The ranking place in the Sharwa home (ancient Amdo)

Samten Karmay and Philippe Sagant

Translator: Matthew Cunningham
The ranking place in the Sharwa home (ancient Amdo)

Samten Karmay and Philippe Sagant
Translation: Matthew Cunningham

EDITOR’S NOTE

This is a translation of an article published in 1987 as ‘La place du rang dans la maison sharwa (Amdo ancien)’. In Architecture, milieu et société en Himalaya, edited by D Blamont and G Toffin, p229–260 (Paris: Éditions du CNRS). We remind the reader that we have respected the style of the original, except for the reformating of references and correction of errors. Our thanks go to Samten Karmay for agreeing to this translation and to Frederic Dubois for his help with the illustrations.

1 In the 1950s, prior to the arrival of the Chinese in Tibet, Sharwa country—inhabited by Tibetan-culture sedentary farmers, and located not far from the Chinese town of Songpan at the edge of Sichuan—counted among what Carrasco1 called ‘the tribal communities of Amdo’. It was made up of a half-dozen small political federations (tsho), each of which assembled several villages around the worship of a sacred mountain, a country god (yul-lha). These federations were not dependent on any large monastery or prince, and central Tibet did not intervene in their affairs in any way. Before 1911, they were under the nominal authority of Manchu China, or more specifically the viceroy of Sichuan. Hereditary headmen (go-ba) were in place, maintaining links with Chinese officials. However, they were far from wielding power over Tibetan communities everywhere. The federations paid no taxes to anyone. They were lords of the earth (sa-bdag). They administered with full sovereignty. These were like what Walsh called ‘small republic state[s]’ based on a political tradition ‘which has been in force from time immemorial and is probably of very great antiquity’.2

2 Between 1934 and 1950, that is to say after the ‘Long March’ had passed through Tibetan country, the Chinese, who were occupied elsewhere, made themselves even
more scarce. Within the Sharwa republics, political struggles were occasionally bitter in some places. In each federation one saw a handful of men, four or five, climb to a position of power. In many cases, these were not hereditary headmen (‘go-ba’)
 supported by the Chinese. Neither were they sages or doyens in the traditional sense. Was this democracy? Not according to our own criteria: those men who rose to power (dbang-can) were not representatives in the sense in which we understand this word. Why, then, did communities recognise an authority they did not elect? From where did those men draw their legitimacy, from what political tradition? These questions are the subject of a study in progress.

In any case, among the Sharwa of Amdo, there was a close relationship between the country god (yul-lha) and the political organisation. Each federation (tsho) instituted its own sacred mountain. The worship held in midsummer—with its fumigation (bsang), its offerings of wind horses (rlung-rta) and its various competitions (horserace, gun shooting, oratory jousts)—is of the same kind that, further north, supplied material that inspired the ‘mad saints’ in the Epic of Gesar: according to R A Stein, it remained little-known in the 1950s.

And although Tibetologists have stressed its role in endowing the country with an ‘elected’ king, the way it underpins the political organisation as a whole has hardly been studied.

As for ethnologists, those who worked in Tibet prior to 1950 and those whose post-1960 studies concerned enclaves of Tibetan culture in Nepal and elsewhere, they often confirm the existence of the tsho: for example, in Tibet among breeders in Amdo or Changtang, even in Sakya; in Sikkim, in the upper Chumbi Valley; in Nepal among the Nyingba, in Dolpo, in Manang, in Ladakh, in the sedentary highlands. The word tsho is translated in a variety of ways: tribe, district, village quarter, village. The political aspect is rarely mentioned. This is because unlike in Sharwa country, the authors are dealing with the forgotten relics of an ancient, dismantled order, and if they endeavour to present political life, it is usually the one that is right before their eyes, and results from a centralisation. Furthermore, the relationship with mountain worship does not get mentioned. Only Walsh, in his beautiful study on the Chumbi Valley, presents the tsho as political, and power as a favour from the mountain god (yul-hla).

Nonetheless, here and there, some of these works raise the same questions as in Sharwa country. Let us take the example of the Sherpa of Nepal, on which the literature is abundant: C von Fürer-Haimendorf, who described the political organisation, stresses its democratic aspect:

‘The fundamental principle that inspires the men in charge of administering consists in making sure authority is considered the privilege of the whole population. This authority is then delegated to elected leaders for a set period’.

Thus, as long as we set aside the headmen called phembu, who appeared along with the centralising state (their powers were delegated by the king of Nepal), the organisation of the Sherpa of Nepal appears to be simple: on the one hand, an assembly of house headmen, and on the other, elected representatives called naua.

However, Fürer-Haimendorf stressed the ineffectiveness of this framework. He noted that the community handed over responsibility for settling conflicts to private mediators—arbitrators instead of judges. He was especially surprised by the procedure for electing political leaders:

‘The method that presides over the appointment of the naua is difficult to determine and even more difficult to describe, because of the casual way in which it
unfolds and the lack of any traditional procedure... This appointment results from
neither a village vote, nor nomination by a local authority. The decision is made in
a private meeting between three or four of the village’s most important figures’.

9 If, furthermore, one observes that the elected leaders, the naua, are not the real holders
of power, but are rural guardians at most, then one is faced with the same questions
among the Sherpa of Nepal as those raised by the Sharwa of Amdo: a handful of men
who appoint ‘leaders’ seem to hold power; they are neither representatives of the
central authority, nor elected representatives of the population. Then who are these
people? On this point, once again Fürer-Haimendorf points the way: ‘In Khamjung, the
choice of naua’, that is to say leaders, ‘has for years remained the exclusive business of
four or five men who were the headmen of the two wealthiest families’.

10 Power, family, wealth: here we are confronted with the most sensitive question of all,
that of the ‘ranking place’ (go-’phang). Throughout Tibet, when an assembly is held,
each participant is assigned a place to sit according to their social status and political
authority. However, the criteria of this hierarchy are far from clear. It is seen in the
epic of Gesar, where it is described as ‘a faithful mirror of social practices’: the day of
the horserace, the doyen of Gling welcomes the country’s headmen. To place each of
them in the ranking place that is his due, he evokes the origins of the clans: taken into
consideration are age, primogeniture, the age of the lineages, and the heredity of
responsibilities. But rank is far from being a function of birth privileges. One sees this
at the end of the race, when everything is turned upside-down: Gesar, the winner, who
was originally seated at the end of a row, is suddenly propelled to the throne. The
whole ranked hierarchy is challenged by the hero of the day.

11 This challenging of hierarchies brings us back to the Sherpa of Nepal: S Ortner showed
the extent to which it is customary. Like the doyen of Gling, a Sherpa house headman,
who invites the village to a domestic celebration at his home, places everyone in the
ranking place that is his due. But the operation is not carried out immediately. Prior to
the meal, guests sit down wherever they please and spend a good deal of time drinking
and joking around. Everyone chimes in, beginning with the widows, who make
suggestive remarks. The laughter, however, has a direction. Where will everyone be
placed during the meal today? The cutting remarks are particularly caustic when
directed at those who claim a position that the village denies them. Insults are
perceptible in flattery, and conflicts of authority are latent. In this case, it is not a
horserace that will decide the ranking place, but rather a kind of oratory joust
arbitrated by the laughter of public opinion. Once the power relations have been
clearly established, the house headman assigns the places. Thus each invitation brings
about a reorganisation in the hierarchy. Ortner says that the celebration is a political
enclosure.

12 However, one question remains: between two assemblies, what are the new events that
make a community want to revise its hierarchies? Paul Sherap, Coombe’s Tibetan
informant, once gave his answer. He said that on the occasion of a wedding, once
inside, guests sit in their ranking place on long rugs. The big man is at the back of the
room, and the man of little consequence is closest to the door. Seniority is first
determined by the ranking of official responsibilities, then by oratory reputation, then
by wealth, and finally by age. This seniority that takes renown or wealth into account
strikes us a curious. Note also that age and responsibility are data that, in principle, do
not vary from one assembly to the next. Challenges to the rankings would therefore
result from fluctuations in wealth and reputation. But why do only orators and rich people enter onto the lists? Are not the horserace winner (described in the epic) and the wild yak hunter (found in the Dunhuang manuscripts) men meant to build renown?

In this article, we will attempt to present the home of the Sharwa of Amdo. Once the dwelling and the organisation of space have been described, we will adopt the perspective that Ortner used among the Sherpa of Nepal: domestic hospitality as political enclosure. It is a matter of answering a question. In the little Sharwa republics, men climb to power without ever having been elected. When a neighbour receives them, are their pretentions ridiculed in the same way as among the Sherpa of Nepal? Or, on the contrary, are they assigned the seat of honour in the home, and if so, according to what principle? If the latter should be the case, it would have its significance. It might then be necessary to assume that still recently, the Sharwa elected their leaders the way Gesar was elected king of Gling in the epic, that is to say based on renown and feats. And since tsho have been attested to all over the fringes of Tibet, another question arises: was this way of recognising power, through living the myth, once widespread in Tibet? And has it been handed down from time immemorial?

Description of the Sharwa home

The hamlets of Sharwa farmers are perched on the mountainside, under the pine forest. Generally facing away from the summit, most of them get plenty of sun. Lower down, Bonpo monasteries can be found here and there amid the fields that descend towards the river. Along the water are a mill, a covered wooden bridge, and a few Chinese residences. The riverbank is where Tibetan farmers and Chinese colonists mix, the latter being much less numerous in 1950 than they are today. Near the small town of Songpan, located an altitude of 3700 metres, the bottom of the rGya-chu river valley marks a transition zone between the two civilisations, Chinese and Tibetan.

Captain Gill was one of the first to visit the fringes of the Sharwa valley. Wood enters prominently into his writings a construction material, and he described the buildings as Swiss chalets, with their span roofs and upstairs terraces lined with balconies. There were many hamlets of around twenty houses. The homes were huddled, but not attached. Each house had its enclosure, its courtyard, its autonomy.

The dwelling we are going to describe belongs to a hamlet of around fifteen houses. Including servants, the home has ten inhabitants. In smaller neighbouring houses, the average is around four to seven people. Farming is the main activity, but livestock is also bred. The home in question owns some hundred sheep, eight mdzo for work, eight mdzomo for milking, two pigs, hens, and around twenty horses, all permanent. Additionally, 75 mdzo for transportation are permanently on the pastures, far up the mountain. They only come down in early winter for the departure of the large trade caravan that sells Chinese tea among the breeders on the Tibetan plateau, beyond the loop of the upper Yellow River. The home in question is obviously prosperous, one of the most prosperous not only in the village, but also the valley.

The wealthier a household, the higher its enclosure, and the more spacious its courtyard. One enters the courtyard by the ‘wide door’ (rgya-sgo). The orientation of this gate differs from house to house. It has an important effect on the fate of the inhabitants. Several factors combine: topographical adaptation to the land, the beneficial opening onto the best cardinal points and, above all, the specific
configuration of each of the sites, stemming from Chinese geomancy criteria. The courtyard of the Karthok house opens to the east. From the gate, one perceives a torrent on the other side of the mountain that seems to be hurtling towards the house: this is beneficial. A little higher up in the village, the Tsewang house is even better off. At the bottom of the valley, after a bend, the river runs without twists and turns a long way to the south. From the gate, it looks like it is making straight for the Tsewang house. It is said that this is why the household is rich and its herd of mdzo is the largest in the country. Other houses are less favoured. The gate on one of them even opens to the west. Inside, the orientation of the gate determines that of the house’s ground-floor door, and to some extent that of the courtyard and the upstairs balcony that overlooks it. But it still has no influence on the orientation of the main façade, which, throughout the village, overlooks the valley and opens onto the midday sun.

Fig 1: Typical Sharwa village of the northern rGya-chu river valley

We see dar-shing posts and a few houses, khang-chung. The lower-left structure is Chinese. It served as a grain warehouse during the Cultural Revolution.
After passing through the gate, one runs into a furious dog, a huge half-wild hound, bought for a small fortune from the breeders on the plateau. During the day, chained to its kennel, it guards the gate. People in the village say they can recognise their dog's barks from far away. The deeper its voice, the prouder they are. So aside from neighbours and friends, not just anyone can enter the Sharwa house. One must be invited. A vagabond will call from outside before taking the risk of going in.

The wealthy (phyug-po), enclose their courtyard within a very high wall. At its base is a large, low dry-stone wall less than one metre high. In autumn, the logs that will be burned all winter are piled up around the whole perimeter. One must fell the trees, cut up the trunks in the forest, then carry them down to the houses on the backs of mdzo. For weeks at a stretch, the rich employ woodcutters and day labourers. The greater a home's prosperity, the higher the wall must be. Some are as high as four to five metres. Sheltered from the strong winds, the enclosed, sun-bathed courtyard becomes an island of calm, a luxury.

In the middle of the courtyard is a prayer pole (darg-shing) topped with a flag that is renewed yearly during the good fortune ritual (g'yang-gug). And all the way along the eastern wall, the side that has the gate, six or eight similar poles (dar-lcog) help keep evil at bay. A wealthy home needs a spacious courtyard. In early winter, it must be able to hold the mdzo that will be saddled for the trade expedition. All kinds of work is done there as well: barley flour is roasted in a small oven; pigs are slaughtered; sheep are sheared; every morning, in the southern corner, the eight mdzomo kept on the farm are milked. They spend their nights there year-round along with the work animals.
The ground floor

22 Facing the gate is the entrance to the house, which also faces eastward, on the long side of the building. One enters the ground floor (khang-'og) by the interior door (nang-sgo): it is a wooden double door surmounted on the outside by a stuffed bear head (dred-mo). It guards (sgo-srung) the threshold against roaming spirits. Not every house has such a protector. Only the hunter who kills the beast takes the head, and not every home has its bear killer.

23 The ground floor is reserved for animals. It is a sheepfold, a pigpen, a stable, and a storage space. Inside the entrance, facing the door, the staircase leading upstairs has thirteen steps, an auspicious number among the upholders of good.

24 The wall to the right of the entrance, the one whose back faces the peak, is occupied by small compartmentalised units made of wood, each with its own door, used for storage. The first is the tool house (skag-khang). Hoes and ploughs are hung on the wall. That is where farming tools are stored. The room is windowless.

25 The next room is the wool house (bal-khang), and it too is windowless. Placed on the floor or attached to the walls are wooden chests containing various kinds of wool from shearing. There are also skins, but only from domestic animals. Those of wild animals are under the roof. Here one also finds the reserve of tea from China and salt brought back from the Tibetan plateau. This is one of the home’s treasure rooms, and like every treasure room, it rests against the northern wall, on the mountain side. Only the masters of the house have the key. The servants are not allowed to enter. Every year, when the ‘summoning of good fortune’ is performed, a tuft of wool is attached to the door, helping attract g’yang, the essence of wealth.

Fig 3: Map of the ground floor
Further along is the home of the horse (rta-khang), specifically that of the mare, because it is here that she is placed to give birth to her foal. A trough runs along the wall. Daylight enters through a small opening. Saddles are hanging on the wall, but they are in general use. The beautiful saddles are upstairs. If a horse is sold, once again a tuft of horsehair is attached to the door, so the horse’s g’yang will remain in the house.

Finally, the last storeroom of the northern façade, in the western corner, is the grain house (’bru-khang). On the floor, in compartments separated by boards, are wheat and barley, especially the latter. Every pile of grain is the remainder of the year’s harvest. The house has reserves.

On the western wall, at the back of the ground floor, along nearly the entire length, is a chest-high wooden fence; this is the sheep house (lug-khang), where the animals return every night, except in autumn, when they are on the pastures for two months. It has a beaten-earth floor. Every year at the approach of spring, the servants remove the manure from an enclosure outside the courtyard, so it can be taken to the fields before the barley work begins. In the southern corner, at the end of the sheep enclosure, are the latrines and the pigpen (phag-tshang): every house breeds one or two pairs of them.

Along the two other walls, to the south and west, run troughs for sixteen to twenty horses that are each tethered in front of its own. There are also two mules and four mares. In the middle of the lower room is a special trough: the one for the horse that will be saddled the following day. He has a right to special treatment. In every house of the federation, a man, horse and gun are always ready. Sometimes the country is not safe.
This ‘floor below’ is dedicated to storage and animals. The layout varies from house to house. But treasure rooms are always against the wall facing the peak. The whole floor is very dark, and children are afraid to venture in, especially into the wool house and tool house. The ground floor is the least pure of the home. When a woman is expecting a child, it is in the wool house that she gives birth; she only returns upstairs after a few days. Finally on this floor below, with its beaten-earth surface, the spirits of earth and water are not far away. The aquatic klu inhabit a spring in a neighbouring field. They have their say about the home’s prosperity. Above all, Tsang-tsang is the lady of the earth (sa-bdag). The house was erected on her kingdom; she supports it. She had to be subdued during construction when the foundations were laid.

Upstairs

It is on the first floor, called the ‘middle floor’ (khang-steng [lit. upper floor]), that the people live. This is accessed through the thirteen-step staircase that leads from the floor below to a large terrace under the open sky, on the valley side, emerging right in front of the large vestibule door (sgo-khyams che-ba) leading to the apartments on the mountain side. This door too is surmounted by an animal’s stuffed head, but this time it is that of a stag, with his full spread of antlers. It is said that if the home is prosperous, this is thanks to that other threshold guard. The home’s upstairs is divided into two sections: one public, lower down, towards the south; the other private, to the north. The large interior door piercing the middle of a façade—behind which the living spaces are located, especially the largest of them, the fireplace room (khyim)—determines the house’s main façade: it opens onto the fields, river and valley floor, whereas it has its back to the mountain and summits.

On the public side is the terrace (yo-ka), along which runs a balcony where one can look down onto the courtyard to the east, and the valley to the south. This is where one sunbathes, sheltered from the wind. At the Karthoks’ home, it is so large that children can run around on it. During harvest season, twenty day-labourers from other regions sleep there comfortably. In winter, around ten women from a neighbouring village set themselves up to do their craft there for several weeks, weaving the wool from shearing. In the south-eastern corner of the terrace is a small stone building that evokes the stupa. It is called the fumigation house (bsang-khang). This is where the house headman burns juniper every morning facing the mountain, in honour of the country god (yul-lha).

The whole west side of the terrace is occupied by a wooden building, slightly raised on piles, under which are heaped all kinds of sleeping materials for itinerant farm labourers: this is called the little house (khang-chung), as opposed to the big house (khang-chen) that contains all of the private apartments. It has wood-trellised windows giving onto the terrace. At the Karthoks’ home, this is where the house headman’s nephew has been sleeping since getting married. Passing guests used to be received there, and the building is still called the guest house (mgon-khang). Propped against the walls of the little house on its southern, western and northern sides are lean-tos that serve as rooms where household servants (gla-ba) can sleep. Against the walls are heaps of horse saddles, yak saddles and harnesses.

Let us leave the terrace and go through the large inner door, which stays open all day. One enters a large vestibule that serves all of the rooms of the private apartments.
Closest to the entrance are the bedrooms (ga-tsi): that of the house headman and his wife, that of his two boys (the oldest of whom is ten years old), that of a brother who is a monk, which he uses when he leaves the monastery to come and visit for a few days. At the Karthoks’ home, no one ever sleeps in the fireplace room. Towards the back, against the northern wall with their backs to the peak, are the house’s three large rooms, accessed by a corridor: to the east is the chapel, in the middle is the treasure room, and to the west is the kitchen, where the fireplace is

In the north-eastern corner is the chapel (yig-khang). Through three doors with wooden panels that can be detached when the officiants are numerous, the chapel opens southward onto a small corridor. At the back, against the northern wall, is the altar, ‘a sculpted wooden console blackened by generations of use’ with its statues and book compartments. Every home has its titular divinity (yi-dam). With only one exception, it is the same for all of them: a Tantric divinity called gSang-drag. In front of the altar are small dishes containing sacred water, small butter lamps, and quivers containing arrows (mda’-dar), each of which symbolises one of the men of the house—the living on one side, the dead on the other. Paintings hang on the wall. Some homes are renowned for the rich collection of objects that ornament their chapel: masks, drums, bronze statues, musical instruments. It is to the chapel that Bonpo officiants come to perform the necessary rituals for the inhabitants’ wellbeing. Here, in this house, the ceiling is raised. Two of the village houses have this layout, the two most powerful.

Adjoining the chapel is the treasure room (mdzod-khang), a very dark space without any opening onto the outside other than a small window giving onto the vestibule. A light has to be brought if one goes inside. Its only door leads to the kitchen.

There are five wooden chests on the floor, along three sides of the room. Inside them one finds: dollars and ingots of Chinese money; silver dishes used for celebrations and a bowl for serving or eating; rolls of beautiful fabrics, Chinese silks, thick wool sheets from Lhasa, fine ones made in the region; deer antlers; and a few beautiful wild animal skins—leopard, used for the summoning of the g’yang, otter to decorate the cuffs and fringes of tunics, and fox for making hats. One also finds food provisions like rice or barley, but they are not ready for consumption like those in the storeroom beside the women’s corner in the fireplace room. Finally, there are beautiful saddles on the floor. On the other hand, there are no weapons here: all of the men take them into their bedrooms, especially their guns. There are no drums, books or statues, since these are in the chapel. Most skins are stored under the roof, whether wild or domestic; bearskins are in the bedrooms, where people sleep under them. Nor are there rugs, felt, tent fabric or harness ropes; these are piled up in the children’s room. Servants never enter the treasure room, and the mother rarely goes in. The men of the family rule over it and maintain it.
Finally, in the western corner of that northern façade is the fireplace room (khyim). It is accessed through the kitchen’s interior door (khyim nang-sgo). The room is spacious but dark. Aside from one small window, the walls are windowless, completely covered by panelling, various decorations, and shelves of dishes. Light enters through the ceiling when the ‘smoke hole’ is open. And when that is closed, it is the fire that provides light, as do a few lamps on the shelves.
The fireplace (thab-ka) is a monumental structure that rests against the western wall at the back, and juts out into the middle of the room to the point of invading it. Its ‘three stones’ are actually packed-earth structures that raise the fireplace and allow the housewife to cook standing up. Arranged radially, they divide the kitchen into three distinct spaces. They are shelves, and on one of them is a secondary fireplace holding an enormous pot used for boiling the milk from milking. The fireplace god (thab-lha) lives inside the fireplace.

Above the fireplace, the smoke hole (dud-khung) is a square aperture through the roof. It can be opened or closed. A prayer wheel hangs inside. Every time the fire is fanned, the draft makes the wheel turn, and the prayers fly towards the mountain.

There is a separate name for each of the three spaces established by the fireplace stones and by the extension of their axes. From the perspective of the door, the back-left is the ‘most interior space’ (phug-do, henceforth simply the ‘interior’). At the back-right is the ‘ranking place’ (go-dbang). And lastly, there is the ‘fire door’ (me-sgo), a triangle that has its summit at the fireplace and encompasses the threshold on which one is standing.

Through its name, the interior (phug-do) evokes a cave, its deepest recess: this is the sanctuary of domestic intimacy. Here one finds receptacles containing potable well water, the huge milk pot, some worn-out water tubs, and all kinds of household utensils. On the wall are shelves of dishes. To the left, at the back of the room against the southern wall, a small door leads to the food storeroom. The interior is especially characterised by the presence of women.

On the other side of the interior with respect to the fireplace stone that rests against the back wall, is the ranking place where the men take their seats. First is the house headman, with his back against the west wall and his storage chest within arm’s reach. Then there are his sons, his brothers, his nephews, and also the servants who live on the farm. In the middle of this space is a small table surrounded by cushions for sitting: it is square, low, and has a semi-spherical receptacle cut into its centre, which is filled with embers. Further along is the ‘long pillar’ (ka-ring), the seat of the kitchen god (khyim-lha). This is the only pillar in the room. Because of the size of the fireplace, it is not in the centre, but moved towards the right. Set against the northern wall is a long table that is pulled out for guests during New Year or wedding celebrations. In this wall, near the pillar, is a recess dedicated to the kitchen god. In the north-eastern corner is a door leading to the treasure room. It is the counterpart of the one in the interior, leading to the food supply.

Finally, at the front of the room, on the side with the door to the corridor, is a space called the ‘fire door’. This is the only place from which the fireplace is loaded. The rules stipulate that this simple operation can be done neither from the interior nor from the ranking place. A store of logs is found piled against the wall, to the left of the door when entering from the corridor. On the other side, against the wall to the right, is yet another table, not as long as the ranking place table, but it too is used for guests on celebration days. There are also more cushions on the floor near the fireplace, where men and women sit together, those of indeterminate status.

Considerable variations are found from one house to another. As we have seen, the orientation of the gate depends on the site of the house. It determines the ground-floor
door and, to some extent, the courtyard and even the terrace. It therefore varies depending on the dwelling.

46 The upstairs terrace, which is spacious in the Karthok’s home, is smaller elsewhere. The little house is not present on all properties. It does not exist at the homes of the destitute (med-po). At the homes of the wealthy, there may be more than one: the first on one side of the terrace, as at the Karthoks’ home; sometimes a second on the other side, facing the first; more rarely a third, which blocks the view of the bottom of the valley. Then the terrace becomes a patio, an upstairs inner courtyard, closed on all sides. Finally the number bedrooms is smaller in most other houses. It happens that people sleep in the kitchen.

47 Outside of these variants, what is striking in the Sharwa house is the permanence of certain features, which are identical in every dwelling, such as the internal order of the kitchen.

**Symbolic organisation of space**

**The three kitchen spaces**

48 In almost every house, the layout of the kitchen is the same. The fireplace is central and its three stones establish the same three compartmentalisations between the interior, the ranking place and the fire door. The characteristics attributed to each of them differs. Oppositions appear that particularly concern the interior and the ranking place. What the fire door is connected with is less clear-cut at first glance.

49 The first opposition between the interior and the ranking place puts men on one side and women on the other. The interior is above all the place where the housewife, her daughters, their aunts, their cousins and the maidservant busy themselves. They prepare meals, make cheese and churn butter. The men are kept away. When a little boy holds onto his mother’s skirt to follow her into her interior domain, the mother does not like this. She says to him: ‘Don’t hang around the interior; go back to your father in the ranking place’. The house headman can go into the interior. But he does not stay there. If he stays too long, and if his wife subsequently injures herself, they will know why. In the village, a woman lost her son at a young age. It affected her to the point that she fell ill and was unable to take care of household tasks. Aside from her, there were only men in the house. There was no question of any of them moving into the interior to replace the mother. A woman from another house was called. As for farm servants, the rules are even stricter: they rarely venture into the interior space.

50 Opposite the interior, the men sit in the ranking place. The housewife can go there to tidy up. She leaves it as soon as the task is complete. She never sits down there. The other women linger there even less. The household servants have their place there: the family men welcome them to take their meals around the low table. But passing day-labourers have no access. If they are admitted to the kitchen, it is in the fire door section.

51 There is another opposition between the interior and the ranking place, determined by the general orientation of the whole house: each of them has its back to the summit and its main façade turned towards the valley. In the village, the topography requires that this layout include an opening to the south, receiving as much sun as possible. As
we know, in every dwelling, the three main rooms have their backs to the north, against the mountain, with the kitchen in the western corner. This data has consequences for the internal order of the kitchen. In relation to the fireplace stone that rests against the western wall, the interior is located on the valley side, to the south, and the ranking place on the north side, towards the summits. Instead of referring to cardinal points, which can vary depending on the site of the village, in everyday language people speak of the relation of the ranking place to the summit, and that of the interior to the bottom of the valley, to the river. When a boy follows his mother into the interior, she says to him: ‘Don’t stay here, go back up there, to the ranking place’. And the same goes for a little girl who ventures among the men and is sent ‘back down’. Thus the interior is considered ‘low’, and the ranking place is considered ‘high’.

A third opposition pair is translated in terms of interior (nang) and exterior (phyi). Recalling the names of the doors that must be passed through to get to the kitchen, one sees the importance attributed to these notions. In the courtyard there is the wide gate. Then on the ground floor is the interior door; upstairs is the vestibule’s large door; finally, in the corridor, is the door to the kitchen’s interior, which involves a redundancy, since the kitchen is considered the interior of the house. Every door brings another level of interiority separating private from public a little bit more. And if the kitchen is considered a closed world whose organisation of space is sufficient unto itself, the women’s side is ‘the interior of the interior’, which is the very meaning of phug-do. On the other hand, in this kitchen, the men’s place is considered ‘exterior’.

Fig 6: The fireplace room in a Sharwa house

To its right is the ranking place (go-dbang), where a man is sitting; to the left is the interior (phug-do), where the woman is. We see the three monumental stones of the main fireplace; the secondary fireplace where the enormous pot of milk from milking is heating; the pillar (ka-ring); the empty seat of the house headman and that of the ‘counsellor’, where the man is seated.
This opposition is a big part of life. It primarily reflects the division of tasks. The wife lives in the house... It is her special domain. She prepares food, fetches water from the watering place..., maintains the different rooms..., takes care of the animals. She has a close relationship with the house. At the crack of dawn, her various household activities are supplemented by work in the fields. Most of the small everyday farming tasks are done by the wife: manuring, weeding, watering, fodder collection, milking animals. The man makes his contribution at the time of the ploughing and the harvests..."^22

He breaks the soil open with the swing plough, and piles up the sheaves. But the rest of the time, he is always on the move, on the pastures, with the mdzo or the sheep, or in the village, for public business, or in China to bring back tea, or on the plateau, to trade with the breeders. He lives outside, his wife inside. And when they meet around the fireplace, he in the exterior, his wife in the interior.

Like elsewhere in Tibet^23, the idea extends to the possessions belonging to each of the sexes. Bacot has noted that among Tibetan farmers of the 10th century, there was already the ancient Chinese division between women’s possessions and men’s possessions, indoor possessions and outdoor possessions. The notion is found among the Sharwa: adjoining the ranking place, which is exterior, is the treasure room, with its chests and beautiful saddles—men’s property—and on the other side, giving onto the interior, is the food storeroom over which the wife rules.

The final marked opposition between the interior and the ranking place is the distinction between ‘dark’ and ‘light’. The kitchen is dark overall. The walls have no windows, or almost none. But when the smoke hole is open, it lets in a ray of light. It is still said that the interior is dark like a cave and the ranking place bright like a mountain summit. Up to this point, what is said has not so thoroughly contradicted the facts. This is because in the kitchen, we are faced with a symbolic order that sometimes contradicts reality. An opening nevertheless shines light on the ranking place.

So a series of clear-cut distinctions oppose two spaces established by the fireplace stones. The ranking place is associated with men, light, height, and the exterior; the interior is associated with women, darkness, lowness, and the interior.

Beyond these oppositions, the character of the fire door, the kitchen’s third space, are more ambiguous. Compared to the ranking place it is ‘low’, like the interior. But compared with the interior it is ‘exterior’, like the ranking place. It borrows sometimes from one, sometimes from the other. It is in an intermediary state. Between black and white, one might say it finds itself multicoloured.

The two authorities

There is, however, one characteristic that is distinct to the fire door, not found in the interior or the ranking place. The latter two areas are the seat of a specific authority, that of the housewife on the one hand, and that of the head of the family on the other. The fire door is not connected with any power, and this is where its clearest characteristic lies, the only one not borrowed from either of the two other spaces.

The very expression ‘fire door’ reflects a position of submission, since it evokes the servile task of feeding the fireplace. And those who sit there have no other recognised authority. One finds men and women there, but they both take their orders from the house headman or housewife. Or they are people whose authority is exercised in other
contexts. As a result, this characteristic of the fire door leads us to examine the power attached to the two other spaces.

62 The interior is the women’s realm. However, ultimately it appears to be the special seat of the housewife alone. Of course the women in the family go there to perform household tasks. They can even sit there. But as soon as mealtime arrives, things change: they all abandon the interior to go sit on the other side—the fire door. That is to say all but one, the housewife, who is the only person to take her meal in the interior, where no one would ever dare sit in her chair.

63 However, the mother takes her meal in the interior only as long as she remains the mistress of the house. The day her son marries, the daughter-in-law takes her place, as well as her authority. Henceforth, it is the daughter-in-law who will rule over the upstairs food storeroom and over the wool house on the ground floor. She now has supreme control over the work done by other women in the home, including her mother-in-law. She leads them to the fields, and directs the mdzomo milking, the barley roasting, the butter and cheese making, meal preparation, the hired neighbours’ weaving, etc. Once a mother’s eldest son has married, she surrenders all her authority to her daughter-in-law, and as a result, she will no longer be enthroned on the chair in the interior space. She becomes an old woman with no power. And to take her meals, she joins the other submissive women on the fire door side. She has retired.

64 As for the house headman, the data is a bit different. First of all, he is not the only one seated in the ranking place. His privilege is shared by his younger brother, his sons, and his nephews if he has them, as well as by the servants. However, his authority is clearly signalled by the place he occupies near the low table where the men assemble for meals. He sits as close as possible to the fireplace. With his back to the wall, he faces east. His seat is the highest: it is made up of a small, square platform covered with a felt rug, another wool rug, and a cushion. The others do not have all of this. Facing him on the other side of the table is the man who will succeed him upon getting married. And to his left, around the table—but only on the side furthest from the fireplace—the rest of the males take their place according to age or kinship, right down to little boys. The servants who live in the house are welcomed at the low end of the table. However, this is a kindness in their regard, a dispensation granted to them, because under normal circumstances, they have no access to the ranking. As for the monk of the house, he sits in the ‘counsellor’s’ place, facing east like the head of the family, but further away from the fireplace.

65 When the eldest son marries, the transfer of powers is not as brutal as it is for the mother. The old man does not give up everything. Of course, on that day, he gives up his best guns, best horses, and best mdzo. He also surrenders control over the major male activities. He leaves his son in charge of the labour and the harvest. He will no longer go down to get the Chinese tea. In winter, he will no longer lead the home’s men on the large trade expedition to the plateau. He too retires. In autumn, he will leave the house to take care of the sheep all by himself on the pastures. Finished are his responsibilities for shearing and slaughtering animals, for transactions with Chinese merchants, and for ritual decisions. But this is a half-retirement compared to that of the mother. Because he preserves both the highest ‘ranking’ on his wooden platform and his bedroom in the private apartments. In this half-retirement, the father abandons the activities that require the vigour of a young man. He becomes an old
man. But if he has power in the public affairs of the village and federation, he preserves this.

Thus, on the occasion of the wedding of the eldest son, it becomes clearly apparent that the interior space and the ranking place are closely related to household authority. But what are the origins and nature of this power? This is where the home’s gods enter the scene.

**The protection rampart**

The home has its gods. As we have seen, among the main ones, Tsang-tsang is the lady of the earth (sa-bdag). In the fireplace room reside both the kitchen god (khyim-lha) and the fireplace god (thab-lha): they have a role to play in protecting the house. However, it is the source spirits klu and the country god (yul-lha) that are most important when it comes to powers.

The notion of ‘creative dismemberment’ exists among the Sharwa. The country itself is called shar-khog, the East Country. The word khog refers to a region, but also to the open carcass of a slaughtered animal. Sharwa country is therefore similar to Tibet itself, which was built on the corpse of a subdued demon whose heart and limbs were nailed to the ground. This image, which is valid for the region, seems also to apply to the home. Founding a dwelling is referred to as ‘reassembling the corpse’ (ro zin-pa); dividing up an inheritance, the property and the home, is ‘sharing the corpse’ (ro bgod-pa). When the foundations are being dug, Tsang-tsang, the underground divinity who will support the house, is invoked as soon as the dwelling’s four corners and centre have been marked out. Like every dismemberment, the ritual has strong implications. In the Sharwa house, we can only grasp them through clues; materials are lacking for the development of their study. Here we will only stress two points: the protection rampart and the powers.

Once Tsang-tsang is smiling upon the house, it becomes a haven for those who inhabit it. The erection of the centre (the pillar that ‘marks the taking of possession’) and the delimitation of an enclosure (at the four corners of the house) are two notions found elsewhere in Asia, whatever the space concerned: that of the civilised country (yul) in Tibet, with its piles of stones at the four cardinal points and its sacred mountain at the centre; that of the Newar town, with its nine mother-goddesses, one at the centre and the others at the eight cardinal points; that of the territory of the Tungusic clan, with the spirit rampart (marylija) that the shaman builds, providing protection from external aggressions, whether from gods or men. However symbolic this notion of the rampart may be, it is effective. It is seen when the Tungusic shaman dies: the spirit rampart collapses, and calamities soon appear; children start talking in their sleep; game animals become scarce, renowned hunters get injured; an epidemic breaks out; panic and madness sweep over the clan. They hasten to enthrone a new shaman. He rebuilds the protection enclosure. Peace returns.

The same goes for the Sharwa dwelling. The gods of the home grant their protection against external dangers. We do not know how Tsang-tsang intervenes once the dwelling has been built. However, we better understand the roles of the gods of the kitchen and fireplace, among others. Their protection is not given for free. They have requirements that, though minimal on the face of it, have profound implications for the inhabitants’ behaviour.
The first fruits (phud-mchod) must be offered to the kitchen god that sits in the pillar. When the barley is ripe, the house headman goes out to the fields and cuts the most beautiful ears. Upon his return he ties them to the top of the pillar: these are the ‘barley arrow’ (nas-mda’). The same is done at the time of the wheat harvest. The harvested grain cannot be eaten straight away, under pain of sickness. On sheep-shearing day, the first tufts of wool are placed in the recess near the pillar, which is also dedicated to the kitchen god. Likewise when the butter is churned: the housewife removes a pinch, with which she anoints the pillar. When the cheese is made, she goes out on the terrace and tosses a ladleful of whey into the wind, for the benefit of the klu.

Above all, in order that the gods stay in the house and protect it, it must remain pure, the kitchen first and foremost, especially the fireplace and pillar. Boots cannot be put on top of the fireplace stones. An eye is kept on the cooking pot. If it overflows and food falls into the fire, the fireplace sizzles, and the god is angry; to appease him, he is offered a pinch of butter or roasted barley flour. When it cracks, that is a sign of his displeasure, or that one will receive a visit that day. Nothing should be hung on the pillar, including tools. Neither can it be touched with one’s foot. The kitchen must be kept clean. Every morning, the housewife—or another woman if absolutely necessary, but never a man—takes care of the fireplace. Before sweeping, she sprinkles water on the floor. The kitchen god does not like dust.

This notion of purity ends up going a long way. It implies behaviours, but also intentions. In the kitchen, no one would ever cut up an animal killed in hunting. In autumn, when the house headman slaughters the pig, children and women cannot be present; they are sent on an errand in the village. To preserve the home’s purity, dirty people are banned from it. Someone returning from a funeral where the corpse was burned cannot enter without being purified. And the betrayer of an oath will find the door closed, marked by defilement (mna’-sgrib).

On some occasions like a birth or death, because of defilement, the household becomes fragile and its inhabitants vulnerable. From the day of a birth until the name giving day, the home turns in on itself; it closes. A juniper branch is hung outside. This is the ‘mark on the door’ (sgo-tho), the sign that the home is off limits. Inside, multiple precautions are taken. The wife gives birth on the ground floor, in the wool house. For the next three months, the pace of life is slower. Neither the mother nor her infant can go out. The wife is prohibited from eating all meats. The only exception is if she has dizzy spells, as sometimes happens. Then a bone is boiled in water that she is able to drink. They protect themselves from the exterior. All outside food is rejected, all visits are prohibited, all village commensality is suspended. Even if relatives have come from far way, they will wait in a neighbouring house. If someone must enter due to absolute necessity, this person must be purified from head to toe. In any case, he must leave all slaughtered game outside, as well as his weapons and boots. They are afraid of someone who enters with his gun, because it is said that if the newborn is a boy, this will turn him into a girl. This happened in a neighbouring village. When the name giving day arrives, the juniper is finally removed from the door. Then a Bonpo priest enters and the first thing he does is purify the home through fumigation (bsang). Then the maternal uncle that was waiting at the neighbour’s house can himself enter: he has come to give an arrow to the newborn nephew, or a spindle if it is a niece.

Of course, there is much that eludes us in the character of the house gods, unless it has already been forgotten by the Sharwa themselves. The notions of phug-lha (interior
god), thab-lha (fireplace god) and khyim-lha (kitchen god) end up getting confused. Maybe it is the same for the Sharwa today as it was for Tibetans yesterday? Waddell said\(^{29}\) that the interior god (nang-lha) moves around inside the kitchen. Sometimes his seat is in the fireplace and he is called the fireplace god. Sometimes his seat is in the pillar and he is called the pillar god. And the same goes for the attic, the doors, the recess, etc. Comparable data is found among the Limbu of Nepal\(^{30}\). Among the Sharwa, moreover, aside from offering the first fruits and respecting purity, the fireplace and kitchen gods seem to hardly have their own worship. Be that as it may: though discreet when satisfied, the household gods become terrifying when they are angry. In a neighbouring village, a man entered his enemy’s house and deliberately urinated on his fireplace. In Tibet\(^{31}\) it is said that this kind of defilement leads to the violent death of the house headman. This is what happened in the Sharwa house: the next day the gravely offended man died. Out of panic, he committed suicide.

Granet said that the world is only in order when it is enclosed like a dwelling. The assertion could be reversed. The Sharwa house is really only closed on condition of being in order. All creative dismemberment involves a separation of space into a hierarchy of parts: the heart and feet, the high and low, the centre and periphery. In the home, inhabitants must adjust their behaviour to this separation. Everyone has their place, men in the ranking place, women in the interior, etc. This is the only way to respect purity and satisfy the gods: if categories are blurred and spaces mix, they withdraw, the protection rampart collapses, and diseases and misfortunes sweep through the dwelling. As we see, the household gods are doubly effective. In exchange they protect the home’s prosperity against outside dangers, as also protect power, which is linked to this prosperity.

The power of the mother and the klu

In winter, the klu spirits are asleep. But in summer, when the frogs are croaking, one knows they are awake. The klu are female, and every house has its own exclusive one, different from those of the village. She lives in a spring or tree. If the spring is defiled, if someone washes their feet in it, or if a cruel death has hit the village, the klu is irritated. She must be pacified. The village soothsayer is the one who knows and decides. At the Karthoks’ home, there is a spring in the large field where wheat is grown: this is where she lives. Every year, during the period when the fruits and vegetables are ripening, when flowers are scattered about the pasture grass, an offering is made to the klu (klu-mchod). The housewife plays her role. And on that day, the spirit of the spring renews her particular power, which is hers alone in the dwelling. Because it is from the klu that a wife draws her authority.

Two days are spent preparing the celebration. Dirtiness disgusts the klu\(^{32}\). Clean clothes are put on. The house is cleaned from top to bottom. Bad odours irritate the klu during those two days, so the meals are particular: it is prohibited to eat meat, to grill it. The house must be pure. Upstairs, the large interior door stays open, as usual. But if a murderer, even a neighbour, crosses the threshold, this is of ill omen. He knows it. He continues on his way without stopping. The children are sent to the fields. They bring back all kinds of flowers and plants. They go draw water from the spring. Milk is also needed for the altar to the klu, which is built inside the house like a mandala. In the
centre, a gtor-ma is placed: this is the queen of the klu. Flowers and offerings are placed around it. Blood and meat are never offered. The klu would not accept it. Their food is pure: milk, butter and cheese, the ‘three whites’. The housewife makes the klu cake.

On the appointed day, two Bonpo officiants who live in the village are summoned. One of them is married. They are not monks or initiates, but rather priests that the Sharwa call ya'u. They also have duties as astrologers, soothsayers and doctors. At that time of year, they drop in on every client house, one at a time. When they arrive, they are taken into the chapel. For the next two days, they officiate according to the Bonpo liturgy. However, one part of this worship unfolds in the fireplace room, and the dwelling’s inhabitants have a role to play in it. On the afternoon of the second day, the housewife prepares to go to the spring, bringing the offering to the klu spirit. She stuffs everything necessary into a basket: the gtor-ma, flowers, a flask of pure water, fresh butter, cheese, milk, and roasted barley flower. The wife slips the klu’s cake into the side of her garment. With the basket on her shoulders, she leaves the house. One of the children runs behind her. It is a long way. He asks questions during the whole walk. His mother does not respond, and he wonders why. It is because on the path to the spring, the wife must not speak to anyone. Having arrived in the field, she puts down her load. She takes out the offerings. Standing in front of the spring, she throws them into the water—the flowers, milk, butter, etc. She pulls the cake from the folds of her smock. She shows it to the klu spirit and says ‘grandmother, open the door!’. She hides it in her jacket again to bring it back home. Only then can she speak, and the little boy trotting behind her is relieved.

When she returns to the kitchen, all of the men are there, ceremoniously waiting in the ranking place, as are all of the women on the fire door side. The mother divides up the klu cake. The house headman is served first, followed by the man across the table from him in the seat of honour, the one who will succeed him one day. Next each of the males in the family is served, down to the youngest boy. Then comes the women’s turn: first the eldest, then all of the others. On that day, the servants are not seated in the ranking place. They are not members of the household, so they have no right to the klu cake. The two Bonpos in the chapel, who continue to read their book, have no right to it either. Once everyone has been given their share, the housewife sits down on her chair in the interior space and eats her own. Pieces are saved for those who are absent.

If the people displease them, the klu become poor and sick. Then the people who live alongside them get sick in turn, from the same illness as the klu. They catch ulcers, rheumatisms and leprosy. And if they want to recover, the must first take care of the klu. But if the klu are satisfied, then the people are as well.

In the home, the Sharwa mother makes her offerings. The spring’s grandmother klu is satisfied. She makes the mother happy by giving her all her powers. Then the home becomes prosperous. The women have children who are always lively and happy. The water is pure. In the fields, seeds germinate and fruits ripen. Sprouts reach for the sky; thanks to the rain, the harvest is ample. Money comes in, wealth settles in, and food abounds. A man can buy meat or grain at the Songpan market. Only the wife has the power to cook food and make it feed the body, and perhaps also the soul. A Lepcha from Sikkim once said: ‘What I expect from my mother is food above all’. Likewise in the Sharwa home. Thanks to the spring’s grandmother klu, the Sharwa wife brings prosperity to the household that honours her. In the kitchen, seated on her chair in the interior space, her authority comes to her from the klu.
The father’s power and the mountain god

83 Every morning, in both summer and winter, just before sunrise, all of the house headmen throughout the village and federation come out onto their terrace to burn a few juniper branches for the ‘country god’ (yul-lha). Though every woman has her exclusive klu spirit, the mountain god is the same for all men. It is not the village mountain, but rather brag-dkar, the White Rock, that of the federation. Only the man goes to the ‘fumigation house’, just as only the woman makes the offering to the klu. This house is the household replica of the la-btsas set up on the mountain at the foot of the White Rock, where the four villages go every summer to please the god with their offerings: musketry, horseracing and oratory jousts.

84 The ritual is not very long. It lasts half an hour at most, at sunrise, before starting work. The man faces the direction of the White Rock, which can be seen over the peak. The fragrant smoke that rises is both a scent offering and a site purification. The praise of God is recited, the same as that of collective summer worship. In fact, all of the gods are invoked, beginning with those of the pillar and fireplace. However, the offering is primarily intended for the country god. Worship concludes in the chapel, to the sound of the drum.

85 Once per year, when the harvest is completed and the grain brought in, Bonpo officiants also come to the house to celebrate the country gods (yul-lha). They are the same ones who performed the worship of the klu. The celebration has different names from one village to the next. In Kitshal it is called ‘the encouragement of the protectors’: (srung-bod); elsewhere in the valley, ‘the acquisition of power’ (mnga’-rnyes). Since they have been subdued and bound by an oath, the local gods protect the religion and guard both country and dwelling. Not so long ago, they still received bloody offerings: yak, sheep, goat. As the above names indicate, the aim of the ritual is to encourage them to destroy enemies of the home, and to grant power, with all of the benefits this entails. Just as the offering to the klu is done for the benefit of the housewife, the encouragement of the protectors mainly concerns the house headman.

86 The ritual lasts one day. On that morning, the house headman performs a longer-than-usual juniper fumigation on the terrace. Then he goes to the kitchen to attend the ritual with all members of the household.

87 When the priest arrives, a small table is placed against the northern wall, under the god’s recess in the kitchen. It is covered with white felt. On it are placed three figurines (gtor-ma), a bowl of butter and roasted barley, as well as a bowl of beer. Before starting the service, the priest ya’u offers a bit of butter to the pillar and recess. He is said to be ‘decorating’ and ‘praising’ (brgyan bstod-pa), in order to ‘renew’.

88 Next, the Bonpo sits in the ranking place, in the counsellor’s seat. The worship essentially consists in reading a book called srung-bod. Someone goes to the chapel and fetches the arrow (mda’-dar) that symbolises the house headman’s life. Decorated with its five streams of colour, it will be whirled by the priest above his head when the ritual calls for this. There are several sequences. At the beginning, the gods of the Bonpo pantheon are invoked. But very quickly the important part begins, the celebration of the sacred mountains, all of the gods of the countries making up Tibet, maybe around a hundred of them, beginning with the greatest, represented by the three figurines under the recess, rMa-chen spom-ra, gNyan-chen thang-lha and Yar-lha sham-po. After this long
celebration, in the afternoon, it is the federation god’s turn. He is the last one invoked, but is the most important in the eyes of the members of the household.

This federation god sometimes assumes the form of a wild sheep (gnyan), a male with horns so enormous that a fox is found living in one of them. He lives on the summit of the White Rock. His praise presents him as a crystal-coloured warrior armed from head to toe, mounted on a blue horse. Dressed in red silk, surrounded by loved ones, he wears a coat of mail and a silver helmet. He holds a trident in his right hand, and over his heart, in his left hand, a jewel.

If the house headman were to forget the incense offering on the terrace one morning (this has never occurred), he would not be surprised if he loses a sheep during the day. A man who displeases the mountain god can expect terrible furies. On the path, a pack of wolves attacks his horse. When he hunts, he finds himself face to face with a leopard. An epidemic decimates his herd of yaks. He is unable to triumph over his enemies. He is exposed to attacks by spirits. He fails at everything he undertakes. At worst, frost descends upon his fields, lightening on his dwelling. Everything goes badly in his home, and weakness spreads over the household.

However, inside the house, the man is honouring the mountain god as his ancestor (a-myes). The god is satisfied and his favour spreads like rain. A man who pleases the mountain god is never sick, nor are his loved ones. His livestock prospers, as does his home. Many sons are born to him, ensuring the continuity of his lineage. Above all, his life force is so powerful that he succeeds wherever he acts. He hunts down the stag at a run. He kills the bandit who lies in ambush on his caravan’s path. He keeps demonic forces at bay. He imposes his presence wherever he goes.

Near the fireplace, the house headman occupies the highest seat in the ranking place. In the home, all of the men submit to his authority. They know that the whole house fully depends on the power that the mountain god grants him.

The three levels of the world

Thus the aquatic and underground spirits are the foundation of the housewife’s authority, just as the mountain god is that of the house headman’s. Klu and yul-lha are both present in the dwelling. The former rules over the interior, the latter over the ranking place. Both are country gods, and also household gods. And in two different ways, the house appears to be the image of the cosmos.

Firstly, in their elevation, all Sharwa houses resemble one another. The ground floor is dedicated to animals. Upstairs is where the people live. As is quite common in Tibet, this level is called the middle floor (bar-khang). The expression assumes a third floor that appears not to exist among the Sharwa. Elsewhere in Tibet, that ‘floor above’ is the roof terrace, with its fumigation house, wind horses and, sometimes, stag antlers and yak horns. Among the Sharwa, however, wood is used as a construction material. Their homes have span roofs, so the fumigation house cannot be placed there. Instead it is located on the middle-floor terrace. Nonetheless, the juniper offering is linked with summits everywhere in Tibet. It is said that the plume of incense that rises ‘opens the door to heaven’ and enables contact with the gods on high. Consequently it seems that among the Sharwa, this fumigation house, along with the smoke hole above the fireplace, the chapel when its ceiling is raised, and the antlers sometimes planted on the summit of the roof, end up constituting the beginnings of a floor above, at least
symbolically. Like elsewhere in Tibet, we find ourselves with a house whose vertical elevation reproduces the traditional order of the world; the floor below, linked to spirits of the underground and water (klu, sa-bdag); the middle floor, where people live, and the floor above, linked to the mountains, heaven, and the gods lha on high.

This data is even clearer when the layout of the kitchen is examined. The three spaces established by the fireplace stones also reproduce the levels of the cosmos, but this time according to a horizontal projection: the interior—which is dark like an underground cave, female like the spirits of the waters and the lady demons of the soil, low like the bottom of the valley—is marked by the presence of the klu, who are fertile, sedentary and agricultural. It is the equivalent of the lower level of the world.

The ranking place, bright like the sky, high like a mountain, exterior like the pastures where yaks and sheep wander, male like the country god, depends on this god’s favour. It is the replica of the upper level of the cosmos.

The fire door, with its motley characteristics, reflects the intermediary world of people who have no power if they are unable to attract the protection of the gods. And the fireplace, where the three spaces converge, is like the intersection of the three worlds.

Kitchen spaces, house floors, cosmos levels: here we are in the known tradition of nested worlds.

The ranking place in the Sharwa home (ancient Amdo)

In the foregoing, we emphasised only one of the effects of creative dismemberment: that which exalts separations, differences and the opposition of opposites. The home has hitherto appeared as a fragmented set in which three spaces and two authorities coexist. Yet in everyday life, relative to other dwellings, the home is one: through its name, its stability in time, and its representation in the affairs of the federation. There is not enough information on the unity of the home to be specific. However, one important clue enables its principle to be posited: in Sharwa country, most house headmen, including the majority of the ‘destitute’ (med-po) are considered sa-bdag, that is to say ‘lords of the earth’ or landowners.

First, note the primacy of the mountain god over other household gods. The fireplace god—except in the extraordinary event that he is unhappy—seems rarely to be conjured up alone. As for the kitchen god, aside from the offering of the first fruits, he seems not to be the object of any regular worship. In fact, it is during the daily fumigation in honour of the yul-lha that all of the household gods are invoked, including the klu: they appear as the retinue of the mountain god. On that occasion, the master of the house can claim one or another of a very wide variety of benefits. Some of these, such as power (dbang-thang), are specifically granted by the yul-lha. Others however, like food abundance, wealth, crop health, and protection against certain illnesses, do not directly depend on him, but rather on other household gods. Like elsewhere in Tibet, the fate of the dwelling results from the joint favour of all of the home’s gods. Yet during the daily fumigation, this favour is only requested from the mountain god. Likewise in cases of misfortune. When frost descends, or rain is scarce, or a mdzo is attacked by wild animals, one knows that the klu are angry, but it is the yul-lha that is invoked to straighten things out. Because his goodwill as the lord of the earth (gzhi-bdag) determines the attitude of all other gods over which he exerts his authority. He is the ‘headman of the protectors’.
But there is a relationship between the authority of the country god and that of the house headman. In the epic, as in Sharwa country, all creative dismemberment ultimately founds a power. In the epic, young Gesar, expelled from Gling, takes refuge in rMa country. Among the gifts he is offered, he receives a hoe that makes him lord of the earth in exile. On the first evening, his mother sees him plant his tent pole right in the heart of the black demon, where the three valleys meet. In the morning, using his hoe, it turns up four potentilla roots, at the four cardinal points. His son kills the king of the marmot-demons infesting the country, hitherto uninhabited. Gesar then declares himself lord of the earth (sa-bdag), just like the mountain god that grants him his protection. He defends his land against bandits from outside. In exchange for taxes, he protects merchants and escorts their caravans. He grants land to brothers from Gling who are requesting it. His position as lord of the earth gives him authority over those who inhabit it.

Like Gesar, a Sharwa house headman is lord of the earth. He erects the pillar of his dwelling on Tsang-tsang’s territory. His fireplace is located at the intersection of three spaces. He controls a domain that extends to the four cardinal points of his house. He fearlessly uses the hoe to open the soil. He pays no tax to anyone. His land holding does not come from a monastery, nobleman or central government, but from the will of the mountain god. Henceforth, the prosperity of the members of his household depends on the power that this god grants him. Since he is at the centre like the yul-lha, he enables unity between the high and low, male and female, interior and exterior, light and shadows. He is like his dwelling’s pillar: in him, the harmony of opposites is achieved. Like the yul-lha’s power over the country gods, his relationship with the members of his family is that of a sovereign ruling over his subjects. The cohesion and strength of the group inhabiting the house is achieved through him.

Conclusion: the ranking place and the mountain god’s favour

The most important conclusion of this study on the organisation of space in the Sharwa home is the following: the favour of the mountain god, the country god (yul-lha), determines the hierarchy of ranking positions. The investigation also sheds some light on the relationship between mountain worship and political power.

It should first be noted that there exist two religious centres in this Sharwa house: the chapel and the fireplace room. Of course, Bonpo priests called ya’u sometimes officiate in the kitchen. But these occasions remain exceptional. They are limited to the encouragement of the protectors and the major annual divination. As for the rest, Bonpo priests or monks act in the chapel. They are called on the occasion of a funeral, a birth, or before the departure of a trade expedition; they are asked to summon luck, to perform the long-life ritual, etc. They make the gods in their own pantheon favourable.

On the other hand, the ‘autochthonous gods’ are seated in the fireplace room. Generally, it is not the Bonpo who invoke them, but the masters of the house, the father and mother. Therefore two religions coexist among the Sharwa, even if they frequently interact. On the one hand, in the kitchen, is the ‘men’s religion’ (mi-chos) of lay officiants. On the other hand, in the chapel, is the Bon practice of ritual specialists.
The mountain god (yul-lha) is the same for everyone in all of the federation’s homes. He presides everywhere over the spaces where people assemble. His favour determines the hierarchy of places. He is the god of men and could be called pho-lha. But at the same time, the mountain god controls the whole home, since his authority is wielded over the other household gods, including the klu, which are perhaps the women’s gods (mo-lha). Because of this, it is the man and not the woman who represents the home at public assemblies. In this regard, the favour of the mountain god is the same in every dwelling; it founds the authority of every house headman.

Is the mountain god fair and equitable? Nay! For his own reasons, he values men more than others. But there are also some he rejects. At the New Year, the ranking place shows that Tsetar Karthok and old Tsewang are his favourite children, whereas Luje is looked upon scornfully, even though he is a house headman like any other. The ranking place shows the exact degree to which the man is held in favour. It is true that this hierarchy is that of one moment. Returns to favour are always possible. But it is said that ‘the mountain god’s favour spreads like rain’, so for everyone, the ranking place is a rain gauge.

Yet one might object that at the New Year, it is not the god in person who seats everyone according to his ranking. It is the house headman, if need be, who sends Tsewang to the head of the table and Ludje to the low end. As Ortner says, on that day, he is the spokesman of public opinion. Why must Tsewang preside over the assembly? Public opinion replies: because ‘his name is great’ and everywhere, ‘it reverberates like an huge noise that shatters your ears’". Renown is the sign that enables the community to interpret the god’s favour and seat everyone in the place that is his due.

However, this favour is expressed in multiple ways. Sometimes the god acts in everyone’s favour, repelling frost, ending drought. Usually, he responds to the requests that individuals address to him. To one person, he grants success on his trade expedition; to another, a male child; or he wards off illness, or demons that are assaulting a house; he increases the number of livestock; he allows a hunter to kill a stag; he makes a family’s enemy vulnerable; he makes a feat possible, grants oratory talent, vitality, the head held high, power, a long life, etc. How does public opinion fit into weighing up god’s favour? How does it go about integrating these very diverse favours in the ranking hierarchy? We must distinguish between that which stems from Sharwa dialect and from traditional Tibetan, since it seems that in this area, the ways of seeing are different.

In classical Tibetan, the ranking place is called go-'phang. The word go indicates a person’s place among other people; 'phang implies the idea of elevation, height. The expression therefore denotes a person’s place among others according to his elevation. In the men’s religion, we know that the expression reflects the notion of ‘head held high’ (dbu-phang mtho, 'go-phang mtho) or ‘powerful helmet’ (dbu-rmog). And the ranking place in an assembly—whether it be public as in the midsummer worship, or private as in a neighbour’s New Year invitation—has as its ultimate criterion honour, which is a function of renown, and is the crown on creative dismemberment’s set of symbolic structures. Only men of honour can aspire to the ranking place. Farm servants, who are dependent on the honour of their Sharwa masters, sit in the fire door section. Others, gravely offended, lose face or their helmet falls: they are abandoned by the mountain god. Remaining in this state makes them into the living dead. Honour, in
the epic for example, is thus the standard measure that integrates various signs of the god’s favour.

111 For the Sharwa, the criterion that determines the ranking place seems to be different. In dialect, the name given to the space where men assemble in the fireplace room is go-
dbang. Instead of go-phang in traditional Tibetan, a Sharwa translates the expression as go-
dbang. The word dbang refers to power. The Sharwa’s preference for this notion might be found elsewhere in their institutions. On the occasion of midsummer worship, one of the first personal requests that most men submit to the mountain god is to obtain dbang-thang. In some villages, the encouragement of the protectors is called mnga’-rnyes, power acquisition, and we know that mnga’ is an archaic word synonymous with dbang. Finally, the major annual divination is done on a charter with a drawing that evokes the mountain god in the form of a wild sheep (gnyan): its main objective is to find out what the house headman’s power (mnga’) will be that year. Thus, among the Sharwa, the principle that serves to evaluate the ranking hierarchy is not honour, but power. Power might be considered the mountain god’s ultimate gift.

112 Though they favour power as a rank hierarchy principle, the Sharwa nonetheless possess their own conceptions of honour. Of course, references to the head held high and to the powerful helmet are rare. They are considered pretentious and too literary. The Sharwa have their own images, the same as those of the breeders, their neighbours on the plateau. For example, a gravely offended man ‘has the hot face’, etc. Reciprocally, the epic, in which the ranking place is a function of honour, has its own ideas about power. These differences are not just an illustration of the diversity of representations, beliefs and practices among Tibetan-culture communities. What strikingly underpins this diversity is the coherence and unity of thought. Honour and power are in fact two sides of one same reality: the mountain god’s favour.

113 Wherever it is located in time and space, Tibetan lay society remains profoundly epic, and this is no doubt why it fascinates us. Because its images relating to vitality, honour and renown are still at work in the social organisation. Sometimes they are its form, to borrow Louis Dumont’s expression.

114 For a Westerner accustomed to cutting life into slices in the attempt to understand it, the Tibetan or Limbu idea of ‘losing face’ reflects various kinds of reality: psychological (shame), religious (abandonment by the mountain god), social (expulsion from the community, sometimes). For a Tibetan, life is no doubt a whole. However, it should be noted that the institutions penalize the state of shame: it is accompanied by defilement; it implies a break in commensality; it sometimes suggests distancing, banishment. Here we are approaching conceptions of lost souls, of ‘flight into the forest’, those of shaman societies on the fringes of Tibet.

115 Likewise, these notions are at work in the conquest of political power. One might even think that at one time, the history of Tibet was a race to monopolise honour as the principle of political centralisation. Be that as it may, at the higher level of the ranking, renown that is based on feats creates honour and power. Achieving a feat is the greatest favour from the mountain god. It opens access to political power: that of Gesar by winning the horserace, that of the kings of the first dynasty by hunting the wild yak, that of the Sharwa farmer by hunting down the stag at a run. It is still the mediator extracting the price of life: the winner of an oratory joust; the hero saving a caravan from plundering bandits. If a chosen headman is necessary for a specific task,
it is from among the feat-performing men that the community will select its various candidates. When the dice are thrown, the mountain god will show his final preference. In Tibet, power is underpinned by a feat morality, expressed in terms of honour, vital power, and wealth. It determines the ranking place. It no doubt dates back to the dawn of time. It is found in the epic, in legends, and in the Dunhuang manuscripts. It was taken up by the Tibetan aristocracy, with its ideas about the 'nine strengths of man'. In central Tibet, it is disappearing because of military and religious centralisation, which is integrating those groups called tsho or rgyud. It is still alive among breeders, and along the borders, here and there: if there is myth, it is lived today as it was in the past. Among the Sharwa, as in the Chumbi valley that Walsh studied in 1905, political power is granted not by a central government, but by the mountain god.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Dictionaries


Other sources


Hooker, J D. 1854. Himalayan Journals: or, notes of a naturalist in Bengal, the Sikkim and Nepal Himalayas, the Khasia mountains, &c. London : John Murray.


Nebesky-Wojkowitz, R de. 1956. Oracles and Demons of Tibet, etc. La Haye: Mouton.


NOTES

1. Carrasco (1959: 156). This article is the result of joint work by S Karmay, himself a native of Sharwa country, and P Sagant. It was produced in the context of the project ‘Himalayan Rituals’ at the Laboratoire d’ethnologie et de sociologie comparative, Université de Paris X, Nanterre. The idea of this study in progress was presented in Sagant (1981: 151). It aimed to establish whether the notion of ‘head held high’ found among the Nepalese and Tibetans also implies, for them, a relation between mountain worship and political organisation. In the text, when the Sharwa term literally corresponds to the Tibetan, we have only retained the latter, according to T Wylie’s transliteration system. We would like to thank A-M Blondeau and A W Macdonald for giving us the chance to present our ideas at their respective seminars, at the EPHE, 5th Section, and at Paris X.

2. Walsh (1906: 303)

3. On the ‘go-ba and their role in relation to the Chinese administration, cf Tucci (1969: 140); Stein (1962: 99). On the fact that sometimes they do not hold power, Rockhill (1891: 189); Carrasco (1959: 157). On the fact that the same role is found under various names, see Walsh (1906: 306); Goré (1923: 324); Cunningham (1853: 260). On the power of doyens, Stein (1962: 99) has noted that ‘there are... small tribes without headmen, solely directed by a group of elders’. However, not all of the elders hold power, as noted by Carrasco (1959: 157) and especially Schram (1954: 76-79).

4. ‘Information is scarce, because most observers have only spoken of the town and monastery rituals’ (Stein 1959: 449).

5. Walsh (1906: 305). In dictionaries, tsho is usually presented as a group, a tribe (JA 1881; TC 1957; GO 1975). The notion of community that appears in the form of ‘the group of the three, of the four’, ‘numbering three, four’ is rarely mentioned. DA 190 emphasises the solidarity of the yul-tsho, which he calls ‘community, country, parish’. Likewise, TT 1979 points out that the homes of a tsho were, however, related. In a general way, it is interesting to note that dictionaries emphasise ideas that evoke political, military and administrative centralisation. Every tribe has its own headman.
(TC 1957; GO 1975). There are headmen of ten families, of one hundred families, (TC 1985), etc. *Tsho-khag* designates the 'section', the 'division' (TC 1957). This centralisation also appears in the work of ethnologists: in Dolpo, for example, ‘there are 10 *cho* for 4 districts’, writes Jest (1975: 286). On *tsho* and *rgyud*, cf Carrasco (1959: 157). See also Ekvall (1939: 11, 69–69); Stübel (1958: 59); Cassinelli (1969: 104); Hédin (1909, II: 388); Snellgrove (1981: 207); Levine (1982: 263); Macdonald (1982: 44); Stein (1956).

6. Fürer-Haimendorf (1964: 104–105): the quote is from the French edition of that book. The same ideas could be illustrated in Dolpo (Nepal) and based solely on the example of Nyima Tsering, an inhabitant of the village of Saldang, who is often quoted in the books of Snellgrove (1981) and Jest (1975, 1985).


10. Gill (1878: 78; 1880, I: 380, 383 and passim). For the history of Songpan and its region, cf Pelliot (1961: 4, 64, 66, 83). We have little information on the modern era, and it is all provided by observers who, passing through Songpan, remained on the fringes of Sharwa country. Cf Bodard (1921); Graham (1924); David-Néel (1933: 149-156), etc. Rockhill, in various books (1891, 1894, passim) provides precious information on the development of trade in the late 19th century.

11. The Sharwa are farmers (*rong-pa*). They do not look after the reproduction of their herds of *mdzo*. They buy their animals from breeders on the plateau.


15. On the courtyard pole as a mark of citizenship, cf Clarke (1980: 181). The studied house, which straddles two terraces, also has an enclosure near the courtyard where the pigs eat, and another courtyard on the upper terrace, where grain is brought in during the harvest.


17. Some bedrooms are also used to store rugs, fabrics, etc. —Editor’s note: in this sentence and the next, we have corrected an error in the original regarding the location of the chapel and the kitchen.

18. In the chapel of this house one also finds books, six paintings on canvas, and statuettes (*Ston-pa gshen-rab, gShen-lha ‘od-dkar, etc.*).

19. The treasure room is not locked.


21. On this term, cf the conclusion.


29. Waddell (1894).

30. The Limbu interior god is called Oama. His mobility is used for divination.


32. David-Néel (1933: 199).

33. These priests are members of households in which the responsibilities are hereditary.

34. Among the Sharwa, women cannot carry out fumigation.

35. Hooker (1893: 382).

36. It should be noted that one cannot set foot ‘under the roof’ (‘gas-’og), nor above the chapel, nor above the kitchen, and one finds the heads of mdzo that served the house well in their lifetime and had the favour of the mountain god.


39. Stein (1956; 75, 76, 79, 85); Stein (1939; 339-345).


41. See also Tucci (1966: 190).

42. In Tibetan: snyan-grags che-ba.


45. According to Tucci (1955: 200): ‘mnga-’t’ang and dbu-rmog cannot be separated one from the other, the one being the essence of power, the other its active symbol’.

46. Among the Limbu, these various data are used in the shaman’s cure. Cf Sagant (1987).

47. The processes of this centralisation are diverse, but before the introduction of Buddhism, for the central power, it was still all about monopolising or redistributing the mountain god’s favour.