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The Khandroma of the Highlands for sister, a cinematic jewel by Gya Stanzin Dorjai (and Christiane Mordelet)

The Sherpherdess of the Glaciers, Les films de la découverte and
Himalaya Film House, 2016, not distributed yet, 76 minutes, DVD
(personal communication of the director)

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REFERENCES

Stanzin Dorjai Gya, Mordelet Christiane, *The Shepherdess of the Glaciers*, Les films de la découverte and Himalaya Film House, 2016

- 1 There are means that help staying away from preconceived ideas. One is not to pass judgments at all or, if this is inescapable, to avoid expressing them without the support of full evidence. Touché: I should have done that myself.
- 2 My first reaction when I read about *The Shepherdess of the Glaciers* (*La bergère des glaces*) was that it must be one of the documentaries shot in a land, Ladakh, where facets of its culture have been shown, in some cases, not so much for their intrinsic sense but for what may appear picturesque to a shallow look.
- 3 My initial and grossly unsubstantiated impression about *The Shepherdess of the Glaciers* had a complete turnaround almost immediately after I came to know a little more about it.
- 4 I found out that it was shot in the highlands above Gya – nowadays a small, unassuming village, which attracts little tourism. Graced by a quintessential character, though, that makes it noteworthy, Gya has a glorious, extraordinary past. Gya was the capital of the

- ancient Ladakhi kingdom before the Tibetans advanced to annex it to their own dominions that formed the three divisions of united Upper West Tibet.
- 5 It was almost one thousand and one hundred years ago. If not for scanty references in ancient Tibetan and Ladakhi historical works, there would be no traces left about its existence.
 - 6 Despite the lost memory of its Gyapa Jowo rulers, legends expressed in oral form remain vivid in the tradition of the locals to this day. Legends were the ancestral religion of the Tibetan world and storytelling is an extraordinary tradition that flourished locally. Gya is famous for its bards who recited these legends and for the ceremony of the “breaking of the stone”, a long ritual with recitations of the old lore that culminates with breaking a stone slab by means of psychic power.
 - 7 Gya and its capital Sertri (the “Golden Throne”) have populated my thinking for a long time and will continue to do so. With Gya in mind, my penchant for loving the documentary grew exponentially.
 - 8 I went for a trailer and was conquered by the scenes that I saw. Mine was an aesthetical reaction this time. The beauty of those images is overwhelming, a feast for the eyes. Many documentaries have pretty pictures but *The Shepherdess of the Glaciers* has much more to offer.
 - 9 I can hardly compare Stanzin Dorjai’s cinematic effort with documentaries I have seen before. Despite my cold feet about the genre focusing on Tibet and the Himalaya, watching *The Shepherdess of the Glaciers* has warmed my heart.
 - 10 The subject is introduced in a subtle way. The documentary opens with the typical whistling of a shepherd in a landscape that is touching in its vastness. Then the camera shows to whom the whistle belongs. It’s Tsering Palmo from the Zems Khang family of Gya, the protagonist of the documentary. But that is unfair to say, for her herds are a true, strong presence throughout its length. I didn’t imagine that goats and sheep are so photogenic!
 - 11 She appears on screen talking to her animals. The camera moves from her to long, wide frames of the highlands that run to the horizon, ridge after ridge, slope after slope.
 - 12 The solitude of these high valleys and mountains becomes populated by flocks of goats and sheep that spread around these vast plateaus rolling on them with movements that are a perfect balance between emptiness and occupation.
 - 13 Simplicity of these movements of goats – just flocks isn’t it? – makes the solitude of these highlands inhabited and empty in one go. The animals spread out and fill the space under a blinding sunshine. This is the preamble.
 - 14 The voice of the documentarist outside the frame talks to her. It asks whether she realises what is happening. She wonders what is the sense of filming her: loneliness is her companion. She hardly communicates with anyone. How can she be shown around the world?
 - 15 Her father handed over the work of shepherd to Tsering Palmo. She was ten when she set out with him into the wild for the first time. He told her that a shepherd must have a head of steel. She understood what he meant when she began to brave the wild in sheer solitude, for no one can teach how to live in the highlands. A shepherd has to find a personal balance within the tradition that is transmitted down its members by using mental and physical concentration on one’s exertions.

- 16 Then the camera focuses on Tsering Palmo who is shown advancing with difficulty but assuredness in a landscape covered by ice and high snow, in contrast with the wide angles of the herds rolling down the slopes of grazing grounds. One notices that her walk carries some effort in such extreme conditions: every step is slow and prudential. Away from these difficult passages, she moves with a pace – anyone who has been in these mountains and valleys cannot deny this – trained by the long distances she covers.
- 17 She carries on and gets inside the frame from one side in order to leave it from the opposite one. The idea is a small classic, which works well in terms of filmic narrative.
- 18 Moving in the landscape to work on her routines, she talks about the wilderness as a friend she has known all her life and what it is like to live in solitude.
- 19 In these initial soliloquies – the documentary is made of soliloquies and speeches that are short and to the point – she tells about the approach to the highlands.
- 20 They are not places for suffering if one's mind is as light as the air one breathes. If one thinks that the altitude is a burden, then there is no escape. It's impossible to cope with it.
- 21 Spectators are then transported into a world of its own where Tsering Palmo negotiates the harshness of nature with a confidence that comes from her empathy with the environment.
- 22 The viewer is led into this world without the need of climbing the wall that separates, in other documentaries, the cameraman from the subject.
- 23 The documentarist, who is shooting Tsering Palmo in her wanderings and the grazing herds, is perfectly immersed in the context of what he is showing and this sensation is transferred straight to the audience. Stanzin Dorjai, who follows Tsering in all her itinerant paths, is her brother. His closeness to her goes beyond their bonds. He was himself a shepherd for five years with his sister before becoming a moviemaker.
- 24 Stanzin, too, did not avoid any hardship in his work, for he did not spare fatigue and personal engagement. Carrying all equipment himself, he has documented his sister in surroundings where no one of his crew dared to venture. The result is worth his efforts.
- 25 The camera moves in the landscape and focuses on the sister in a way that communicates a sense of unity and belonging. Steps and rituals, unfolding of seasons and the needs of the animals – Tsering's life – are seen with a closeness that transpires from every frame.
- 26 While becoming acquainted with that feeling, I thought of the great hermit masters of ancient Tibet and their penance, who, in pursuit of a spiritual life, left all attachment behind.
- 27 I thought of masters such as the great Gyelwa Götsangpa (1189-1258) who went through all sorts of hardship. He hardly felt the same empathy that Tsering Palmo manifests on all occasions, which her brother did not fail to capture with suppleness and without imposition.
- 28 Götsangpa suffered much pain on his way to Kailash, found the journey across the wilderness of the Northern Plain daunting, got sick with hepatitis and eventually left the caves around the mountain during winter to take refuge in the lower and more negotiable land of Purang. His was not an isolated case. This is how hermits survived in

the wilderness of Kailash and Manasarovar by moving to more hospitable Purang during the coldest season.

- 29 Overcoming fatigue in bearing the harshness of the world of emptiness that is the Northern Plain and the Kailash region, Götsangpa succeeded in his practice, and attained supreme status. The highlands are places that lead the initiate to enter into another dimension.
- 30 Tsering Palmo's tough existence also made me think of Nangzher Löpo, a great Bonpo master of the 8th century, mythical for his hard life. His teacher brought him to an island in a lake in a land with hardly any human habitation to practice penance that lasted for many years. Eventually Nangzher Löpo could not bear austerities any longer. Hunger led him to hallucinations, and austerities deeply affected his physical balance.
- 31 Islands for reclusion can only be accessed during winter when the water freezes. His teacher took him away from the island by making him fly on his shoulders, for there was no alternative to leave in the other seasons.
- 32 Back to the human fold, Nangzher Löpo was like a ghost to the few people he knew. They could not recognise him anymore, but age-long greatness was his achievement.
- 33 With the life of the great hermits of the Tibetan tradition in mind and their endeavours in solitude, I wondered whether Tsering Palmo Zems Khang should be considered a special breed of human being.
- 34 I think her traits are typical of a *khandroma*, a *dakini* or "fairy of the sky". *Khandromas* are supernatural women who look towards the earth to attend to the destiny of man. They can be friendly – or noxious if not appeased properly – but, more than anything, they have an ulterior vision that makes them see human life from a different perspective.
- 35 Besides having features of a *khandroma*, Tsering Palmo talks throughout the documentary about life – her life in particular – with the depth and the wisdom of a philosopher.
- 36 She says that you need to learn to know yourself – the same great piece of wisdom (*Notsi seauton* in ancient Greek) that Socrates told his disciples, and for which he left an indelible mark on the unfolding of civilisation. Pretty stunning for an illiterate shepherdess, I would dare to think. But she claims she has no knowledge: only a stick in her hand and a basket on her shoulders. Her attitude is a sign that she doesn't miss an iota of this insight.
- 37 Unlike present-day Tibet under Chinese duress, Ladakh's cultural landscape does not impose restrictions, either physical or mental, despite a modern penchant for the many compulsions of globalisation. An outcome of such a different topical reality, *The Shepherdess of the Glaciers* is a celebration of freedom that germinates from the traditions of a land that has not experienced the repression of its way of life.
- 38 The choice of Tsering Palmo, the *Khandroma* of the Highlands, is vocational within the context of tradition. Tsering Palmo is beyond common behaviour, even by local standards. She stays away from everything else to meet her world – rich and intense.
- 39 Her world is the tool that gives her happiness. This is a major trait of the movie. Happiness with her is not a national goal – the aim of a nation as in Bhutan – but a subtle state of well being that she has achieved living in solitude.

- 40 Happiness comes from the heart – not the desk of a government – so she thinks that people should be sincere in what they do. It all depends on how much sincerity and energy one puts into his or her work. Nothing comes easy, especially if one doesn't work hard. One should build inner strength while others struggle to build their material lives.
- 41 But her happiness is tinted with sadness when she thinks that her work is bound to be gone in the future. No people want to be shepherds anymore. Herds will disappear. It will be an impoverishment, for they are beneficial not only for pastoralists. The sedentarists get much advantage from them. Everyone in Ladakh recognises that the fields of Gya are especially fertile. This is because they are treated with animal dung. Other fields, where fertilisers are used, are drier and dustier.
- 42 Tsering Palmo reads what the climate will bring and knows how to take steps to avoid being unprepared. She locates the best grazing grounds for her flocks during the different seasons – the animals give her the strength to find the best path – and collects flowers for the pharmacopeia of Ladakhi doctors; she is not afraid of leopards and wolves because she stands by her herds.
- 43 A shortwave radio is her only contact with the world outside the highlands. It's like the flight that took Nangzher Löpo away from his island, but it's temporary, for she doesn't evade her world. The radio, in the absence of her relatives, is mother, father, brother and sister to her.
- 44 She says she cannot afford to get ill. Who would look after her animals then? Thinking of them makes her feel better. Her brother told me that, in some cases, she has healed from diseases by herself.
- 45 Animals, even wildlife – marmots, wolves, leopards, birds, lynxes – are able to read human reactions and like to communicate. She has found a way to share their conversations and feels that they are part of her family. She is their big sister.
- 46 Her existence embodies a distinction of another category of special people. She has the traits of a secret *yogini*. She indeed speaks like the secret *yogis* of ancient India and Tibet, masters in the appearance of humble workers doing manual jobs. They used to hide their identities of superior beings who have attained great knowledge and cultivated intellectual capacities.
- 47 Tsering Palmo is a *khandroma* (or secret *yogini*?) who has spent many years of her existence in uncompromising wilderness, living in harmony and happiness. This qualifies her as the ultimate herdsman. I see her as a modern counterpart of Miti Drenpa Yeshe, the great master from India, one of the supreme Tantrists of the 11th century.
- 48 Following certain misfortunes, he was sold in Tibet as slave shepherd, for he could not speak the language. One of his Tibetan disciples ransomed him from slavery and he ended up becoming extremely proficient in the language to the point of founding a school of the discipline in eastern Tibet.
- 49 In his years as shepherd he developed a supernatural control over his herds, a proof of an uncommon mastery. He cast pebbles to disperse his flocks for grazing and gathered them back in the evenings by collecting the pebbles in his hand.
- 50 At the end of the intense experience I had, I thought that Tsering Palmo's soul is so encompassing that she is a sister of us all, even of those who do not even imagine that

the life of a secret *yogini* exists and transcends the boundaries of easily affordable solutions.

- 51 An old adage recites that people should be themselves in every situation of life, for it advises not to be affected by the environment. I guess it would be no less wise to go for an environment that is conducive to practice one's own chosen way of life.
- 52 The highlands are ideal for detachment and harmony despite their harshness, a challenge for the few. Ways of life on the Tibetan Plateau select people to living conditions – various lifestyles – reserved for the chosen ones. Tsering Palmo Zems Khang incarnates one of those, rarities of modern time.
- 53 Every step she takes in the high snow of the mountains is an imprint of the Himalayan traditions, hidden but not lost, so that people, one distant day, will look for traces of past civilisations. They will realise that in the solitude of the highlands not everything went astray, as in the plains.
- 54 Stanzin Dorjai's documentary stands by a world too difficult to imagine by common thinking, but typical for the few who know what it is like.