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Demolition and Re-erection in Contemporary Rukubji, Bhutan

Building as Cyclical Renewal and Spatial Mediation

This essay focuses on the way concepts of ordered space and built form are dealt with in Bhutan, and the way they relate to a larger spatial and ritual whole: the sacred landscape of the Himalayan Range. By presenting two cases of architectural transformation observed in Rukubji, a village settlement in central Bhutan, I hope to shed some light on Bhutan's living architectural tradition as a creative process and a force for cultural integration.

Introduction

The Buddhist doctrine of the impermanent character and condition of all modes of existence means that buildings have never been associated with eternity. Like other aspects of material culture, architecture does not escape from this same wheel of existence (*samsāra*) – the cycle of life, death and rebirth; architecture, too, is subjected to a continuous process of construction, demolition and re-erection.¹ Like various comparable Buddhist cultures, Bhutanese culture celebrates a continuous process of cultural renewal as its very tradition. By studying the cultural dimension of architectural transformations in Bhutan, I have identified two main categories of culture transfer.

The first category refers to the cyclical renewal in a matrilineal system that subjects each family farmhouse to a process of deconstruction and re-erection, endorsing the transfer of social and spatial obligati-

ons from mother to daughter vis-à-vis group and local deities. The second category relates to the “art of soliciting or offering mediation” (Aris 1994: 21) that activates processes of demolition, reconstruction or even erection of new structures as built signs of “spatial mediation”.

Both categories, however, involve different rates of change by the which such processes of demolition and re-erection take place. Notwithstanding their interactive and intertwining relationship, the first category suggests a process of architectural refinement that sustains a process of identity, cultural preservation and continuity; the second category, on the contrary, is of a more unpredictable nature and occurrence, suggesting a process of architectural transition marking the emergence of new, mediated spatio-cultural conditions.

By inviting the reader on an architectural journey to Rukubji, I will discuss traditional concepts of Bhutanese ordered space (farmhouse, temple, and other votive structures) within their geographical environment and micro-cultural context; and comment on their specific meaning and vitality by presenting two examples of the dynamic interaction between architecture and the culture group that deals with them. But before embarking on this journey, it might be relevant to sketch out a profile of Bhutan's diverse architectural context. The case of Rukubji is but one fine example of Bhutan's rich and complex dwelling culture.

¹ In 1975, Romi Koshla, a renowned architect and researcher of Tibetan architecture, wrote: “Nothing is considered permanent in the unending cycle of life and death and the temples too undergo the cyclical change ... Thus, the entire architecture of the temple is wholly subservient to the presence of the deity in the fresco on the wall. The flight of the deity leads to the end of the old architecture and the creation of a totally new architecture ... This process of demolition and re-erection had been going on for decades in Tibet” (Koshla 1975: 81–83). See also Dujardin 1994: 2.

Bhutan's dwelling culture: a preliminary profile

Built summary of an intercultural co-habitation

Bhutan, enclosed by China (Tibet Autonomous Region) to the north and India (Assam and Bengal) to the south, possesses one of the most rugged terrains in the world. Within a distance of 100 to 150 km, the landscape bridges altitudes of less than 160 m above sea-level (the plains of Assam and Bengal) to more than 7,000 m (Himalayan Range). Over the same distance ecosystems change from subtropical to temperate monsoon to extreme alpine conditions. The north-south oriented mountain ranges divide Bhutan geographically into a western, central and eastern region. Of a total land area of 46,500 km², only 8 % of the land is used for cultivation; this includes orchards and settlements. Approximately 60 % is forested, and 12 % is perpetual snow/glacier or rocky/barren land (see Standley and Tull 1990, Part a: 3, 13).

Bhutan's population, estimated at 600,000 (1990), consists of an intercultural complex of several groups of different ethnic stock and historical background: Tibetan, as well as Tibeto-Burman and Indo-Aryan of Indian and Nepalese provenance. Each of these groups is associated with geographical regions and inherent dwelling traditions going from permanent nomadic to sedentary conditions and everything that lies in between, such as patterns of seasonal dwelling. Of all these groups, the Ngalong Drukpa, from Tibetan stock, are the most assertive sub-culture of this unique intercultural symbiosis. They settled originally in western and central Bhutan, the nation's economic and cultural heartland. The rural community of Rukubji – that I studied extensively between 1988 and 1991 – belongs to this group.

Bhutan is a rural society without an urban tradition, and the country never underwent a period of colonialism, post-industrialism or rapid post-independence urbanisation. Indeed, urban development is a very recent phenomenon that goes back to the late sixties when the country gradually opened up to the outside world after a long state of self-imposed isolation. It suffices here to mention that by trial and error Bhutan is still in its initial phase of urbanisation and very much in search of its culture-specific urban identity and modern condition.

Striving for harmony and cultural uniqueness: the role of architecture

Of the total Bhutanese population 80 to 90 % still live and organise their habitat as part of a very rich cultural tradition, predominantly rooted in Tibetan Buddhism. At all levels of cultural expression and

in all facets of Bhutan's material culture we come across the religious dimension as the integrating factor *par excellence*. This means that all signs, iconographies, symbols, patterns and colour-codes, applied to represent the Buddhist stock of ideas about life and after-life in the form of cosmic diagrams (*maṇḍala*), come to light in the most diverse forms of Bhutan's material culture and other forms of cultural expression: costume, architecture, traditional crafts, as well as song, dance, working, dwelling and festive affairs. Bhutan's living tradition is manifested in this coherence.

This situation is not exclusively Bhutanese, but inherent to most sub-cultures in the Himalayan region that live or survive in the influence of Tibetan (tantric) Buddhism; but contrary to the case of Tibet (China's TAR) itself, the Indian provinces of Ladakh and Sikkim, and the northern regions of Nepal and Pakistan, Bhutan is the only state where Tibetan Buddhism is politically, socially and culturally common property and stands for the enhancement of its predominant rural tradition, and for the culture-minded development of its modern urban condition.

The repertory of Bhutan's traditional architecture is associated with a number of clear-cut architectural concepts and building types that are rooted in Tibetan Buddhism: majestic and strategically positioned fortress-monasteries (*dzong*), dramatically located temples (*lhakhang*) and monasteries (*gompa*), picturesque clusters of village farmhouses (*gungchim*), and various types of religious and votive structures such as Buddhist *stūpas* (*chörten*), prayer walls (*mani*), different types of spirit houses (*lukhang* and *tsenkhang*), and last but not least the technical genius of its cantilever and chain bridges (*zam*).

If we accept a substantial degree of cultural and architectural reciprocity between Bhutan's dwelling culture and other sub-cultures of the Himalayan Range, we do have to acknowledge Bhutan's explicit quest for harmony (a fundamental cultural theme in Buddhism) and for a distinct identity and cultural uniqueness (a political necessity vis-à-vis its geographical neighbours) ever since its unification process began under the authority of Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel² in the 17th century. Commonly referred to as "father of Bhutan", the Shabdrung is regarded as the architect-builder of fortress-monasteries (*dzong*) in Bhutan.

In terms of architecture, an all-encompassing striving for cultural uniqueness and identity is manifested by a movement from introvert to extrovert patterns of architectural expression, reflected by a limited development of courtyard-architecture, the abundant application and artistic elaboration of wooden oriels (*rapse*)³, the dominance of "float-

2 Once he had been recognised as the incarnation of a famous Drukpa Scholar, Pema Karpo (1527–1592), the authority of Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel (1594–1651) – the 18th abbot of Ralung, the great Drukpa monastery in Tibet – was challenged by the Tsang Desi, the ruler of Tibet's province of Tsang, who had put forward his own candidate. Since the Drukpa school had already been established in Western Bhutan since the 13th century, the Shabdrung fled to Bhutan in 1616 and started his unification process which was characterised by numerous internal and external conflicts (numerous Tibetan invasions) that were settled to his advantage (see Pommaret 1990: 60–61). In the quest to situate Bhutan's cultural uniqueness and national identity in a historical perspective, the following statement was made by the late historian Dasho Rigzin Dorji in the national weekly *Kuensel* (26. 02. 94): "Ever mindful of the small size of Druk Yul and the hostile and hegemonic attitude of the rulers of Tibet, the Shabdrung found it necessary to promote a distinct cultural identity for Bhutan although she shared with Tibet the common heritage of Mahāyāna Buddhism. He, therefore, developed distinct Bhutanese characteristics in religious ceremonies and rituals as well as in the dress and costumes of the people." This observation applies to architecture as well.

3 *Rapse* is the Tibetan word for "light" or "clarity" (Tib. rab gsal), and refers to the room with the largest number of windows. In Bhutan, where timber is abundant, the concept of *rapse* has become one of the most distinctive characteristics of traditional architecture.

ing”⁴ roof types, and the bold façade treatments of domestic architecture that make every farmhouse look like a small temple. The interrelation between Bhutan’s state/religious (dzong) and domestic (dispersed clusters of individual farmhouses) architecture best exemplifies the country’s striving for cultural uniqueness. Although this architectural coherence, reciprocity and harmony between *dzong* and traditional village settlements has been a constant throughout Bhutan’s history (at least since the Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel unified the nation), every building structure has also been subject to a cycle of continuous architectural renewal that goes far beyond what we understand by restoration and renovation.

The two categories of architectural transformation – cyclic renewal and spatial mediation – exemplified by the case of the Rukubji village settlement, are inherent to this unending cycle of demolition and re-erection – a continuous process of architectural trend-setting and fine-tuning.

The key issue of this essay, however, does not focus on the diachronic arrangement of my research results that exemplify the role of the *dzong* and/ or *lhakhang* as the setter of new architectural trends over longer periods, nor will it comment on the factors that facilitate these processes, namely Bhutan’s nailless construction system, the role of the master-carpenter (*zopön*), and the labour system (*dzong ula* and *gungda ula*) that acts as catalyst for cultural sensitisation.⁵

Of particular interest are the motives underlying such processes of architectural demolition and re-erection, to present them against some characteristics of the Bhutanese proper, and last but not least to discuss them in the light of their full and vibrant micro-cultural context.

Bhutan in the Himalayas: the country’s spatial and ritual anchorage within a larger spatio-cultural whole

The sacred landscape of the Himalayan Range: obstacle or threshold?

The Dutch philosopher Cornelis Verhoeven argues that the natural environment does not recognise “thresholds”, even in the case of an accidental terrain with spatial characteristics: “Nature knows various differences in levels, rifts and gorges, but has no intention with it ... and therefore does not recognise “thresholds”, no doors with a lock, no walls, no in and out. Nature does not design and does not draw straight lines. She does not build houses and rooms and does not separate rooms. Her space is open in all her diversity and neutral. Nature is indifferent towards visitors and their opinions. She does not

know enemies nor friends ... What we call a ‘natural boundary’ is a geographical given that we have taken up in the architectural ordering of our dwelling environment” (1997: 15).

This argument is acceptable from a Western point of view. In a context like Tibet or Bhutan, a culture region where the earth is sacred, things seem to be different. In the words of the Dutch-American philosopher Bernd Jager, “the entirety of forest and river is addressed as a subjective being; a viewpoint where it is possible to approach concrete elements of a natural phenomenon as so many properties that make up the description of a heavenly or demonic personality” (1996: 13). What Jager formulates as “the first human attempts to control over nature” is commonly understood as geomancy, a centuries-old tradition of divination rituals through signs, figures and geographical characteristics of natural elements such as the profile of mountains, the flow and confluence of rivers, that make up an important part of Bhutan’s “nature ethos” and “Nenjorm-Pawo” tradition, Bhutan’s lay ethos.⁶ Nature is not at all impartial towards human beings; she is a capricious phenomenon inhabited by all sorts of demons that have to be tamed or detained. Even the most rationally planned urban centres and high-tech skyscrapers of Singapore and Hong Kong are the object of divination rituals of geomancy to make them inhabitable and liveable. For, for the Bhutanese there are thresholds in the natural environment too.

The built landscape: dwelling between gods (*lha*) and serpent-spirits (*lu*)

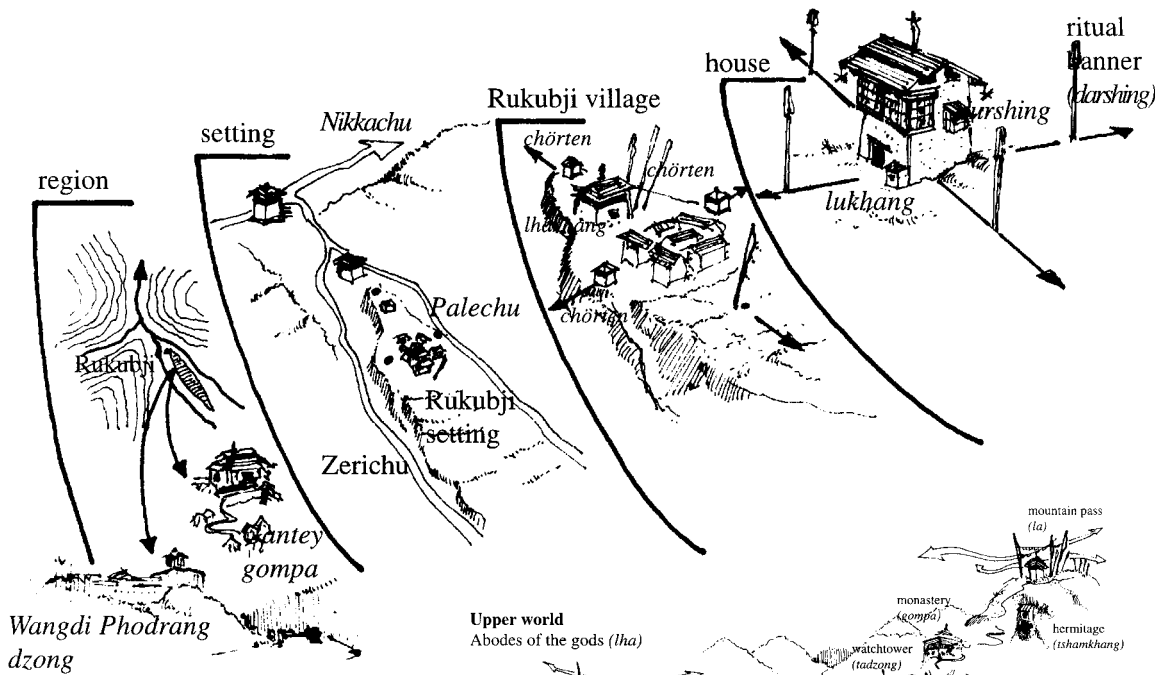
The first contact with the Bhutanese landscape – that is the overall picture of natural and built elements – seems charming and harmonious; even, at a first glance, heavenly. Is Bhutan the lost Shangri-La after all? The built environment is far from being dominant in relation to the overwhelming landscape of the eastern Himalayan Range, and has nothing to do with the “culture of enclosure”, characteristic of the West, that appropriates and mutilates the natural environment at an unprecedented scale and pace. Here a more subtle play is going on. The impact is not less because siting does not take place at random. Each village settlement, each temple and each shrine exemplifies – in both a pragmatic and a ritual sense – a high level of commitment, meticulousness and expertise.

According to the Bhutanese the universe is structured as a three-tiered world referred to as *lha tsen lu ragsum*. A heavenly upper world up to where the highest mountain peaks reach is the realm of the gods (*lha*), a middle world where the human beings live in their environ-

4 This does not mean that the architectural concept of “floating” roofs is peculiar to Bhutanese culture: the architecture of the Naxi in Yunnan demonstrates reciprocal features (personal communication from Corneille Jest, May ’95 and Niels Gutschow, February ’98).

5 For more information on the interrelation between Bhutan’s state/religious and domestic architecture and some of the factors that sustain such processes, see Dujardin 1994a:154–157; 1994b:16–19; and 1998: 66–70.

6 For an introduction to Bhutan’s indigenous “Nenjorm-Pawo” tradition, rooted in pre-Buddhist practices, see Chhoki (1994: 107–21).



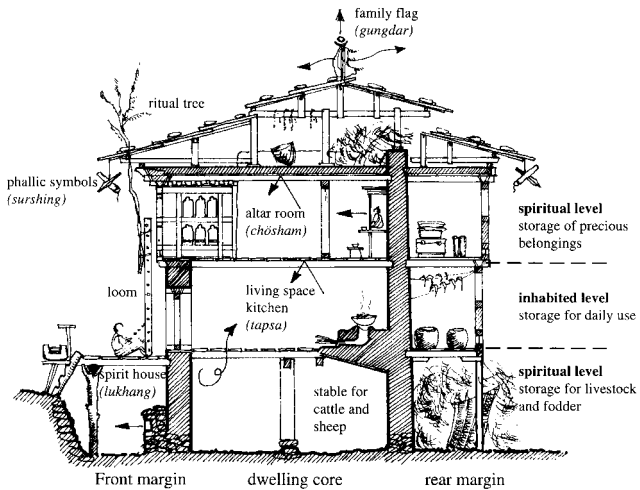
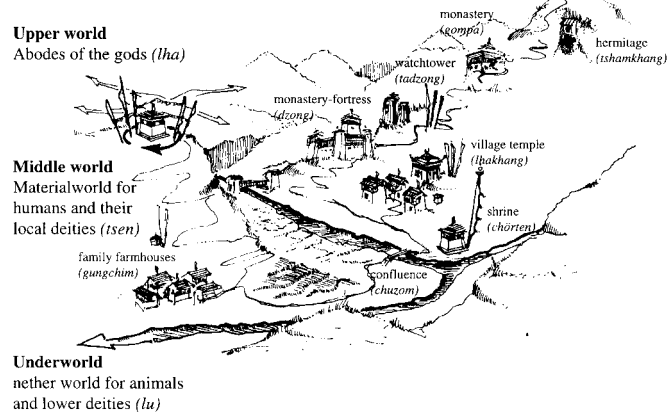
Wangdi Phodrang dzong

Rukubji: Spatial and ritual anchorage
Synoptic sketch depicting 'horizontal' levels of spatial and ritual protection. The 'horizontal' hierarchy illustrates how every spatial configuration belongs to a higher level of cultural protection, articulated by collectively staged rituals.

Bhutan: Spatial hierarchy of the built landscape

Above: synoptic sketch of the concept of a three-tiered universe (*lha tsen lu ragsum*): The three levels of the universe, - the heavenly upper world, the middle world of material existence and a demonic underworld, - provides ritual meaning to implemented concepts of ordered space and built form.

Below: section of a three-storeyed traditional farmhouse, Bhutan's archetype: Structural correspondence between the idea of *lha tsen lu ragsum* and the tripartite division of the traditional farmhouse into a ground floor level for the livestock and earth-deities (*lu*), a first floor level accommodating the living and social functions, and a third floor level, reserved for the private chapel (*chösham*) and storerooms for valuables.



ment and with local deities (*tsen*), and the underworld of rivers, lakes, surface and underground life where a plethora of demons (especially the serpent-spirits, *lu*) are detained. This three-tiered division of the universe is depicted in religious painted scrolls (*thangka*) and cosmic diagrams (*maṇḍala*) and gives ritual meaning to the tripartite division of the traditional farmhouse, Bhutan's archetype: in its most ideal configuration, the living space of humans is situated above the stable and under the private chapel.

It is a widespread phenomenon in Asia and beyond that the three-tiered conception of the universe provides ritual significance to religious and domestic concepts of ordered and built space. The cultural anthropologist Roxanna Waterson, in her book *The Living House*, emphasises that "most indigenous belief forms of the Indonesian archipelago share the concept of a three-tiered cosmos, consisting of a middle world inhabited by humans, sandwiched between an upper and lower world ... whereby the structure of the house may be seen to reflect the division of the cosmos into three layers; the sacred upper world, abode of the gods/attic and roof, the middle world inhabited by humans/habitable platform, and the nether world, abode of animals and lower deities/stable" (1997: 93).

It is inherent to the Buddhist inspired stock of ideas that the heavenly powers that humans mean to recognise in the natural environment and in landscapes belong to "the other realm" ruled by Order and Harmony. There is also the insight that this higher Order (macrocosm) can be transferred to the material level (microcosm) of our existence by building by analogy with that higher order. The Belgian orientalist Winand Callewaert (1996: 72-73) describes comparable insights in India's ancient culture and speaks of an "imitation-offer". The architectural reproduction of the universe is dealt with by many scholars, particularly those who have developed a deep interest in the relationship between cosmic conceptions (*maṇḍala*) and their architectonic expressions in the shape of votive structures (*stūpas*, *caityas*, and *chörten*); or in the way larger areas are architecturally structured by analogy with the cosmos. It suffices here to refer to a selection of seminal works on the subject.⁷

The motive for building and the merit derived from it lie in the structural and architectonic replication of the image of the universe in the way it is depicted in *maṇḍalas* by enlightened persons such as Buddhist lamas. In this context, it is wise not to disturb the malevolent underworld and challenge the demons to cause inauspicious events. All activities that may disturb the earth such as the digging of foundations and ploughing fields are hazardous activities that call for prudence, professional guidance and ritual protection via purposeful ritu-

als, implemented by the most relevant mediator, such as a Buddhist lama, an astrologer or local priest (*phajo*).

The “tamed” landscape: the threshold as a sign of protection

In his article “Religion in Bhutan: the formation of a world view” the Tibetologist Michael Kowalewski observes the Bhutanese landscape as follows: “Just looking at the Bhutanese landscape, it might seem the very embodiment of the Buddhist concept of Emptiness (*sūnyatā*). ... Just as easily, however, one may find in it more of the idea of the Buddhist heaven described as “the realm of the densely-packed” (*sTug-po bkod-pa'i khams*), a realm full of various life-forms, gods, demons, spirits, historical personages and figures of myth and legend” (1994: 124–125). Having surveyed a small area in western Bhutan, he concludes that “even this small patch of Bhutan contains a whole plethora of historical, religious, Buddhist and non-Buddhist, divine, demonic and human (*lha dre mi gsum*) beings and forces that inhabit the landscape and are intertwined in a sort of gridlock of spheres of forces ... that are arranged in hierarchies and sequences according to a deep structure, in which ritual power acts as a universal medium” (1994: 124–25).

He describes how great historical figures of Buddhism such as Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava) in the eighth century, and later Drukpa Kunle (1455–1529) and Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel (1594–1651) turned an apparent chaos into an ordered and recognisable world by “taming” the land. This act of taming consists in the subjugation of local demons and deities and turning them into protectors of the Buddhist faith. In this regard, Kowalewski notes that “temples and other sacred sites are not simply places within a landscape; they act as a focus of sacred energies and commemorate the very rising of order out of chaos” (*ibid.*: 125).

The function and meaning of a building is, however, not always readable and recognisable from its local function and siting only. I think about Bhutan’s oldest temples, Kyichu Lhakhang in the west and Jampa Lhakhang in the east. They are important not only because of their monumental and historical value, but because they form the anchor points that have been set out as thresholds from Lhasa, the cultural heart of Tibet.

The story goes that a giant demoness was spreadeagled over the whole area of Tibet and the Himalayan Range, and her flailing limbs prevented the spread of Buddhism. To pin down all the parts of her body, the Buddhist King Songtsen Gampo built 108 temples. Twelve

of these were built in accordance with precise plans and at geographical positions that were identified with her hands, shoulders, elbows, hips, knees and feet. In about the year AD 638 the temple of the *Jokhang* in Lhasa was built over the very heart of the demoness with the *Jokhang* as centre. From this ritual centre, three subsequent grids were set out: a first imaginary grid demarcates the “royal zone” (*Runön*) in the central region of Tibet, the second grid establishes the tamed border of Tibet (*Thadul*), and a third grid encompasses the areas beyond the Tibetan border (*Yangdul*). The two temples in Bhutan, Kyichu Lhakhang and Jampa Lhakhang, respectively detain the demoness’ left foot and left knee⁸ (see page 24, Anthropomorphic interpretation of the detained demoness). The physical presence of these two temples on Bhutanese territory and their inherent value, make all inhabitants of Bhutan feel spatially and ritually protected and anchored in a larger spatio-cultural whole. Both temples symbolise the victory of good over evil and make Bhutan a tamed and inhabitable place.

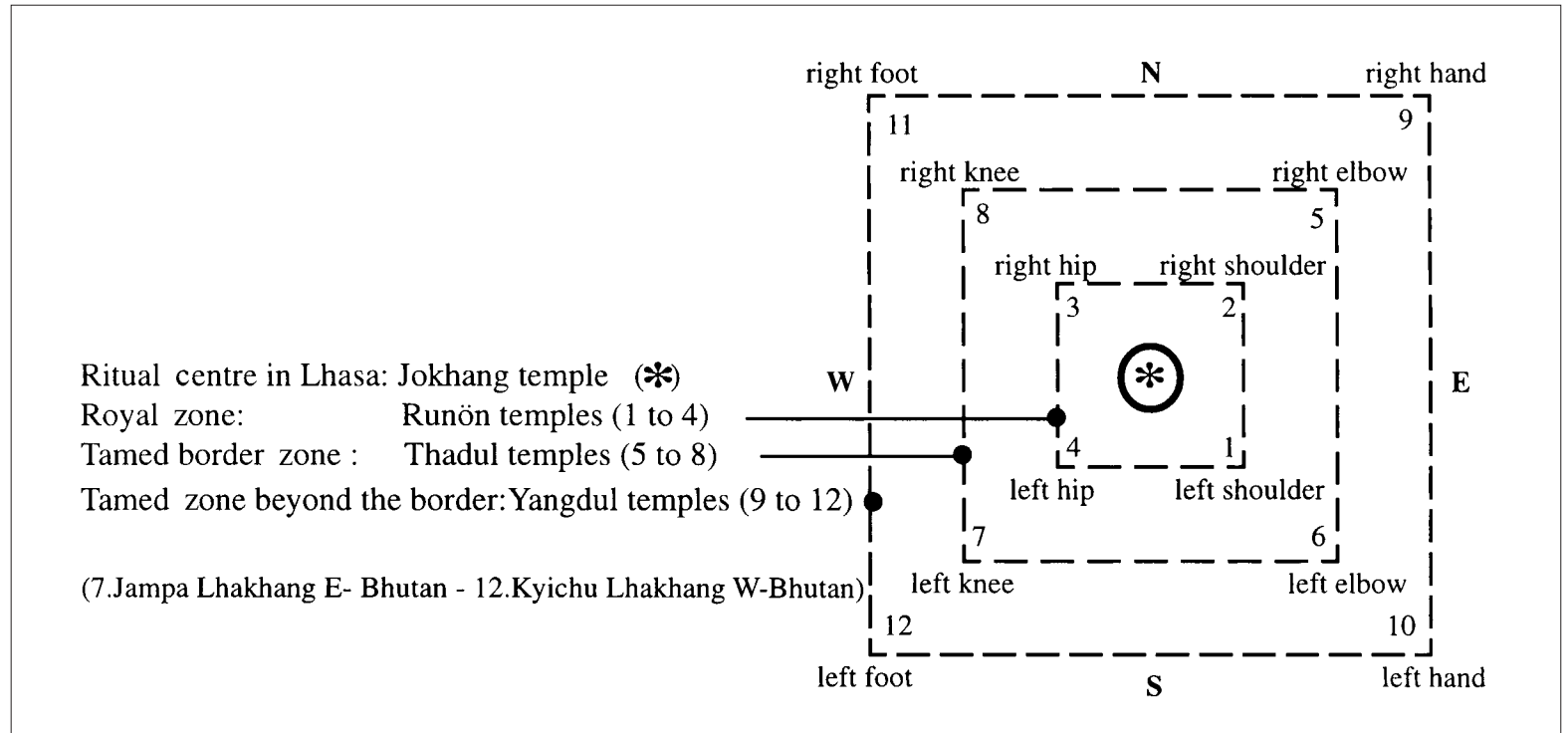
Building as sign of protection is manifest at all levels of architectonic complexity: the house, the village, the setting and the region. By inscribing the spatial configuration (coherence of natural and built elements) into one higher level of spatial protection and by articulating the ritual significance of each spatial level by means of individual and collective stages, the Bhutanese succeed in creating a sense of order, harmony and spatio-temporal interdependence.

It is significant to note that this – to the Western eye – seemingly oppressive cultural system, is in fact very flexible: when a certain spatio-temporal level is structurally threatened (e. g. inauspicious events, effects from processes of acculturation and modernisation), the lost elements are recovered and ritually corrected on a higher spatial level of protection without jeopardising the entire culture system. By means of a graphic synopsis I have applied the issue of spatial and ritual protection to Bhutan and in particular to Rukubji, the village settlement for which I shall describe processes of demolition and re-erection (see page 22, synoptic sketch: spatial and ritual anchorage: Rukubji).

Here we recognise four levels of spatial and ritual protection: the dwelling is protected by its meticulous orientation, a spirit house (*tsenkhang*) for the house deity, a house flag (*gungdar*) and a phallic symbol (*surshing*) hanging from each of the four eave-corners of the roof; the settlement is protected by the temple (*lhakhang*) and three votive structures (*chörten*) each of them facing one mountain; the setting is protected by the settlement’s location at the foot of three mountains (*pokto*), the confluence of three rivers (*chu*) and a spirit house for the local deity (*tsenkhang*); the region is protected by the

7 Mircea Eliade’s *The Sacred and the Profane* (1962), Niels Gutschow & Götz Hagmüller’s *Svayambhunath Conservation Masterplan* (1989), Niels Gutschow’s *The Nepalese Caitya: 1500 years of Buddhist Votive Architecture in the Kathmandu Valley* (1996), Giuseppe Tucci’s *Stupa: Art, Architectonics and Symbolism* (1988 [1932]), Yael Bentor’s *Consecration of Images and Stupas in Indo-Tibetan Tantric Buddhism* (1996), Pema Dorjee’s *Stupa and its Technology* (1996) and Martin Brauen’s *The Mandala: Sacred Circle in Tibetan Buddhism* (1997), to name a few.

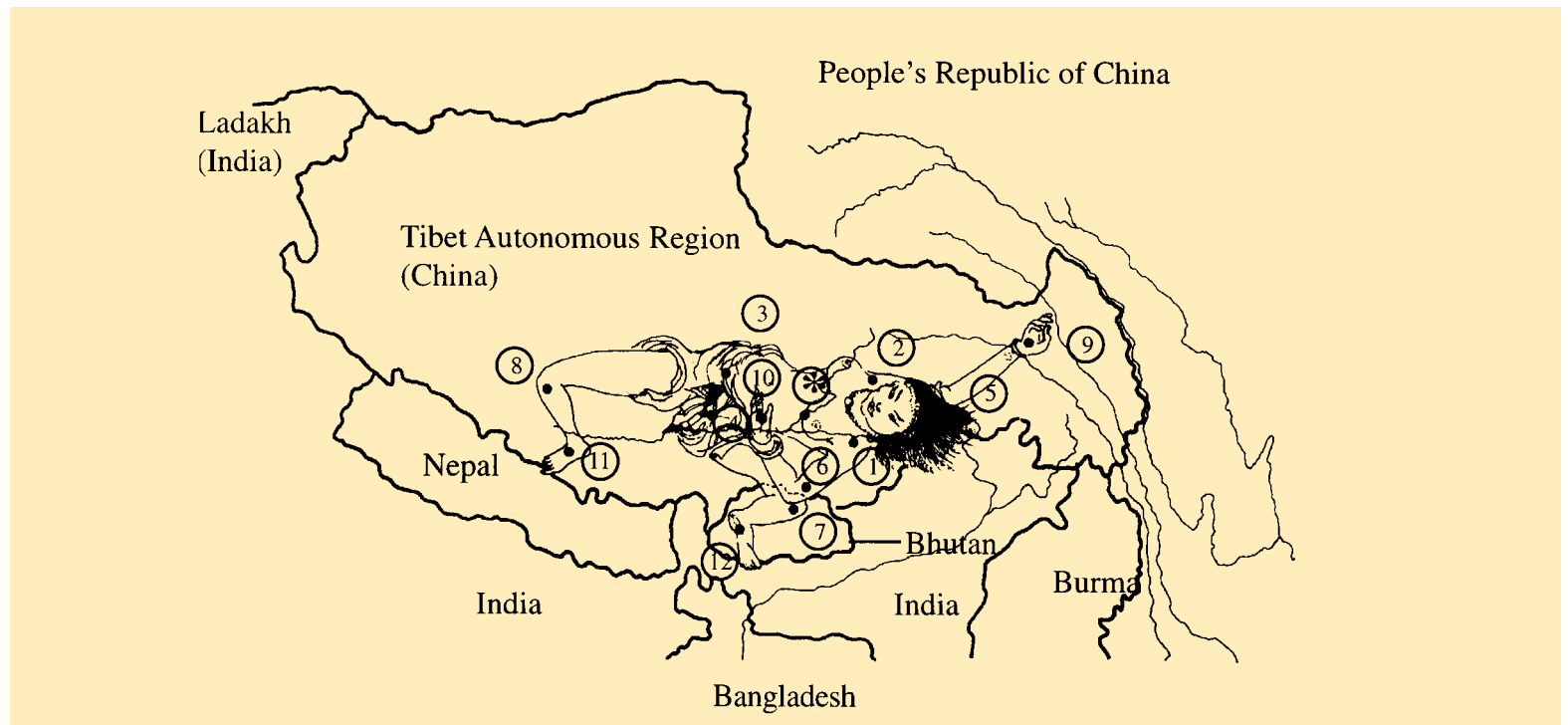
8 This account is based on Aris (1979: 15–20) and Pommaret (1990: 122, 214).

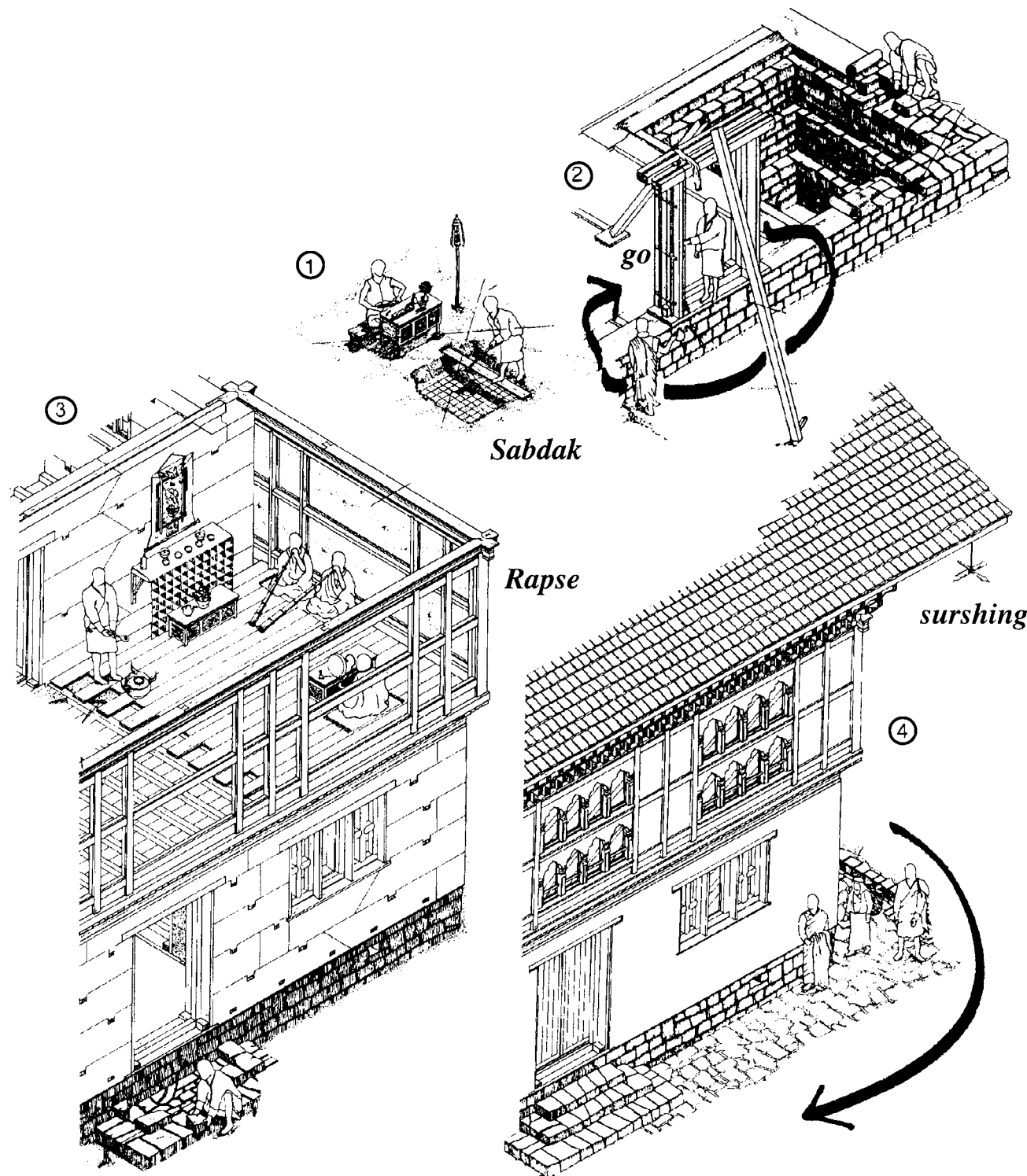


Bhutan: The country's spatial integration into the "sacred" landscape of the Tibetan Himalayas

Above: scheme showing the three concentric zones of protection with the Jokhang temple in Lhasa: Built in ca. AD 638 as religious centre by the Buddhist King Songtsen Gampo, 12 out of 108 temples detain the demoness' body joints (Source: Aris, 1979:15-6). two are sited in Bhutan: Jampa Lhakhang in east Bhutan (N°7) and Kyichu Lhakhang in west Bhutan (N°12).

Below: anthropomorphic interpretation of the giant demoness detained by 13 temples: The temple structures, built in Bhutan, detain the demoness' left knee and left foot respectively. The physical presence of both temples on Bhutanese territory, make all inhabitants of Bhutan feel spatially and ritually protected and anchored in a larger spatio-cultural whole. Source: For the geographical situation of the 12 temples refer to Aris (1979:16); for a schematic representation of the demoness, refer to Van Dyeke (1994:108) and Pommaret (1997:38).





Bhutan: construction rituals

Source:

Marc Dujardin, *Illustrated Handbook for Improved Traditional Housing in Bhutan* (1990: 1,4,8,13)

The process of making artefacts in general and erecting buildings in particular are the object of basically four construction rituals:

1. The first construction ritual (sashock) concerns the physical and ritual examination and selection of the site; the identification of the ritual owner of the plot, i. e. the serpent earth lord (sabdak), and the first digging of the earth.

2. The second construction ritual concerns the installation of the main door frame (go). Once positioned, the door frame is adorned with ritual scarves and mantra and is circumambulated.

3. The third construction ritual concerns the installation of the main wooden oriels (rapse). The erection of the rapse precedes a major ceremony (marchang pūjā) that involves the patron, the master-builder, the ritual master, the building team, invited monks and the entire village community.

4. The fourth construction ritual concerns the consecration of the house (surshing). It may be regarded as the official transfer of rights and obligations of one generation to another. In the ideal case this spatio-cultural transfer (the house and the obligations that come along with it) takes place between mother and eldest daughter when the latter reached a major rite of passage: marriage. In the consecration rituals the newly appointed family head circumambulates the completed house carrying the wooden phallic symbols which are ultimately hung at each of the four corners of the roof.

fortress-monastery (*dzong*) of Wangdi Phodrang and the monastery (*gompa*) of Gantey. With the village of Rukubji as the hypothetical centre, I have structured my data on Bhutanese concepts of spatial and ritual protection in the form of a provisional culture matrix.

The idea is to bring architectonic concepts (cultural patterns of building such as hierarchy, scale, form and orientation) and ritual practices (type of ceremonies, circumambulation patterns and so on) together in an associative grid, and to extend the issue of protection to three more levels of spatial protection: the country (Druk Yul), the cultural region (Pan-Tibetan), and the global (world-wide) level.

Having started to map the “building-fever” of Tibetans and Bhutanese outside their historically associated territories, it is interesting to see how places around the globe are being tamed and founded as new cultural centres and Buddhist places of worship. The least one can say is that these ongoing activities evoke some of the 13th century Buddhist foundation missions to Bhutan (e. g. the story of Phajo Drugom Shipo [1208–76]).⁹ More significant – at least for the Tibetans – is the spatial and ritual recuperation of their cultural heritage to overcome the cultural losses ever since Tibet’s cultural genocide began in 1951. The present resurgence of Tibetan architectural activities in exile, partially demonstrate the flexibility and vitality of Buddhist inspired cultures, of which Bhutan is a distinct but constituent element.

To supply the historical background for the vitality that characterises Bhutan’s architectural tradition I shall now introduce the vibrant and integrated dwelling culture of a dense village settlement in central Bhutan.

An architectural reconnaissance: the traditional settlement of Rukubji¹⁰

The geographical situation of Rukubji: settling in the land of the Black Mountain Bjob

The village of Rukubji is situated in central Bhutan at a height of 3,000 m, 11 km east of the mountain pass of Pelela (3,400 m) and just below the central motor road connecting the district centres of Wangdi Phodrang and Tongsa (see map). Rukubji belongs to Sephu sub-district (*dungskhag*), falling under the jurisdiction of Wangdi Phodrang district in western Bhutan.¹¹

Transcending administrative and geographical borders, Rukubji belongs to a region that is commonly known as the land of the “Black Mountain Bjob”, the domain of yak and sheep herders. The area extends to Gantey Gompa in the west and the Nikkarchu river in the

east, and includes other areas to the north. The Black Mountain range splits western and central Bhutan longitudinally into two clear-cut regions with two distinct ecosystems. In contrast to the abundantly forested west side, the far side of the range is predominantly covered with high-altitude dwarf bamboo, which makes the landscape of Rukubji appear harsh and desolate.

Dwelling at the foot of the three mountains: the spatial configuration of Rukubji’s setting

Traditional settlements in Bhutan are meticulous in their planning and spatial arrangement. The earth is believed to possess divinity, and every settlement foundation is subject to both practical and spiritual considerations. Practical considerations can involve soil structure and topography for cultivation and livestock, accessibility of surface and spring water, and the proximity of road networks (mule-tracks). Spiritual considerations involve geomancy, a set of divination rituals taking account of geographic features such as the profile and position of mountains, the flow and merging of rivers, etc. Many of these principles go back to Bhutan’s pre-Buddhist era and resemble the principles of “wind and water” (*feng-shui*), the Chinese art of life in harmony with the environment, as well as some of the principles of Indian building codes recorded in the *Vāstusāstras*.

As regards its genius loci, Rukubji is auspiciously located at the end of an elongated spur where three mountains meet. In fact, the village itself lies at the foot of a fourth mountain. The spatial layout of the village and its fields is dictated by the confluence of three small rivers. Rising in these mountains, the Zerichu, Palechu and the Dje-bichu rivers embrace the whole of Rukubji’s setting, settlement and fields before they merge with numerous streams and, becoming the Manas river, eventually find their way through the plains of Assam in India. The mountains that define the contours and horizon of Rukubji are known elements; they are personified and named (as foot, body, head); they are venerated for their divine power through their association with mountain gods (*yul-lha*).

Taming and the land: historical figures in Rukubji’s foundation myths and legends

By directly associating the historical figure of Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava) and Bhutan’s national hero Drukpa Kunle (1455–1529) with the foundation myths and legends of Rukubji, all who have connections with the village cherish the idea of belonging

⁹ For the story of Phajo Drugom Shipo *et al.*, see Pommaret (1990: 56–60).

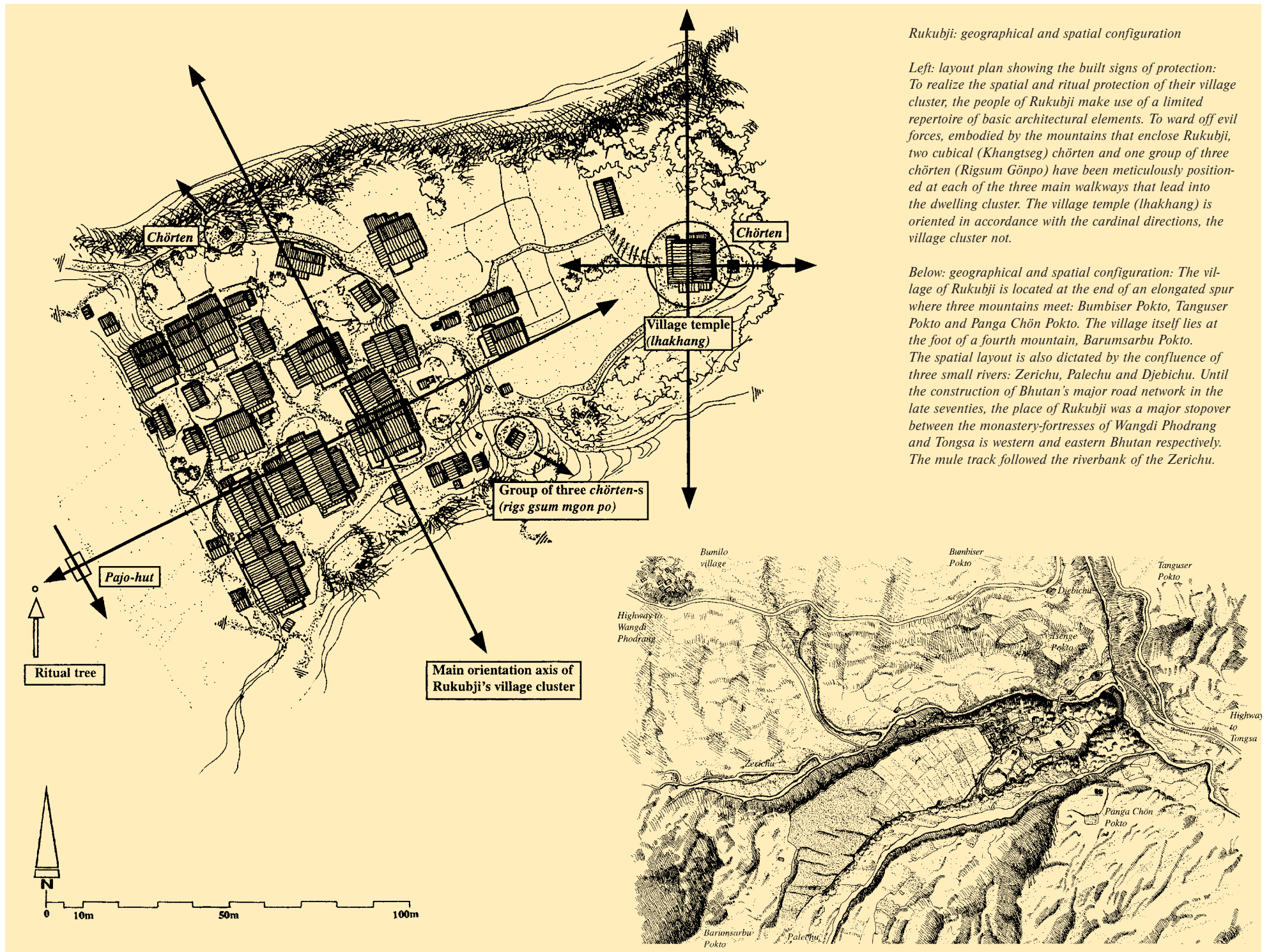
¹⁰ In John Claude White’s account of his first Mission to Bhutan in 1905, Rukubji (“Rokubi”) is referred to as a village located above a traditional camp, used by the Tongsa Penlop Sir Ugyen Wangchuck, who became the first hereditary monarch of Bhutan on 17 December, 1907. See White (1909: 155, 171).

¹¹ In earlier times, Rukubji fell under the jurisdiction of the Tongsa Penlop. See Pommaret (1990: 184).

Rukubji: geographical and spatial configuration

Left: layout plan showing the built signs of protection: To realize the spatial and ritual protection of their village cluster, the people of Rukubji make use of a limited repertoire of basic architectural elements. To ward off evil forces, embodied by the mountains that enclose Rukubji, two cubical (Khangtseg) chörten and one group of three chörten (Rigsun Gönpo) have been meticulously positioned at each of the three main walkways that lead into the dwelling cluster. The village temple (lhakhang) is oriented in accordance with the cardinal directions, the village cluster not.

Below: geographical and spatial configuration: The village of Rukubji is located at the end of an elongated spur where three mountains meet: Bumbiser Pokto, Tanguser Pokto and Panga Chön Pokto. The village itself lies at the foot of a fourth mountain, Barumsarbu Pokto. The spatial layout is also dictated by the confluence of three small rivers: Zerichu, Palechu and Djebichu. Until the construction of Bhutan's major road network in the late seventies, the place of Rukubji was a major stopover between the monastery-fortresses of Wangdi Phodrang and Tongsa in western and eastern Bhutan respectively. The mule track followed the riverbank of the Zerichu.



to an important lineage associated with this very place. The villagers of Rukubji believe that in his manifestation as an owl and in his capacity as “tamer of the land”, Guru Rinpoche purified the site of evil spirits and demons by subduing a mythological snake demoness. The whole of Rukubji’s setting is metaphorically associated with the body of a snake.

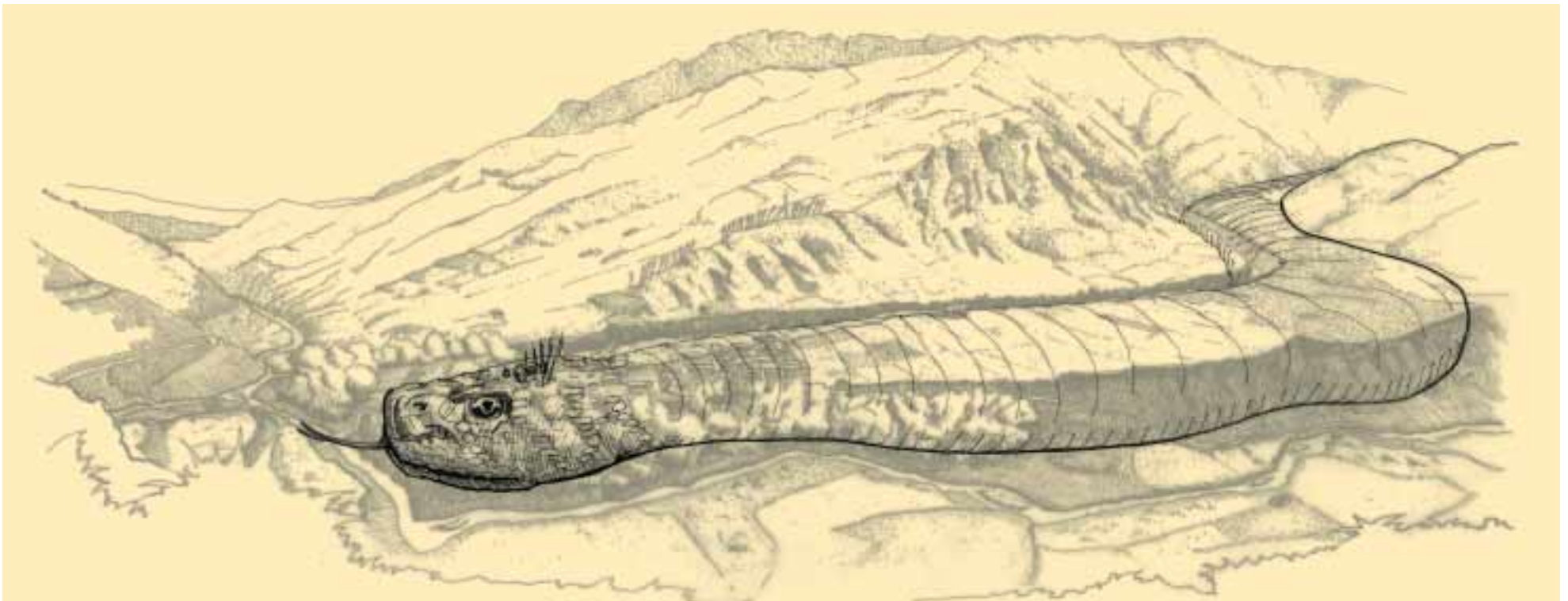
It is a popular belief in the village that the temple pins down the eye of the snake. The core of the village cluster, where houses are built and rebuilt, evokes the snake’s beating heart. The elongated form of the plateau, the mosaic of fields and the seasonal variation in colours and texture caused by patterns of shifting cultivation, evoke the body of a snake shedding its skin each year. The fields converging uphill evoke the snake’s small tail that remains hidden behind the mountain ridge. The trickle of water seeping down from the plinth of the eastern elevation of the village temple is believed to originate from the lake below the spur where the snake demoness is detained.

Along with its neighbouring villages Chendebji and Tangchebji, Rukubji is known as Bji Sum (the three Bjis) after a popular story of Lama Drukpa Kunle.¹² The legend tells of the saint’s refusal to cross the Pelela Pass to visit the three settlements with names ending in “bji”. Holding mustard seed in his hand, Drukpa Kunle scattered it over the area where rice was once cultivated. It is believed that because of this no one ever succeeded in growing rice there. Ever since, the yellow colour of the abundantly blooming mustard plants contrasts with the brownish bamboo vegetation and more significantly remind the villagers of the saint’s meddling with their forefathers’ affairs.

**Entering the village centre of Rukubji:
the daily practice of gradual trespassing**

I now take the reader on an architectural hike from the outskirts of the village right to the interiors of one of the farmhouses, while also

¹² See Albin (1982: 135). In the French translation “Bji” is referred to as “peepees”.



Rukubji: theriomorphic interpretation of the village

Against the traditional patterns of spatial hierarchy and spatial interrelation between the various elements of Bhutan architectural repertoire, the village temple (lhakhang) of Rukubji is sited at a lower level than the village cluster. The reason for this apparent aberration may be found in Rukubji’s foundation myths and legends which conceived the village as being built over the body of a snake which is a harmful spirit. Thus the location of the temple on the head of the snake can be understood as the subjugation of the spirit by Buddhism. Source: fieldwork.

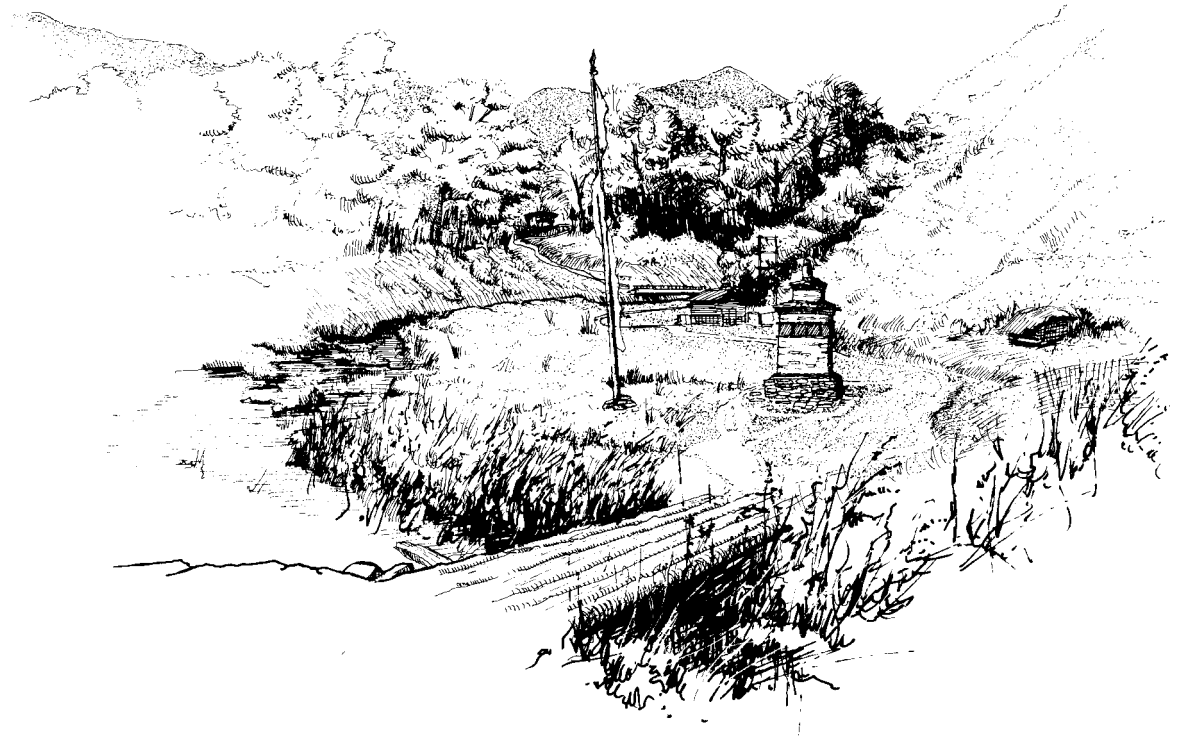
commenting on some of Bhutan's spatial and architectural concepts encountered along the way.

The centre of Rukubji can be approached from various directions. For a traveller arriving on the road that was completed in the mid-1980s, the village suddenly appears in its entirety after a fifteen-minute drive eastwards from the Pelela Pass. In earlier times, however, the main mule-track that linked the *dzong* of Wangdi Phodrang and Tongsa followed the riverbank of the Zerichu, keeping the settlement out of the immediate view of travellers and wanderers. Though numerous tracks lead into Rukubji from all directions, the place where the highway branches off towards an open field below the spur suggests the main entrance to the village settlement. This feeder road runs down until it crosses the small Djebichu river.

Having crossed the Djebichu by a bridge made of six tree trunks, one is attracted by a tree-high prayer flag and a two-storey *chörten* aligned with the cardinal points on an open piece of land bounded by the merging rivers Djebichu and Zerichu. The *chörten* marks the presence of one of the cremation grounds (*durtrö*).¹³

Chörten are Buddhist monuments that exist in a multitude of forms and sizes. Bhutanese *chörten* can be divided into three major types. The most common type is a square stone structure topped with a gently sloping pyramidal roof of stone slates. The second group is of the Tibetan type and is referred to as *khangteg chörten*. It is often covered by a wooden roof structure similar to those of traditional farmhouses. The third type is the large the "eye-stupa", modelled after the well-known stupas of Bodnath and Svayambunath in Nepal. The latter type is rarely seen in Bhutan and the only noteworthy examples are those at Chendebji near Rukubji and Chörten Kora in eastern Bhutan.

Chörten are erected for various reasons: to ward off evil spirits from places that are identified as thresholds (confluences, bridges, mountain passes, etc.), or to commemorate in stone the place of visit of a historical figure, lama, or even some beloved relative who has passed away. Today the "*chörten* of enlightenment" (*changchub chörten*), one of the eight Tibetan types, is favoured over the more traditional cubed versions. Each *chörten* is given life by inserting a "tree of life" (*axis mundi*) inscribed with prayers. The erection of a *chörten* is accompanied by a number of construction rituals and finally consecrated to fulfil its purpose. *Chörten* are usually circumambulated clockwise.¹⁴ The *chörten* marking Rukubji's cremation ground is of the square type and is characterised by a red belt in the upper third of the cube, displaying a continuous row of slates inscribed with the mantra *om mani padme hum*.



Heading towards the bridge over the Zerichu, Rukubji's main access to the village, one comes across the micro-hydel power plant that since the mid 1980s has been providing electricity to each farmhouse (for lighting only). The bridge (*zam*) has recently been rebuilt in concrete and not as a traditional cantilever bridge. Deprived of all symbolism and despite its rational and naked outlook, the new bridge still serves as one of Rukubji's most important thresholds. It is here that on the occasion of Rukubji's major festivals, Bhutanese New Year (Losar) and rituals such as the harvest ritual (*habe*), relatives and guests are officially welcomed. For such occasions the bridge is topped by an arch made of green leaves of fir and cypress, the Bhutanese counterpart of the sacred sandalwood in India.

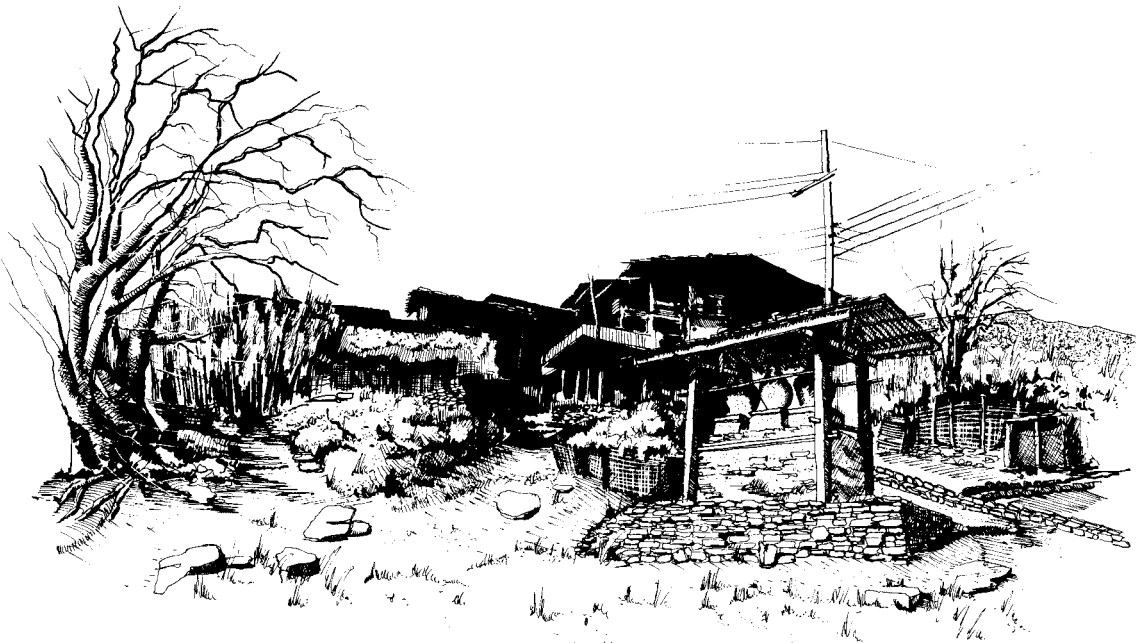
Although a small steep track climbs directly to the temple ground, the usual access path leads along a stone wall protecting some of Rukubji's isolated pockets of agricultural land and threshing grounds. When the first "floating" roofs of the first farmhouses appear, the rough track diverges to the right and leads up to one of Rukubji's major entrances, earmarked by three small *chörten* in Tibetan style, grouped under one single wooden superstructure covered with split shingles of softwood. This *khangteg chörten* south of the village cluster is one of the three *chörten* that were specifically erected to ward off evil spirits

Rukubji, the daily practice of gradual trespassing

Threshold one: the confluence of the Djebichu and Zerichu river. Having crossed the Djebichu, one is attracted by a tree-high prayer flag and a two-storey cubical chörten marking the presence of an occasional cremation ground (durtrö).

¹³ Other cremation grounds are situated: (1) further downstream near a *chörten* at the confluence of the rivers Longtechu and Nikkarchu; (2) at the Pelela Pass; and (3) occasionally in Punakha.

¹⁴ For information on specific Bhutanese *chörten*, see Pommaret (1990: 81–83); and Gutschow (1996), with a section on Bhutan.



and mountain deities (*yul-lha*) associated with Rukubji's three mountains, namely Bumbiser Pokto in the north, Tanguser Pokto in the west and Barumsarbu Pokto in the south. From this very spot one can proceed in four directions. Turning sharply to the right, a path leads up to the village temple (*lhakhang*).

Although unusually located below the dense cluster of houses, the village temple dedicated to the Menla, the Medicine Buddha¹⁵, undoubtedly dominates the village in terms of its position and its ambiguous and dual appearance. The temple is aligned with the cardinal points, the village is not. Its western side (facing the village cluster) has the appearance of an elaborated farmhouse, while its eastern façade (facing the confluences of the rivers and the cremation grounds) has architectural features usually associated with religious structures. To the right, the path leads around the cluster of houses towards the main entrance of the village in the west, from where one path continues along the edge of the elongated cultivated fields and another descends towards the bank of the Zerichu, before climbing up to the village cluster of Bumilo, Rukubji's sister village, located above the highway. To the left, a track descends to the main threshing floor, some more dispersed farmhouses and the archery field that stretches over a distance of more than 110 metres, where Bhutan's national sport is performed during various festivities and rituals.

The tracks that lead in various directions beyond the *chörten* are made of small elevated footpaths in the shape of small dikes. These are the only traversable corridors during the rainy season, which completely transforms the entire outdoor space between the houses.

When one continues the approach to the dense village cluster, the farmhouses rise up against the sky like massive inward-sloping cubes of compacted earth, crowned by elaborate woodwork (*rapse*) projecting from the first and/or second storey, depending on the number of storeys a building has. Huge and multiple-eaved roofs covered with loosely placed shingles held down by wooden stakes and heavy stones, protect the mudwalls from being eroded during heavy rainfall in the monsoon period (June–September). Most of the farmhouses are extended at the first level by spacious terraces and secondary timber structures.

Rukubji is a large and densely populated rural settlement in comparison with the average Bhutanese village. And yet there are barely 29 extended families with a population ranging from 300 to 368 persons (1990), depending on whether they actually live in the cluster or are settled at the periphery of the village. The village cluster itself consists of some 24 individual farmhouses of various sizes, each with one, two or three storeys.

When we approach and cross the village cluster typologies such as “public square”, “street” and “alley” become meaningless. The paths circumvent the individual compounds and all houses seemingly avoid one another’s “faces” by looking towards more neutral open spaces. Approaching a three-storey farmhouse, we come across a small *chörten*-like structure built against one of its massive walls of rammed earth.

This is a spirit house (*lukhang*), dedicated to the serpent spirit (*lu*) that is identified as the spiritual owner of the land on which the farmhouse was erected. *Lukhang* are of many shapes and forms. Attached or detached are miniature *chörten* with small niches. Sometimes a *lukhang* is no more than a piece of rock in the vicinity of the farmhouse. Only the farmhouses dating from the foundation period of the settlement have spirit houses. Members of the extended families that erect a farmhouse next to the main family house (*gungchim*) venerate the same spirit (*lu*). In Rukubji I have identified 15 *lukhang* that correspond to the farmhouses of the 15 families (out of 29) that are entitled to participate in certain special rituals.

Continuing down the alley one sees that on the projecting and elevated stone plinths of the farmhouse piles of firewood are stored, reducing the outdoor space even more. In this particular house, the sole entrance to the house is via the stable, shared by cattle and sheep. Pigs, because of their ritual uncleanness, are never kept inside the buildings and stay at the rear of the compound or in detached pigsties. A steep staircase, with stairs chopped out of three joined tree-trunks, leads to the kitchen (*thabsang*), the main living space of a Bhutanese family. This is the room where meals are prepared and consumed, where guests are entertained casually, and where the entire family sleeps in one row on mats and bedding folded up and put aside during daytime. I observed that very often the dress of the day (*go* and *kira* for men and women respectively) is used as blankets.

The traditional Bhutanese interior is characterised by the absence of furniture, except for low tables, bold painted boxes and perhaps a radio. Compared to Indian and Nepalese villages, places such as Rukubji are realms of silence. The traditional mud stove is used to prepare meals for the family and fodder for livestock, but above all serves in winter as the main heating source. Traditional stoves are not usually equipped with a chimney, although recent development schemes are gradually introducing improved versions. Nevertheless, three-storey houses are furnished with a shaft of wooden planks that runs from the ceiling of the kitchen right up to the open attic and creates a draught for the stove.

The kitchen gives access to storerooms for meat and other goods and, in the case of a two-storey farmhouse, to a *chösham*, a private altar or shrine room. The *chösham* is always located on the top floor. This room is the pearl of the house and sometimes equipped and decorated like a fully-fledged temple.

The first floor also gives access to a partly protected outdoor veranda which is frequently used for cleaning vegetables, for bathing and other sanitation purposes. Very often a single hole in the floorboards serves as the toilet. Nowadays, more modern rural sanitation devices are being installed, which makes the outdoor spaces at ground level more hygienic.

A typical Bhutanese ladder, hewn from a single tree, leads to the attic, which is predominantly used to store straw and vegetables. Roofs are



Rukubji, the daily practice of gradual trespassing

Opposite

Above: threshold two: the bridge over the Zerichu. The newly constructed bridge (zam) over the Zerichu marks the official entrance to the village. Deprived of all symbolism and despite its rational and naked outlook, the new bridge still serves as one of Rukubji's most important thresholds. On official occasions the bridge is topped with an arch of fir and cypress leaves.

Below: threshold three: a substitution for "gate". A group of three chörten - usually referred to as Rigsum Gönpo - shielding off the evil spirits associated with the opposing hill known as Panga Chön pokto, marks the southern entrance to the village.

Left: Threshold four: a built sign of the tension between the "middle world" and the "underworld". A small spirit house (lukhang), built against the wall of the three-storeyed farmhouse (gungchim), is constructed as a full-fledged chörten in miniature. Lukhang may be understood as a built threshold that acts vertically. Inhabited by underworld subjects, the often chörten-like structures literally poke like a thumb into the middle world of human existence.

15 The main statue in the central niche of the shrine is that of the medicinal Buddha Menla, flanked by two lamas (without hat); in separate niches to his right a lama of the Kagyupa order with a “doctor’s” hat; and to his left a statue of the eleven-headed Avalokiteśvara and Mahākāla.

accessible by simply pushing away some shingles, and are frequently used for drying meat, chillies and other vegetables. For spiritual protection, each roof is topped by the family prayer flag (*gungdar*) which is replaced each year.

Rukubji: demolition and re-erection as cyclical renewal

The Rukubji household: identity, kinship and land inheritance

In Rukubji, the household largely determines a person's identity, rights and obligations. Kinship (*rus*, "bone"), household (*gung*) and the family farmhouse (*chim*) a person belongs to – whether or not he or she actually resides there – constitute linked aspects of identity. It is common practice among the Drukpas to add to the personal name a name that refers either to the village of origin or to the name of a protective deity identified with the valley in which the village is located.¹⁶ In Rukubji, the personal name is commonly prefixed or suffixed by "Dorji".

Specific patterns of space use such as housing, land cultivation and land inheritance are defined by the identity and status of the household as a structural part of a larger cultural entity. In Rukubji, land is passed down within a single household. Land and associated property are passed from mother to daughters. The marriage pattern is matrilineal, with the couple settling in the bride's parental house. Patterns of social identity, origin, marriage, kinship land-inheritance, however, differ substantially from valley to valley. Where in central Bhutan matrilineal kinship systems prevail, patrilineal systems are common in south Bhutan.

Among the Drukpas, land¹⁷ is usually divided into irrigated and dry land. The irrigated land is divided and rotates among the sisters on a yearly basis. Each sister thereby experiences the (dis)advantages of different pieces of land (in terms of location, soil condition and water). The dry land is divided into equal shares. When a system of shifting cultivation is adopted, the land is called *tseri* land. Until she dies, the mother keeps a share of dry land which is known as *langdo*. The daughter who has taken care of her mother most attentively inherits this *langdo*, which may be the object of serious conflict.

As mentioned above, Rukubji's ecosystem does not permit rice cultivation on irrigated land. Most of the households share two to four acres of dry land for the cultivation of barley, buckwheat and potatoes. Income is also generated from raising cattle and sheep.

Spatial implications of a rite of passage: the cycle of renewal in a matrilineal system

When thresholds are dealt with as rites of passage, the threshold of age is frequently taken as an example. In Bhutan the most important rites of passage are birth, naming of the child, marriage, promotion and funeral.¹⁸ Of all stages of life that are identified as "thresholds", Buddhist literature shows interest in one particular rite of passage: the funeral, in which death is represented as an intermediate state between death and rebirth.

The "Book of the Dead" (*Bardo Thödrol*) considers this state of "trespassing" as a very temporary and intermediate phenomenon in the cycle of birth, death and rebirth (*samsāra*). The rite of passage ceases when the state of enlightenment is attained: the ultimate liberation from the cycle of life.

In Rukubji, however, the marriage of the eldest daughter implies more change than is usually acknowledged, and entails substantial spatio-temporal consequences for the parents and brothers and sisters of the bride. The matrilineal system involves a very simple, but nonetheless drastic custom. When the eldest daughter (or son, in the absence of a daughter)¹⁹ is married, the parents hand down their social and spatial obligations to their daughter. They retire by literally moving out from the family farmhouse (*gungchim*) to live in a small single-storey house next door, which is referred to as the 'small house' (*chimchung*). The *chimchung* has a subsidiary and temporary status and can be erected and dismantled without much protocol.

Apart from the retired parents, younger married daughters who await the construction of a farmhouse of their own may spend a couple of years in offshoot structures like the one erected for their retired parents. Others may take the vow of monk or nun, and brothers may join the army, etc. Nowadays, youngsters increasingly migrate to urban centres to seek a government job or to start a business.

By moving out, the parents have crossed a threshold that is likely to be more significant to them: the heralding of a period of explicit spiritual devotion and the progressive renunciation of material wealth. When one of the parents dies, the widow or widower goes to spend the rest of her or his life in a small hut somewhere uphill (near the grazing fields) or at the periphery of the village. Others may move back to the family house and occupy a small room close to the private chapel (*chösham*), equipped with a one-hole mud stove, where they will lead a secluded life mainly devoted to religious activities. These two dwelling conditions might be regarded as outdoor and indoor hermitages.

16 Referring to the place or village of origin, as in Karma Ura, Dasho Shinkhar Lam; or referring to the protective deity (*yul-lha*), as in Chencho for Paro and Haa, Sacha and Dophu for Wangdi Phodrang and Jambay and Kunle for Punakha. Personal communication with Thuji Nadik, Belgium, 19. 06. 96.

17 The information on patterns of land use and land tenure is partially based on a report of the Department of Agriculture, prepared by Elisabeth Tjerckstra (1990: 3,6,10).

18 For an overview of Bhutanese rites of passage, see Pommaret (1990: 186–87). Note that puberty does not involve a special ceremony and that promotion on the social ladder is the object of a ritual like that of the wedding ceremony.

19 The analysis of genealogies and kinship systems in Rukubji revealed the tolerance by which conflicting situations are solved. I came across one family where the eldest daughter was an unmarried mother. The next married daughter in line simply inherited the rights and duties associated with the status of her eldest sister. The younger daughter has become the new head of the family.

Rebuilding the family house: the re-enactment of the foundation ritual

After the official retirement of the parents (mother) and investiture of the new owners (married daughter), plans are made to rebuild the family house with the advice of the astrologer and local master-carpenter (*zopön*). With the help of the entire community, the newly-married couple dismantles the old structure (especially the woodwork) and reconstructs a new farmhouse on the same spot where centuries ago the ancestral family was founded. Twenty founding families were identified of which five have their family house in Bumilo, Rukubji's sister village above the road.

The reconstruction process of a village house is not considered to be the private affair of the newly-married couple, either in concept or in form. In the rural areas, every village house is the cultural achievement of the entire village community. Every villager – male or female, young or old – acquires merit through active participation in the building process and in the construction rituals (see page 25, Synoptic sketch: the four construction rituals).

House construction is essentially an act of cultural belonging in the service of a collective ideological goal, namely the re-enactment of the foundation ritual and the renewal of the allegiance to the house deity. Each house is the materialisation of the cultural identity of its users, endorsed by the entire community. The house is the locus for social interaction and ritual. At certain ceremonies and rituals, performed for the well-being of all the village inhabitants, a single farmhouse literally accommodates the entire village community, demonstrating its status as a true social habitat.

I shall now focus on the second category of processes of architectural transformation that are generated by motives, other than what is understood by cyclical renewal.

Rukubji: demolition and re-erection as spatial mediation

Spatial mediation of a conflict: the discontent of Dramar Pelzang, Rukubji's protective deity

It has already been suggested that architecture is the physical embodiment of an ideological concept, insofar as it is subject to an unending cycle of life and death. The spirit house (*tsenkhang*) dedicated to Dramar Pelzang, Rukubji's protective deity (*tsen* and *yul-lha*)²⁰, and

the village temple (*lhakhang*), underwent the same fate. The relocation and reconstruction of the *tsenkhang* was the last of three transfers initiated in 1980. Notwithstanding the good physical condition of the temple and renovation works on the interior in the late 1990s²¹, the building was demolished in 1992 and replaced by a structure that leaves no doubt as to its status: an unambiguous religious structure, commanding in scale, form, and overall location.

In Rukubji, every family farmhouse is dismantled and reconstructed at regular intervals of roughly 20 to 25 years, which corresponds to the life span of untreated timber, but more importantly to certain rites of passage, in particular those associated with the changing social position of the eldest daughter of the household. The demolition and reconstruction of Rukubji's *tsenkhang* and village *lhakhang* cannot be considered a part of this cyclical process. In my opinion, the drastic intervention of the people of Rukubji demonstrates the spatial mediation of a life- and culture-threatening conflict.

Road versus mountain god: the aggravation of a slumbering problem

Problems began with the construction of the Central Road in the late '70s. Until then the mule-track from Wangdi Phodrang to Tongsa had followed the flow and riverbank of the Zerichu, which placed both the village settlement and the *tsenkhang* of Rukubji's protective deity at a higher level. With the completion of the motor road in 1980 just above the site of the *tsenkhang*, it was believed that the dust of motor vehicles would sully the building and bring bad luck to the village.

On the advice of the local priest (*phajo*), the villagers decided to relocate the *tsenkhang* at a safer spot on the opposite mountain, far above the road. It was relocated to another mountain in 1984, in connection with a general crop failure. Between March and October 1990, six villagers died of various causes. It was now understood that the local deity had not appreciated the villagers' strategy of frequent relocation.

The *phajo* and the *trulku*: in search of the relevant mediator

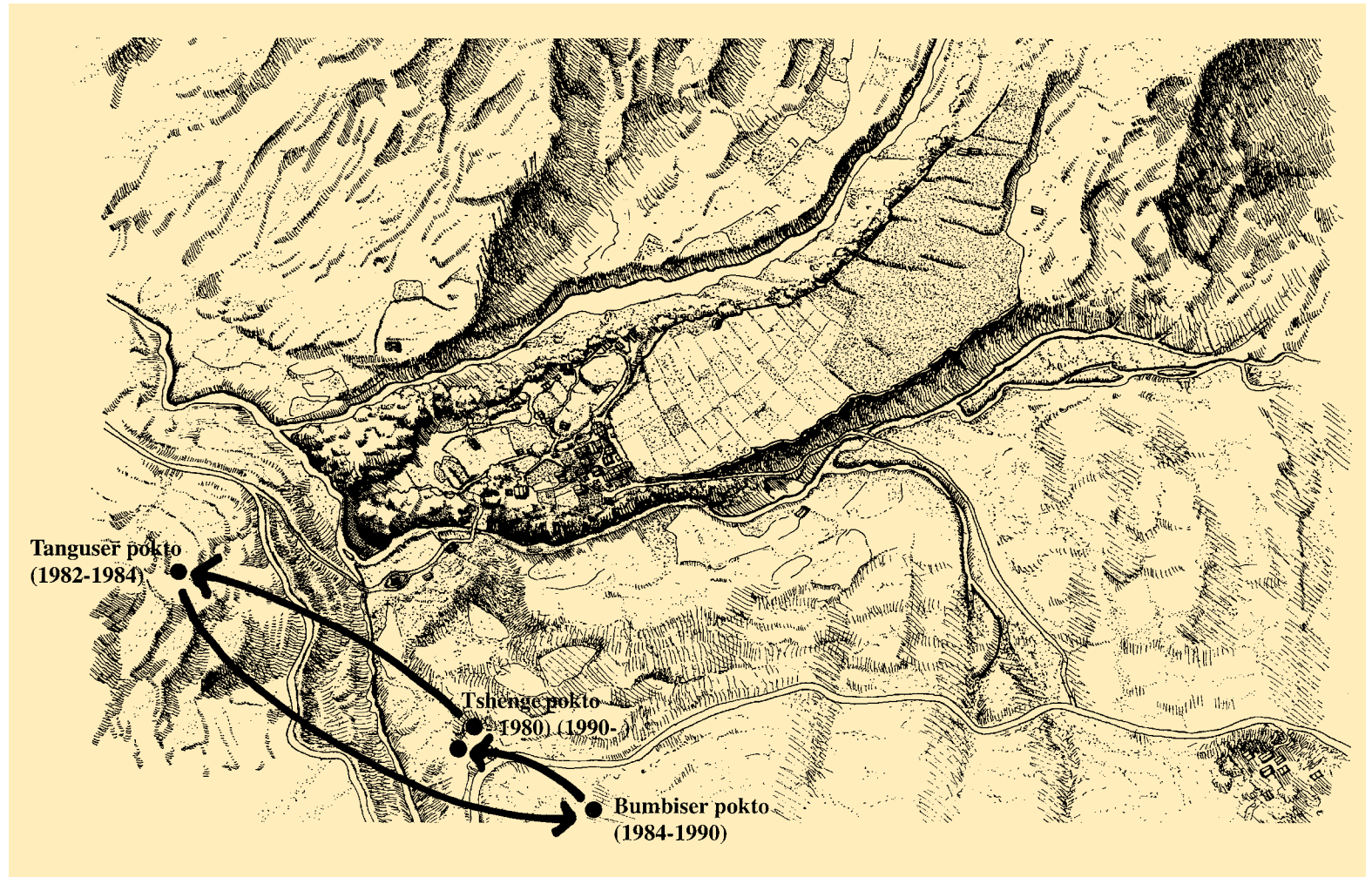
Since human life was being threatened, the people of Rukubji no longer sought the advice of the local priest in this matter. *Phajo* are usually consulted for "preventing such calamities as famine and drought and in insuring the fertility of the land and cattle" (Chhoki 1994: 112). In other words the *phajo* mediates between human beings and natural forces and their associated demons (*dre*). The advice of a

20 According to legend, Dramar Pelzang, a mountain deity (*tsen*), offered his services to the dying Bon lama who used to protect the villagers of Rukubji and Bumilo from calamities such as hail and heavy rainfall. The only condition for insuring the deity's protection was to offer him a male sheep twice a year – one to him during the harvest ritual (*habe*), and one to his consort Raphu Chem, whose *tsenkhang* is located between the village of Rukubji and Bumilo near the Zerichu. In this perspective, Rukubji's local deity *yul-lha* and *tsen* are equivalent. This observation supports Pommaret's (1996: 42) reflection on the *tsen/yul-lha* equivalences in "the absence of a specific term that would mean 'mountain deity' in Bhutan and in the rest of the Tibetan world".

21 At the time of my investigations, an altar was being constructed in the anteroom of the main altar room, which was beautifully finished with mural paintings. One mural depicts Dramar Pelzang, Rukubji's protective deity (*tsen* and *yul-lha*), on horseback.

*Rukubji:
relocation process of the tsenkhang*

The road versus Dramar Pelzang, the village's local mountain god (*tse*) and protective deity (*yul-lha*). Until the 1980s, the *tsenkhang* of Rukubji's protective deity was situated on top of the Tsenge Pokto, a small hillock to the north of the village. Unlike the old mule track, the new road overlooked both the *tsenkhang* and village which was experienced as a conflicting spatio-cultural situation. To address this problem, the *tsenkhang* was relocated to the Tanguser Pokto in 1982, and to the Bumbiser Pokto in 1984. With the untimely death of six villagers in 1990, it was understood that the local deity had not appreciated the villagers' strategy of frequent relocation. Advised by the head abbot (Gantey Trulku) of the Nyingmapa monastery of Gantey Gompa, the *tsenkhang* was re-installed on the Tsenge Pokto, close to its original position.



more efficient mediator or harmoniser was sought, one with the authority to deal with “rituals of death and after-life issues” (*ibid.*:111). The Gantey Trulku, head abbot of Gantey Gompa, the only Nyingmapa monastery in the neighbouring valley of Phobjika, was consulted over this inauspicious event. The *trulku* advised the villagers to move the spirit house of Dramar Pelzang to its original location below the road from where it was removed in 1980 upon completion of the highway to Tongsa. By the end of December 1990, the reconstruction of the *tsenkhang* had been completed.

While the earlier *tsenkhang* had consisted simply of a heap of stones topped by a prayer flag, this time a real building was erected in the form of a little house. It is not clear to me whether the *trulku* also

advised the villagers to demolish the temple in 1990. The least one can say is that the demolition of the village temple in 1992 was preceded by a process of unprecedented architectural transformation that challenged the position and state of affairs of the old temple.

**Restoring hierarchy and spatial order:
architectural refinement by analogy with a renewed higher order**

Since the events of 1990, the village of Rukubji has experienced an accelerated process of more profound transformations. In 1991, and prior to the demolition of the old temple, the overall configuration of the settlement was altered by private initiative. The gabled roof of one

of the village farmhouses, made of traditional wooden shingles (*shinglep*), was taken down and replaced by a four-eaved rooftop made of corrugated iron sheets, a type of roof usually associated with royalty and religious structures.

At a first glance this initiative seemed no more than another phase in a process of sacralization of domestic architecture, an evolution that can be observed throughout the nation, in rural as well as in urban areas. Architectural features, once restricted to royalty or to religious structures, are now being copied by private parties, especially those belonging to the wealthy class. This same initiative can also be understood as a form of architectural refinement, related to the wave of reconstruction works that various important *dzong* and *lhakhang* are currently undergoing.

However, this private initiative disrupted the balanced and harmonious spatial hierarchy of the settlement. The temple was challenged and lost its spatial authority. Surveying the spatial configuration, the renovated farmhouse located in the middle of the cluster – with its shiny four-eaved roof, whitewashed walls and bold religious wall-paintings – appears to dominate the village cluster in the same way as the temple whose privileged position it has usurped. Despite its distant and isolated location and its good physical condition, the old temple with its ambiguous architectural concept (half temple, half farmhouse) could no longer compete with the renovated and modernised farmhouse – either in appearance, or in size, or form.

It was suggested that the monastery-fortress or *dzong* functions as an architectural trend-setter as well as a catalyst for cultural coherence (harmony), typified by the interdependence and interaction of *dzong* and farmhouse. The construction of a new *lhakhang* in honour of Guru Rinpoche in the village of Ura in the mid 1980s initiated a process of architectural experiments. By the end of 1990 there followed the construction of a new temple at Kuje in the valley of Bumthang, and recently the completion of the Machen Lhakhang in Punakha Dzong, founded by Bhutan's unifier Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel. With these developments, a new trend was set for the conception and construction of present-day and future structures, both reconstruction and new structures.

The participation of some of the Rukubji artisans (master-carpenter and painter) in the reconstruction of some of these important works undoubtedly inspired them to include some of the architectural and stylistic innovations in the design and construction of Rukubji's new temple. The new temple is a fine example of the traditional process of architectural refinement contributing to a process of cultural preservation and identity.

Expanding spatial margins and renewed contract with Dramar Pelzang: spatial and ritual achievements

In essence two things had happened in the village: the flight of Rukubji's local deity following a series of well-intentioned but inauspicious acts of relocation; and the threatening of Rukubji's spatial hierarchy by a private initiative of modernisation.

By relocating Dramar Pelzang's *tsenkhang* to its original position, a major step was made towards the normalisation and revitalisation of the allegiance between the local deity and the founding families. By demolishing and replacing the old temple with a structure that does not leave any space for speculation regarding its status, the spatial hierarchy between temple and cluster was restored.

Also significant is the new spatial margin that has been created. By this single act of rebuilding the temple along the lines of a higher architectural order (Ura, Kuje, Machen), and at the very same place (keeping the snake demoness detained), every farmhouse is entitled to continue a process of cyclical elaboration and sacralisation without becoming a threat to the overall spatial hierarchy. On the contrary, the first step is made towards a syncretic juxtaposition (coexistence) of traditional (rural) and non-traditional (urban) concepts of ordered space and built form.

Conclusion

This paper has focused mainly on the traditional architecture of the Ngalong Drukpa, associated with Bhutan's national cultural identity and exemplified by the traditional village of Rukubji, a dense settlement in central Bhutan.

A preliminary profile of Bhutan's complex and predominantly rural dwelling culture, typified as an intercultural co-habitation, introduced the reader to the complexity of this Buddhist-inspired dwelling culture. That Bhutan is a culture in which architecture still plays a culture-integrating and culture-generating role was suggested by the function of the monastery-fortress or *dzong* as an architectural trend-setter, as well as a catalyst for cultural coherence (harmony), typified by the interdependence and interaction of *dzong* and farmhouse (*chim*). *Dzong* and farmhouse are but two ingredients of a limited morpho-typological palette – rooted in Tibetan Buddhism – shared by other distinct sub-cultures associated with the dwelling culture of the Himalayan range.

Notwithstanding a substantial degree of cultural and architectonic reciprocity between these sub-cultures, Bhutan is characterised by an

enhanced quest for national identity and cultural uniqueness, ever since its unification in the 17th century, covering all aspects of (material) culture. In terms of architecture, this continuous process of architectural trend-setting and refinement is achieved by subjecting every built edifice to the same wheel of existence (*samsāra*) – the cycle of life, death and rebirth. Whenever circumstances indicate that a built artefact misses or has lost its ritual goal and force, it loses its right to exist, decays or is demolished altogether. The original problem, however, is posed again and urges appropriate action – both ritually and pragmatically. Everyone who dwells in the sacred landscape of the Himalayas lives in awe with his gods, deities and demons. The re-erected built thresholds can be understood as witnesses in stone of new allegiances. The motives behind such processes of demolition and re-erection, the type, the scale and time for intervention, the degree of adjustment or innovation, and the rate of change by

which such transformations occur, are but a few factors that can be satisfactorily understood only when they are discussed against the micro-cultural context of the culture group that thinks, executes and gives meaning to them.

We saw how the people of Rukubji make use of a limited repertoire of basic architectural elements to realise the spatial and ritual protection that they envisage for the realisation of their earthly existence and material world in the image of a higher cosmic order. To achieve a sense of order and harmony, thresholds have been thought, built and ritually activated at all levels of architectonic complexity. In Rukubji, one temple (*lhakhang*), four *chörten*, one religious structure (*tsenkhang*) for the protective deity, and fifteen spirit houses (*lukhang*) were meticulously positioned to protect the fifteen founding families and their members, a comprehensive spatial hierarchy that regulates daily life in the village. Each villager knows what the differ-

*Rukubji:
spatial configuration in 1992:
the emergence of a spatio-cultural
conflict*

*A private initiative of “sacralization”
and “modernisation” alike. In the centre
of the village cluster, a farmhouse is
fitted with a roof type (four-eaved) and
technology (iron sheets) that is
commonly applied to royal and religious
structures. Despite the old temple’s
distant location, it no longer competes
with the renovated farmhouse, either in
size or form (photo: Klaus Deen).*



ent levels of protection or “thresholds mean to him and his socio-cultural group, and how” he should deal with his (architectural) heritage. Every villager knows in the same way that his spatial and ritual protection is not restricted to his micro-cultural context, but extends to various higher levels of protection. This helps us understand that the function and meaning of a building – as in the case of the two Bhutanese temples detaining the left knee and foot of the giant demoness that encompasses the whole of the Himalayan Range – is not always readable from its local siting only. That the siting of specific buildings is dictated by religious considerations is exemplified by Rukubji’s theiropomorphic interpretation of the village as a huge snake whose head is nailed down by the village temple – the very same temple that lost the right to its existence in the early 1990s following the challenge and disorder of a seemingly harmonious dwelling situation. Until 1990, the main catalyst for architectural transformations in

Rukubji was associated with the matrilineal system prevailing among the Ngalong Drukpa. This teaches us that the social position and changing status of the eldest daughter is one of the most important factors that subjects every family house to a process of demolition and re-erection. In Rukubji, architectonic renewal is one of the symbols of this living traditional dwelling culture, wherein tradition really means “transfer” and not simply “restoration”.

The relocation of Rukubji’s *tsekhang* and the demolition and re-erection of the village temple, however, are the results of two escalating conflicts: first, the flight of the protective deity of the village which caused death among its inhabitants and threatened the survival of the group; and secondly the disruption of the spatial configuration of the settlement caused by a private initiative of modernisation which deprived the village temple of its commanding position and ritual status.



*Rukubji:
spatial configuration 1994: demolition
and re-erection as strategy for mediation
in the conflict*

The construction of a new temple at the very same location not only restored a disrupted spatial and typo-morphological order, but more significantly created new margins offering perspectives for the spatial densification and architectural modernisation of the village cluster (photo: Gert Jan Harpe).



Rukubji, architectural context: the identity of clustered housing

The detailed architectural survey shows that in the case of a clustered pattern of dwelling, typologies such as “public square”, “street” and “alley” become meaningless. Paths circumvent each individual compound and all houses seemingly avoid each others face by looking towards more neutral open spaces.

In the light of Bhutan’s accelerated process of development and modernisation, similar problematic circumstances will be imposed on apparently harmonious village settlements throughout the country’s predominantly rural society. The way in which the Rukubji people turned a complex conflictual situation into a positive and culture-

generating condition that opens further perspectives – spatially, architecturally and spiritually alike – should be a source of hope and inspiration to anyone who believes in the cultural role of contemporary architecture as a culture-integrating and creative force within a world of uninterrupted challenges and transformations.