

## Protecting the Treasures of the Earth: Nominating Dolpo as a World Heritage Site

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*If there are no people in the pristine nature,  
who will admire its beauty?*

Laxmi Prasad Devkota, Nepali poet <sup>1</sup>

In a review of Nicoletti's *La Foresta Ancestrale* published in *EBHR* 19, Hildegard Diemberger has posed an interesting question. How far does the rapidly expanding discourse of heritage conservation in the Himalayan region affect existing mythical narratives surrounding natural resources and landscapes? In the case of the Kulunge Rai, she wonders, how far does the changing symbolism of a (timeless) mythical forest relate to contemporary environmental issues such as deforestation and the incremental extension of national parks in Nepal (Diemberger 2000: 143)? What, in other words, is the symbolic and mythical impact of the designation of such protected areas?<sup>2</sup>

Toni Huber (forthcoming) provides one such an example from the *Shar-khog* region of southern Amdo in Tibet. Huber has examined the impact of four decades of modern Chinese state policies on the mythic and ritually defined territory of Shar Dung-ri, a mountain once considered to be a protective territorial deity and *gnas-ri* by Bonpo and Buddhist Tibetans alike.<sup>3</sup> During the 1980s and 90s, he recounts, an explicit attempt was made by the authorities responsible for tourism promotion

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Chandra Gurung at the sub-regional meeting on 'Conserving Himalayan Heritage—the role of the World Heritage Convention', Lalitpur, September 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Helpful advice and comments from Ken Bauer, Marietta Kind, and Ben Campbell on drafts of this article are all warmly acknowledged. As is conventional in ethnographic monographs, pseudonyms have been employed to replace the real names of people described.

<sup>3</sup> My thanks to Charles Ramble, Oxford University, for making available the two as yet unpublished papers by Toni Huber and Marc Dujardin, which are cited below.

in the area to introduce a new symbolic narrative of a ‘temple fair’, purported to have occurred on the annual day of Tibetan pilgrimage in mid-summer, as well as in a commemorative pillar claiming that the Communists’ Long March had passed through the locality. The result, he shows, has in this case been the ‘reinvention’ of Tibetan ritual territory by Chinese interests, and the displacement of the Tibetan pilgrimage site to other more remote areas in the province.

The present article addresses another selective description of a Tibetan cultural space as an internationally recognized protected area in Nepal. Ethnographic field-work was carried out between May-September 1998 on the proposed nomination of Shey Phoksumdo National Park (SPNP) as a UNESCO World Heritage site. The account retraces some of the logic of world heritage as it appeared on the ground ‘looking for the facts’ for the nomination of a cultural landscape in the Himalayas. Considerable scope existed for the local actors from Dolpo to present their culture strategically, which was not the case during the hegemonic state appropriation of Shar Dung-ri discussed by Huber. To some degree, the convergence of interests between the specialized agency of the United Nations, and the concerns of the Bonpo minority in SPNP, anxious to deploy and extend their own (universal) mythical narratives, found their way round elite institutional channels populated mainly by Hindu bureaucrats.

In the discussion which follows I introduce the concept of ‘World Heritage’, present a summary of the history of Bon religion, and introduce the major arguments concerning Himalayan sacred landscapes, before going on to present an account of the World Heritage nomination process for Shey Phoksumdo National Park.

### **The World Heritage concept**

Officially, the nomination of potential natural and cultural sites for international World Heritage status rests on formal bureaucratized channels established by national governments. In its formative years the idea for a universal list of ‘wonders of the world’ was chiefly inspired by western aesthetic notions of grandiose monuments and buildings, and the promotion of the Euro-American idea of the national park. The vice-chair of the WH committee, Bing Lucas, reports that the concept was first proposed by the conservationist Russell Train, chair of the US Presidential Council on Environmental Quality. In 1965 the White House thus recommended that “there be established a trust for the World Heritage that would be responsible to the world community for the stimulation of international cooperative efforts.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> In 1971, perhaps surprisingly, it was the then US President Richard Nixon who stated in a speech that “Yellowstone is the first national park to have been created in the modern world, and the national park concept has represented a major contribution to world culture...

Since the formal creation of the World Heritage Convention in 1972 with six cultural and four natural selection criteria (see Box 1), the first step in the nomination process has been the drawing up of ‘tentative lists’ by national experts, followed by technical assistance and support from the international secretariat. To satisfy the WH Bureau and WH Committee, exigent demands are thus made for site descriptions as well as for the well-documented commitment of a government to protect a site in perpetuity. Nomination dossiers require that clear and undisputed boundaries must delineate a space which includes only the ‘authentic’, based on a persuasive argument for the ‘outstanding uniqueness’ of a site as an example of a particular historical, aesthetic, or scientific genre. Authenticity is then further allied to the twin concept of the ‘integrity’ of monuments and parks designated through national legislation.

In recent years, UNESCO has also been making a deliberate attempt to counter-balance the Euro-American bias inherent in the early period of the convention, and extend the range of sites on the list to encompass new definitions of living rural heritage. This elaboration has included the recognition of intangible cultural values as the ‘associative perceptions’ of landscape, recognized in a codified linkage between the natural and cultural criteria in the operational guidelines of the Convention (von Droste, Plachter, and Rossler 1996).<sup>5</sup> The first such associative cultural landscape nomination, Mount Tongariro in New Zealand/Aoeteroa, thus set out to recognize the interconnection between Maori ancestor-memory and the protection of the sacred peak, opening up a range of new possibilities for sacred mountains and sites elsewhere (ICOMOS-Australia 1995). The category has now also been extended to a number of case studies in Europe and Central Asia (see Dömpke and Succow 1998).

The proposed nomination described here addresses the search for a new world heritage cultural landscape in the Himalayas, and the present-day expansion of pan-Tibetan Buddhism, including Bon, throughout Nepal and the wider Himalayan region. As already amply discussed in EBHR 19 by Anne de Sales and Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, one result of the post-1990 democratic movement in Nepal has been that many of the hill peoples or so-called indigenous nationalities (*janajati*) such as Magars, Tamangs, Gurungs, and Rais, have begun to articulate their political voice long suppressed during the Panchayat period. In some cases, these groups

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It would be fitting by 1972 for the nations of the world to agree to the principle that there are certain areas of such unique worldwide value that they should be treated as part of the heritage of all mankind and accorded special recognition” (quoted in Lucas 1997).

<sup>5</sup> Suggested possibilities in this medium include the interpretation of ‘vernacular forms of artistic expression’, such as Cézanne’s landscape paintings, or other representations as evidence for the authenticity of cultural landscapes and sacred sites.

have also rejected previous moves to Sankritize themselves and have begun to affirm their links to a spiritual homeland on the Tibetan plateau, or further still to a common mythical origin in Mongolia.

Recognising that the world's cultural and natural heritage transcends national boundaries and must be preserved for future generations, the Member States of UNESCO in 1972, unanimously adopted a Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, known in short as the World Heritage Convention. The structure of the WH Convention is such that sites and properties can be nominated according to one or more of the ten criteria, four natural and six cultural. Concerning the inclusion of natural properties, the criteria require that nominated sites should:

- (i) be outstanding examples representing major stages of earth's history; or
- (ii) be outstanding examples representing significant on-going ecological and biological processes; or
- (iii) contain superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty; or
- (iv) contain the most important and significant natural habitats for in situ conservation of biological diversity.

Criteria for the inclusion of cultural properties require that each nominated property should:

- (i) represent a masterpiece of human creative genius; or
- (ii) exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning, or landscape design; or
- (iii) bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared; or
- (iv) be an outstanding example of a type of building or architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates significant stage(s) in human history; or
- (v) be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement or land-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change; or
- (vi) be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance (the Committee considers that this criterion should justify inclusion in the List only in exceptional circumstances or in conjunction with other criteria, cultural or natural).

### 1. UNESCO Heritage Site selection criteria.

### Bon and Tibetan sacred landscapes

The Bon faith, the so-called ‘indigenous religion of Tibet’, appears to be derived largely from Central Asian Buddhism. While Bonpos accept the historical figure of Shakyamuni Buddha as ‘one Buddha among many’, they look to Tonpa Shenrab Miwoche as an earlier Buddha, who they believe appeared some 18,000 years ago in the mythical country of *Olmo Lung-ring*, located in the Iranian-speaking region of western Central Asia. Tonpa Shenrab is thought to have brought the higher teachings of Bon to the land of Zhang-Zhung, which centres on the sacred mountain of Mt Kailash in western Tibet (Kvaerne 1995).

Giuseppe Tucci (1970) argues that Bon was already widespread on the Tibetan plateau before the kings Songtsen Gampo and Tisong Detsan persecuted its practitioners and converted them to Buddhism during the 8<sup>th</sup> century. During these times of repression, many of the sacred texts of the Bonpos in the Zhang-Zhung language were thus said to have been concealed in the landscape as hidden treasures (*gter-ma*). They were rediscovered during a Bon revival in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, and translated into Tibetan over several centuries by eminent scholars and translators.<sup>6</sup> The idea of landscape as a hiding place for treasure can thus be attributed to this period of persecution by an ascendant Buddhist orthodoxy which, in the process, also incorporated a considerable number of Bon influences into its own cultural templates.

However, over the centuries, many Bonpos have migrated away from central Tibet to the hinterland provinces of Amdo, Kham, and northern Nepal. There they practise their religion relatively undisturbed by the unreformed Nyingmapa who, unlike other Buddhist sects, share with the Bonpos a ninefold division of their Ways or modes of religious observance. During the twentieth century, Bonpo were nonetheless caught up in the exodus of Tibetans to India and further afield following the annexation of the Tibetan plateau by the Chinese in the 1950s. Like many other Tibetan Buddhist schools forty years on, Bon is now expanding the scale of its global appeal and outreach. In 1978 the Dalai Lama visited the newly created Bon monastery in Dolanji in northern India and formally recognized Bon as a branch of Buddhism alongside the four main sects of the Mahayana/Tantrayana Buddhist tradition.

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<sup>6</sup> These texts were first organized into ‘The Four Portals and the Treasury’ and subsequently reclassified into ‘The Nine ways of Bon’. Passages dealing with rituals classified in this way were later translated into English by the Tibetologist David Snellgrove in the 1960s based on a manuscript of the *gzi-brjid* found at Samling monastery in Upper Dolpo (Snellgrove 1992).

Marc Dujardin (forthcoming) has argued that diasporic Tibetans, actively building monasteries outside their historical territories in countries such as Switzerland, Germany, France, the UK, and the USA, are now founding or ‘taming’ different places around the globe. In diagrammatic form, he depicts an international interconnection of sites envisioned as anchor points or thresholds away from Lhasa, the cultural and spiritual centre of Tibet, and set into an associative grid or culture matrix of Buddhism. As a part of this globalizing trend, Bonpos also find themselves promoting the view that they are in some way unique in the world, while at the same time emphasising a shared political plight with other diasporic Tibetans, linked to a further compassionate mission towards humankind as a whole.<sup>7</sup>

The taming of the mind through monastic discipline, and the taming of the land, are pervasive motifs for nearly all Tibetan-speaking populations in relation to landscape (Stein 1962). The great historical figures of Buddhism, such as Padmasambhava, Milarepa and Drukpa Kunle, ritually subjugated the local demons and spirits of the land, often those of Bon and other animist groups, by imposing the orthodox order of the Buddhist faith. In this manner, P.S. Ramakrishnan (1996) has reported that the whole of Sikkim is considered a sacred treasury by the local Buddhist population of Lepchas and Tibetans. However, analysing the same landscape beneath Mount Khangchen-dzonga, Brigitte Steinmann (1998) argues that the pilgrimage places themselves delimit the sanctity of the Chogyal’s ‘mandala-state system’ of land revenues, against which the indigenous Lepchas, as nomadic hunters with scattered settlements in forest clearings, had historically revolted.

Dujardin therefore broadens his argument to present a succession of levels in landscape perception, extending to an indigenous anthropomorphic map of a demoness who once terrorized Tibet and was then ‘nailed to the earth’ by ritual consecration across the length of the entire Himalayan range.<sup>8</sup> He portrays three imaginary grids

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<sup>7</sup> For example, the Ligmincha Institute, recently founded in Virginia, USA, under the guidance of Geshe Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, ambitiously claims that “The Institute will seek to discover new ways in which the teachings and practices of the ancient Bon shamanic tradition can contribute to healing both the individual human being and the natural environment of planet earth... the Institute hopes to preserve and further develop the indigenous culture of Tibet among Tibetans themselves living in exile from their homeland, as well as to communicate the ancient tradition of Bon to interested people in the West. We at the Institute believe that the ancient Bon tradition of Tibet, which otherwise is in much danger of being lost to humanity, can make a significant contribution towards solving the problems of the world at the end of the twentieth century” (Ligmincha Institute promotional material, [www.ligmincha.org](http://www.ligmincha.org)).

<sup>8</sup> The giant demoness was said to be spread over the Himalayas and inhibiting the spread

demarcating a ‘royal zone’ (*ru-gnon*) in central Tibet; the tamed border of Tibet (*yang-dul*); and a third one to encompass areas beyond the Tibetan border. Thus the two Bhutanese temples of Kyichu and Jampai Lhakhang detain the left foot and left knee of the demoness respectively, helping “all inhabitants of Bhutan to feel spatially and ritually protected and anchored in a larger spatio-cultural whole” (Dujardin forthcoming: 7).

Far to the eastern edge of the Buddhist sphere of influence, Caroline Humphrey (1998) also addresses issues connecting a wide geographical scale in Inner Mongolia with locally grounded spatial idioms which have remained relatively constant despite recent political upheavals in China. Humphrey recounts a myth recorded in 1874 by the Russian geographer Prezhavalski on why the mountain range of Mona Uul was considered to mark the boundary between Chinese and Mongolian cultures at the line of the Yellow River.<sup>9</sup> With a progressive shift in the political relations of monasteries in Inner Mongolia, which came under the administration of Hohhot and Beijing, the former extensive scale in mythic thinking ‘shrank away’ from distant Lhasa, with the land-guardian deity Mona Khan (once reputed to send firewood to Tibet) being substituted by secular forest guards. Humphrey thus contrasts a Chinese ‘military-strategist’ view of topography with the Mongol herders’ emphasis on the reproduction of living resources and the sacralization of particular mountain peaks, springs, and trees.

In recent times, however, vernacular landscape paintings in the Kathmandu valley and the Solu-Khumbu region of Nepal, display an *increase* in the scale of their iconography by ‘flying over’ the natural barrier of the Himalayas. The mountain range, previously portrayed in Buddhist *thangkas* as a threshold or boundary depicted as a white jagged line, has been surpassed to include universal landmarks in Tibet such as Mount Kailash, the Potala palace, and other prominent monasteries. As Alex McKay observes in a discussion of Tibetan pilgrimage as a prominent indicator of local and national identity, sacred sites and trading fairs in the region must therefore be situated in “hierarchies ultimately encompassing the entire Tibetan cultural sacred map of the world—in a network which stretched as far as

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of Buddhism by the movements of her arms and legs. In response, the Buddhist king Songsten Gampo had to build 108 temples across the territory, twelve of which were placed at geographical locations designed to correspond with the joints of the demoness, with the Jokhang in Lhasa corresponding to her heart.

<sup>9</sup> In the myth, a Mongol reincarnate lama living in Beijing was unjustly arrested by the emperor, resulting in a magical flight by the lama to the Altai mountains in far western Outer Mongolia in order to take a mountain range and drop it into the Yellow river to exterminate the Chinese population.

the sacred places of the Buddha in India, to Omei Shan in Szechuan and to Urga in Mongolia” (1998: 8).<sup>10</sup>

Michael Aris (1990) makes a similar point when he notes an “uninterrupted sequence of linkages” in the Buddhist theory of interdependent origination and the “wide network of lateral contacts” in the Himalayas connecting Ladakh in the west with Bhutan in the east. This includes the widespread cult of ‘hidden lands’ south of the barren plateau which offered refuge at times of political and religious uncertainty in central Tibet. Katia Buffetrille, another specialist on Tibetan perceptions of landscape, argues in connection with the pilgrimage to the lake Halas-Maratika in Eastern Nepal that “there is a firm intention on the part of the Buddhist authorities in exile to map out a new sacred geography based on sites outside Tibet, known through the texts... Tibetans do not try to create new sacred places but only to revive the ones collective memory knows” (1998: 30).

Many of the myths of Padmasambhava’s passage to Tibet, in the course of which he conquered local divinities and demons, have been adapted in this way by converted Buddhist populations to fit the topography of the landscape in newly settled areas. Nick Allen (1997), for instance, compares the widespread mythical tradition of flood and drainage across the entire Himalayas, describing the origin of the cultivated world through the symbolic act of drainage making the ‘cosmos suitable for human habitation’.<sup>11</sup> The conversion was not, however, an unchallenged or one-way process. Huber (1990, 1994) shows how the dominant discourse of subjugation of divinities by famous lamas and yogis was also contested by differing conversion myths espoused by rival Sakyapa and Kagyu Buddhist schools at the time of the relocation in Tibet of the cult of Tantric *pīṭha* sites adopted from India.

Charles Ramble (1997) has argued that although the pattern of the Tibetan mandala has been applied widely across the Himalayas, the creation of Bon or Tibetan sacred mountains cannot be reduced to the squeezing of topography into abstract landscape referents. Landscape perception should rather be seen as the interweaving of cultural templates, such as the form of the mandala or of holy caves, with memory events enmeshed in prominent natural formations in tangible material form. Ramble thus warns that mandala models of nature can be “too grand to

<sup>10</sup> McKay also alludes to the ‘somewhat idealistic’ political manifestation of the ‘Tibet: Zone of Peace’ proposal. Interestingly, this rhetorical strategy was shared by Nepali politicians who deployed a discourse of ‘Nepal, birthplace of the Buddha, the light of Asia’ as a part of their campaign to have Nepal declared a ‘Zone of Peace’ during the 1970s and 1980s.

<sup>11</sup> This tradition is notable in the myth of the ‘Turquoise, the Demoness and Padmasambhava’ at Ringmo in Dolpo.

account for small topographical details” without an elaborate grid-referencing.<sup>12</sup> Instead, the mechanisms for the allocation of precise places generally occur according to three associated techniques of: (a) buried treasure and treasure-discoverers as an affirmation of doctrine; (b) imprints on rocks by luminaries of the Bon tradition as ‘steadfast tokens’ of the faith; and (c) resemblances necessary to achieve the subjugation of nature (i.e. as swords, drums, anthropomorphic shapes, or animals).

Numerous local mountain peaks throughout the Himalayas, and further afield in Mongolia, may in this way be revered more fervently than the distant points of Mount Kailash (*Ti-se*) or Lhasa as central to a regional sense of cultural memory. They may even be considered to be alternative earthly manifestations of the heavenly Mount (Su)Meru or the *axis mundi*. In such a manner, András Höfer considers that, while Buddhist myths have travelled across the Himalayas and have been grafted onto new natural sites by converted populations, they have also hybridized with more territorial landscape perceptions, such as those of Bon. He comments that “subjugation turns out to be Buddhist rededication of historically older motifs such as the fixation of the earth, or the domestication of the superhuman masters of the natural environment by a cultural hero to the benefit of man” (Höfer 1998: 78).

Buffetrille (1998) presents an overview of what she terms a process of ‘Buddhicization’, whereby mountains traditionally considered locally to be territorial gods (*yul lha*), and characterized by a high degree of anthropomorphism of animist representations, are turned into Buddhist mountain holy places (*gnas ri*). While lay worship of Bonpo *yul lha* is generally carried out by conducting rituals on the actual slope of the mountain, Buddhist *gnas ri* feature the installation or superimposition of the mandala of a Buddhist deity, around which pilgrims perform a circumambulation. Buffetrille demonstrates that, although Buddhist pilgrimage texts try to incorporate territorial gods as protectors of the doctrine, certain mountains do exist where Bon *yul lha* continue to reside, despite Buddhists’ claims that the area is a *gnas ri* representing the form of a *stupa*: “out of a mountain of local symbolical import, Buddhism makes a mountain of universal symbolical scope” (Buffetrille 1998: 23). Through this process, a mundane deity is transformed into a transcendental one, and a logic based on exchange and equivalence between pilgrim and deity is overlaid with a Buddhist attitude of veneration.

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<sup>12</sup> The argument is equally valid for Humphrey’s descriptions of distant mythical narratives in Inner Mongolia which are connected to Lhasa.

### Dolpo: a brief history

For most of its history, the inaccessibility of the high valleys of Dolpo have provided a natural refuge for the Bon religion on the periphery of the Tibetan heartland. After the establishment of the royal dynasty by A me dpal, the area was brought under the influence of the king of the walled city of Lo Manthang immediately to the east, known today as Mustang. Between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Mustang acted as a kind of ‘cultural motherland’, and the king collected tax from, yet did not directly administer, the people of Dolpo. From the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the area was thus considered as a hidden valley (*sbas-yul*) where hermits visiting the area from as far away as Amdo and Kham in eastern Tibet could meditate (Schicklgruber 1995).

Both Dolpo and Upper Mustang, because of their historical position, have long attracted pilgrims and travellers. Numerous architectural similarities exist between the two areas yet, compared to Mustang, which has for centuries been a major trade route linking Nepal and Tibet, Dolpo has a higher mean altitude, lower population density, and is more remote of access. While Lo Manthang drew its power mainly from its authority of the monarchy, Dolpo lacked the same political centralization. Instead, it comprised a loose affiliation of village units called *tshos* with hereditary leaders, and has always been venerated as a spiritual retreat area of exceptional natural beauty. A major pilgrimage to the sacred crystal mountain near Shey *gompa* (also established in the 11<sup>th</sup> century) continues to attract both Bon and Buddhist pilgrims from across Tibet every twelve years during the full moon of the month of Shrawan, which normally falls in August.

Economically, Dolpo relied on yak caravans which transported grain to Tibet during the summer months and returned with salt to barter in the middle hills of Nepal. In winter, the salt was then exchanged in lower Dolpo for millet and barley with Thakalis who would carry the salt by sheep, goats, or horses down to the southern hills to trade it for rice and maize (Gurung 1979). In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the political connection with Lo was interrupted following the unification of Nepal and political linkage with Kathmandu. Between 1951 and 1974 the area was opened for research, but was again closed until 1989 owing to tensions with refugee Khampa guerrillas hiding in the remote mountainous terrain.

In line with other accounts of the Tibetan approach to landscape outlined above, David Snellgrove (1967) describes how lamas are locally regarded not only as the supreme ideal of Buddhist philosophers, but also as popular sage-magicians who can produce rain when it would not otherwise have fallen, and have the capacity to overpower local gods. Corneille Jest (1975) gives us a detailed account of life in the

valley of Do Tarap, focusing just briefly on Bon which has long coexisted with the majority Nyingma Buddhist sect in the area. More recently, Guntram Hazod (1995) describes how the great Bon communal worship of the land gods (*yul lha gsol*) is still held in the village of Ringmo in Phoksumdo every second and eighth month, and is designed to coincide with the dates when cattle are driven to and from the mountain pastures, as well as marking the time of sowing and harvest. Marietta Kind (1999) has also provided an exhaustive summary of research in Dolpo, and explores in detail the Bonpo ritual of Mendrub performed in Ringmo (also known as Tsho) dedicated to the benefit of all living beings and the empowerment of medicine.

### Shey Phoksumdo National Park

The natural heritage value and biodiversity of Dolpo were first brought to international attention by the conservation biologist George Schaller (1977) who traveled to Dolpo to study the behaviour of the Himalayan *tahr*, blue sheep (*bharal*), and the elusive snow leopard, and was instrumental in the creation of Shey Phoksumdo National Park (SPNP).<sup>13</sup> His travel companion, the writer Peter Matthiesen, also played a significant role in popularizing the spiritual benefits of so-called wild areas to a wider public in *The Snow Leopard* (1979). Further, since its creation in 1981 with an area of 3555 sq. km (the largest national park in Nepal),<sup>14</sup> SPNP has been linked to an extensive string of protected areas stretching along the Himalayan range (Bajimaya 1998). Dolpo is one of the least populated regions of Nepal, with a human population of some 2,500 inhabitants within the park at the time of the 1991 census.

In June 1998, this anthropologist visited SPNP with a group of ethnobiologists and conservationists working for an international programme entitled 'People and Plants' coordinated in Nepal by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF).<sup>15</sup> The team was engaged in the mobilization of traditional Tibetan doctors (*amchis*) for a workshop which was to be held in the village of Do Tarap, and which was designed

<sup>13</sup> In fact, Dobremez (1976) was the first to publish a comprehensive overview of the ecology and biogeography of Nepal resulting from eight in-depth expeditions accompanied by researchers such as N.P. Manandar, Corneille Jest, and T.B. Shrestha between the spring of 1969 and autumn of 1975.

<sup>14</sup> SPNP was formally gazetted on August 6 1984 and is covered under (a) the National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act 2029 (1973) which provides a legal basis for the preservation of the flora and fauna by the Royal Nepal Army; and (b) the Himalayan National Parks Regulation of 2036 (1979) which provides free entry, public right of way and limited use of park resources for the local community as long as it does not have a detrimental effect on the natural environment.

<sup>15</sup> P&P website: [www.rbgekew.org.uk/peopleplants](http://www.rbgekew.org.uk/peopleplants)

to channel local knowledge of medicinal plants into a primary healthcare project. Long-term monitoring was also being carried out by the programme in the high-altitude summer pastures above the village of Pungmo in lower Dolpo to estimate sustainable harvesting quotas for medicinal plants. Three fieldworkers focused on issues of grazing rights, women's traditional ecological knowledge, and customary rules regarding the intensity and timing of access for livestock to the pastures (Shrestha *et al.* 1998).<sup>16</sup>

Alongside ecological values, the team was also researching a grazing area on the Gungthang plateau associated with a sacred spring and three peaks which merged together into a pyramidal mound resembling an altar called Lama Chumig. As captured by Ramble's analysis of 'steadfast tokens of the faith', informants described how in this place the fecundity of the grass for yaks and other living resources was associated with the legends of luminaries who had left hand and fingerprints in the rocks. In this way, the interrelationship between ecology, memory, and identity was the focus of the team's research which entailed drawing participatory landscape maps of the sacred places.

As I entered the park to join the WWF personnel, I met a Bonpo Geshe, Lama Yesang, who was involved in an indigenous school project.<sup>17</sup> Until late one evening, amongst the noisy children boarding at the school, we discussed the history of Dolpo, the period he spent in India studying Bon texts, as well as a visit he had made to the United States on behalf of a biodiversity project. When I mentioned the suggestion to have the area nominated as a WH site he reacted eagerly, saying he had heard of the proposal a month earlier during an environmental awareness training session, but wanted to know more. I explained the interest in protecting endangered species such as snow leopard and musk deer, and the growing number of cases in cultural heritage preservation in the form of the UNESCO cultural landscape concept.

The idea of linking nature and culture conservation seemed obvious to him as he enthusiastically described the pilgrimage and grazing areas, ancient treasures and

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<sup>16</sup> The team estimates that there are at least 26 *amchis*, but probably more, in the wider district of Dolpo: roughly one *amchi* per 1000 people making use of some 205 species of plants for medicinal purposes and another 279 species for other ethnobotanically important uses. Shrestha *et al.* (1998) are also of the opinion that the grazing of yaks and *chauri* (yak-cattle crosses) in the high pastures has been instrumental in maintaining the floristic and medicinal plant diversity in those meadows.

<sup>17</sup> Tapriza Cultural School was founded by local people from the villages of Ringmo and Pungmo, in coordination with Marietta Kind who opened 'Tapriza Verein' in Switzerland to provide additional support for the project ([www.tapriza.org](http://www.tapriza.org)).

marks left on the rocks by revered ancestors and saints. According to Lama Yesang, the *gompa* in Ringmo (on the shore of Phoksumdo lake) had been founded some 600 years ago as a Nyingma Buddhist site, which was later converted to Bon by Lama Treton Tsewang Tsultrim in order to protect the sanctity of the turquoise lake by banning hunting near the water's edge.<sup>18</sup> Quite taken by our discussion, Lama Yesang encouraged me to put forward the case for Bon culture as part of the WH nomination amongst the Hindu elites in the capital.

During the visit I also met Catherine Inman, a representative from the 'Partnership for Biodiversity' programme engaged in strengthening environmental education in the park. She had stayed in the area as a Peace Corps volunteer and had herself launched a small not-for-profit organization which aimed to foster and support the collective spirit of community heritage maintenance in the area, and attract donor funding from abroad. As part of her efforts a month earlier, a group of US park wardens had carried out workshops on trail maintenance, visitor management, and ornithology in SPNP, as well as first introducing the idea that the area might be considered as a WH site.

### A 'local panel' presentation

On my return to Kathmandu, I contacted UNESCO in Paris.<sup>19</sup> During a visit to the UNESCO head office in April 1998 I had met Aswan, the person responsible for natural site nominations in Asia, and he had informed me of the likely possibility of the WH centre holding a meeting in Nepal. He asked me what I thought of Shey Phoksumdo as a possible nomination. I replied that as far as I was aware, Lo Manthang had been suggested as a possible WH nomination but the local people had been opposed to the idea, yet the two areas were culturally quite similar, and could perhaps be considered together to form part of a cluster nomination.

A month later, I was approached by the Nepal National Commission for UNESCO to provide a background paper at the 'Sub-regional meeting on conserving Himalayan World Heritage' to be held in Kathmandu in August-September 1998. Two days before the meeting, some of the various actors involved congregated at the WWF office in Kathmandu to set about organizing a local people's panel. Assembled were Aswan from the WH centre in Paris; Lama Yesang; Suman, a young Hindu community leader living at the edge of the park; Chombi from the WWF

<sup>18</sup> The location of the *gompa*, a natural cul-de-sac, had formerly been used to drive animals to a point where they could no longer escape and were killed (see Kind 1996).

<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, WWF staff had to cancel the workshop with local *amchis* two days before it was due to begin, owing to escalating Maoist activity and violence south of the national park, and sent a helicopter to evacuate a group of seven of us from the village of Ringmo.

field office; the SPNP park warden; Raju from WWF Kathmandu; Shrestha, an eminent Nepali botanist; Robinson, the foreign donor representative; and Krishnan from the Kathmandu donor agency office (all pseudonyms, as noted above).

After introductions, the meeting got underway when Aswan used the whiteboard to put forward, as he put it, “just a way to go about your presentation” by drawing a diagram showing ‘Shey’ at the top with four arrows emanating down indicating a sequential order of: ‘introduction’; ‘natural heritage: Shrestha’; ‘cultural heritage: Lama/others’; and ‘conditions of integrity: management planning/local people’s participation / education & awareness / logistical aspects’. As this was going on, Lama Yesang and Raju were busy discussing the biggest and oldest *chortens* in Dolpo, whilst Shrestha re-read a copy of Matthiesen’s *The Snow Leopard*.

Lama Yesang then began to describe to the others how the Bon figure of Tonpa Shenrap had in fact been taken over by Buddhists and that Zhang-Zhung was really the ancient ‘Bon language’. At this point, Raju produced a photocopy of the nomination criteria, stimulating Aswan to interject that it might be helpful to separate cultural heritage into ‘tangible’ components such as ‘monuments, architecture, and art history’, and ‘intangible’ components such as ‘cultural/religious history, ritual patterns and manuscripts’. Aswan suggested that, because Bonpos circumambulate *chortens* in the opposite direction to Buddhists this could be used to draw out the peaceful ‘mixing of religions’, and that Dolpo could be considered ‘a refuge for this religion to survive’. He then explained that the “history of the WH convention is with the tangible side, monuments and buildings, immovable objects ...it’s not so good with the intangible, the moment you have a moveable object, like a book, you have a problem.”

Asked to comment by Aswan, I added that *chortens* should be seen as part of the landscape in terms of the local materials and technical skills of the community, as well as in their specific positioning at the entry and exit points of villages. Attention then re-focused on Lama Yesang, and concern arose regarding the length of his performance during the meeting, with Krishnan asking: “How long does Lama have to speak? Precision will be necessary for the fifteen minutes during the panel, then the audience will think ‘great!’” Aswan responded that, as far the ecological values of the park were concerned, there was a seemingly clear case for natural criteria (iii) and (iv), but Lama Yesang needed to ‘distil his vast body of knowledge, to match three cultural criteria’ which he suggested could be drawn from criteria (iii) living cultural tradition; (v) outstanding example of land use; and (vi) interchange of values (see Box 1).

Understanding the critical role of documentary evidence in the nomination process,

Shrestha added that he had collected various historical accounts of Dolpo by the Japanese monk Ekai Kawaguchi; Harka Gurung; George Schaller and Peter Mathiesen; as well as by David Snellgrove who having “travelled all along the Himalayas” had commented that the lake at Phoksumdo was “one of the most glorious places on earth”. In order to prepare visual aids and overheads, Robinson then projected a series of slides taken by the environmental awareness team, observing “I guess what we’re looking for is the best”, including some ‘people shots’ featuring Lama Yesang in ceremonial dress and other villagers from Pungmo and Ringmo. On seeing one particular image of a grey-stone winter village, Aswan commented that it seemed to really “blend into the landscape” and thought that it might be used for the presentation, leading Shrestha to agree that the flat roofs of the buildings demonstrated a clear “indicator of no rainfall”, and the particular practice of using birch bark as roof-lining.

Like Shrestha, I had myself been collecting documents and reading many of the books to which he had referred. One publication not mentioned was a book entitled *Reflections of the Mountain* (reviewed in *EBHR* 14 by András Höfer) which I displayed as a detailed ethnographic commentary on territorial *yul lha*. One of the chapters included maps of Dolpo and the village of Ringmo, which Lama Yesang and Suman began to examine. As we started to discuss further the sacred geography of the area, most of the other participants decided to go, leaving me with the two ‘local witnesses’ of Dolpo culture to help prepare their presentation.<sup>20</sup> Now in the different context of Kathmandu rather than the mountains, I asked Lama Yesang why he thought world heritage might be a good thing. He replied, now rehearsing his lines, that they lived in a ‘remote area’ (as classified for Nepali administrative purposes) and ‘facilities’ were difficult to come by, adding:

We love our culture and the environment... so if world heritage comes it will be good for our development. Our culture will not go extinct. Through world heritage we can send a message about our problems to the whole world... we are equally endangered as musk deer and snow leopard, so come and protect us.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> It is important to note that while the above-mentioned individuals both came from the region of Dolpo, the area is, needless to say, very heterogeneous and the selective recruitment of a few ‘spokespersons’ is not representative of the preponderance of Nyingma as compared to Bon faithful in the wider area, which also includes Tarap and Upper Dolpo.

<sup>21</sup> Bruno Latour, in his discussion of ‘dieux faitiches’, also mentions the work of Patricia de Aquino amongst black-Portuguese *mestizo* communities in Rio de Janeiro who strategically invoke the language of ecology (‘Um Orisa em via de extinção’) to refer to the disappearance of their gods and traditions (1996: 21).

### World Heritage sub-regional meeting

As is common before any meeting gets underway in Nepal, a country noted for its ‘seminar culture’ (Bista 1994), the formal opening session of the event commenced with a series of obligatory remarks by government ministers and a retinue of civil servants, who filed in and out of the spacious conference room of one of the showpiece hotels in Kathmandu. The Minister of Soils and Forest Conservation (MOSFC) began with the ubiquitous roll call made at innumerable other such occasions: “I look forward to considerable support from UNESCO and other donor agencies... we would like to extend our full co-operation”, before describing the enchanting scenery and wonders of the Himalayan kingdom during ‘Visit Nepal Year 1998’.

The director of the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC) then explained that His Majesty’s Government of Nepal was trying to ‘fill the gaps’ in the representativity of ‘keystone eco-regions’. This was seconded by Aswan who elaborated that the seminar was a “first attempt to get an idea of the natural and cultural heritage of the Himalayas”, while adding in a more direct tone that, as a South Asian himself: “You don’t need a guy like me coming from Paris telling you about your natural and cultural diversity, you live here.” Aswan warned, however, that the aim of the Convention was not to have twenty sites nominated each year, with forty percent of natural nominations being rejected on average, and that encouraging more mixed natural-cultural sites was “not going to be easy”. The purpose was, in fact, increasingly to *limit* applications to ensure that only the best get in the ‘global honours list’.

Mr. Fujitsuka, the director of the new UNESCO office in Kathmandu, established just a month earlier, then took the floor, and explained somewhat tautologically for those unfamiliar with his organization that “UNESCO in Kathmandu is small, but part of a big networking activity called UNESCO”. Adopting a business-like attitude, he insisted that there be “strict respect for the standard and guidelines of the 1972 Convention, so that the sites are preserved in perpetuity... it is not voluntary, it is an obligation.” Mechanisms exist, he stated, to involve local people in the long run monitoring of WH sites, and therefore ‘education’ must be an indispensable factor in their success.

The next item on the agenda was billed as a presentation by ICIMOD, which, as a Himalayas-wide office based in Kathmandu, would address regional issues in conservation and development. The head of the Mountain Natural Resources division then explored some of the features of the north and south faces of Himalayan heritage, mentioning his own research on ‘temple-plants’ found in the yards of Thera-

vada Buddhist temples across Yunnan. Having done this, he then handed over to me as a researcher working on cultural landscapes to deliver my pre-prepared paper on behalf of ICIMOD. I had decided to make a plea based on the possibility of undisclosed or 'silent' files for respecting the cultural tradition of Tibetan hidden valleys:

...Karna Sakya, director of Visit-Nepal Year activities in 1998, argues that in the unique case of Dolpo as a protected area, both international experts as well as His Majesty's Government of Nepal should draw lessons from the previous opening up of other 'hidden valleys' such as that of Manang which have seen their charm and unique heritage diminished by the intrusion of mass tourism. A more culturally sensitive strategy, Sakya feels, would be to maintain 'an invisible force of curiosity' around Dolpo. Indeed, what is secret is very often associated with the idea of the sacred (hidden valleys of the Tibetan tradition can only be revealed to enlightened Lamas) and a World Heritage responsibility may be, perhaps paradoxically, to ensure concealment and hide an area from the effects of mass tourism that has also taken place in Ladakh. However can Dolpo, as Sakya hopes, really 'be preserved as a blank spot on the world map of tourism'? In May 1989 the government opened the southern part of SPNP for trekking to spread the load from Sagarmatha, Langtang and ACAP. Whilst considering this question Sakya feels that:

In the jargon of planning, tourism is a calculative card-game. In this game it is essential that the player uses his trump card carefully. Dolpo is the future trump card. Hence the principle that concealed beauty has a greater psychological impact than tactlessly exposed nudity, [should] be followed... For the longevity of mountain tourism, Nepal must preserve her wilderness and virgin peaks. They will always remain the national, sacred, and inviolate heritage (1991: xii).

Other critics such as Harka Gurung feel, on the other hand, that the so-called sanctity of peaks such as Macchapuchre has been artificially invented and that most of Nepal's mountains should be declared open for climbing if the attached price-tag is appropriately set.<sup>22</sup> The Kathmandu and Lumbini World Heritage sites have undoubtedly gained more interest from their international status, and the flood of trekkers and mountaineers climbing Everest testifies to Sagarmatha's universal appeal. Yet the com-

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<sup>22</sup> Remarks made during a presentation on 'Pilgrimage Tourism' for Visit Nepal Year 1998, August 1998.

plexities of absorbing large numbers of visitors to the latter has also shown that outside interest can be at odds with local cultural privacy—Sherpas heavily involved in trekking have little time to themselves as a community. (...) Existing mechanisms have still not been able to deal adequately with

DOLPA NEPAL WORLD HERITAGE

RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL HERITAGE IN SHEY-PHOKSUNDO: UNIQUE VALUES IN DOLPA, NEPAL

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Shey-Phoksundo National Park is equally unique for its cultural heritage as it is for its environmental heritage and conservation. Every year hundreds of people visit this Park for pilgrimages in different holy places situated within and near the Park. Shey-Phoksundo provides many interesting opportunities for the tourists and researchers.

There are hundreds of community and private monasteries and religious structures in the Park area, many of them with enormous historical importance. Many traditions which were lost elsewhere still survive only here.

The community itself is another special case of this National Park. Shey-Phoksundo is the only place where we can find strongly organized people practising the Bonpo religion.

The remoteness and hardship of this place helped us to remain unaffected by other cultures and religions. Bonpo religion, which was founded 18,000 years ago, was at its peak of progress during the Zhang Rung empire in what is now Western Tibet. We have written evidence of its beginnings, in our old manuscripts. Some are with gold or silver script, or earliest even written on animal hides and leaves. With the negative effects of time, this religion started declining in the world. (i.e. forced conversions in A.D. 7-800 by Lhasa Kings, and recently Tibetan politics since 1959.) Bonpo forms the entire cultural base for Tibetan Buddhism, and is very closely related to that. Bonpo religion, the source for Tibetan Buddhism and the tradition of 18,000 years, is only culturally intact in Dolpa, Nepal (without political disturbance.) Daily village lifestyle cannot be separated from Bonpo (in other places, Bonpo is in refuge monasteries only.)

This religion has a central, deep respect for nature and universal creation of the natural world.

## 2. Written presentation of Lama Yesang.

the issue of cultural integrity of remote mountain areas too rapidly transformed by tourism. Under World Heritage inscription, might the obligation for Dolpo be to ensure that the national park is NOT included in broad publicity and showcasing to the rest of the world? ...It would be ironic to imagine that by trying to protect the harmony of Dolpo, the WH nomination could in fact contribute to its demise?...

One response to my paper, “on the integrity of cultural nominations” as Aswan put it, came from the director of IUCN-Nepal. He pursued a number of the issues, asking: “Who decides the level of secrecy, the local people? ...are these values which must be managed like the card game? We need to balance the need for curiosity with Nepal’s economic development.” However, the allusion to a secret-sacred relationship failed to strike the same chord as the metaphor of being ‘in the very exclusive company’ of other great monuments in the WH network such as the Taj Mahal, Borobudur, and Angkor Wat. Bajimaya’s (1998) country paper listed the international assistance received in the past from the WH Bureau for the restoration of *gompas*, conservation education, and micro-hydel projects in the Everest region.

The appointed envoy from the International Council on Monuments and Sites,<sup>23</sup> Aziz Niazi, then made a case for an enquiry into the archaeological evidence available for ‘ancient cultural landscapes’, arguing that artefacts such as stone tools in Kashmir are rendered meaningless without a social, religious, and cultural context. He also mentioned an objection held by the WH Bureau against lodge-owners remaining within the Royal Chitwan WH site in Nepal, which led to the deferral of its nomination for six years. “Those [world heritage] laws have to be enforced,” he warned. “This is something we are preserving for posterity, perhaps we have to encourage His Majesty’s Government to move people out, this is my humble suggestion.” Somewhat inopportuned by Niazi’s hard-liner approach, Aswan tempered these remarks by adding: “Now we are opening a Pandora’s box about what happens outside the park... animals, for instance, don’t respect these boundaries.”

On the second day Aswan began by noting that sites are derived from different criteria, and therefore very diverse: “It’s not a thing you can standardize, it’s very often site-specific.” Only through case studies, he remarked pragmatically, “can you understand how the convention works, UNESCO and IUCN can’t monitor sitting in Paris with monitoring reports, there must be broader-based interest from local people and international groups.” The Galapagos, he went on, was the first natural nomination to the Convention according to all four (natural) criteria as a

<sup>23</sup> ICOMOS is the independent organization, also based in Paris, responsible for the the evaluation of cultural heritage proposals submitted to the WH Convention.

‘living museum and showcase of evolution’. Upon Aswan’s request, the head of the DNPWC then presented a case study of an irrigation project led by another government ministry which he had personally blocked owing to the likely negative downstream effects on the ecology of Royal Chitwan National Park. Until then, the director argued, Nepal had been seen as a ‘leader in conservation issues’, but the project would have entailed a ‘loss of image’ and ‘international prestige’ for the country in the eyes of donors.<sup>24</sup>

In the afternoon, there came the turn of the local people’s panel to put forward, with the assistance of NGO staff, their case for the enlisting of SPNP. Robinson from the international donor agency introduced the speakers by saying: “We have two residents of Dolpo, here to talk about their home. We have Lama Yesang, a highly respected cultural leader, a Lama from the Bon religion; and Suman, a very prominent community leader.” Suman spoke first and briefly and emphasized his local credentials with the following humble words: “I have just a few words to say. As the local person of Dolpo, we need to make some confessions ourselves. So, as the environment and cultural value of Dolpo is nonmaterial, we will also try to educate our people in such a manner that they will love and respect their heritage and try to keep balance with the modern development without disturbing value.”

Lama Yesang then read out his statement in a slow hill Nepali, drawing some sniggers from those members of the Kathmandu elite who were present, with a simultaneous translation into English by Raju from WWF. Bonpos, he began by saying, are part of a ‘rare religion’ but can be found in Mustang, India, Tibet as well as Taiwan and the USA, and a national Bonpo organization of Nepal had also been recently formed in Kathmandu. Making sure not to alienate Bon from Buddhist sympathy, he observed that the ‘mandala of Lord Buddha is the symbol of the universe’. The history of *gompas* in Dolpo, he explained, was linked to anti-poaching activities and a conservation ethic, and many local pilgrimage places, replete with treasures (*gter*), such as Jagdulla and Gunasa, were still considered “as holy as other places in the Himalayas such as Manasarovar and Mt. Kailash”.<sup>25</sup> In conclusion, he stated: “We request that Shey Phoksumdo National Park be declared as a WH site, so that the world community will have support for this area” (see Box 2).

To fulfill his part in the panel, Shrestha then eruditely presented a series of over-heads of historical quotations and extracts from Western sources, beginning with

<sup>24</sup> The ‘victory’ was also heralded by UNESCO as an exemplar of the effectiveness of the WH Convention.

<sup>25</sup> Struggling to grasp a translation from Tibetan to Nepali, and then English, of the nuance of the word *ter*, Raju described the land of Dolpo as full of a great number of ‘wells’.

the romantic travel account of Matthiesen (“the land of Dolpo, all but unknown to Westerners even today was said to be the last enclave of pure Tibetan culture left on earth”), and the herds of *bharal* described by Schaller as ‘mountain monarchs’ were to be seen as the ‘missing link between a goat and a sheep’. Another totemic species for conservation, the snow leopard, he went on in anthropomorphic terms, was a “shy, elusive, solitary and secretive cat”, and signified an essence of the Himalayas, such that National Geographic magazine had run an article in June 1986 claiming:

An aura of mystery surrounds the snow leopard, one of the rarest of the world’s large cats... without *Panthera uncina* the high mountains of Asia would be like African plains without lions, reduced in vitality and appeal.

The panel was followed by a film, screened during the tea break, by Austrian Tibetologist Christian Schicklgruber of his travels in Dolpo. This showed, amongst other images, the Tibetan practice of ‘air burial’, and the story of two children taken from Samling *gompa* to the Bon monastery in Kathmandu. Laxman from the Department of Archaeology (DOA) who, earlier in the day, had been describing his frustrations monitoring the Kathmandu Valley WH site for UNESCO, interjected sardonically: “If you mention cremation practices under WH criteria, it will also have to be preserved.” Evidently struggling with the protection of cultural monuments of Kathmandu enlisted by UNESCO in the 1970s, he appeared ambivalent as to whether the commitments of WH were possibly more work and aggravation than any of the environmentalists present actually seemed to realize.

The meeting concluded with a series of synoptic statements regarding possibilities for new nominations in various countries in the region and trans-boundary collaboration. Aswan summed up the scope for more inventorying and field surveys to evaluate the cultural heritage of Dolpo, whilst stressing the necessity for regional comparisons to establish the uniqueness and possibility of future cultural cluster nominations, emphasizing: “You can’t just describe a site.”<sup>26</sup>

### Reactions to the meeting

Despite the momentary foregrounding of many of the social actors at the meeting, the responsibility for the WH nomination of Dolpo reverted ultimately to the governmental bureaucracy. Eight months later, having returned from the field, I

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<sup>26</sup> On behalf of ICOMOS, Niazi also spelled out the need to have ‘proper documentation on religion, ceremonies and rituals’, but felt that the ‘authentic manuscripts’, old paintings and sculptures described by Lama Yesang sounded most appropriate.

received an e-mail from a foreign volunteer who had been assigned to the National Parks department in Kathmandu to facilitate the nomination process. He expressed doubts over the practical difficulties of translating many of the esoteric concepts present in the nomination concept into any meaningful form of indicators for monitoring cultural heritage ‘on the ground’. Directly involved in helping prepare the nomination dossier himself, he observed that most of the relevant administrators had their time taken up by logistical planning, and had little interest in a discussion of the cultural nomination criteria. He thus wondered whether many developing countries with the greatest potential for putting forward associative cultural landscapes were “not institutionally quite ready, even in a legislatively progressive place like Nepal” to tackle what he termed “interdisciplinary management”:

Since the nomination is being prepared by the MOFSC and is being managed by the DNPWC, the cultural aspects will be overlooked, if not presently in the nomination, then most surely during management, if and when the site becomes inscribed. None of the meetings we have had to date have included any cultural specialists, and when I asked whether it would be necessary to bring someone on board for cultural consultation, they seemed to balk. (...) In fact, in a meeting it was almost explicitly expressed that they would rather it be listed as a natural, rather than cultural site, since that is their arena of expertise.

In contrast with the high level of interest in the nomination shown by Lama Yesang and other local protagonists, elite bureaucrats within the administrative machinery viewed the process of WH listing as rather routine, without any enthusiasm for highlighting this particular culture. One reason for this seemed to be because the ‘culture’ under scrutiny was that of a minority group with whom the predominantly Bahun civil servants had almost nothing in common. It had become obvious towards the end of the WH meeting that Hindu participants hoped, in fact, to advance the case for enlisting the Janaki temple, the legendary birthplace of Sita from the Ramayana epic, located in Janakpur in the southern Tarai of Nepal.<sup>27</sup> In an open discussion, Raju had drawn attention to the existence of a Hindu pilgrimage shrine found outside the southern extremity of the park.

The performance of the local people’s panel therefore had a multiple audience. As we saw, the UNESCO representative himself facilitated an act of self-description, and was therefore complicit in framing the nomination proposal by soliciting

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<sup>27</sup> Three participants put forward the case for Janakpur, adding that the ponds near the temple are ‘rich from a biodiversity point of view’, and that there was a ‘daily flight from Kathmandu’.

certain facts. UNESCO, by this token, had itself initiated steps to search for new nominations in the region which fitted with its mixed set of cultural and natural criteria. Amongst the group of congregated actors, the act of persuasion to convince the Nepali authorities was, to a large degree, a collaboration between the cultural/political minority concerns of Bonpos in Dolpo (enlisted by a range of other NGOs and donor groups) and the interests of the international Convention, equally intent on promoting the WH nomination in a remote area. Suman and Lama Yesang thus attempted to appeal to the narrative of world heritage in its own terms, akin to a form of 'strategic essentialism'. In this way, both local protagonists, caught in the donor-driven development situation so prominent in Nepal, strategically deployed descriptions of their local culture so as to attract outside interest and funds.

### Protecting the 'treasures of the earth'

In a related situation in Nepal, the story of Sagarmatha National Park (SNP) created to protect the Everest region has been commonly acclaimed as a successful example of culturally based environmental conservation practice (Basnet 1992). In particular, forest protection in the national park is often attributed to a rotational system of forest watchers (*shingi-nawa*) from within the local Sherpa community, who in groups of four are said to regularly survey the illegal cutting of forests. However, some anthropologists, such as Vincanne Adams (1996), have critiqued this widespread image by exploring the Sherpas' ability to astutely recast themselves in the context of mountaineering and development, by portraying an 'authentic Sherpa image' tailored to Western expectations. Sherpas in SNP have thus over the years been very successful in attracting funds for *bikās* activities such as schools and the renovation of *gompas* from private sponsors and NGOs.

Huber and Pedersen (1997) also scrutinize recent Tibetan claims to an innate and systematic traditional ecological wisdom, which is phrased in the scientific language of ecology and environmental protection, and advanced by "inventing their ancestors in their own image". These green Tibetans, including the Dalai Lama himself, employ such keywords as 'sustainable development' and 'nature conservation', evident in the oft-repeated significance of the fact that four of Asia's major river systems originate on the Tibetan plateau.<sup>28</sup> The authors contrast a modern form of

<sup>28</sup> Martin (1997), for example, presents the proceedings of a conference held in New Delhi entitled 'Ecological Responsibility: A dialogue with Buddhism' featuring a poem and statement on universal responsibility by the Dalai Lama. Similarly, WWF organized a 'World Religions and Ecology' book series on each of the major world faiths. Pedersen (1995) critiques this 'religious environmentalist paradigm' as a signifier of identity in the modern world, and lists references to the Hindu caste system as an 'ecological space' and God's different 'functions' for all living things to be found in Islam.

quantified knowledge about the environment, with a locally grounded observation of the weather as found in historical Tibet. Crucially, for Huber and Pedersen, the characteristically ‘Tibetan’ apprehension of the environment in both Buddhism and Bon is evident in the pre-modern system of (shamanic) hail-protectors involving territorial closure, and has always been concerned with “the impersonal moral law of karma which binds beings in unsatisfactory cyclic existence” (1997: 584-5).

In much the same way, at the meeting described above, numerous philosophical incompatibilities inevitably persisted in the alliance of diverse actors around the concept of world heritage, especially concerning the indefinite protection and permanence of material heritage. Buddhist perceptions of impermanence have in the past also disrupted UNESCO projects for the renovation of temples in Bhutan which came to be negatively perceived as illusory ‘beautification’.<sup>29</sup> To return to Dujardin’s spatial schema mentioned above, while architectural elements in the Bhutanese landscape sometimes act as stone markers to help form new cultural allegiances across different geographical scales, other fundamental questions regarding deeply held Buddhist attitudes towards material cultural property must be addressed:

The Buddhist doctrine of the impermanent character and condition of all modes of existence has never associated buildings with eternity. Like other aspects of material culture, architecture does not escape from this same wheel of existence (*samsara*)— the cycle of life, death, and rebirth; architecture, too, is subjected to a continuous process of construction, demolition and re-erection. (Dujardin 1998: 1)<sup>30</sup>

So, how universal is the desire to list and categorize ‘heritage sites’? Michael Herzfeld, who has analysed the government protection of a historic town in Greece, notes that “scale is not particularly relevant to the centrality of symbolic classifica-

<sup>29</sup> In one instance, a temple façade was ‘saved’ from partial reconstruction by UNESCO by negotiating the extension of the monastic kitchens at the rear further into the mountain. Intriguingly, the Bhutanese have interpreted the notion of world heritage to potentially include their whole country, stating emphatically: “Bhutan is one of the wonders of the world.” Paradoxically, however, although the small nation has one of the most explicit set of policies to conserve natural and cultural heritage with some 26.23 percent of the country’s total land area as designated protected areas, it has not yet ratified the WH convention.

<sup>30</sup> According to Humphrey, Mongol and Chinese attitudes towards material culture in Inner Mongolia share, despite other manifest differences, a ‘re-generative’ rather than a ‘preservative’ outlook: “buildings, including temples, are not constructed in ways that are conscious of time... buildings are erected and torn down with speed, often being constructed from the bricks and wood of previous ones” (1998: 2).

tion, except perhaps in that vastness of scale may obscure the symbolic aspects of social experience” (1992: 68). The key issue for the heritage endeavour, he argues, is to identify the power differentials in the motives and interests of those “who do the reifying”, not the mere fact of singling out a heritage object itself. This point is echoed by Tibetologists such as Ramble (1995) in their analysis of Buddhist mandala models of nature which, despite an obvious hegemonic tendency to classify, must also be flexible enough to incorporate idiosyncratic experience at the level of individual lives as well as wider cultural memory.

According to Marilyn Strathern, the main conundrum facing the study of culture in the late twentieth century has therefore been one of *excess* at the heart of the cultural critique, leading logic to be forever trying to ‘catch up’ with the facts. As she points out, “culture exceeds itself (nature vanishes) and, outcultivated, culture is manifest as style” (1992: 5-6). Amongst the plethora of culturally derived descriptions of nature, the UNESCO WH Convention portrays itself as the “only international convention that protects both nature and culture together”. During the WH nomination of Dolpo outlined here, the Convention thus required social actors from Dolpo to literalize descriptions of themselves as heritage objects. In the process, symbolic literalization did not only bring a particular (Bonpo minority) culture to national attention, but simultaneously cast new light on nature according to the, inevitably, culturalist logic of the global convention.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, does the above instance provide any insights into Diemberger’s question regarding the impact of national parks on pre-existing mythical narratives in the Himalayas? What emerges from the re-presentation of Dolpo as a potential WH cultural landscape? In the institutional process of configuring diverse Tibetan perceptions of landscape according to the fixed criteria for world heritage, was there a marked resistance from the local protagonists? This did not appear to be the case. The long history of the compromise between orthodox Buddhist doctrine and popular forms of Bon described above may suggest an unstable interface. Following the lead of the Bonpo globalization of morality for a Western audience (especially by the Ligmincha Institute), the ambitious scale of the universal vision of UNESCO in fact provided ample opportunity for new myth-making exercises in world heritage ordered space.

In the light of a Tibetan-derived worldview, elements of vernacular landscape perception were thus re-fashioned into new narrative assemblages. During the meeting in Kathmandu, any site included on the WH list was deemed to be ‘in very exclusive company’, a turn of phrase used to particular rhetorical effect by the UNESCO

representative.<sup>31</sup> In a systematization analogous to Buddhist orthodoxy, the WH convention can in this way be seen to ‘bind by oath’ through the commitment to maintain a site in perpetuity. Comparable to the phenomenological conversion of a *gnas* into a transcendental Buddhist *stupa* template, a WH site is bequeathed with a halo or unique aura.<sup>32</sup> Parallel to the process of Buddhicization, the codification of world heritage discourse transforms a site through an auratic museum effect. “Once the mountain has become completely Buddhicized, the pilgrim acts as if he were in a temple”, Buffetrille remarks (1998: 24).

Nevertheless, as Huber (1998) has alerted us with reference to the Chinese-derived narrative around the Tibetan pilgrimage site of Shar Dung-ri, political and economic power interests will never be far away in such acts of symbolic appropriation. Similarly, McKay’s historical examination of the perspectives on Mount Kailash held by Hindu pilgrims, who perceived themselves to be in a ‘wilderness’ outside the state of India, reminds us that this was a view heavily influenced by British colonial officers’ image of a desirable sacred site deployed to help spread revenue to frontier districts. McKay thus points out that a close connection persists between religious topography and taxable areas, such that “the expansion and growth of a pilgrimage place beyond the merely local... depends upon it being drawn into a dominant model of sacred landscape imposed by a universal religion, a model which doubles as a landscape of control—a sphere of authority, ordered, taxed, and made subject” (1998: 15).

The outlook of the WH convention reflects a scale of global universality which seeks to recognize sites of paramount significance for all of humanity: a supreme act of reification and all-encompassing authority. A key mediator and cultural translator in the process, such as Lama Yesang, used the opportunity strategically to essentialize Bon culture and the hidden valleys of Dolpo as being “as endangered as the snow leopard”. In so doing, he may also have been increasing his own moral and karmic merit, publicly predicting that “two hundred and fifty years from

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<sup>31</sup> Raju from the WWF later commented during a presentation at the Ministry of Tourism that “The Sagarmatha National Park is one of the world heritage sites, in the Khumbu region so much known all over the world. For the mountaineers, for the trekkers, wildlife people, for almost everyone who loves Nepal. Khumbu is the name which originated from the peak of *Khumbi-yul-lha*... the peak names are after the gods. Gauri Shanker are also other names for Parvati and Shiva. Some people like to call Gauri Shanker as ‘Olympus of the East’.”

<sup>32</sup> Social anthropologists have often observed that aesthetics are crucial to classificatory practices and gild such exercises with feelings of satisfaction, such that “bureaucratic logic is pleasurable when it accomplishes successful classifications” (Handelman 1998: xlix).

now a lama will be born who will recover the books and texts and build seven monasteries in the area.” In the case of the Dolpo nomination, universal world heritage status may perhaps be viewed as one further mechanism for Tibetan populations to form allegiances with powerful allies in the taming of the land and the reaffirmation of their protection of the treasures of the earth.

## Acronyms

ACAP	Annapurna Conservation Area Programme
DNPWC	Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation
DOA	Department of Archaeology
HMG	His Majesty’s Government of Nepal
ICIMOD	International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development
ICOMOS	International Council on Monuments and Sites
IUCN	World Conservation Union
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
MOSFC	Ministry of Soils and Forest Conservation
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
SNP	Sagarmatha National Park
SPNP	Shey Phoksumdo National Park
WWF	World Wide Fund for Nature

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