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Expressions of Diversity

A comparative study of descriptions of village space
in ritual processions in three villages of North West Nepal

This paper¹ aims at developing an understanding of the diversity of the expression of space in rituals in the high Himalaya of Nepal. It does so by comparing ritual processions in three Tibetan village communities: Losar, the New Year festival in Nyimathang, Humla District; Tenkor, a ritual to prevent drought in the late spring in Togkhyu, Upper Dolpo; and Targya, celebrated in the autumn after harvest in Braga, Manang District.

Whilst the three rituals are celebrated for different purposes, they share the performance of circumambulation – where people’s footsteps inscribe a line in the landscape which circumscribes the village space. The meaning of this line as a boundary which separates an inhabited inside from a wilderness outside is constructed by Tibetan ideas of inhabitation.

The paper examines the link between formal aspects of the sacred space of the village, as defined in the ritual procession, and in the non-ritual social and architectural history.

The first section of the paper introduces the notion of spatiality in rituals and presents the processions; each description is followed by an inquiry into the relationship between the route, buildings and fields of the villages. The second section compares these spatial relationships and links the differences to local social and economic forces which have affected the formation and cohesion of each village community.

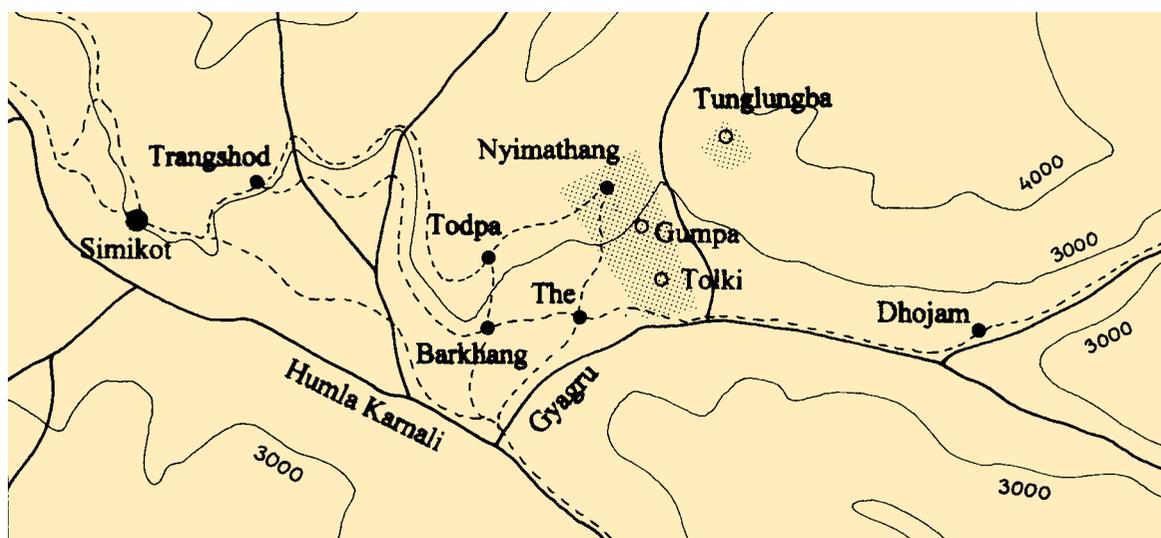
Spatiality in rituals

“The life of the Tibetan is ... enclosed in a world of multifarious divine manifestations, in which all appearances are suffused with religious significance ... The entire spiritual life of the Tibetan is defined by a permanent attitude of defence, by a constant effort to propitiate the powers whom he fears.”
(Tucci 1980: 165,187)

Tibetan ideas of inhabitation underlie villagers’ conception of space through which they construct the meaning of the ritual processions. According to the villagers’ explanations, the processions inscribe a protective wall around the village – an imagined boundary line which separates an “inside” of the village space from an “outside”. Aggressive gestures pointing outward, calling of *mantras* and casting away of *torma* offerings are examples of symbolic acts in the rituals which obtain their meaning through the Tibetan concepts of *dö* (propitiation), *to* (exorcism), *lü* (ransom) and *kor* (circumambulation) (Tucci 1980: 176–82). These concepts translate the relationship between people and spirits into spatial relations, enabling their concretisation and manipulation in the process of the rituals.

The focus in this paper is the spatial dimension of the ritual. I shall examine the line inscribed in the ground during the ritual performance in terms of the route, sequence of events – their location and

¹ I thank Niels Gutschow for his encouragement and support for my studies, Charles Ramble and Roberto Vitali for making their important articles available to me before publication. I also thank Andrés Höfer for his valuable comments to an earlier draft.



Map of central Humla with location of Nyimathang

Right: Nyimathang: *gonphu* offering presented to the water spirits (*klu*) by each family at the beginning of the New Year festival serves as a healing device.

The offering consists of nuggets of dough into which each person's physical or mental pain is extricated. These are believed to be taken by the mythical bird (*garuḍa*) and its rider (sculpted in dough) as ransom (*lü*) exchanged for their health.

2 *gonphu* - a buckwheat-dough offering in the shape of a human figure, sometimes riding a mythical bird. The *gonphu* figures and the nuggets representing the villagers *duḥkha* (physical and emotional pain) were cast away at Nyi Lhasa, a *mendang* marking the western most edge of the village.

3 *goth* (Nep.) - a shepherds' shelter built on high altitude seasonal grazing grounds located at a distance from the village. It is usually of poor construction, and inadequate for permanent habitation.

orientation, and contextualise these aspects of the ritual in relation to the village layout, local legends, oral history and spatial aspects of everyday practices or beliefs. A complete description and discussion of the rituals and their multifaceted meanings is outside the scope of this paper. For want of space, the accounts below concentrate on the part of the performances related to the route; other details have been condensed to provide sufficient context for the purpose of our discussion.

Losar: Nyimathang, Humla

Losar, the New Year festival, commences in Nyimathang on the night of the winter solstice, and lasts for two nights and two days engaging the whole of the village community. It is preceded by two ceremonies: during the day, a *dō* ritual is performed in the house of the village head (Nep. *mukhiyā*) on behalf of the community; in the evening, each family gathers in the living room (*khyim*) where a festive meal takes place subsequent to each family member having symbolically extricated his or her bodily ills into nuggets of dough placed on a tray around a *gonphu*.²

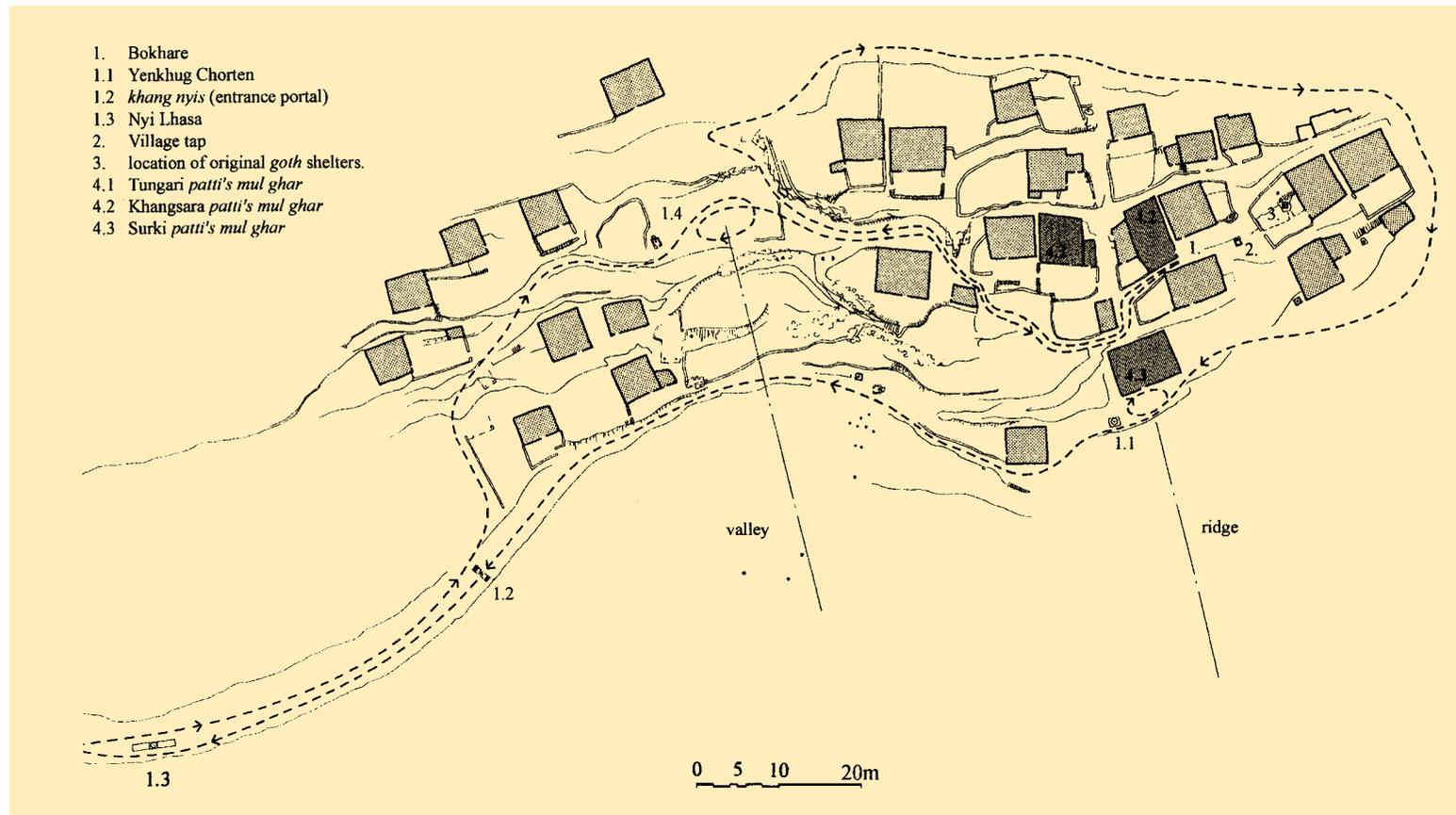
The ritual consists of three parts. In the late evening, the villagers gather around a fire in the centre of the village, from where a torch procession sets out to encircle the village houses. After the procession is complete and returns to the fire, the festival continues throughout the night with water games, drinking, eating, singing and dancing competitions around the fire. On the following afternoon, adult males are hosted in every household of the village for a meal, and in the evening they gather in the house of the village head for a concluding dinner.

Let us observe the ritual procession and examine the places it traverses.

After dark: A large log fire is lit in Bokhare to become the centre of the festival that night. Around 7.30 drumming announces the onset of the festival. The households' trays with the *gonphu* carrying the nuggets of suffering are collected on a flat stone near the house of Konkyama. They are to be taken secretly soon afterwards to be cast beyond Nyi Lhasa on the western edge of the village, towards the spirits believed to have inflicted the pain.

Bokhare, which appears as an indistinct space between some houses, is the locus of all communal activity during the first night of the ritual. Located near the village spring, it was the original centre of the village between the first three *goth*³ shelters and the first three houses which were built when the founding ancestors joined on the site and established the village. These families are considered the forefathers of the present clans of the village, and their houses have since served as the main houses (Nep. *mūl ghar*), the abode of the ancestral deities (*pholha*) where clan rituals take place. Thus Bokhare has an inherent reference to the transition of the settlement from temporary to permanent, and to the formation of the village community. The return to the place of such historical significance corresponds to the principle of *dō*, which returns the participants to the "beginning of





Nyimathang: ritual procession on the occasion of Losar, the New Year festival. The clockwise circumambulation begins at Bokhare (1), the historical centre of the village between the village spring (2) near, according to the legend, the original centre of the village (3), and the clan ancestors' houses (4). The marking of three locations - the terrace of Yenkhu Chorten (1.1), Nyi Lhasa (1.3) and the terrace of Twangra (1.4) highlight topographical features of ridges and valleys which are considered to be entry points of malevolent spirits. These locations also refer to three of the cardinal points, and together with Bokhare (originally East but now at the centre of the village) allude to the symbolic construction of the village space as a maṇḍala.

creation" (Tucci 1980: 182). The assembly at this location brings the participants back to the original village centre at Bokhare⁴ and associates the beginning of the year with the founding of Nyimathang. The centre of the ritual at Bokhare is marked by a large log fire around which ritual activities take place that night. The fire is a multivalent object for the Tibetans⁵ - not only does it serve as a means of cooking and heating in the house, but it is also a symbol of life⁶, the abode of the household deity (*thablha*, lit. "hearth god"), and the social centre of the home. The centrality of the fire, and later the hierarchical order of the villagers' seating arrangement around it, resemble the centrality of the hearth and the seating arrangement of the family in the *khyim*. Thus, the image of the community around the fire during the ritual strikingly resembles that of the family around the fire at home. This is highly significant when taking an architect's perspective, where analogy and transposition of images evoke association between conceptual structures and suggest meanings for spatial experiences. In the case of Losar, not only is the image - of a unified



Nyimathang: procession on the occasion of New Year (Losar)
The drummers begin to encircle the fire while people assemble at Bokhare (no. 1 on the map).

⁴ In many villages in Nepal, the *dhara* (Nep.), the village spring, still provides a meeting point.

⁵ The centrality of the fire and its spatial, social and symbolic significance in the Tibetan and the Asian cultural context have been extensively discussed elsewhere, for example, Corlin 1979; Stein 1957.

⁶ In Portaje, in Nyeshang, I met an old woman who devoted her last years to "keeping the fire" alight in the Gumpa of the abandoned village. She explained that this had to be done "to maintain life" in the deserted place.

7 In the beginning drummers played *nga* (rounded cone-shaped drum) and a *dhimay* (Nep., large cylindrical drum). Later they were joined by another *dhimay* player, and shortly before the procession began, Lama Choten, the village *lama* and the conductor of the festival, joined with cymbals to lead the group.

8 It is believed that Yenkbug Chörten protects the village in the south and has the power to bless people with wealth.

Nyimathang: procession on the occasion of New Year (Losar) Encircling the terrace of Yenkbug Chörten (no. 1.1 on the map). With their backs to the village and the torch sheaves pointing down hill, the participants follow lamas leading with cymbals and drums. At the terrace by Yenkbug Chörten the participants perform a circle. This is believed to provide extra protection at the place which is considered a main route via which malevolent spirits can enter the village.

group sitting around the fire – similar, but also the socio-spatial relationships are analogous – both the community and the family are seated hierarchically and gender- divided within an enclosed protective wall, whether imagined or real. This socio-spatial experience projects social relations from the domain of the family to the domain of the community and homologises the links among villagers to kinship ties.

The children carry brushwood sheaves (about 2.5 meters long) they have prepared during the day. As people congregate, the beating of the drums intensifies⁷, and the drummers begin to move clockwise around the fire, followed by the children, who arrange themselves according to age. Everybody holds the torch-sheaves upright, thumping them against the ground to echo the rhythm of the drums. One after another adult males join the circle. Women do not participate in this part of the festival.

Circumambulation: At a certain moment, beginning at the front of the line and following to the end, the torches are thrust into the fire and ignite. This marks the onset of the circumambulation procession, led by Lama Choten playing the cymbals and the three drummers progressing in dancing movements. They are followed by the line of torch bearers, arranged according to seniority and age.

The procession moves around the village houses. The participants always point their torches away from the village while echoing the lama's recitation of a special *mantra*. Once the circle has been completed, the procession returns to the fire, where the drumming increases and dancing around the fire continues.

The gathering together of the community males in a single, hierarchically ordered line begins the ritual in an explicit representation of the community's unity. Guided by the religious leadership, the community is represented as an assembly of householders in a patriarchal society. Every household of the four clans is represented in the procession – not only from the core cluster of Nyimathang, but also from its associated, splintered clusters of Gumpa, Tolki and Tunlungba. The participation of their inhabitants in the village-exclusive procession thus valorises the inclusion of their inhabitants in the village community.

The line traced by the procession as noted on the map circumscribes all but five of the village houses and denotes four of the five cardinal directions (according to the Tibetan tradition): south, west, north, and Bokhare – an ambiguous centre or east (discussed below). In the centre, the fire is encircled several times. The same performance takes place in three locations on the perimeter: in the flat terrace by Yenkbug⁸ *chörten* to the south of the village, and in Twangra to its north. In the west, the line of people extends a short distance beyond the Kangnyi (entrance gateway *chörten*) without trespassing beyond the point where the nuggets of suffering were secretly cast to the spirits beforehand.

The three locations at the south, north and west of the village are identified by the villagers as vulnerable “openings” where the additional attention paid during the procession increases their protection. Yenkbug Chörten is located on a vertically descending ridge of a mountain spur and the terrace of Twangra is at the upper reaches of a vertically descending valley. Both these topographical features are considered by the villagers to be major routes along which spirits cross the space and through which they enter the village. The westernmost point of the procession is also a mountain spur, like Yenkbug, but more importantly, it is the “threshold” of the village, where the main access path reaches the houses. For extra protection, Yenkbug in the south and Twangra in the north are encircled several times. In the west, the line of people deviates from the circle and follows the main access path to the village, until reaching the descending ridge before it returns.

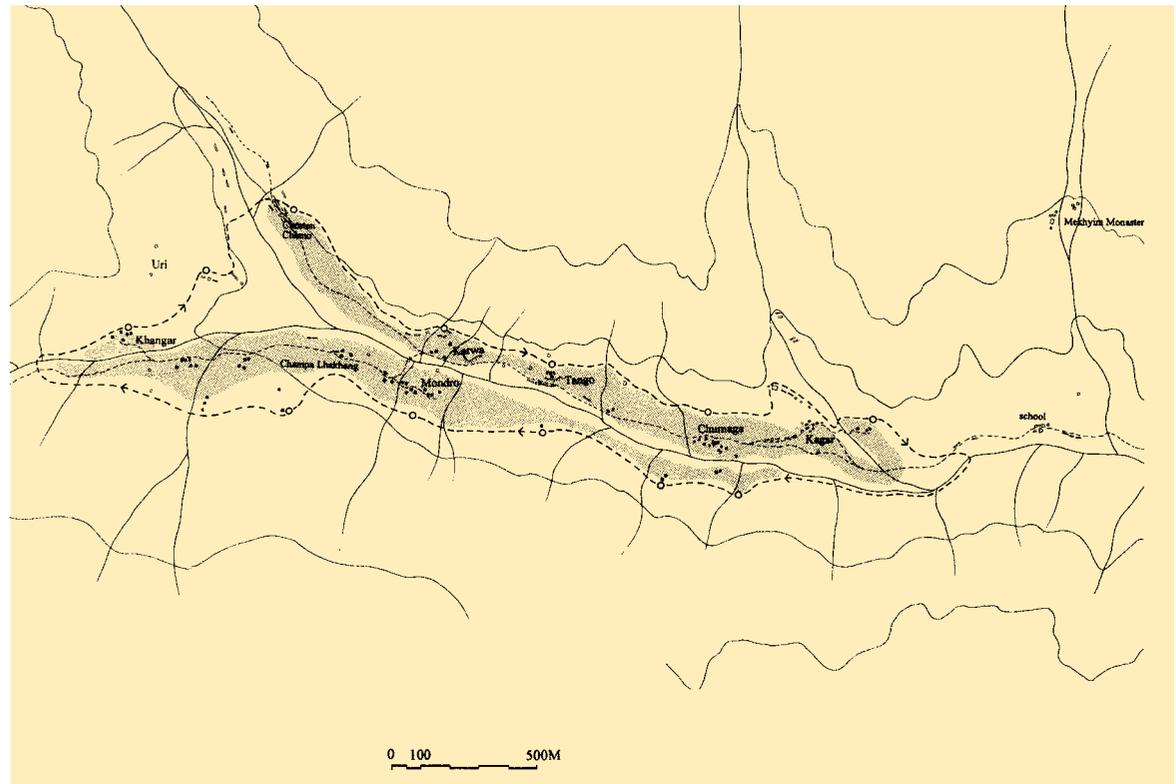
Bokhare is both the centre of the ritual and the notional east in the construction of the symbolic protective boundary around the village,



structured and perceived as a *maṇḍala*. The ambiguity in the meaning of Bokhare is denoted by the absence of marking the actual east during the procession. This omission in the ritual can be understood in the context of the village history and its present configuration. According to local legend, the celebration of Losar was instituted in the same year that the village was founded. This explains the location of the starting point at Bokhare – to the east of the early village. This conforms to what is “ideally at least, the starting point of a circumambulation ... the North- East ... in Indian cosmology, this cardinal point is identical to the centre”.⁹ Thus Bokhare, the original east of the village, has continued to represent it during the ritual. At the same time Bokhare represents the historical social centre of the village, linked to specific site characteristics – the spring, the early houses and the level ground. This suggests that the overlapping perceptions of Bokhare – a ritual east and a social centre – shift according to circumstances but coexist at the moment of the ritual. In this way the fusion of symbolic significance and historical memory adds to the construction of meaning of the ritual through site and space.

In Nyimathang, the correspondence between the ritual performance and the structure of the *maṇḍala*¹⁰ is notable, even if skeletal. The procession is perceived to create a wall around the village, with four openings at the cardinal directions and a fire marking the centre. However, the route of the performance on the map reveals that although the pattern is topologically correct, there are formal imperfections by the standards of the ideal of the *maṇḍala*. The form does not resemble a square, the centre merges with the east, the north and south are merely notional and the enclosure is not inclusive of all the houses. Furthermore, the path reaches outward in an indirect spiral and includes repetitions, parallel walks and even passes some of the houses in the “incorrect” – anti-clockwise – direction, unlike other circumambulations.

The imperfections between the ideal formulae of the *maṇḍala* and the actual route of the procession reveal the localisation of the cultural scheme which has been adjusted through the process of settlement to accommodate specifics of place and site. The map suggests that the route was incrementally adjusted to include new village houses. The spiral, rather than circular route around the village can be seen as the result of a sequence of adjustments to the procession as the village grew. The example of the five most recent houses (constructed after 1980) which still lie outside the circumscribed village space testify to such a time-lag between construction and adjustment to the ritual route. The strong link between social life and the site has preserved Bokhare as the notional east even though the village has grown



Togkhyu in Upper Dolpo: ritual procession of Tenkor. The circumambulation begins at the cluster of the lama who initiates the procession. The ritual encircles the cultivated fields of Togkhyu and the dispersed clusters of the village. The participants stop to perform libation at springs or rivulets, or at the 'outer' side of clusters, whose inhabitants are blessed and the participants are fed in exchange.

farther to the west and east. Similarly, the ideal north-south axis has been adjusted to topographical conditions, interpreted by local beliefs in spirits and their routes.

Tenkor: Togkhyu, Upper Dolpo

The ritual of Tenkor¹¹ is a device to protect the fields from drought and the inhabitants from its consequences. It is conducted in Togkhyu, a village of several dispersed clusters, in midsummer. It is performed when the barley has sprouted, irrigation has been completed and the young plants are dependent on the sparse monsoon rains. The ritual, which can be initiated by an individual *lama*, is performed by a group of cluster representatives who carry books and statues and are led by two of the village *lamas*. They encircle all of the cultivated territory together with the dwelling clusters within it. In this way, a villager explained, protection against drought is secured for the whole of village space as a single, unified expanse.

⁹ A. Höfer, personal communication 29. 5. 98.

¹⁰ See also Ramble 1997: 2.

¹¹ Tenkor: *ten*: receptacles, referring to the *ten sum*, the “three receptacles”. Images, books and *chörtens* are symbolic representation of the body (*ku*), the speech (*sung*) and spirit (*thug*) of the Buddha (Jest 1975: 301); *kor*: circumambulation.



Togkhyu: Tenkor procession

Participants in the procession with idols, scriptures and musical instruments, photo 1994

The walk (*kor*) of the idols and scriptures (*ten*) starts in the morning. Eight people from several of the clusters came to participate in the procession. They walk in a fixed order during the ritual procession. The group is led by a carrier of a white banner on a *chörten*-decorated mast who is blowing the conch in the front of the line. He is followed by three people carrying books, two carrying statues (one brass image of the Buddha and one *chörten*) and two Lamas with *kangling* (thigh-bone trumpets) and *damaru* (double-headed hand drums) who also carry a *bumpa* (ritual jug).

The procession begins at Kagar in mid-morning and finishes in the early afternoon, without ceremonial beginning or end. The people walk eastward from the village, cross the river southward, encircle the fields westward and continue along the northern edges before returning to Kagar. Occasionally the group pauses, and those who carry the objects rest them on an outer line where the statues face the mountains behind while the people sit below, looking into the valley.

Sometimes the *lamas* stop at certain rocks, springs or rivulets which flow into the Tarap Chu to perform libations using the *chang* from the *bumpas*; or they would retreat for a short recitation while the accompanying lay carriers of the objects would wait at a distance. At other times the performers stop near every cluster or single house, whose inhabitants come to welcome them, offer *chang* (local beer) or tea and receive a blessing.

The procession unifies the fields and the clusters of Togkhyu into a single spatial entity inside the boundary it defines. Tenkor is one of several *kor* (circumambulations) performed in Upper Dolpo¹² and in Tarap (Jest 1975: 354). Unlike them Tenkor is exclusive to village members. The performance of *kor* in similar circumstances is reported by Ramble (1995, 1996) who discusses neighbouring Lo and Tibet. Ramble notes that these are sometimes called *chökor* (“scripture circuits”), where villagers “walk around the perimeter of the village in order to protect it from possible nocent influences” (*ibid*), and in Lo they are referred to as *lukor*, (*lu*: cultivated land), where “the route usually encloses only the cultivated fields” (Ramble 1996; see also Gutschow and Ramble, in this volume).

Despite the traditional Tibetan distinction between *lu* (cultivated fields, also pronounced *lung*) and *yul* (inhabited area of the village houses) and the conceptual separation between them, the procession during Tenkor encircles both the dispersed clusters of the village houses and the fields, separating them from the *ri* (uncultivated wilderness). The representation of the space of the village in this way during the procession integrates the fields and the houses into a single, extended village space. (Tenkor is the only village circumambulation of Togkhyu and I am not aware of a circumambulation of any of its clusters).

The formal aspects of the procession and its organisation mirror the unified cluster constitution village of Togkhyu. The stations along the perimeter evenly punctuate its length. Stopping at every geographical feature and cluster during circumambulation divides the perimeter into relatively similar segments. The points at beginning and end are defined by the way the procession is arranged. Subject to his prediction of rain, any *gompa*'s lama can initiate a Tenkor procession independently and define an auspicious day for the ritual to take place. After the first performance, additional processions can be arranged by other lamas aimed at reinforcing a previous ritual if it failed to prove sufficient. Such processions would begin and end at the *gompa* whose *lama* arranged the ritual. Representatives of several of the clusters participate in the ritual. For instance, when I was there in 1994,

¹² Another circumambulation ritual encircles the sacred Buddha Ri mountain, north of Togkhyu (Jest 1975: 68); I was also informed of two additional circuits in the area of Upper Dolpo which are undertaken by individual villagers with the aim of attaining merit.



people from Mondro, Karwa, Chumaga and Kagar came to take part in the procession. Thus, the independent initiative of the *lama*, the representation of the different clusters in the performance and the mixed participation following the same route around all the fields and houses, as well as the collective service provided, mirror the aggregate nature of the village of Togkhyu.

Targya: Braga, Nyeshang valley, Manang District¹³

Targya (lit. “sealing the limit”)¹⁴ used to take place at the end of the agricultural season and before winter set in. It was celebrated in every



Togkhyu: Tenkor procession

Left: libation of a spring along the procession

Right: the brass chörten and the image of the Buddha are rested facing the mountains ‘outside’ while, on high grounds above the houses of Pharkhyen, the two leading lamas stop to chant mantras looking down onto the valley they protect from drought, photos 1994.

village of Nyeshang on a different day specified by the *lama* of each village as auspicious. Since the beginning of the 1990s, when the Nyeshangpas’ agriculture was marginalised by the new economy of private enterprise in Nepal’s urban centres, and when most of the valley inhabitants emigrated to Kathmandu or Pokhara, the ritual has no longer been celebrated in the villages.

Targya was a *to* ritual – a ritual of propitiation of the *yul-lha* (territorial spirits) for the violation of nature’s order after the crops have been harvested. In Braga it was said that the ritual was established in the early days of the village:

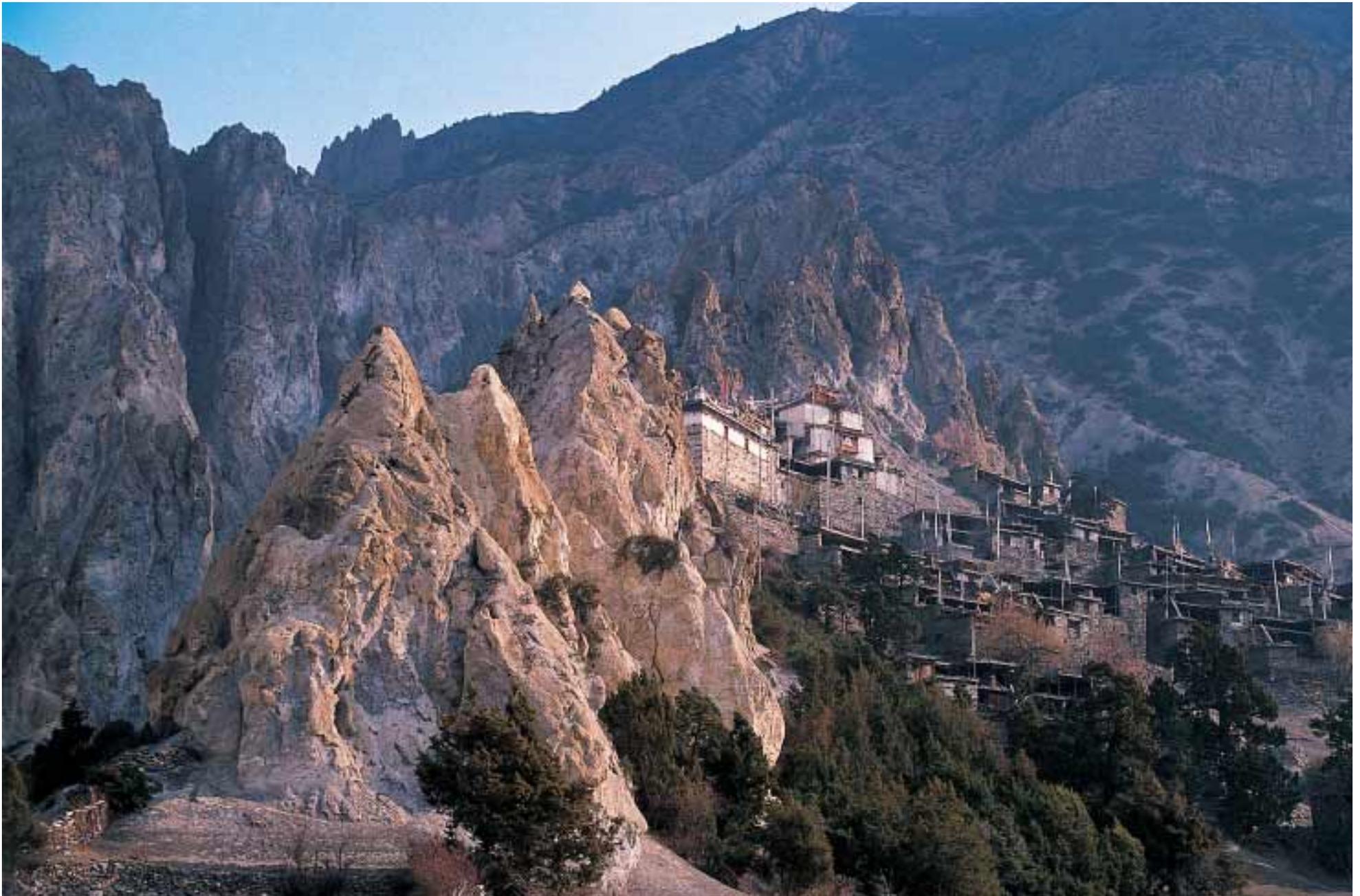
¹³ I first documented the ritual in 1985. Later, in 1994, when I returned to the village to complete the study, the ritual was no longer performed, the *lama* who led the ritual no longer lived there, and other *lamas* as well as most of the villagers had left the village. Consequently, I was able to obtain only partial background to the performance.

¹⁴ Targya (Tib. *mtha’ rgya*): *mtha’*: limit; *rgya*: seal, stamp, mark.



1. *chörten*
2. *gompa*
3. Village terrace
4. Dance Hall
5. Early entrance *mendang*.
6. Village spring
7. Pipal tree
8. Symbolic segmental boundary line
9. New entrance *mendang*
10. *panchayat* building

Braga in Nyeshang valley, Manang: the procession of Targya ritual of propitiation of the territorial spirits. The route begins in the upper reaches of the village, at the gompa in the north-west of the glacial cirque where the village is sited. The procession reaches a symbolic edge of the village area, at the south-east of the cirque. The route leads along the important social institutions of the village - the social meeting point at the 'village terrace' (3), the Dance Hall (4) where public festivals and dances are held, the early mendang which marked the original entry to the sacred site of the gompa (5). The route continues along the village spring (6), and passes by a large pipal tree, believed to be an abode of a local spirit (7) before it reaches an erect boulder and a low retaining wall which represent a segment of a territorial edge between the village 'inside' and the space of the spirits 'outside'. Recent markers of the village entrance - the new, state-initiated but rarely used, panchayat building (10), and the mendang (9) nearby are ignored by the procession.



Only a few farmers inhabited the early village houses, and they were tormented by misfortune and disease. They consulted Lama Khyiru Karma Lapsang, who established the *gompa* around which the village grew. He identified the cause of these afflictions as the *mang* (see below), and consequently instituted Targya.

Mang is a Manangi abstraction of the local malevolent spirits, permanently threatening the inhabitants, their crops and houses. Sonam Palma from the village, explained: "... He does not have a body; he is like wind ... He is everywhere, also in Manang ... There is no private name to this *mang* ... he makes people sick ...". Höfer observes that

Braga: view from the west, the white gompa located high above the village cluster, photo Niels Gutschow, April 1992

“*mangs* ... are not accorded a legitimate power over nature and men. They are outlaws ... they are not expected to protect men, except in the passive sense, that is by their absence ...” (Höfer 1981: 23).

The ritual commenced in the morning with a *yen tsang* (“water prayer” – it was explained to me). Subsequently, children collected donations for the ritual they would perform at night. In the Gompa during the early afternoon villagers assisted the *lamas* in the preparations. Some read texts while others prepare *tormas*. Later, the largest *tormas* – *Gutag*, *Sumdoma* and *Ling*¹⁵ – would become the centre of the ritual.

From the “village terrace” which overlooks the houses, the village crier called out: *Lha Ke Lo! Lha Ke Lo!*¹⁶

Braga: Targya procession
The offering of *gutag torma*, an offering about 1 m high of a triangular plan-form. It is sculpted in buckwheat dough and decorated with butter, with a reed-fence at the bottom and an umbrella above, photo 1994.



15 The three *tormas* are as follows:

Gutag – a triangular pyramid sculpted with a mask of a demon’s face, is “a wife of Guru Rimpoche”.

Sumdoma – a large triangular pyramid, “another wife of Guru Rimpoche”.

Ling – a statue of a figure lying on its stomach with outstretched limbs; “it has blood in it”. According to Lama Dawa Tsiring, it is a representation of the *mang*.

16 Although this was interpreted for me as either a call to the villagers for the ritual, or to call to draw Guru Rimpoche’s attention to the ritual, and bless the villagers with health, it probably represents the familiar Tibetan expression *Lha rgyal lo*, “May the gods be victorious”.

17 A similar image called *ling* was offered at Samye *cham* in 1994, when, after it was presented, a skeleton dance took place around it, and a dancer representing Tonga (a deity) slashed the image with a sword.

After the *lamas* were fully dressed in costumes of *ngagpa* (tantrists) and the preparations were complete, a prayer was conducted in the *gompa* “to inform the gods of the ceremony before the procession begins”.

A rifle shot announced the beginning of the procession.

Afternoon: The procession was led by a young novice from Sher Gompa who led the dancing *lamas* with a *thangdo* (Ny.: hand-held drum) and cymbals. They were followed by six *ngagpa* dancing down the hill, each holding a symbolic object, in the following order: *vajra* or “thunderbolt” (Ny. *chelen*), bell (Ny. *dulpa*), triangular dagger (*phurpa*), bow (Ny. *myiso*), arrow (Ny. *talen*) and sword (*shalang*).

The procession was led by the drummer down to an upright boulder beside a low terrace wall about 30 cm high. The barely visible wall at the edge between fields was transformed during the moment of the ritual into a territorial border line. It represented an imagined boundary around the whole of the village and symbolised the division of space between the inhabited environment and that controlled by the spirits. The symbolic division of space became concrete and absolute: no one was allowed to cross the wall for the duration of the ritual.

The *gutag* and the *sumdoma tormas* were placed on the boulder close-by. The *cheme* (Ny.) – an offering of lights – followed, when women placed small bowls of *rakṣī* and lit butter-lamps on the boulder.

Once the significance of the line as a border was established through the placement of lamps and bowls on the boulder, signifying an altar consecrated by ritual, the presentation of offerings across that line became an act between different spaces – from the “inside” to the “outside”. The festival which followed included dances, fire, offerings, symbolic gestures and playful gender provocations and much alcohol.

In the course of the ritual, two masked children hastily arrived from the *gompa* with the *ling*, the offering sculpted as a lying figure. They stopped at the “border” where one of the village members slashed the image with broad strokes of a long sword he carried.¹⁷ The pieces of the dissected figure together with the board on which it was carried are cast away into the fields. Later two *lamas* take the *sumdoma*, carry it away about 20 metres and placed it on the retaining wall of a field to the south-east. The paper ornament and *khata* which adorned it are taken out and returned to the *gompa* later.

Mid afternoon: A large straw-sheaf fire was lit by the boulder. Two people approached the “border-wall”, and stretch across it a small banner with a printed symbol of the *ling* (a six-pointed star) facing



Braga: Targya procession

Having descended through the village, passing through lines of women bowing in anticipation of blessing, the dancing ngagpa exit the compact cluster of houses to reach the symbolic boundary of the village, photos 1994.

towards the “outside”. Two men shot at the banner with rifles followed by an arrow from a bow.

Wheatstraw sheaves were piled up in a pyramid and lit. The *gutag* was ceremonially cast into the fire while everyone whistled and then joined the dance around the fire.

Evening: Some women removed the altar bowls from the boulder and carried them back into the *gompa*. The lamas followed them with dances, and the male villagers came after them to the *gompa*, but most women returned home.

Night: The young boys who collected donations in the morning were joined by others and gathered in one of the houses to receive

lagar (buckwheat pitta-bread), meat and *chang* (home-brewed beer). They also prepared a small *gutag* as an offering to the *mang* across the symbolic border during a nocturnal ritual they would perform. They lit torches they had prepared during the day and left in a torch procession to the boundary which was marked in the afternoon ritual, dancing and shouting “*Lha Ke Lo! Lha Ke Lo!*”. They threw the butts of the torches beyond the “border” and continued drinking, eating and dancing throughout the night.

Let us now turn to a more detailed examination of the route, the boundary, the location of events along it and their significance. The route traces the structure of the village space – both in the symbolic and historical sense. According to the Tibetan spatial scheme, the people dwell in the intermediary space between *lha* (deities) above and *lu* (underground or water spirits). This not only gives a symbolic meaning to “above” and “below”, but also leads to practices such as the location of village *gompas* at the highest point of a village.

Manang: concluding the Targya procession, banners attached to three spears are stuck in the ground at the edge of a field to mark the symbolic boundary of the village. The use of spears, and the banner’s colour (red, white and black, representing the triad of Bodhisattvas, see Gutschow/Ramble in this volume) construct a transient Rigsum Gönpo during the moment of the ritual, and refer to the contest over territory and inhabitation which underlies the ritual. In the middleground, the gonphu (a human figure shaped in buckwheat dough) and the ling offering can be seen. In the background along the path, villagers await the ngagpa dancers for the beginning of the ritual.

18 The segment of the boundary line is located at the edge of the land suitable for building, at the upper edge of the aquifer, below which there is permanently wet marsh.

19 In fact, the procession begins from the new assembly hall built around 200 years ago. It complements the first shrine at the higher ground nearby, which, according to Snellgrove (1981: 216) was built during the 15th century and is considered by villagers to be the oldest building.

20 The tendency of villages to relocate from higher to lower grounds in the area is noted in Vitali and Harrison 1994. In Braga, this is confirmed by my architectural analysis of details of the village (Gansach 1999).

21 The building is a two-storey hall where local dance festivals take place.

22 Observations are drawn from my detailed architectural analysis of the relationship between structure and topography, “straight joints” between houses in a *gadi* (Ny.: a block of adjacent houses sharing party walls) and the pattern of spaces between the buildings, complemented by villagers’ oral accounts of the relative age of the village quarters, reveal the development of the village (Gansach 1999).

23 Considering that paths tend to follow the shortest route, the path around house 3.1 can be seen as having been realigned as the village grew; similarly, the path through *gadi* 7, blocked by an infill (house 7.6) indicates the path was re-routed to the “village terrace” after it was constructed around houses 7.9–11.

24 The full description and analysis of the rituals appear in Gansach 1999.

25 During the morning, girls court boys, children fight to overpower the adult males, submissive after having been intoxicated from meals they have had before, and lead them to a meal at their home, where, contrary to normal practice, they are received by women who are at home on their own.

In Braga, the route began at the *gompa* and passed downwards through the houses to reach the farthest and lowest point within the circle “beyond which lies the territory of the *mang*”.¹⁸

As the route descended through the village, it progressed from the *gompa* which was the first building on the village site¹⁹, through the higher and older Char Tshe²⁰ quarter to Gyang, a newer part of the village, but leaves out Yul Nang to the south-west and the recently built Gum Gang to the east of the circle. The procession passed along the main circulation paths and past all the sites of social institutions important in village life. From the *gompa*, the procession passed along the “village terrace” which overlooks the meadow below where people gather in the afternoon and from which the “village crier” calls out his news at night, past the Dance Hall²¹ where some festivities take place, and the old entrance *mendang-chörten*. It then turned past the first village spring, crossed the central junction of the village paths and the large poplar tree believed to be an abode of a local deity before it turned eastward towards the symbolic segment of the boundary.

The route traced by the procession was the historical path which had led to the *gompa* before the village was established. This route comprised the spine along which the village has grown, and has remained the main circulation route through the village. Villagers’ accounts of the development of the village, complemented by architectural studies²² reveal that in the early days, the houses were secondary to the *gompa* as a place of pilgrimage and were built to accommodate the existing layout of the paths. But when the village grew, and new houses were added, paths were adjusted around the new buildings.²³ This historical relationship between the houses and the paths explains the twists in the route of the procession, which exhibit a tendency to preserve sites of significance along the route (such as the location of blessing at the end of the descent from the hill) and at the same time shift along with the development of the village to link new sites of social importance (like the terrace or the Dance Hall).

Spatial patterns: a comparative discussion

Targya, as performed in Braga, Losar in Nyimathang and Tenkor in Togkhyu share the Tibetan ideas and ritual concepts upon which they are structured. The rituals are based on the belief in an inherent conflict between the inhabitants and the spirits over occupation of the territory. Inhabitation is cyclically re-negotiated through the exchange of symbolic offerings across an imagined boundary which is con-

cretised at the time of the ritual. The performances share a common vocabulary of symbolic objects and gestures (such as *tormas* and exchanges of food) serving to mediate the relations with the spirits, the *ngagpa* dances, torch fires and other more common objects of Tibetan ritual. These have been adapted to local contexts and appropriated for specific purposes in each of the villages.

Despite this shared cultural background, particularisation of meaning and localisation of the performance have produced the diversity of the rituals.

The relationship between the concrete pattern of the route and its meaning in regard to the village space has been the focal point of the study so far. To conclude the inquiry, I examine how the process of settlement and the cohesion of the community which have produced the village space are inscribed in the “spatial pattern” of the ritual procession.

Representation of the community

The procession is a religious experience of the environment which fuses the social and the material – it cyclically validates the sense of community linked to the environment it inhabits. The representation of the community as a cohesive group of people is an important facet implicit in the three village rituals. This can be seen in two aspects of the rituals – in participation in the procession, and, in Losar and Targya, in the subsequent ritual acts. Participation in the procession represents membership in the community. In Losar, every household from Nyimathang and from its clan-affiliated but distant clusters is represented in the performance. In Tenkor, cluster representatives constitute the group and perform the procession on behalf of the villagers, but in Targya, the whole of the village accompanies the *ngagpa* who perform the ritual acts for them.

The procession in Losar and Targya can be seen as the first of Turner’s three ritual stages of structure, anti-structure and re-structure (Turner 1977: 167). After the statement of space and society in the procession, the rituals continue with a series of performances which violate and then reconstruct the social order of the community.²⁴ In these, social categories like gender and age groups, rank and social hierarchy, and behavioural conventions which regulate the structure and cohesion of the community are key elements that make up the rituals, particularly in the parts which follow the procession. On the first night of Losar, a playful “water challenge” reverses male-female relations, and in the following afternoon children and females violate normative behaviour in relation to males²⁵, though the exclusive

participation of male household heads in the meal which concludes the ritual symbolically re-establishes their patriarchal authority. Tenkor is a single stage ritual of procession, but in Targya, violation of standard gender and age group conduct takes place after the procession.

Targya, as performed in Braga, Losar in Nyimathang and Tenkor in Togkhyu share the Tibetan ideas and ritual concepts upon which they are structured. The rituals are based on the beliefs in an inherent conflict between the inhabitants and the spirits over occupation of the territory. Inhabitation is cyclically re-negotiated through the exchange of symbolic offerings across an imagined boundary which is concretised at the time of the ritual. The performances share a common vocabulary of symbolic objects and gestures (such as *tormas* and exchanges of food, the *ngagpa* dances, torch fires and the use of other more common objects of Tibetan ritual) serving to mediate the relations with the spirits. These have been adapted to local contexts and appropriated for specific purpose in each of the villages.

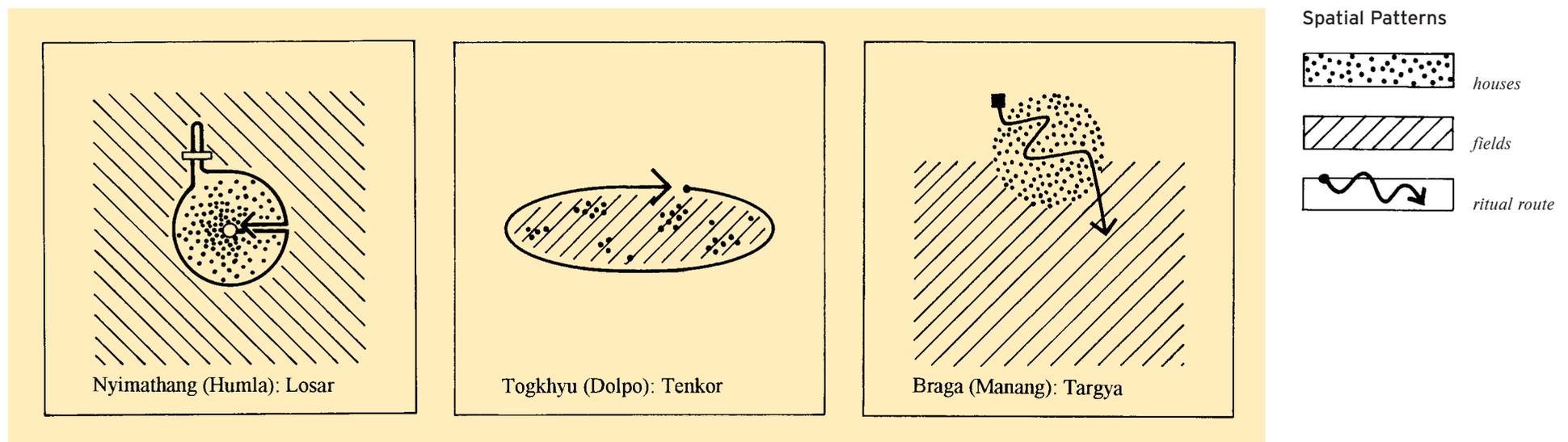
Despite this shared cultural background, the rituals display a diversity of application of the Tibetan concepts and of circumambulation practices. In the following discussion I shall show that this has been produced by the historical development of the villages which has induced the localisation of performances and particularisation of their meanings. I shall conclude the inquiry by examining how the process of settlement and the cohesion of the community which have produced the village space, are inscribed in the “spatial pattern” of the ritual procession. This will provide an insight into what has been

described so far – the relationship between the concrete pattern and the meaning of the route on the one hand, and the village space on the other.

Spatial patterns

The comparison of the spatial relationship between the route, the buildings and the fields reveals fundamentally different patterns. In Nyimathang and Togkhyu the processional route encloses the village in the imagined boundary it creates; whilst in Nyimathang it encircles the built environment whose centre is emphasised at the beginning and at the end, in Togkhyu it encompasses the cultivated territory as well as the dwellings but has no centre. Unlike these, the path of Targya in Braga is linear, passing through the houses running between the high and low points of the village. In Nyimathang and Togkhyu the procession inscribes a path which exists only at the moment of the ritual, whereas in Braga it follows the historical spine of the settlement in everyday use. Moreover, in Nyimathang and Togkhyu, the route completes a symbolic boundary around the village, but in Braga this idea is a notional segment such a boundary.

The different characteristics of the spatial patterns, such as linearity, circularity and difference of emphasis on centre or perimeter, appear to present problematic spatial contradictions. How can we understand the differences in the *spatial patterns* – the patterns which describe the relationship between the route, the houses and the fields? This question is particularly important in view of the spatial



epistemology shared by the Tibetan villagers and the common practices through which the meaning of the processions and the rituals at the boundary have been constructed.

The sharing of ritual symbols, gestures and spatial epistemology leads us to search for the explanation of the diversification of these performances in non-ritual, place-related specifics of the settlement. We have already seen how Tibetan ideas of inhabitation and ritual concepts distinguish between space inhabited by people and space occupied by spirits. We have also traced the ways in which this is given expression in circumambulations and the implicit socio-spatial meaning of the boundary they describe around the villages. However, as villages develop and communities form and transform, these ideas and concepts must be broad and accommodating, and the ritual performance sufficiently elastic in order to accompany the dynamic process of the settlement and maintain their pertinence to the communities' life through time.

The comparative analysis of the relationship between the spatial pattern of the ritual routes and the histories of the villages shows that the disparity between them corresponds to the different socio-spatial development of the settlement. In other words, the spatial pattern of the processions is historical, evolves locally and reflects the social processes whereby villages evolve and their communities maintain their cohesion. The following examination looks at the ways in which the social processes, the village development and the ritual route correlate.

Losar, Nyimathang

The ritual links the beginning of the yearly cycle with the founding of the village on its present site and its clan-based order which has evolved since. The ritual is centered in the original centre of Nyimathang and the route circumscribes the village houses. Nevertheless, people from the distant clusters of Gumpa, Tolki and Tungalungba who also participate in the procession, consider their families, houses and fields protected owing to the performance in the same way as the people of Nyimathang do.

How can we reconcile the apparent contradiction between the social unity with its perceived spatial inclusion expressed in the ideas of the ritual on the one hand, and the fragmented, dispersed pattern of the village on the other? The topographical conditions of the village territory have affected the dispersed development of the village whilst clan-based delimitation of village membership has maintained Nyimathang as the social, political core. Let us trace the development of

this fragmented village pattern and the social centrality of Nyimathang.

The move to the site of Nyimathang, a median point among the dispersed farmsteads of the founding families (the clans' forefathers), has defined its social constitution. Practices of clan-based residence, polyandry and inheritance have limited membership of the village community and restrained growth. However, expansion due to natural growth, albeit small, was shaped by the conditions of the land: the narrow shape of the territory with altitudinal difference of 1,300 m, the need to limit idle time entailed in walking to the fields, location of land reserves and orientation to the sun has generated the pattern of development in splintering clusters (Gumpa, Tolki and Tungalungba).

The branching out of Nyimathang has dispersed its members but not divided the community whose centre remains in Nyimathang. Despite the distance of the new clusters, their inhabitants have remained members of the socio-economic unit of Nyimathang. This is expressed in all aspects of life, like sharing rights to grazing lands, submission to the traditional institutions of authority in the village, inclusion in clan network and participation in village rituals of both ancestral and local deities.

The centre and the perimeter of the village defined by the Losar ritual procession can be seen as concrete expressions of the relationship between the villagers and the village community. The location of the centre of the ritual, which, in the everyday life of the village is an indistinct wide path, emphasises the historical aspect of the community – its origins near the village spring, between the cliff which had guarded the three pre-settlement *goths* (herders' huts) and the first houses of the clans' ancestors. Participation of every household in the procession expresses the clan-based social unity of the village community, even though the inclusion of all of the houses within the ritual boundary is, in fact, incomplete. Thus whilst the centre is an actual historical reference to the origin of the settlement, the perimeter represents its contemporary extent. The ideal, formally perfect, Tibetan spatial scheme, which underlies the structure of the procession, has been adapted to the topography, village growth and local beliefs.

Tenkor, Togkhyu

The expanse circumscribed in the procession of Tenkor during the summer months expresses the centrality of agriculture in the social cohesion of the community. A central aspect of this cohesion is the sharing of water resources and the collective ownership and mainte-

nance of the irrigation canals which line the sides of the valley – these delimit the community and separate the villagers of Togkhyu from those of Do or Lang in Tarap. Related to the use of the irrigation system are the form of incorporation in agricultural work-groups and the procedure of collective ploughing, weeding and irrigating. Each group consists of permanent core members, always from different clusters, and adjuncts employed by it on a daily basis. The work proceeds in two cycles where the group begins at the higher fields of the core members and progresses down along the valley. This form of organisation regulates the even drawing of water from the canals along their length, necessary due to their limited capacity to lead water because of their construction. The inclusion of the fields and the houses within the ritual boundaries has more than the “functional” protective significance of Tenkor to prevent drought. The active role the agri-

cultural incorporation plays in the social cohesion of the community is manifested in the inclusion of all the cultivated land of Togkhyu within the boundaries of the processional route.

The relationship between the perimeter and the clusters with the organisation of the ritual reflects the constitution of Togkhyu as an aggregate of clusters. The beginning and end of the procession which appear incidental points on the perimeter, do, in fact, point out the cluster that initiates and sponsors the ritual. The empowerment of individual *lamas* to independently initiate a procession, and the participation of cluster representatives in the performance can be seen as reflecting the fragmented cluster-constitution of the village. Nevertheless, the encircling of the whole of the territory in the same way, along a perimeter evenly marked by stations, unifies the dispersed community and expresses the solidarity of its members.



Braga: Targya procession

Two skull-masked children hold the ling over the boundary line while one of the lamas dramatically raises his sword before theatrically slashing the figure seven times. The children then offer the dissected figure to the mang, by placing it at a distant location beyond the symbolic edge of the village. Behind, in the centre of the picture the raised boulder with butter lamps, photo 1994.

The divergence between the route of Togkhyu and that of Nyimathang reflects the different social-spatial structures of the villages. In Nyimathang the centre is accentuated and the houses of the core settlement are circumscribed. By contrast, in Togkhyu, where the village space includes both houses and fields, there is no centre, but, rather, a delineated area. Furthermore, the symbolic construction of social space as a Tibetan unity, differs. Compared with Losar, where the Tibetan concept of the *maṅḍala*, realised through the marking of the cardinal points, gives meaning to locations and unify the space, in Tenkor, it is the ritual act of linking the dispersed locations which creates a place specific unified structure to the space.

Targya, Nyeshang

In Braga and Manang, the processional route passes through the central path of the villages rather than around them. The route describes a line which begins in the main village *gompa*, located at the highest point of the village in Braga, and the centre of Manang, which is situated on flat land. It passes between the buildings along a historical circulation spine, reaching an imagined line, marked by the short run of a low retaining wall in Braga or constructed by three spears in a field in Manang. The line is perceived by the villagers as a segment which represents the boundary between the village and the non-inhabited space of the spirits.

The spatial pattern of the routes in Braga and Manang follows Tibetan spatial schemes which enhance its meaning. The descent in Braga from the *gompa* at its highest point to reach the world of the spirits at its lowest, passing through the village houses and along its social institutions corresponds to the layered Tibetan world, which is understood as consisting of deities above, spirits below and people occupying the world in between. The radial pattern of the route in Manang, from the centre to the edge, represents the graded perception of space – between protection associated with the centre and exposure beyond the perimeter.

The formal characteristics of the ritual route – along a single spine (from above to below, or from the centre to the edge) and – without a delimiting boundary around the village – follow the spatial development of the villages and reflect the pattern of their social growth. Both Braga and Manang have developed along a central path (Pohle 1987). According to local legends, the *gompa* at the high grounds of Braga in the west was the first building, and, as is evident in historical traces in the village pattern, the village has grown downward along the access path from the valley route below. Similarly, the two quar-

ters of Manang, Mano and Tenko, have developed along either side of the main valley path, sprawling outward as the village has grown (*ibid*).

The absence of circumference reflects the process of settlement in Nyeshang, where social boundaries and exclusivity of residence have not been stringently maintained. Whilst land ownership in the valley is an exclusive right of ethnic members, dwelling in the villages has been open to outsiders. According to local accounts, the population grew through immigration and assimilation, and ethnic exclusion evolved later, with the granting of trading rights to valley inhabitants (since 1879) and the development of local trading practices. This has restrained growth to internal reproduction, but immigration has continued. Today, there is a considerable number of non-ethnic migrants in Nyeshang²⁶, who can remain in the valley and support their families either as hired labourers, craftspeople providing services, or as tenants on agricultural land. Village and valley boundaries have not limited Nyeshangpa residence. There has been a long tradition of the Nyeshangpa's seasonal migration, which has grown into permanent relocation of many outside Nyeshang in the past three decades. A distinction appears to be made among the Nyeshangpa between social space (defined by membership in the valley-based ethnic group), space of residence (which extends to areas outside the valley, namely urban areas such as Kathmandu and Pokhara) and village space (which may include non-ethnic dwellers). The absence of a delimiting processional route around Braga and Manang together with the emphasis on the central spine along which the villages have grown, can be seen as reflecting the pattern of village growth, sprawling onto new land as the population has increased, and the traditions where neither social space nor residence have been circumscribed.

Epilogue

This paper is a study of diversity. It examined the correlation between formal aspects of ritual routes and aspects of cohesion of the communities they circumscribe. We have seen how Tibetan ideas and ritual schemes have been applied and appropriated locally as communities have formed and transformed, articulating internal social relations and particularising the relationship between the ritual path and the village. In this way historical and place-specific spatial patterns of ritual processions have been generated. Their divergence can be understood in terms of localisation – the process whereby social and economic forces have affected the formation of the community and growth of the settlement.

26 For example, a reference to 21 non-ethnic residents out of the 304 inhabitants of Mano quarter in Manang appears in Pohle (Blamont and Toffin 1987). In Braga, a *kami* (blacksmith) and a *damai* (tailor) lived at the outer edges of the village, and a carpenter household was established in Humde in the mid-1980s.