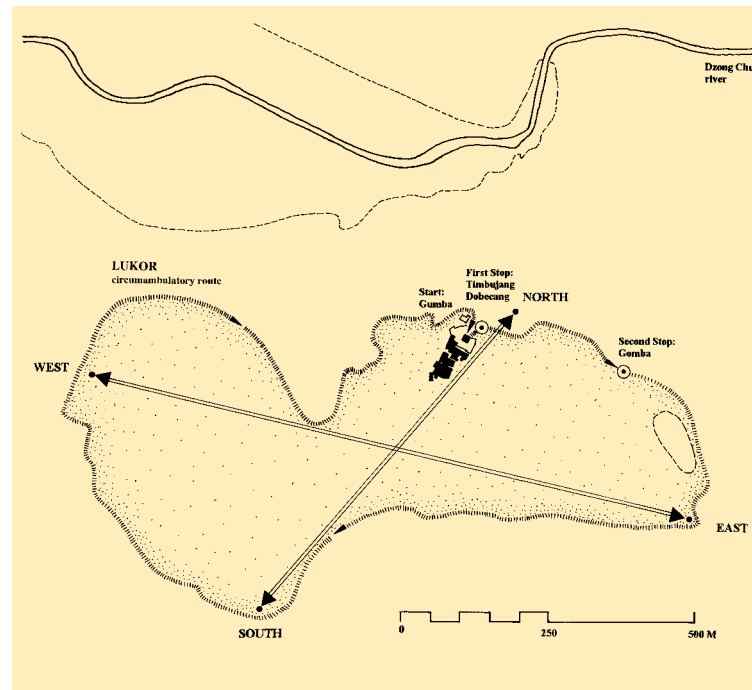
As explained above, the *lukor* procession in Khyinga served to delimit the territory of the village, encompassing the sequence of settlements and the irrigated fields: the sacralised space, establishing a sacred area in the midst of a profane environment. The ritual itself does not



provide any clue as to the orientation of the territory. This is achieved on a second level of spatial ordering by the four Rigsum Gönpö. The placement of these four small monuments creates a spatial order from disorder, cosmos out of chaos. The locations of these *chörten* have already been described: they mark the outermost edges of the village territory and do not seem to have a relation to the cycle of the ecliptic. The orientation of the territory, therefore, does not imply the two other characteristics of meaningful space: centrality and axuality. Drawing a line between the eastern and western, the northern and southern Rigsum Gönpö produces a theoretical centre where the lines meet, a few metres east of the house of Gajen (household no. 26), but such a diagram of lines is certainly meaningless. The identification of the cardinal directions produces a microcosmos without creating a visually comprehensible order. The “idea” is more important than its strict implementation. One may generally say that the east-west axis follows the contour lines and thus runs roughly par-

Kag: location of ten Rigsum Gönpö structures, groups of three *chörten* representing the Three Protectors, Mañjuśrī, Avalokiteśvara and Vajrapāṇi

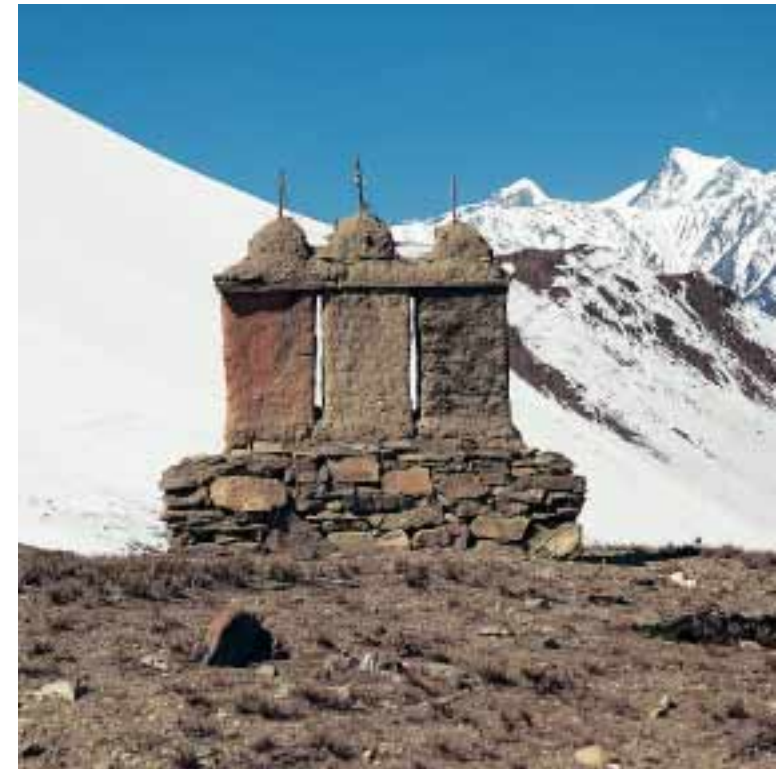
*Khyinga: simplified representation of the circumambulatory route with the Rigsum Gönpö marking the cardinal directions*



allel to the Dzong Chu river, which dominates the topography of the entire territory of the valley. The northern Rigsum Gönpö reveals a strong relation to Khyinga as it marks the beginning of the steep slope that leads almost 200 metres down towards the river bed. The southern Rigsum Gönpö seeks the proximity of the large reservoir that feeds the entire “wheat area” west of the ravine that divides the territory into two halves.

All four Rigsum Gönpö have almost the same shape, but only the one in Kuntso retains traces of colour, which allows us to recognise the decisive feature: a Rigsum Gönpö defends the given territory against evil forces that might enter the village realm; it is clearly set against the outside. Looking from inside, the one to the left must be black, the one in the middle white and the one toward right red. The most convincing role of the protectors as elements to define “outside” and “inside” is found beside the gate that marks the entrance to the “old” settlement”, which most probably was built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and abandoned in the course of the second half of this century. The protectors exactly define the borderline between the old settlement, which is called Nang (“Inside”) and the new settlement, which is called Phi (“Outside”).

*Below, left and right Khyinga: the Triple Protectors (Rigsum Gönpö) guarding the village territory in the west (above) and south (below), photos February 1998*





## Te

Four Rigsum Gönpo form a ritual fortification of what one could call the core of the settlement that comprises the four hamlets. In size and shape the four groups are similar. Originally they are two-tiered; an intermediary layer placed on top of a square cube mediates between the base and a considerably smaller cube on top of it. A Tree of Life (*shrokshing*) emerges from the upper cube. The northern group, placed below the fields of Yü, have lost their upper cube and the group at Kutsogang guarding the western direction have even lost the intermediate layer. The southern and eastern groups are located on gentle slopes overlooking the entire settlement pocket. The eastern *chörten* alone have to a large extent preserved their original shape.

There is a certain ambiguity regarding those groups of four Rigsum Gönpo which are placed to protect the four cardinal directions of their settlement's territory. In Khyinga and Tangbe, the protectors are turned towards the outside world, while in Te they face the area of protection. Even the fifth Rigsum Gönpo on the saddle of Tegagang on the western periphery of the fields, which protects the entire territory of Te collectively, faces the village and not the valley below. An equivalent is found in Rinam, a small village of Zangskar in Ladakh. There, the Rigsum Gönpo is placed near the mother leat (*mayur*) that irrigates the entire plateau below. The protectors are placed in a kind of chapel, with walls on three sides and a roof on top. Thus, the structure has an unmistakable direction from the beginning: it faces the village which it blesses and turns its walled back towards the world "behind". In this case, it wards off the evil influences like floods that might come from the ravines behind.

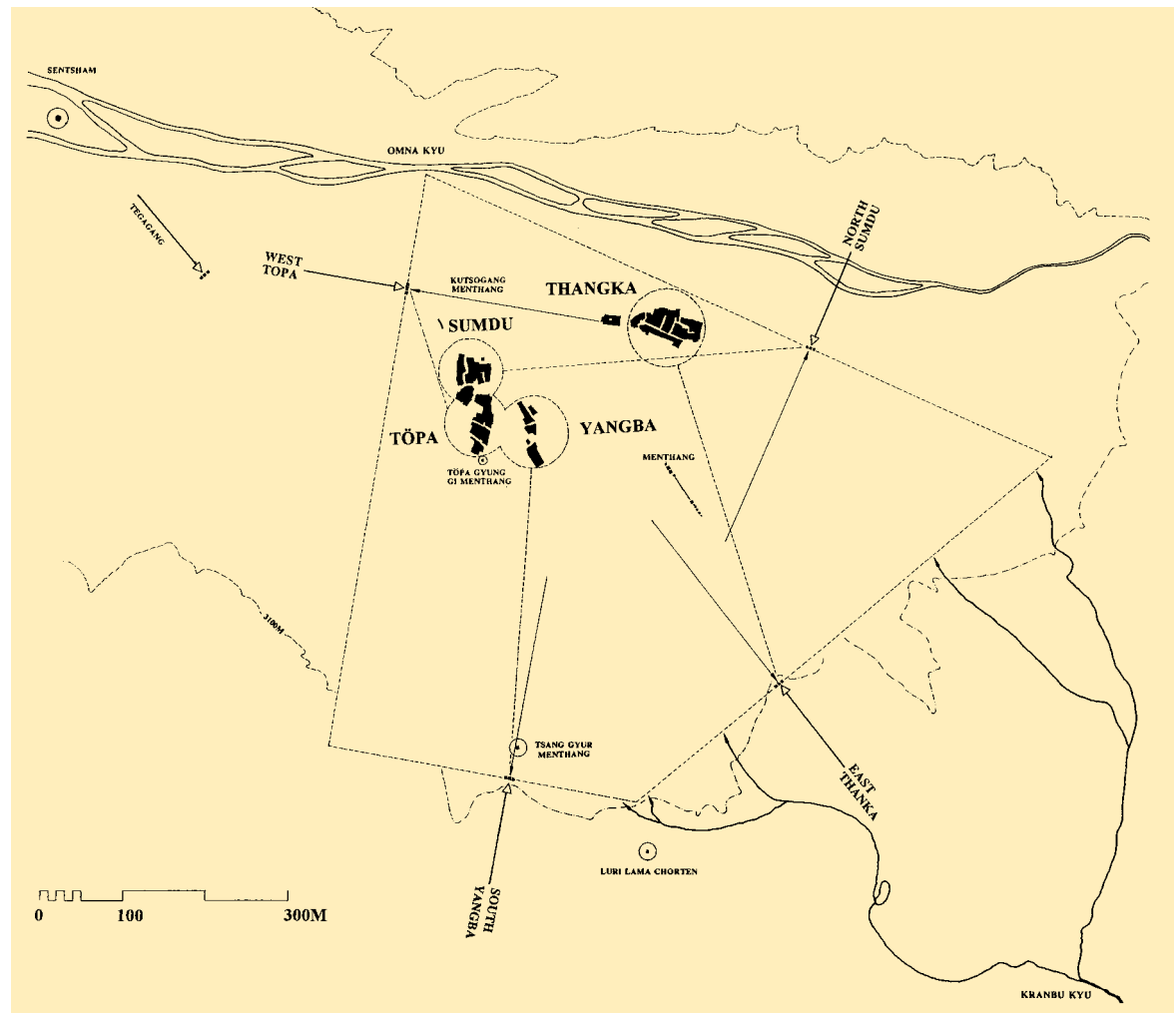
## Horizontal closure, vertical opening

In order to retain their efficacy Rigsum Gönpo must be periodically reconsecrated. In the case of public constructions the task is usually allocated to the headmen (*genpa*) and constables (*rolo, tshowa*) who serve the community on a rotating basis. In some instances, however, the obligation may be so distributed as to reflect important components of the communities themselves. Many settlements in Mustang are subdivided into sectors that probably originated with clan affiliations but have now evolved into residential groups. While the existence of such groups (called *tsho*) in Kag is now remembered by the oldest villagers – their dissolution seems to have come about mainly during the 1950s and 1960s – tax-registers preserved in the

*Te: the Triple Protectors (Rigsum Gönpo) guarding the village territory in the south, photo April 1992*

*Te: Location of four the Triple Protectors (Rigsum Gönpo) that guard the territory of the settlement in the cardinal directions. Lines (dotted on the map) drawn parallel to the structures define a core area incorporating the four settlement clusters. Each section of the village fulfills a ritual obligation by renewing one of the four Triple Protectors.*

*Map drawn on the basis of a survey by Robert Kostka and Erwin Heine, 1996*





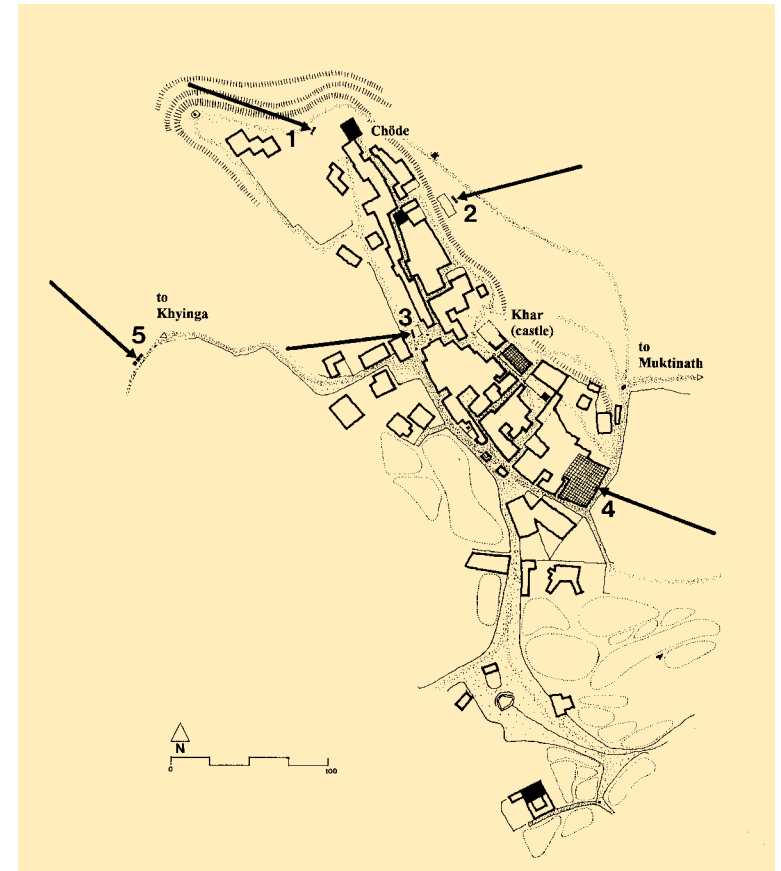
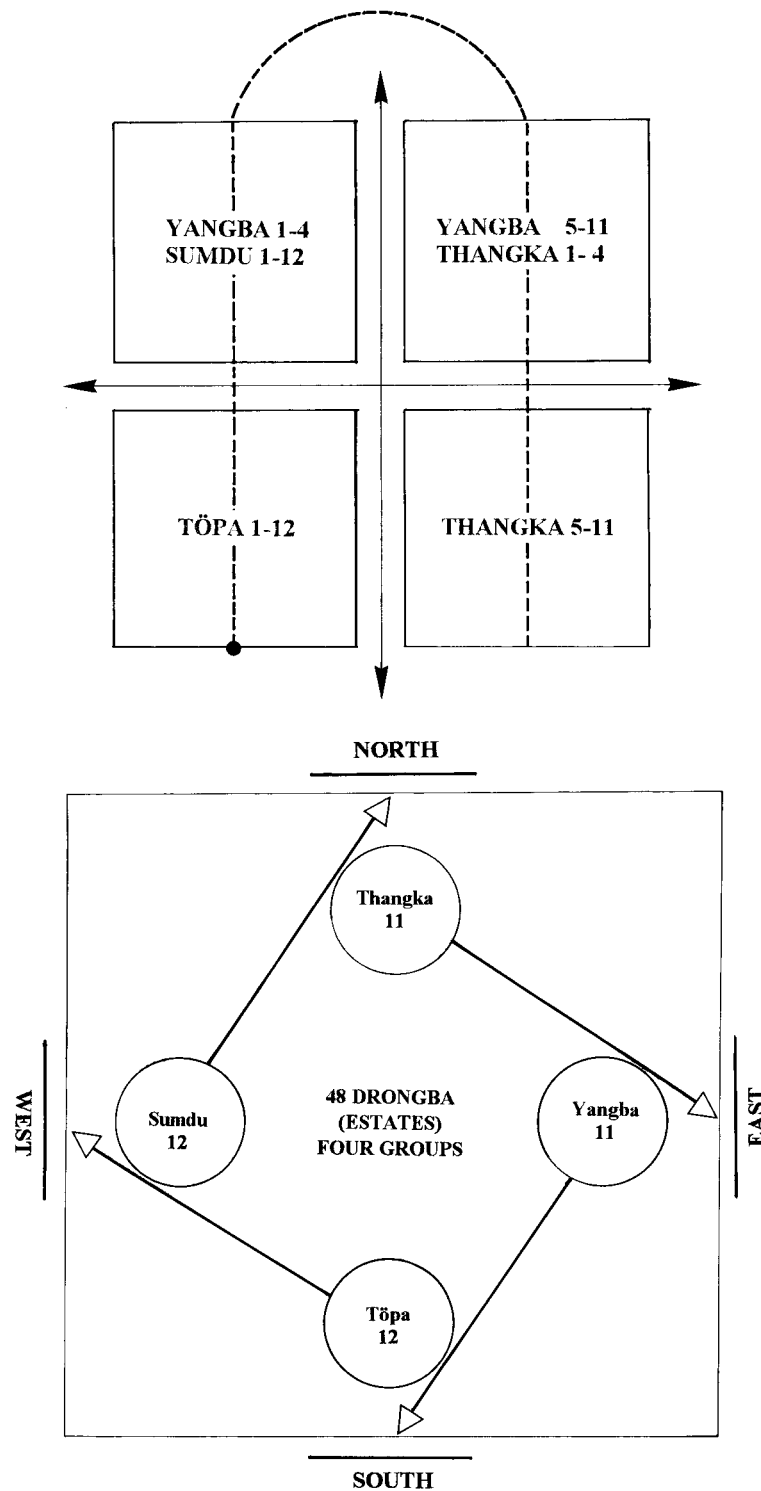
Left: Te

Above: diagram of the village divided up into four clusters, representing the quadripartite universe. The roll-call starts with Töpa, proceeds to Sumdu and Yangba and is completed with Thangka.

Below: diagram of the four clusters of the village in relation to their respective Triple Protectors, the Rigsum Gönpö. The fact that the Rigsum Gönpö that each cluster reconsecrates annually is not the nearest one to it but the next in a clockwise direction creates a dynamic that reflects the movement of the sun.

Right: Dzar

Location of Triple Protectors (Rigsum Gönpö) that guard the "inside" of the village core against evil influences that invariably originate beyond the realm of human settlement. The fourth Rigsum Gönpö was placed in the south by a nobleman on the parapet of his house. 1 Chöde Gyab Rigsum Gönpö, 2 Kyego Rigsum Gönpö, 3 Gale Demba Rigsum Gönpö, 4 Hrewo Palgön's Rigsum Gönpö, 5 Rigsum Gönpö along the road, guarding the entrance into the village.



Dzar: Triple Protector (Rigsum Gönpö) guarding the entrance into the village (see no. 5 on the map), photo 1996

community reveal the considerable social relevance that these sectors had up to the nineteenth century. Although the main concern of these registers is with land revenues, there are several clues to suggest that the responsibility for reconsecrating the village monuments was apportioned out among the sectors.

A similar policy of distribution currently operates in Te. The four Rigsum Gönpö that are associated with the cardinal directions are allocated to Te's residential sectors as follows. West: Töpa; North: Sumdu; South: Yangba; East: Thangka. The fifth Rigsum Gönpö, situated on Tepagang, is the responsibility of the community as a whole, and its consecration is therefore carried out by the headmen and constables.

The Rigsum Gönpö of Khyinga and Dzar are now also tended by the respective public servants of the two communities. Whether or not this state of affairs always prevailed in Khyinga has been forgotten, but in the case of Kag and Te, the arrangement in Dzar mirrored the particular socio-political circumstances of that community.

The relevant information is provided by a document photographed in the house of the late Hrewo Palgön, an heir of the noble rulers of Baragaon. The item deals with the organisation of Dzar's spring archery festival, and although it is not dated, we can deduce from its attribution to Palgön's ancestor Kushog Zinön Namgyal that it was probably drawn up in the first or second decade of the present century.

Here are the unedited text and translation of the document:

*sku zhabs zil non rnam rgyal  
ma 'dos sgong / 'dem 'dem chos  
ba dtsug / sa kha zla 4 ba tshes 9  
la phral thab / tshe 10 la ram  
gnas tshes'brub nyin chad yol nas  
dar tse / tshe 11 la dgra zor / lo  
rim bzhin du sma phyag ba  
mzdad dgos / rang re yul kha  
gsum la sngon khyum bka'  
gnyen rnams la dnyul 4 gnang  
nas kyed bzhing rtog gsal ma byu  
rus tshes zo ba lnga yin / sgong  
sku zhab rnam dang bla ma gnyis  
la tshes 8 la zhal phud / zhen sku  
zhab rnam gnyen da phul dgos /  
tshes 10 la 'bam sgor dang po  
sgob shal 'bam sgor 2 ba la /*

Before Kushog Zinön died he established the Demdem ceremony. On the 9<sup>th</sup> day of the Auspicious Fourth Month the preparations are to be made. On the tenth day the reconsecrations are to be done and a life-empowerment ritual performed. In the second half of the day, there shall be archery. On the eleventh day, the Drazor dance shall be performed. This is to be done every year without interruption. Four rupees were given to us, the members of the three villages, who have been associates since past times, and the

*tshes 'brub ram gsas / 'bam sgor  
3 ba dar tse / mi re re nas da cha  
re re sma phyag ba rnom dgos ba  
/ tshe 11 'bam sgor dang po la  
sgo shal / bam sgor 2 ba gsang  
ma / 'bam sgor 3 la dar tse sgar  
tse klu len / dgra zor tse dgos pas  
rang rang yong dgos ba dang /  
rang rang ma yong tshes nyad  
dngul re re phul rgyu chod / spu  
rang nas tsag gser po / 'dzar nas  
tsag dkar po / mkhyen kha nas  
tsag nag po khur dgos ba / tshe  
10 nyin sban rtsug mi gsum la  
stam ka / chos ldan nam sa phul  
mi gsum la kyog tshad 3 yin /...*

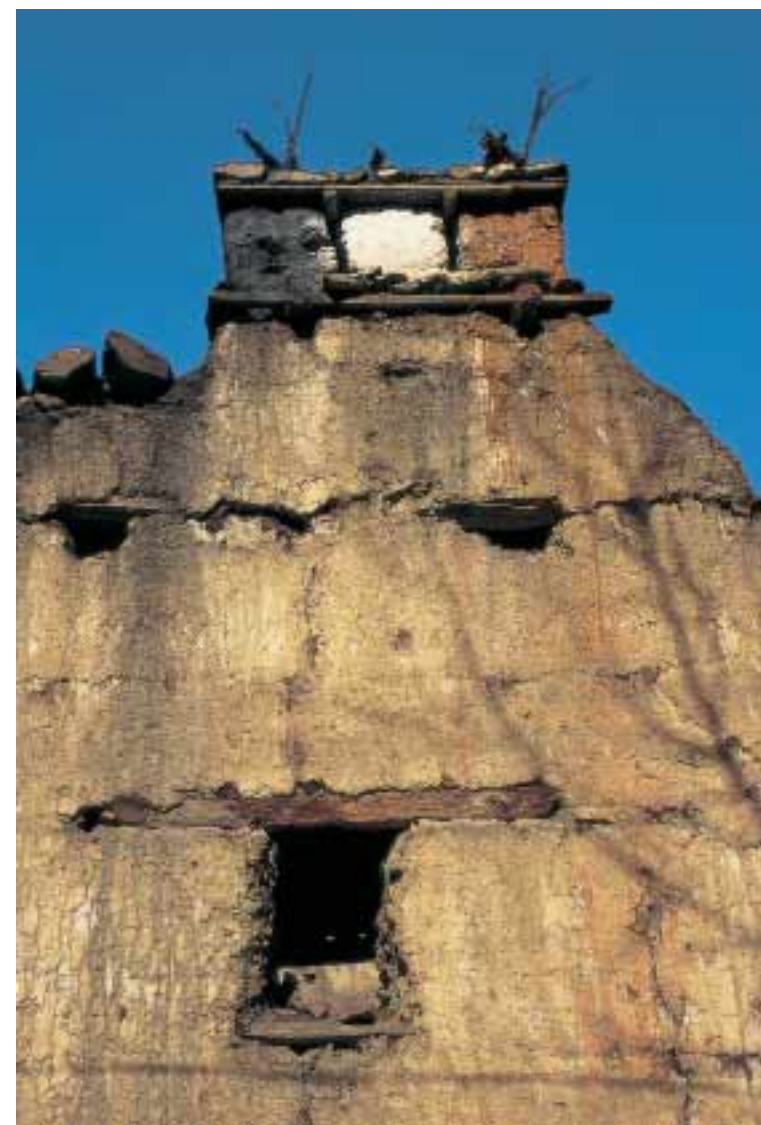
annual interest from this is five zoba of grain, payable when the harvest is collected. On the eighth day our Lord and the lama shall be given the first-offering of beer from this grain, and our Lord shall be given a further share. On the tenth day, first: the company shall drink beer; second: the life-empowerment ritual and reconsecrations shall be performed; third: archery shall be held. Each man should bring along a pair of flawless arrows. On the eleventh day, first: the company shall drink beer; second: they shall eat; third: they shall do archery, dance and sing songs. Since the Drazor is to be danced, everyone must participate. Anyone who does not attend shall pay a fine of one rupee.

Purang shall bring yellow clay;  
Dzar shall provide white clay;  
Khyenga shall bring black clay.  
The three men who set up the targets on the tenth day shall be given half a rupee; the men who redecorate the *chörten* shall be given three ladles of beer ...

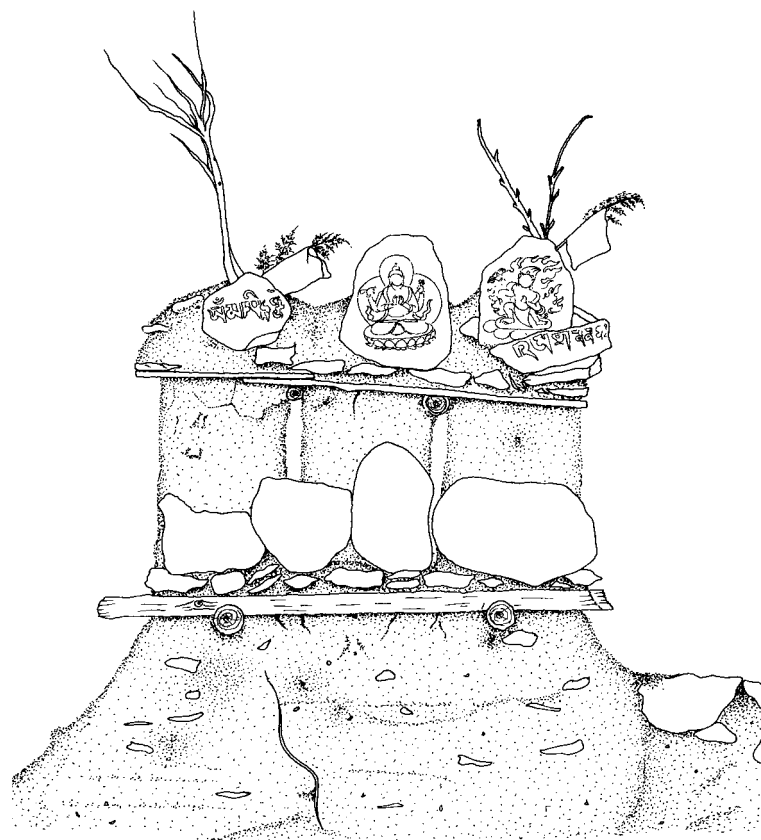
The instructions continue, but this excerpt – translated somewhat freely for the sake of clarity – is enough to give us the context in which the sacred edifices of Dzar were redecorated. Dzar, Khyinga and Purang are even now referred to as “The Three Villages”, signifying that they form a kind of unit within the Muktināth Valley. At the present time this unity is largely limited to the fact of having common pasturelands and a territorial boundary that sets them apart from other villages. Apart from this territorial commonality, however, the three used to maintain strong ritual ties, and the obsolete Demdem ceremony that is the subject of this document is an example of one such occasion. (The name Demdem is obscure, but probably refers to

Pholha Demba, the principal territorial divinity of both Dzar and Khyinga.)

Now, the ritual ties that pertained among the three settlements were based not on social parity but on social hierarchy; they were to a certain extent emblematic of the system of stratification that prevailed in Baragaon as a whole. To summarise the situation briefly: the highest rank is the nobility, a number of whose most prominent families have



*Dzar: drawing and photo (February 1998) of the Triple Protectors (Rigsum Gönpö) placed on the parapet of Hrewo Palgön's house guarding the southern direction of the village core. The three cubes (left Mañjuśrī/red, middle Avalokiteśvara/white, right Vajrapāṇi/black) are joined by planks. Avalokiteśvara and Vajrapāṇi are also represented in iconic form on votive tablets.*



traditionally lived in Dzar. Below these come the priests – the *lama* alluded to in the document probably designates a chaplain from one or other of the two priestly villages of Lubra or Chongkhor – followed by the Commoners, the majority of the population. The Commoners are divided into two levels, the upper stratum being represented by the population of villages such as Purang. The proximate reason for the social inferiority of the lower level is that its members were required to provide transportation duties for local lords and government officials, but a deeper reason is probably related to their being members of a conquered Tibeto-Burman population who were only more

gradually Tibetanised. In any event, the sole representative of such a community in the Muktināth Valley is Khyinga.

The colours the three communities, Dzar, Purang and Khyinga, were required to provide were respectively white, yellow and black (yellow being a common substitute for red). It might be possible to interpret this distribution as signifying that the trio itself constituted a Rigsum Gönpö for the protection of Baragaon and Lo from hostile southerners – but the orientation is reversed, and besides, the interpretation itself would be far-fetched. As stated above, within a Buddhist context the juxtaposition of red/yellow, white and black/blue usually signifies



the Bodhisattvas Mañjuśrī, Avalokiteśvara and Vajrapāṇi. But the colours also have a more archaic and basic association with the threefold vertical division of the world: the gods above (white), the serpent-spirits below (black/ blue) and the *tse* in the middle (red). It is this implication of hierarchy that we see in the way the provision of colours for the reconsecration of Dzar's Rigsum Gönpö was apportioned among the Three Villages.

Mention was made earlier of the conception of the house as a human individual. Such analogies do not stop here, but are extended, with varying degrees of sophistication, to the entire universe, and some aspects of this notion are worth examining here. Tibet has numerous images that associate the dwelling-place with the cosmos. One of the most famous of these is the reference to mountains as "pillar of the sky, fixing-peg of the earth". This archaic assertion corresponds to homilies that are current among modern Tibetan nomads, of the order that one should never feel exposed and endangered outside on the plateau – one should think of the sky as a sheltering tent. If houses are likened to people, they are also commonly conceived in cosmic terms. In his periodic rituals for the prosperity of his community, the pagan priest (*lhawen*) of Khyinga recites the following well-known formula, which contains an implicit three-fold vertical stratification of the dwelling:

<i>skyang la mis 'khengs pa</i>	May the top floor of our houses be full of people;
<i>bar khang 'brus 'khengs pa</i>	May the middle of the houses be full of grain;
<i>'og khang phyugs kyis 'khengs pa</i>	May the ground floor be full of cattle.

Further parallels between the individual house and the settlement as a whole are visible in the way in which the rituals for each are performed. A description of the cult of domestic gods in Te will serve as a starting-point for the comparison. The main house of every estate in Te contains a niche in one of the walls of the *dim*, the floor where the hearth is. Inside this niche are one or more small clay pots representing the household gods (*dimilha*). The mouth of the niche is sealed with clay and whitewashed over, so that people other than members of the house may not even know that it is there.

Household gods are worshipped twice a year: first, within the first fifteen days of the second month, and secondly, within the first fifteen days of the eighth month. The occasions are explicitly related to the sprouting barley and buckwheat respectively. The small clay pots are

given new decorations of butter – yak butter alone may be used – and the butterlamp that stands in front of them is lit again. The lamp itself is of metal – generally silver, brass or copper. The opening of the cavity is then sealed again. The rite itself is performed by the head of the estate. Prior to the performance of the ritual the house is closed: no one who is not a member of the household is permitted to enter the house while the gods are being worshipped.

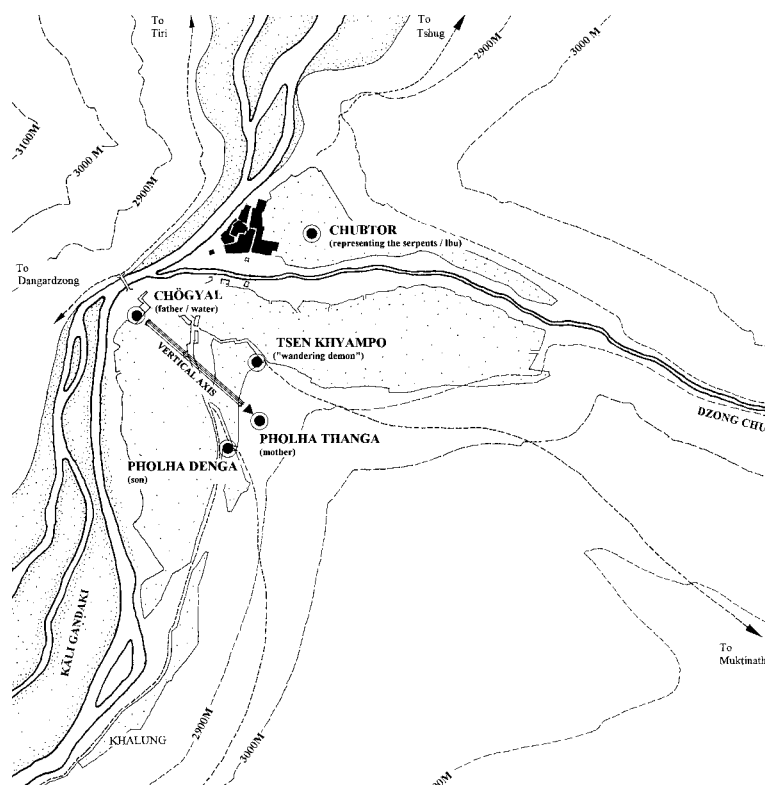
Most of the household gods in Te are also territorial gods, and they have to be summoned to the interior of the house from the lofty heights on which they dwell. A certain estate-holder invokes Lama Suna Yeshe, one of his two household gods, in the following lines, citing locations that descend step by step from the high mountains down to his hearth:

<i>Sabö ri den chag tse muli chö chö</i>	If you are sojourning on Sabö, receive these offerings!
<i>Golen ri den chag tse muli chö chö</i>	If you are on Golen, receive these offerings!
<i>Tsin-ga phodong ri den chag tse muli chö chö</i>	If you are in the hollow of Tsin-ga, receive these offerings!
<i>Yatsog thang ri den chag tse muli chö chö</i>	If you are on the plain of Yatsog, receive these offerings!
<i>Nartong-gi me ri den chag tse muli chö chö</i>	If you are in the lower part of Nartong, receive these offerings!
<i>Lhe sera ri den chag tse muli chö chö</i>	If you are at Sera corral, receive these offerings!
<i>Kyu kar nag ri den chag tse muli chö chö</i>	If you are at the black and white streams, receive these offerings!
<i>Pyanglong ngephu ri den chag tse muli chö chö</i>	If you are Pyanglong Ngephu, receive these offerings!
<i>Pyang-nge chugu ri den chag tse muli chö chö</i>	If you are the spring of Pyang-nge, receive these offerings!
<i>Pyang-nge lhe ri den chag tse muli chö chö</i>	If you are at Pyang-nge corral, receive these offerings!
<i>Lhezubzi ri den chag tse muli chö chö</i>	If you at [one or other of] the four sides of the corral, receive these offerings!
<i>Pyang-ngi dim ri den chag tse muli chö chö</i>	If you have entered the house at Pyang-nge, receive these offerings!
<i>Dim ri dar cog ri den chag tse muli chö chö</i>	If you are on the prayer-flag of [my] house, receive these offerings!
<i>Dim ku dab ri den chag tse muli chö chö</i>	If you are at my hearth, receive these offerings!









To summarise the main points of the above, the invocation of the household gods is reducible to the following components: first, the closure of the house to outsiders; and secondly, the opening of a vertical channel through which the gods descend from the high mountains into the interior of the dwelling.

Collective village rituals also reveal a similar structure of horizontal closing and vertical opening. In order to see this it is necessary first to understand the arrangement of village gods in each of the settlements under consideration.

Kag has three main territorial gods: Pholha, Pholha Denga and Jowo Chögyal. The three are represented by simple constructions disposed in descending order down a hill. Until some forty years ago these gods used to be worshipped with animal sacrifices by a pagan priest from the Thakali settlement of Marpha, to the south. The main ritual for Chögyal, who forms the lowest point of the triad, was called Loyag, a term that means “good harvest”. The rite was carried out in early summer, just after the “closure” of the agricultural area by means of the *lukor* circumambulation described above. There are two points of special concern to us here. First, that the “good harvest” ritual was preceded by the closure of the agricultural area to the out-



side; and secondly, Chögyal was not worshipped in isolation but in association with the two divinities located above him. In the same way that the reconsecration or “reactivation” of sites on the periphery of a community signifies the imposition of a boundary, so the collective empowerment of sites that form a descending line signifies the erection of a vertical axis.

In both Khyinga and Dzar, too, the older form of the corresponding ceremonies has altered considerably as a consequence of lamaicisation, but the essential components are still visible. This is most evident in the arrangement of the territorial gods.

In Dzar, as in Kag, there are three main village gods: Pholha Demba, represented by a rock to the south of the settlement; Yulza Daro, comprising a rock surmounted by a simple *chörten* in the middle of the village; and Jowo Chögyal, a *chörten* at the northern edge. Apart from the slight incline along which the three sites are located, there is little to suggest that these three points constitute a vertical axis. However, they are worshipped not separately but as a triad; and secondly, the triad includes Chögyal. Where the latter appears as a village god in Mustang he is invariably the lowest of a set. There are two possible explanations for this: first, that Chögyal is the Buddhist

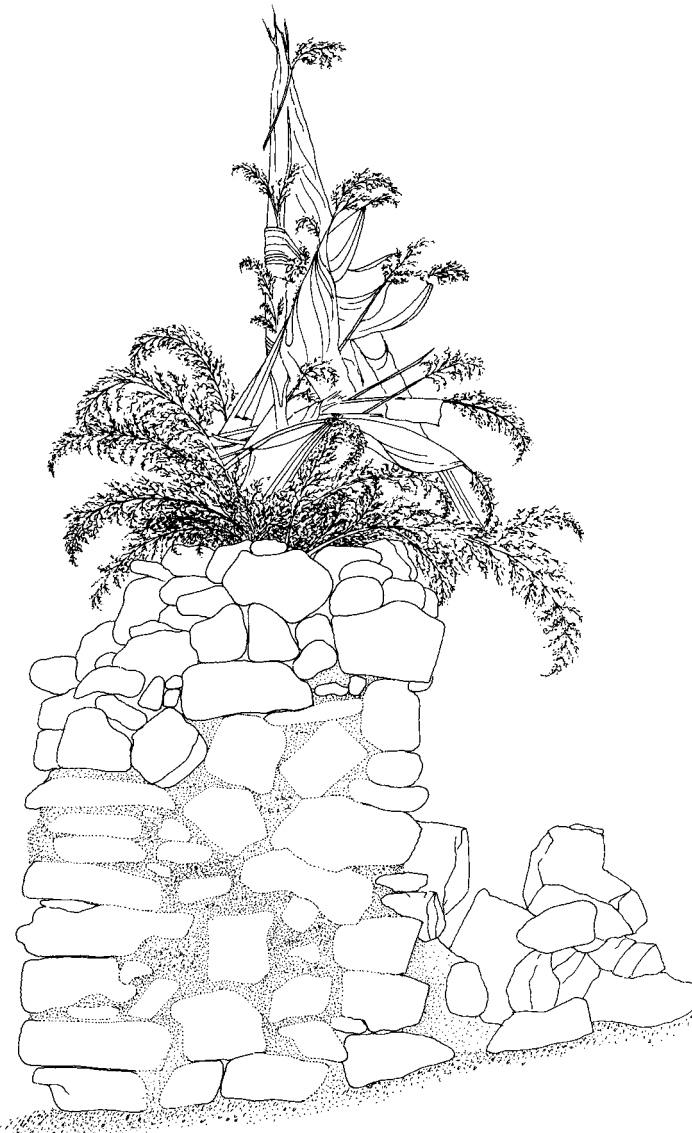
*Kag: view across the buckwheat fields towards north, photo October 1991*

*Kag: the vertical axis crossing the territory from Jowo Chögyal near the river to Pholha Thanga high above the village*

*Opposite*  
*Te: view from the platform of Pholha Yönten Karpo (see no. 2 on the map) across a couple of coloured heaps of stones (thowo) towards the clusters of Yangba and Sumdu, photo Jaroslav Poncar August 1997*

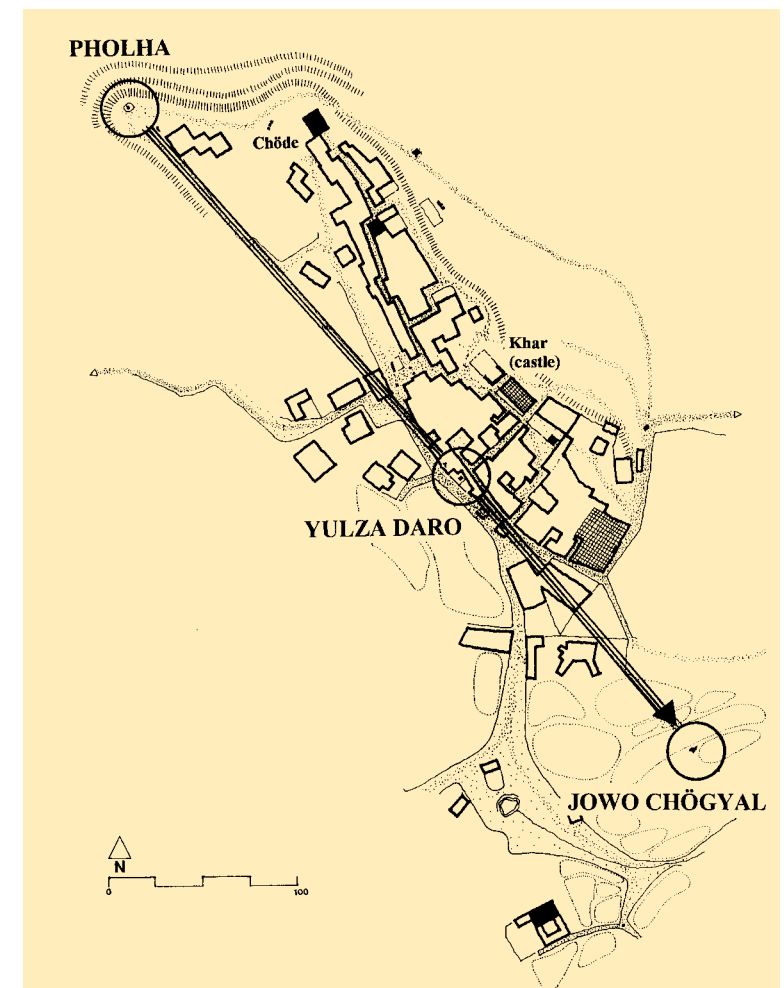


adaptation of the name of some pagan divinity associated with water (as in the case of Te, as we shall see presently); and second, that as the god of the dead – Chögyal is an epithet of Shinje (Skr. *Yama*) – he is above all a lord of the underworld, and hence the base of any vertical construction. Dzar's Chögyal is not located at the foot of a hill as might be expected but at the northern end of the promontory along which the settlement extends. However, the significance of the position is clear, since it stands directly above the Dzong Chu, which is visible from this point.

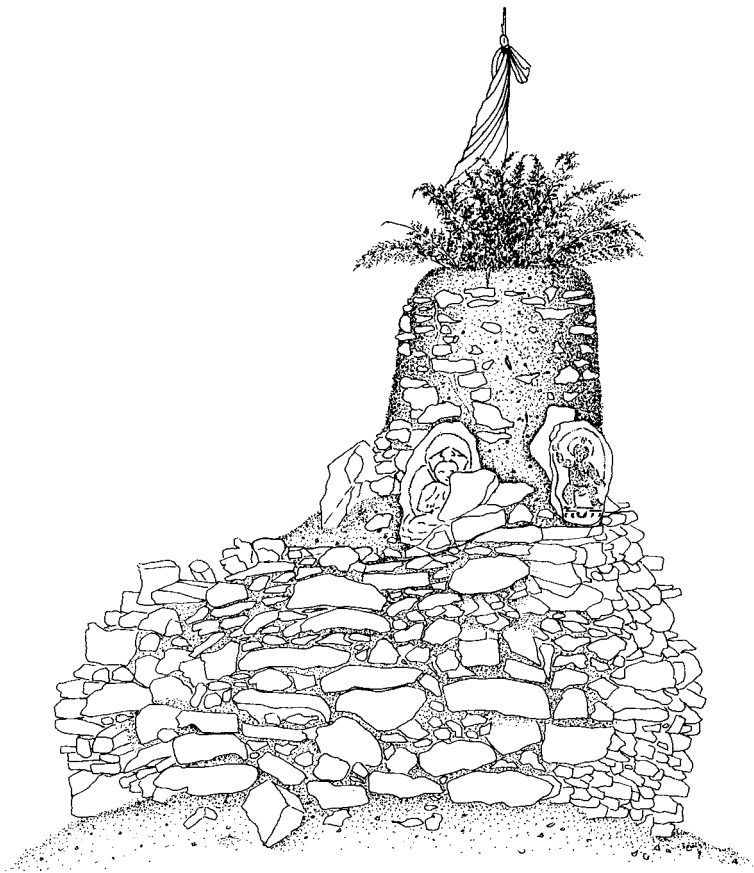


*Kag: Jowo Chögyal – the Lord of Place associated with water – as seen from the south, a roughly cubic pile of stones, many of which have lost their contours due to repeated whitewashing*

The gods of Khyinga present an altogether more complicated configuration. The complication arises partly from the fact that the villagers themselves – including the elderly priest – are uncertain about the identity of the local divinities, the relationship between them and the sites to which they correspond. Furthermore, with the exception of the god Yulsa, who is represented by a rock in the middle of the village, all the divinities are situated above the settlement, to the south and east. This is particularly surprising in the case of Chögyal who, contrary to what one might expect, stands not below the settle-



*Dzar: location of the Lords of Place, three of the eight tutelary gods of the village. Jowo Chögyal – invariably associated with water – is located on a spur overlooking the valley of the Dzong river, Yulza Daro on a rock (see drawing) on the south-western edge of the village and Pholha (see drawing), associated with mountain, is represented by a large boulder in thorny bushes. The three Lords of Place are almost exactly aligned along an axis perpendicular to the contour lines.*



Left  
Kag: Pholha Denga, the “mother” of the three Lords of Place that are ordered along a vertical axis, drawing Anil Basukala, 1998

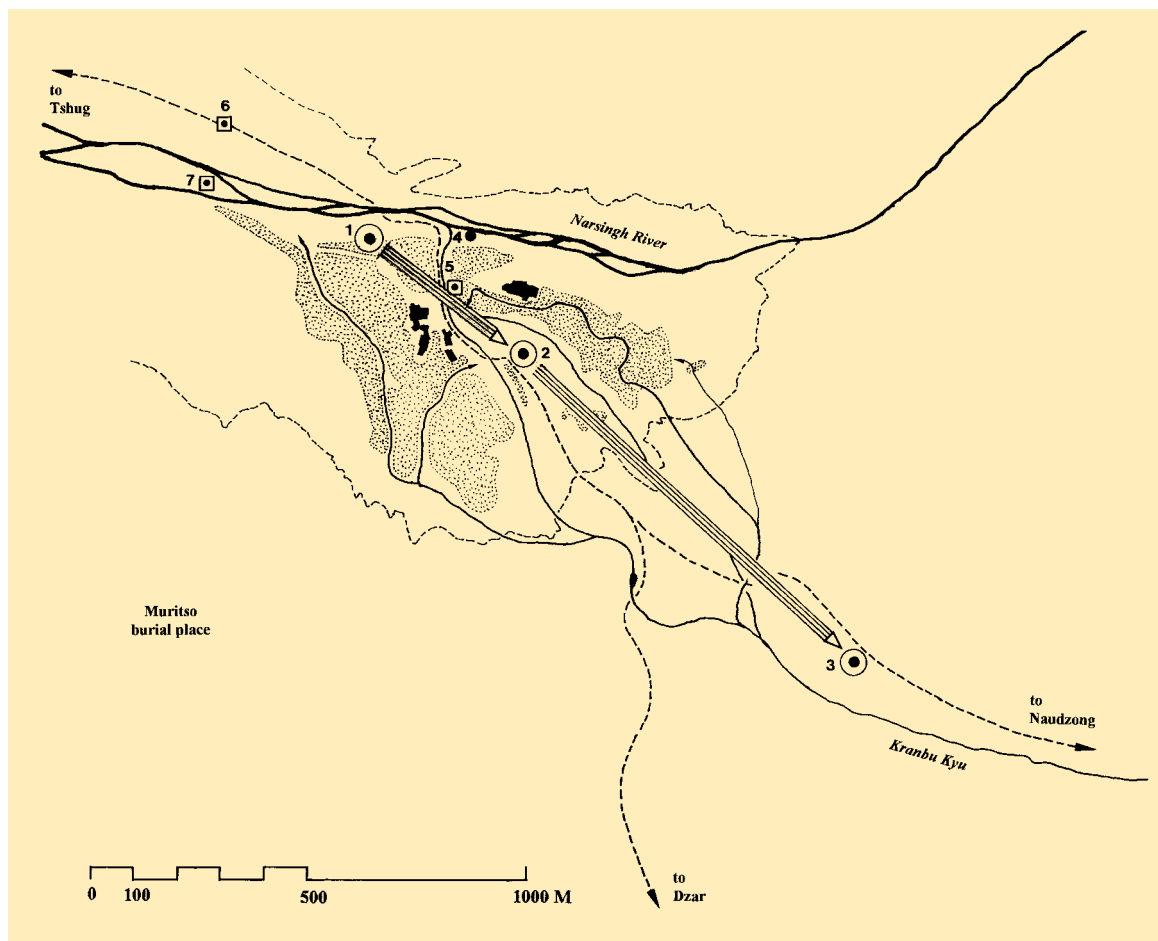
Right  
Khyinga: drawing and photo (July 1996) of the Jowo Chögyal - the Lord of Place associated with water - represented by a pair of chörten-like structures between two large poplar trees just below the ancient settlement of Khalung

ment – as in the case of the other three communities – but above it. Now according to the obsolete form of the ritual – as far as this can be recollected by the villagers – a one-year-old goat was offered to each of four different gods in descending order as follows. First, to the god Pholha Demba, represented by a *chörten* on the hill to the south of the settlement; second and third, at two locations on Khalung mound; and finally to Chögyal, whose shrine is a pair of *chörten* standing between two large poplar trees near a stream just below Khalung. The modern ritual is very similar, but whereas in the past the four sacrifices are said to have taken place on one day, the fifteenth of the fourth month – nowadays the bloodless offerings are staggered: the 25<sup>th</sup> day of the 3<sup>rd</sup> month, and then the 8<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> day of the fourth month.

This configuration of gods suggests very strongly that the divinities in question are properly not of modern Khyinga but of the abandoned settlement of Khalung. It is in fact quite normal that even after the desertion of a site its gods are still venerated. Place-gods are some-



*Te: The vertical axis crossing the territory of the river from the valley floor at Shagtangra (1) to Pholha Yönten Karpo (2) and Jowo Shartsen Gyalpo (3), who resides in the cliffs high above the village. Molha Chutsen Nyenpo (4) presides along the Narsingh river. – A pile of stones (5) in between the settlement clusters at times demonstrates the “closure” of the village, while border markers along the path to Tshug (6 = Sentsham Caudha) and in the river-bed define the border with the adjoining territory of Tshug. Map drawn on the basis of a survey by Robert Kostka and Erwin Heine, 1996*



times transferred to a new site, but this is something that is not undertaken lightly. The village of Taye, Te's immediate southern neighbour, is a case in point. Approximately two-thirds of the village's population now lives outside the settlement, mainly in Pokhara. In 1997, following a series of misfortunes the emigrant community concluded that the principal god was displeased at being neglected, and proposed to his priest that the divinity be ritually transferred to a new site in Pokhara. (The priest – who belongs to the minority that has not left the village – refused the request.)

The timing of the worship of these local divinities is significant. The principal rituals of Dzhar and Khyinga take place in spring, during the archery festival. Although the two villages now conduct their respective ceremonies separately, the chronology of the main events is the same: the Rigsum Gönpö are reconsecrated, and the territorial gods are subsequently propitiated. As suggested earlier, Rigsum Gönpö are

in a sense the “walls” of a settlement, a barrier against the intrusion of unwelcome visitors. To consecrate them is to activate them – that is, to close the walls of the community before the vertical axis is opened. In the latter case, it is important to note that the implied sequence is downward, corresponding to the principle that fecundity and prosperity descend from above into the community and accumulate there without leaking out.

The process is even more explicit in the case of Te, insofar as the worship of territorial gods has not been subjected to lamaicisation. Te has four main territorial gods. In descending order they are: Lama Suna Yeshe, who lives on the high snow-mountains to the east; Jowo Shartsen Gyalpo and Pholha Yönten Karpo who are located respectively just to the east of and near the centre of the settled area; Molha Chutsen Nyenpo, represented by a large rock on the bank of the Narshing river.

There are two occasions when members of this set are propitiated with blood sacrifices. The first is during the second month, at the conclusion of the Zatönse ceremony. On the 29<sup>th</sup> day a kid in its first year (most goats are born shortly before the time of this ceremony) is offered at the site of Pholha Yönten Karpo. The following day, the last day of the month, two further animals are killed. The first is another kid, and the second a young male goat in its second year.

The location of the sacrifices in this case is in the floor of the Narshing river valley – but not, however, near Molha Chutsen Nyenpo. The site is a place called Shagtangra, the “enclosure on the dry river bed”, a few hundred yards downstream of the Molha. It consists of nothing more than a small bay in the lowest fields. There is no particular divinity residing at the place, nor even any kind of marker to indicate that it is in any way special.

The second occasion is in the fifth month, at the time when the villagers go to clear the irrigation canals in the eastern upland area called Nari. On the day when they return to the village, two animals are sacrificed at the place called Mushag, a short distance to the west of Naudzong. The animals in this case are a young kid and a sheep, and the beneficiary of the offering is said to be Lama Suna Yeshe, who lives further up the hill at Mutsogang. On the following day, a yearling goat is sacrificed in the Narshing valley floor, at Shagtangra. There are six actual sacrifices performed on four different days, but these are reducible to two events: the conclusion of the Zatönse exorcism and the end of the highland irrigation work. On each occasion there are two sacrifices to a divinity located uphill – respectively at the Pholha and at Musha, for Lama Suna Yeshe – followed, on the next day, by a sacrifice in the valley floor. The identity of the divine





*Te: Thangka, the oldest of the four clusters as seen from the East, with Pholha Yönten Karpo, the central Lord of Place (no. 2 on the map) on the left, photo July 1996*

beneficiaries of the hillside sacrifices is clear enough. But to which divinity is Te offering a goat in the valley floor? If it were Molha Chutsen Nyenpo one might expect the site of the sacrifice to be at or near her rock. The Tepas themselves, in any case, deny that the offering is for the goddess but do not, for all that, regard it as being a sacrifice to any of the other members of the local pantheon.

Let us examine the circumstances of the two sets of sacrifices. The Zatönse is the major annual exorcism of the Tepas, and its climax of the exorcism takes place on the night of the 29<sup>th</sup> day of the second Tepa month (corresponding to the first Agrarian month), when an effigy is carried out of the village. The community is then pure, and its protection from incursions by alien evils is reinforced the follow-

ing day. The four sectoral Rigsum Gönpö of Te are reconsecrated annually within the first ten days of the third month, but the ceremony for the fifth, the maintenance of which is the responsibility of the community as a whole, takes place on the 30<sup>th</sup> day of the second month, on the day after the exorcism and the dual sacrifice to the Pholha. The casting out of the exorcistic effigy and the consecration of the community's "triple protector" represent the purging of the village and the fortification of its spiritual defences against the exterior. The offerings that are made to the Pholha on this day are an inducement for him to provide rain and prosperity. The sacrifice of the following day is offered to no god in particular.

The significant point about this rite is its geometry. It changes a point

(the Pholha) to a vertical line. The main value of the sacrifice in the valley floor is not that it honours a particular place god but that it turns an ordinary place into a special one: the lower point that makes possible the creation of a vertical axis. The order of the offerings, too, is significant: the temporal order suggests a movement from top to bottom, from the mountain crests where the gods live, through the sites where they are represented in the village, and eventually to the river, in a community that has been prepared by purification from within and protection against the outside.

The topological suggestiveness of the second annual sacrifice is even more apparent. The *memang*, the assembly of all the able-bodied men and women between the ages of eighteen and sixty, go up to the high eastern pastures in the fifth month to clear Yemen and Yeren, two arterial conduits of snow-melt that are vital for the irrigation of Te's fields. The day on which they depart is also the beginning of the period of summer cloistering of the village. The form this practice takes in Te is similar to the cloistering of other villages in Mustang and may be described briefly. Small cairns consisting of three stones piled on top of one another are erected at various points around the perimeter of the cultivated area and daubed with red clay. Such constructions, known as *thowo*, are employed in a variety of contexts to signify closure or restriction: a *thowo* is set up at the door of an anchorage to show that the inmate is in retreat; the claimant of a disputed

field may erect a *thowo* on the land in question to indicate that it might not be farmed by anyone else until the matter of ownership has been settled, and so on. The usual term for the cloistering of a village is *tshö damgen*. This expression, which may be glossed as "dyeing restriction", refers to one of the quotidian practices that are forbidden during the period: wool may not be dyed, because of the evil smell released during the process. Other banned activities include whistling, playing musical instruments and sky-burials (and, in other villages, cremations, which are not customarily performed in Te). The crops are at a vulnerable stage, and these practices are regarded as liable to offend the gods, who might then visit various disasters on the community.

The *memang* spend one night in the highlands, and after the canals have been cleared they return to the village. It is on the day of their return that the dual blood-offering is made at Musha for Lama Suna Yeshe, and on the following day the kid is sacrificed in the valley floor. To summarise the main aspects of this occasion: the community and its growing crops are placed under protection; the physical access of water from the glaciers to the village is established; Lama Suna Yeshe is besought for water and prosperity, and the highland site of Musha (itself the source of a spring) is vitalised with two blood-offerings; and finally, the vertical axis is fixed by the sanctification of a place near the river.