

The Sacred Himalaya

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HIMALAYAN EXPEDITION accounts often mention a fascination with the local people and their culture. Many climbers have felt that their experiences going to and from the mountains were more meaningful than those on the peaks themselves. Thus, it's surprising how little interest there has been in trying to understand the beliefs that Himalayan peoples have about their mountains. True, time factors, language barriers, and the like, help explain this, but there are many cases where these excuses wouldn't hold ... my own, for example.

Despite spending several years in the Himalaya and being an anthropologist to boot, I barely asked a question about mountain beliefs. Looking back, I suppose it had to do in part with my viewing the mountains as simply physical challenges to be overcome. What other people thought of them seemed to be of little import, since my concerns were on more mundane things like logistics and getting through the day. Partly, too, it may have been due to thinking in terms of the broader aspects of Tibetan Buddhism and Hinduism. The occasional story about a god residing on a peak seemed to be just a tiny part of the whole. Such stories looked at times like patchwork mythology—the mountains are there so let's put some god on them.

Out of plain ignorance, I wasn't aware of how beliefs about mountains were closely linked with traditional religion and even daily life. Indeed, as far as I am aware, there is still no book that directly focuses on mountain worship across the Himalaya. This is a pity, since by tying together and analyzing such worship, patterns emerge that aid in understanding the people living not only near the mountains but often far distant.

We tend to be impressed when we hear that a religious cult has over a million followers. Imagine, then, that close to a *billion* people believe the Himalaya to be sacred and these include followers of two of the world's major religions: Buddhism and Hinduism. Nowhere in the world does a mountain range figure so prominently in the religious beliefs of such a large and diverse population. For these people mountains are the dwelling places of deities and saints, and for some they are the very embodiments of the gods themselves.

Such beliefs date back thousands of years, being noted in the oldest legends and epics. For example, the *Mahabharata*—eight times the length of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined—was reportedly composed over 2500 years ago, and it makes clear the sacredness of the Himalaya. Mountain worship must predate the

development of the established religions, since mountains doubtless would have been worshipped by primitive groups living near them. In the Himalaya—and in mountainous regions throughout the world as well—we find a common ground for such worship. The mountains influence weather and are the sources of rivers. In short, they affect the economic welfare of agriculturists and pastoralists alike. Due to their dominating positions, they unite the earth and sky and are perceived as the guardians of the land, people and animals within their domains.

This can even be the case for an entire country. Sikkim has Kanchenjunga as its protector deity. Kanchenjunga is worshipped annually in a ceremony in which he appears as a masked dancer. A similar belief underlies *Mani-Rimdu*, the famous Sherpa dance-drama undertaken principally to appease the local protector deities. At the beginning of the ceremony a yak is consecrated to a mountain god and allowed to roam free as a living offering to the deity.

The mountain protector deities are often given visual form in monasteries. For the layman, they are difficult to distinguish from other deities since they are depicted in the same general fashion. Thus the protector god Numbur was painted on a wall near the main entrance to Chiwong Monastery in north-central Nepal. At Ganden Monastery in Tibet there was (still is?) a life-size statue of the mountain Amne Machen, since he was seen to be one of its special protectors.

According to Tibetan Buddhist beliefs, mountains were the most important of the pre-Buddhist Bon deities. They were the warrior-protector gods, and the original kings of Tibet were closely associated with them. Some scholars claim that the early kings were believed to be incarnations or manifestations of the mountain gods.

When Padmasambhava established Buddhism in Tibet during the eighth century, he is believed to have defeated these deities and turned them into protectors of the Buddhist doctrine—an obvious means of syncretizing the new and old religions. Thus several of the main protector deities of Tibet, such as Nyanchenthangla, Amne Machen (Machenpomra) and the Tshering mched-linga (the Five Long-Life Sisters) are mountain gods. Many place names refer to these battles, e.g. Darjeeling (from Dorje-ling) is said to be named for the place (ling) that Padmasambhava defeated the mountain goddess Chenchigma with his magical scepter (*dorje*). Rituals are still being performed to persuade Padmasambhava to continue using his powers to divert the anger of the mountain gods.

Nyanchenthanglha is also thought to be the protector deity of Marpori, the hill in Lhasa on which the Potala Palace stands. Marpori hill itself was a local god and the cairn originally devoted to it was maintained in a room of the Potala.

Everest is believed by many Sherpas to be one of the Five Long-Life Sisters: But not the most important one. The most revered of the Five Sisters is Tsheringma, identified by most Sherpas with the peak we know mainly by its Hindu name Gauri-Shankar (Shiva and his consort Parvati). At 23,406 feet, it is much lower than Everest but dominates an area that figures prominently in Tibetan religion and also oversees an important trade route. The great saint Milarepa was active in this region and, like Padmasambhava, believed to have defeated the



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Photo by Johan Reinhold

MACHAPUCHARÉ, still off-limits to climbers because of religious beliefs of the Nepalese.

Five Sisters and turned them into protectors of Buddhism. The Five Sisters are even the guardians of an entire religious order, that of the Kargyupa of Tibetan Buddhism.

Everest is only one of several mountains worshipped in Solu Khumbu today. One important "country god" (*yul lha*) is the mountain Khumbu *yul-lha* that rises above Namche Bazaar. These country gods oversee the welfare of communities and may become offended by violations of social norms and environmental destruction. For example, grazing and wood cutting would not be allowed on the mountains associated with the principal clans of Khumbu. If this taboo was violated, it was believed the mountain god would cause the people responsible to become ill. In this way beliefs in mountain gods helped in the maintenance of an ecological equilibrium.

Mountain gods are also associated with riches. Kubera, the Hindu god of wealth, is believed to keep a treasure in the mountains of northwest India. Tibetan Buddhists believe that mountain gods protect the legendary "hidden valleys" (*beyul*) and "hidden treasures" (*ter*) of sacred texts and objects meant to be revealed only at special times of need.

The locations of important monasteries and other sacred places and objects (e.g. holy springs, caves and boulders) can often be traced to a direct or legendary association with a sacred mountain. To provide just one example, legend has it that the location of Thami Monastery in Khumbu was selected after a rainbow led from the summit of Khumbu *yul-lha* to the spot.

As protectors of animals, mountain gods might also take their forms or use them as their steeds. There are stories of the gods transforming themselves into yaks and one tells of Tsheringma (Gauri Shankar) riding on a snow leopard. If angered, mountain gods may send yetis to cause harm. Some villagers believe that yetis are actually the manifestations of these gods.

Mountain deities are believed to protect people against malevolent spirits, and shamans may call them when illnesses and other misfortunes occur. Among the Sherpas, these local deities (and not the high gods of Tibetan Buddhism) are the ones called. They provide spiritual empowerment during trances. Water from these mountains possesses healing qualities. In some areas the shamans are said to undertake magical flights to the sacred mountains in order to communicate with the gods. Even Tibet's famous state oracles became possessed by mountain gods.

Not infrequently, mountain worship can take place as part of a ritual which outwardly might seem to have little to do with it. For example, in Helambu (north-central Nepal) a *yul sang* ("country incense") ceremony is held twice a year to help increase the fertility of crops and livestock, prevent hail, etc., for the village as a whole. Village lamas preside and read a Tibetan text for the ritual, which includes the usual food, incense and liquid offerings along with traditional items, such as bells, drums, conch shells, peacock feathers. The local country gods are invoked and these include, of course, those of the mountains.

For religious reasons a number of Himalayan peaks are still not open to expeditions. Whereas the climbers see only the physical aspects of the moun-

Photo by Johan Reinhard

Mani Rimdu dance-drama at Thami Monastery near Everest. This relates to worship of local protector gods, including those of the mountains. (Reinhold Messner is among the onlookers.)



tains and worry about risks during the ascents, the villagers have to worry about the long-term consequences if the gods become angry. Even in the case of Everest, now so regularly ascended, many Sherpa climbers make offerings to the goddess to appease her. Since climbing sacred mountains is often offensive to the gods, some high-altitude Sherpas resent doing it, and only are engaged in climbing because it pays so much better than any other work open to them.

If angered, mountain gods might not only cause accidents on the mountain, but can provoke more serious catastrophes to an entire region, e.g. by causing floods, bad weather and avalanches. In 1954 people near Manashu prevented climbers from attempting the peak because an avalanche had partly destroyed their temple following an earlier ascent.

When Gauri Shankar was opened to expeditions, villagers living near it sent a delegation to Kathmandu to protest. As with any action of this sort, non-religious factors often play roles, and some climbers point to these as examples of the lack of a serious religious concern on the part of the villagers. In fairness, many expeditions have obtained the blessings of local religious authorities and paid for offerings to the mountain gods. On one expedition this came to no small expense, several hundred dollars being given for such offerings while we were on the mountain. And, of course, many mountains are being repeatedly climbed without anyone being particularly bothered. In some cases the villagers think the gods won't pay any attention, since non-believing mountain climbers aren't worthy of it in the first place! But as a general rule, climbers should at least attempt to find out what they can about villagers' beliefs and give serious consideration to how they can avoid offending them.

Climbers usually see little outward expression of mountain worship. In Buddhist areas a small altar of stones might be built at Base Camp. The burning of juniper boughs often serves as an incense offering. This pleases the mountain gods and, when inhaled by climbers, helps to purify their bodies. The gods are thus less offended by them and less apt to attack. Prayer flags also help to avert misfortune. Rice blessed by a lama may be offered at the altar and at dangerous places encountered on the mountain. The low chanting of *mantras* (spells) is often heard, especially before leaving in the mornings. It is a haunting and unforgettable experience to set out onto a glacier in the stillness of the night with dozens of chanting Sherpas.

Certainly the most sacred peak in the Himalaya is Kailash. This mountain is of central importance both in Hindu and Buddhist beliefs. Although only 22,028 feet, Kailash stands alone at a high point of the Tibetan plateau from which four major rivers of South and Central Asia originate: The Indus, Brahmaputra, Sutlej and Karnali. Its religious importance is obviously linked to its being a major geographical center of South Asia. The Karnali is a main tributary of the sacred Ganges River, which helps feed a third of India's population and whose own source lies not far away on the other side of the Himalaya. The Ganges' origin is near the foot of a peak considered one of the lesser abodes of the great Hindu god Shiva. Kailash is Shiva's principal home and he resides there with his consort Parvati. For Buddhists Kailash is the abode of the important pro-

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Photo by Johan Reinhard

Burning juniper as incense to the Goddess of Everest at an altar below the Khumbu Icefall.



pector deities Demchog and Dorje Phangmo and is also associated with Padmasambhava and Milarepa, not to mention numerous other deities and saints. It is here where the legendary contest between Milarepa and a great Bon shaman took place. The line down the south face of Kailash is thought to have been caused by the fall of the shaman's drum after he failed to be the first to the summit. This line gave rise to the name "swastika mountain," the swastika being also a talisman of spiritual strength.

Kailash came to be perceived as the physical manifestation of the cosmic mountain Meru and this symbolized for many the axis of the spiritual universe and center of the universal mandala. Several scholars feel that the forms of pagodas and stupas are based upon the concept of this cosmic mountain.

Mountain symbolism even can play a role in yoga. One yogic exercise is to imagine the spinal column to be one with Mount Meru, thereby gaining one a strengthening of earth consciousness. Of course, Shiva is the lord of the yogis and is believed to chiefly reside in the Himalaya.

The cairns of stones which are such common sights in the Himalaya are usually in honor of mountain gods in the Buddhist region. Some Hindus associate them with their main gods, while Muslims may explain them as being shrines or tombs of their saints.

Whereas Buddhists tend to view the mountains as being individual gods in their own right, Hindus more often claim them as associated in some way with major gods of the Hindu pantheon, e.g. as being their residences. Numerous of the most sacred shrines and pilgrimage sites of Hinduism, e.g. Badrinath, Kedarnath and Amarnath, are located amidst the Himalaya. Virtually every major Hindu deity and saint has been associated in some way with these mountains. One of the most sacred shrines of the great god Vishnu, for example, is found at Badrinath and the principal deified saints (*nathas*) are guardian spirits of mountains. Some believe that Goraknath, patron saint of the royal family of Nepal, still lives on Kailash.

There is an especially sacred mountain in the center of the cluster of peaks that make up the Gangotri-Kedarnath-Badrinath group. It is "Mahadeoka linga," the lingam (phallic symbol) of Shiva, today simply called Shivling. (It's one of the lesser abodes of Shiva, Kailash being the most important.)

Shiva's consort is Devi (meaning goddess), who in a gentler form is Parvati (one "from the mountains"). The mountain Nanda Devi is a manifestation of Parvati. When Nanda Devi Unsoeld died on the mountain she had been named for, local accounts invariably attributed this in some way to actions of the goddess.

The Sikhs make pilgrimages to a sacred place high in the mountains. They believe the great teacher Govind Singh was commanded by God at the lake Hem Kund (15,000 feet), to be reborn in order to combat lawlessness and help the poor. The lake is said to be surrounded by seven (a ritual number) mountains which protect it.

Muslims, too, can consider mountains to have sacred aspects. Thus in Swat-Kohistan in Pakistan they call one mountain, Musaka Musalla, the "prayer mat of Moses," for he is expected to land there when he returns to earth.

It is only logical that tribes living in the Himalaya would have worshipped mountains prior to the establishment of the major religions. After all, we know that primitive tribes throughout Asia believed mountains, lakes and rivers to be inhabited by spirits. If that wasn't enough, further evidence comes from the many accounts of Padmasambhavas' battles with local deities. These battles took place over an extensive area, and there is little doubt that beliefs in mountain gods existed prior to the introduction of Hinduism in the western Himalaya. Some groups, such as the Lepchas, appear to have maintained some of this ancient worship up to recent times.

"In a hundred ages of the gods I could not tell thee of the glories of the Himalaya" goes one saying. Despite the differences that exist between the peoples of the Himalaya, they all share a respect for the sacred mountains. As we have seen, these peaks are the homes of deities and saints believed to directly affect the well-being of millions of people. They can be associated with crop and livestock fertility, environmental catastrophes, illnesses, climbing accidents, pilgrimage places, meditational exercises, architecture, gods of major religions, protection of religious doctrines, even wildlife and legendary beings such as the yeti. Although now assimilated into major religious systems, they still maintain their powers for the peoples of the Himalaya.

APPENDIX

Mountains, Gods and Names—the Case of Everest

The information on the indigenous name for Everest can be summarized in a word—confusing. Some Sherpas perceive Everest to be Miyo (or Miyul) Langsangma. (This is the pronunciation of the more correct transliteration mi-gyo-glang-bzang-ma.) Miyul Langsangma is one of the famous Five Long-Life Sisters (Tshering mched-Ing) of Tibetan Buddhism. However, there are also Sherpas and many Tibetans who do not make this identification. Although he couldn't prove it, Johannes Schubert in his *Mount Everest—Das Namensproblem* (1956) felt that all the Five Sisters were grouped close to the mountain Gauri Shankar. If true, this would exclude Everest as being one of them. Friedrich Funke in *Religiöses Leben der Sherpa* (1969) made the following breakdown of Miyul Langsangma: *mi*-people, *yul*-place, *langsang*-sitting on summit and *ma*-mother goddess. Some Tibetans call this goddess Miyo Lobsangma (mi gyo blo bzang ma) which Funke translated as: *miyo*-unmovable, *sang*-good, *lob*-intellect, *ma*-mother goddess. To complicate things, one Sherpa specialist translated this as "unmovable good ox!" It would take someone knowledgeable not only in Tibetan but also how Tibetans and Sherpas perceive the terms to come up with a correct definition.

Many Tibetans, e.g. in Rongbuk Monastery at the foot of Everest, did not name Everest for one of the sisters, but rather called it Jomo glangma. Tibetans in the region of Khumbu used Jomo (Chomo) lungma. Now Chomo means "goddess" and lung is "valley" so we would have "mother goddess of the valley." This seems simple. However, according to Schubert, Chomolungma wouldn't be grammatically correct in Tibetan. On the other hand, he noted this name appearing on a Tibetan map of 1717. Funke translates Chomolungma as "mother goddess, wind mother," although it is unclear where he got "wind" from.

At least we can say that Everest is perceived as a goddess and a protector deity of nearby regions—not exactly the "goddess mother of the world" as some writers would have it. So which of the indigenous names would seem appropriate for Everest? Chomolungma is a neutral term, but Sherpas apparently do not use it much. Then again, there is no uniformity with Miyul Langsangma either, and it has more specific connotations being the name of one of the Five Sisters. All things considered, if one name had to be chosen, Chomolungma would seem to be the winner—but not by a landslide.



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Photo by Friedrich Funke

The face of Everest as depicted in a Sherpa mask.

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