

TWO 12-YEAR FESTIVALS IN THE THAAK KHOLA

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Preface

It behoves me to mention at the outset that my profession is not that of a cultural -- anthropologist;¹ however, having an insatiable avocational interest in the field, it was a particular pleasure to be invited by a friend, Shailendra Bahadur Thakali, to witness two traditional religious ceremonies enacted only once every twelve years by the inhabitants of a small geographic area.

The first event, the *Lha Phewa*,² has had its program outlined in a cursory fashion by Jest,³ and its history detailed by Gauchan a nd Vinding.⁴ I propose to fill a gap by providing a more detailed description of the diurnal events that could serve to both compare activities with previous festivals as well as avail to professionals in this area a useful record.

1. The author is a sport administrator/coach from Canmore, Canada, doing research as a post graduate Mahendra Scholar with Tribhuvan University, and lending part-time assistance to the National Sports Council.

2. Cf, Tib. *hla* - god; *phe-pa* - coming. Thus, 'Coming of the God'.

3. Jest, "La Fête des clans chez les Thâkâlis: Spre-lo (1968)".

4. Gauchan and Vinding, "The History of the Thakaali According to the Thakaali Tradition".

The second event, the *Pomo Ama*,⁵ has never been seen -- let alone recorded -- by any outsiders in its 800 year history. Thus, I intend by my reporting to fuel the appetite of scholars.

In concert with my opening remarks I trust the following pages will add to the cultural -- heritage of Nepal, and that full-time students in this domain will forgive any errors or omissions occasioned by this humble research.

Location

Both events take place in the Thaak Khola area of the Mustang Zone of Nepal. *Lha Phewa* is indigenous to the Thaaksatsae social region, while the *Pomo Ama* is unique to the Paanchgaun⁶ social region, specifically to the village of Thini.⁷

Lha Phewa

Historical Background⁸

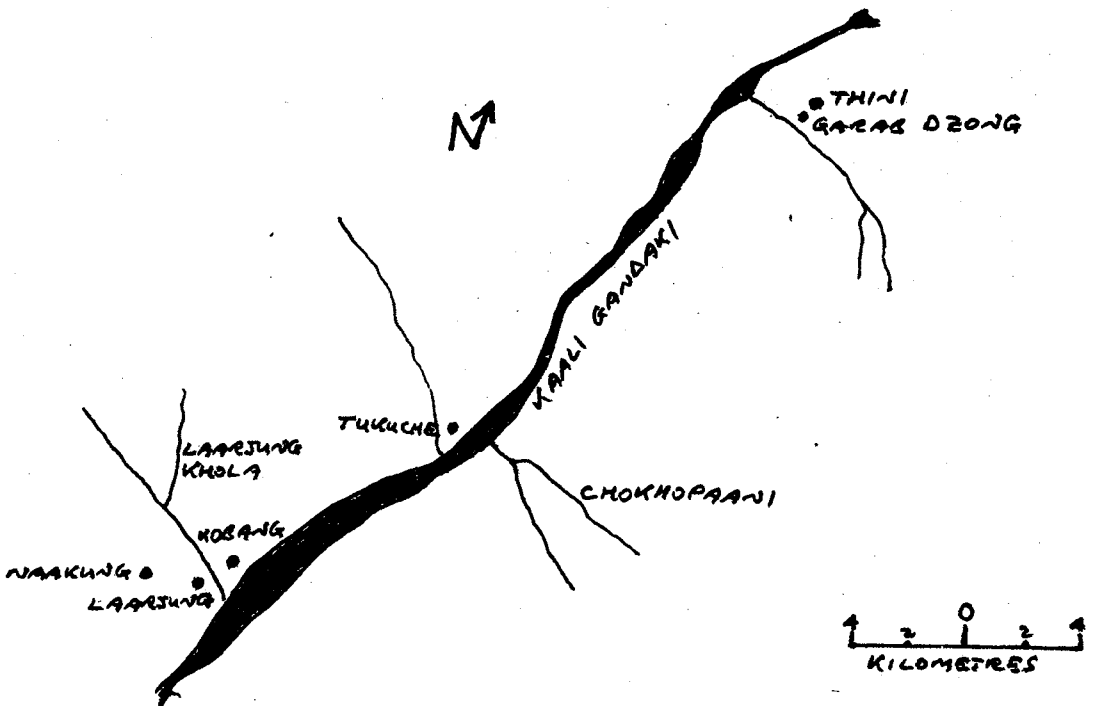
The Thaaksatsae social region is inhabited by four clans -- Gauchan, Tulaachan, Sherchan, Bhattachan -- each having its own deity. Once every twelve years, in the Bird Years of the

5. Cf. Tib. *pu-mo* - daughter; *a-ma* - mother. Thus, 'Daughter Mother' or the suggested implied translation 'Provider'.

6. Detailed information on these social regions is provided in Bista, "People of Nepal", pp. 86-97, Gauchan, and Vinding, "The History of ...", pp. 97-101; and Vinding, "The Local Oral Tradition About the Kingdom of Thin Garab Dzong", p. 193.

7. Thimi is also referred to as "Thin" by locals, "Thinaang" by others in the Thaak Khola, "Thinigaun" by people outside the Thaak Khola and "Sumbo" by Tibetans.

8. For a detailed background paper refer to Gauchan and Vinding, "The History of".



Rabjung,⁹ the four clans collectively celebrate and worship their deities. Last year the event was from January 6 to 20, 1981 of the Roman Calendar. In preparation for the occasion, clan members from all over Nepal congregated in their native region to partake in the celebrations.

Each clan has its own *paande*,¹⁰ whose position is usually inherited from father to son, and who is responsible for taking care of the *hlakhang*¹¹ as well as the *rhab*¹² of his own clan. For the duration of the festival each *paande* is dressed in his respective clan colour.

The subsequent summary should assist the reader in following the text:

<u>Clan Name</u>	<u>Colour</u>	<u>Deity</u>	<u>Deity's Name</u>
Gauchan	Red	Elephant	Lha Laangbaa Nhurbu ¹³
Tulaachan	Green	Water Monster	Lha Chhyuring Ghyalmo ¹⁴
Sherchan	White	Lion	Lha Ghanglaa Singi Karpol ¹⁵
Bhattachan	Black	Yak	Lha Hyawaa Rhangjyung ¹⁶

9. According to the Tibetan calendar, time is reckoned in cycles, that of 12 years known as *lo khor* and that of 60 years as *rab-byung* (*Rabjung*) or *long kham*.

10. *Paande* is the local historian/priest.

11. cf. Tib. *lha-khang* - god's house or temple.

12. cf. Tib. *rab* - history.

13. cf. Tib. *gLang-po nor-bu* - jewel elephant.

14. cf. Tib. *Chhu-srin rgyal-mo* - water monster queen.

15. cf. Tib. *Gangs - la seng-ge dkar-mo* - white lioness of the glacier.

16. cf. Tib. *gYale - ba rang-byung* - self-created yak.

Proceedings

Day 1

The paandes removed the deity images from their homes (where these symbols remain between festivals) and amidst reserved pomp led a small procession to Chokhopani. The latter is a sacred creek north of Tukuche, wherein the images are placed for an overnight cleansing in holy water. Accompanying the paandes were eight boys about 10 years of age, dressed in the colours of their clans, and carrying associated objects such as salt and juniper branches. One adult per clan also went along simply to do the actual carrying of the image for his paande.

Day 2

Few people minded waiting until 1:30 in the afternoon, when the paandes finally arrived from Chokhopani at the outskirts of Kobang, bearing with them the deity images. About 150 eager onlookers awaited them, while a like number took in the program from the flat rooftops of the village.

Notwithstanding that the Lha Phewa was an equitably shared arrangement by the four clans, the Bhattachan paande prominently assumed the limelight: indeed, were it not for his antics, the rest of the occasion might not have proved as interesting. Representing a yak, he was girdled by twelve bells which he caused to ring by rhythmically shuffling along rather than walking like the others. An assistant periodically gave sips of water to the paande from a special gourd.

Having entered Kobang proper, the colourful group proceeded to a village square. There ensued a quarter hour "yak display", with the Bhattachan paande shuffling forward about 3 metres, putting his face into a bowl of

salt, shuffling backward, throwing some salt with his fingers into the excited crowd pronouncing *chhyoe chhyoe*,¹⁷ drinking from a gourd, and successively repeating these actions several times. Thereafter, the procession climbed a hill directly above Kobang to the Hlakhang of Lha Hyawaa Rhaangjyung, wherein the Bhattachan paande recited from his clan's rhab. Fifteen minutes later the visitation continued further up the hill to the Hlakhang of Lha Ghanglaa Singi Karpo for a similar performance by the Sherchan paande.

At last, with the gathering of enthusiastic supporters, a group of about 50 filed up a narrow trail to the source of the sacred Laarjung Khola. This source is referred to as a 'cave', but in reality is just an overhang. Here, the Sherchan paande chanted sonorously from his rhab. Later, each of the four paandes took his deity image from an attendant and placed it in a depression near the source. According to legend, the source was to be dry, with water starting to flow in 3 days: such would prove the tremendous power of the gods. Unfortunately water was already flowing. Never mind! A quick, on-the-spot plug job resolved the quandary and the images were able to be reposed in the now dry bed.

Days 3 to 5

By the third day of their respite, the gods did cause the water to flow and fill up the depression in which they were resting. During these 3 days no religious programs were held, though interesting but unrelated ethnic dances were performed at various times by regional residents.

17. cf. Tib. mChod mChod - an expression of offering to deities.

Also, as of late evening on Day 3, all four paandes retired under an overhang just outside Laarjung to observe a 9 day retreat.

Days 6 to 11

These days allowed a leisurely schedule for some Lamas to repaint or touch up the deity images as required. As the masks entailed elaborate design of 6 colours, all this time was necessary to carefully refinish them. This activity lacked enough interest to attract but a handful of spectators at any one time. Afternoons and evenings were used for festival related drama recitals in which the rhab were retold, and the clans' histories refreshed in everyone's memory.

Much of the idle time was taken up by socializing: renewing relationships, meeting new acquaintances, eating and drinking as well as catching up on gossip from various parts of the country.

Day 12

A special invitation was extended to me to visit the Hlakhang of Lha Chhyuring Ghyalmo at Nakung to observe Hari Dhoj Tulachan, an eminent Lama, do a final touching up of the masks for the benefit of Royal Nepal Film.

Immediately afterwards I accompanied some officials to the overhang that the paandes had been occupying. We were offered coloured *sel* and *cikari roti*¹⁸ as an expression of their hospitality.

On a nearby field, villagers were busy constructing the bodies of the gods. Built from saplings and tied with

18. *Sel Roti* is a doughnut shaped salted bread, while *cikari roti*, is a small pancake shaped unseasoned hard bread.

natural twine, the bodies resembled small quonset huts with colourful cloth coverings and decorations.

It was not before 5:00 p.m. that amidst gaiety, laughter, commotion and rejoicing the deity images were brought forth from the temples to be attached to their bodies in the field. Virtually every household and guest was out to observe this highlight of the festival. Once again the Bhattachan paande performed his "yak display", this time without the salt.

Each paande then led his clansmen to their respective god and affixed the mask -- head to the body. Then each group thrust long poles up the sides of the body in order to elevate it; now, to enthusiastic chanting and clapping, the clans paraded one behind the other in a circle. The gods were complete!

As the sun hid behind the massive Dhaulagiri I, the gods were laid to rest in the field, and another evening of merrymaking ensued.

Days 13 to 14

Relaxed as the pace was anyhow, it began to wind down on these penultimate days. Officially there was no program, and with many returning to their distant homes, even social events were few and far between. The residents and remaining visitors now impatiently awaited the Full Moon -- the last day.

Day 15

In a final surge of energy, all congregated once more in the field to watch clansmen detach the deities' heads from the bodies. Each paande then led a procession to his respective temple to deposit the images. Of course, once

the festival is over, the images will be transferred to the paandes' homes for safekeeping.

Everyone now went his own way and, while the *Lha Phewa* will not occur again until 1993 there will be ample opportunities for other merry -- making and religious observances.

POMO AMA

Historical Background¹⁹

The origin of this event can be traced back to about the third cycle of the Rabjung, 1147 to 1206 A.D. To date no written record of this story has been found; thus the following is a written account of an 800 year old oral tradition.

At Bauddha Gaya in India, a cowboy tending his cows notices that one cow consistently has empty breasts. Frustrated and curious, the cowboy follows the animal in its pasture. Approaching a certain sandalwood tree, the cow gave it all its milk. A now insatiable quest for the reason leads the cowboy to dig up the tree and from below, the goddess Pomo Ama appeared.

Having been brought into the sentient world, Pomo Ama decided to meditate at Bauddha Gaya and at the same time took an oath not to ever marry or look at man.

In spite of strict adherence to her oath, Pomo Ama miraculously became pregnant. She was surprised and worried: but a beautiful son was born to her and leapt to the right side of her face.

19. The author is indebted to Mr. Krishna Lal Thakali for his recounting of this version of the oral tradition.

The goddess soon begot another child, a daughter; she leapt to the left side of Pomo Ama's face. A man then approached proclaiming that it was he who miraculously fathered the children; he then leapt above the goddess' head.

Now in Garab Dzong²⁰ there was the Khe Rhan Laang Gum,²¹ master of magic. He dreamt one day of the appearance of Pomo Ama at Bauddha Gaya. The Khe transposed himself to that holy place to convince the goddess to move to Garap Dzong, the land of juniper, where he and all others would worship her.

Pomo Ama obliged, but soon growing tired of the place returned to Bauddha Gaya. The Khe flew to fetch the goddess once again. She did come, but within a short while repeated her escape. Yet again the Khe entreated Pomo Ama to come back to Garab Dzong, and then in anger placed a trident of iron upon her to prevent her from leaving the place without his permission.

The goddess then informed the Khe that she could grant the local people three wishes: longevity, property and progeny, adding that the people could ask for just one of the three blessings every 12 years.

Upon hearing this, the Khe pondered about the long time to elapse between the granting of these requests; he therefore enquired of Pomo Ama whether she would agree to

20. cf. Tib. *Dga' rab rdzong* - happy fort. Garab Dzong is an ancient kingdom about 1 kilometre southwest of Thini. The place now is just ruins. For an interesting recently discovered history of that area, refer to Jackson, "Notes on the History of Se-Rib, and Nearby places in the Upper Kali Gandaki Valley", pp. 206-210.

21. *Khe* is best translated as ancestor.

a duplicate image, made of brass and gold, which could act on behalf of the goddess in intervening years. Pomo Ama consented, and because of her generosity the people prospered and were always happy. The name of the goddess' duplicate is Tong Tan Beo.²²

It so happened that the bad spirits became jealous of both the goddess as well as the people and began to interfere. Consequently all good deeds were stopped and for many years problems and unhappiness prevailed.

At last, the Khe Rhan Laang Gum consulted with Pomo Ama about this sad situation. The goddess counseled the formation of Te Tang Beo,²³ the controller of bad spirits. Since that time the inhabitants have again been happy.

The celebration of the event this year was from April 19 to May 3, 1981 of the Roman calendar.

Proceedings

Day 1

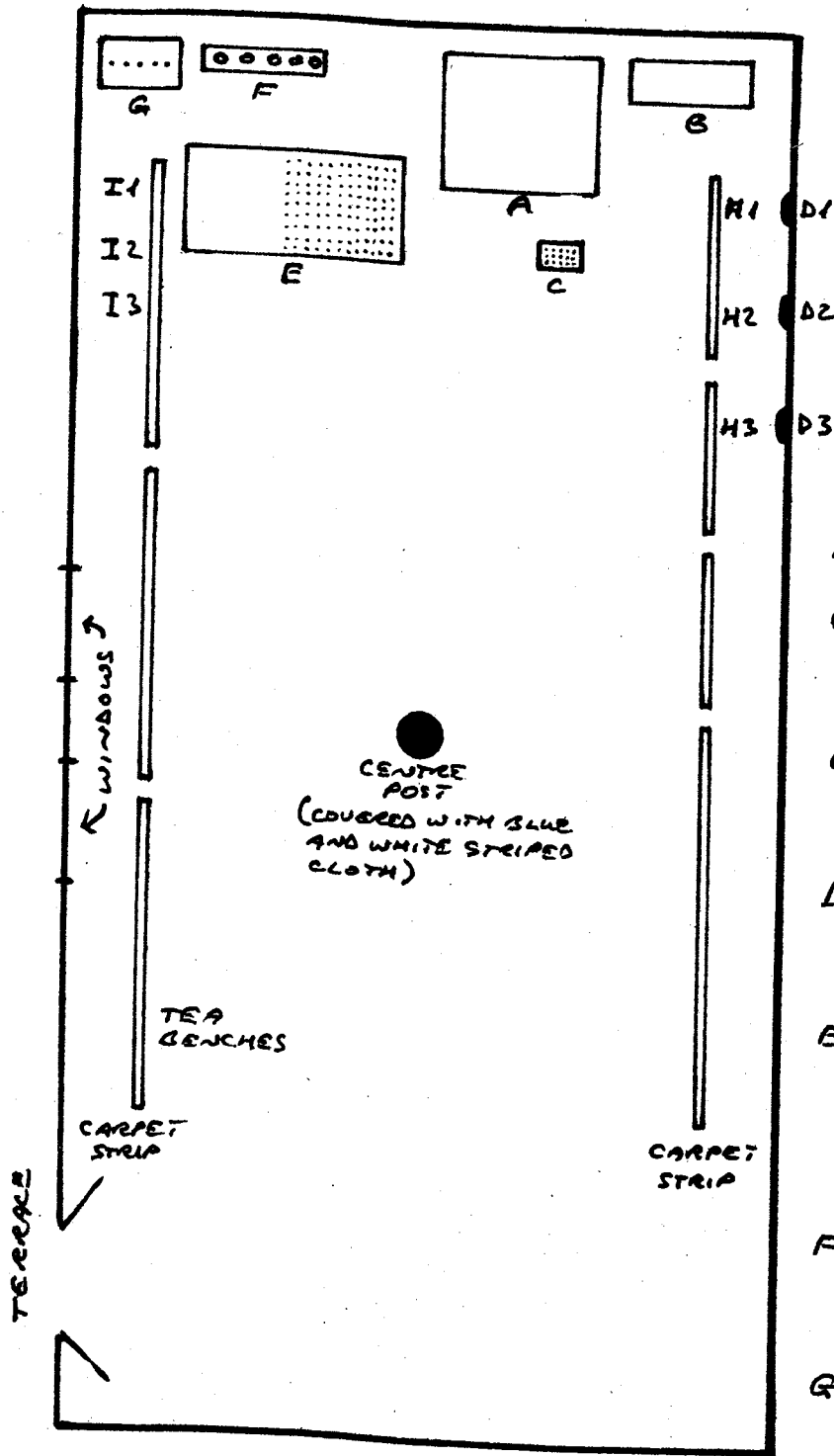
10:00 a.m. Participants (and myself as the only onlooker) began to congregate in the Hlaxhang. Anyone could enter providing footwear was removed. This rule was lax though and even talking and coin-gambling by children was tolerated.

12:25 p.m. The ceremony officially commenced with four drummers beating for 5 minutes on the terrace outside the temple.

22. The origin or meaning of *Tong Tan Beo* is not known to the author.

23. The origin or meaning of *Te Tang Beo* is not known to the author.

HLAKHANG OF POMO AMA



- A: ALTAR
- B: CUPBOARD WITH JUNIPER BRANCHES BEHIND AND ON TOP
- C: TABLE WITH 15 BUTTER LAMPS
- D: DRUMS HANGING ON WALL
- E: TABLE WITH 108 BUTTER LAMPS AND FOOD
- F: TABLE WITH 5 FLOWER POTS
- G: TABLE WITH 5 BUTTER LAMPS AND JUNIPER

Scale: 1.5cm = 1.0m

H: PRIESTS

I: ELAERS

12:30 p.m. Three priests officiated. Priest #1 was dressed in lama garb while the other two were attired in *daura suruwal*²⁴ with western type suit jacket. Priest #2 beat Drum #3 at the start and finish of a successively repeated chant in Thaakali.

12:40 p.m. Except for the three priests and three elders facing them, all were requested to leave the temple. For the next 15 minutes, the four drummers outside continued beating, while inside some unexplained esoteric exercise ensued.

12:55 p.m. Upon re-entering, everyone had to *Chhyaphul*,²⁵ some did this once, while others repeated it up to 15 times.

1:05 p.m. Prior to the unveiling of Pomo Ama, the priests covered their mouths and noses, priest #1 using part of his robe, priest #2 using a *khaataa*,²⁶ and priest #3 using his *topi*.

1:10 p.m. Priest #2 unboxed and partially uncovered the sandalwood Pomo Ama, and removed five necklaces from her. Each necklace was composed of several pieces of one kind of stone; each necklace had different stones from the others; and each necklace was longer in necklace -- circumference than the previous.

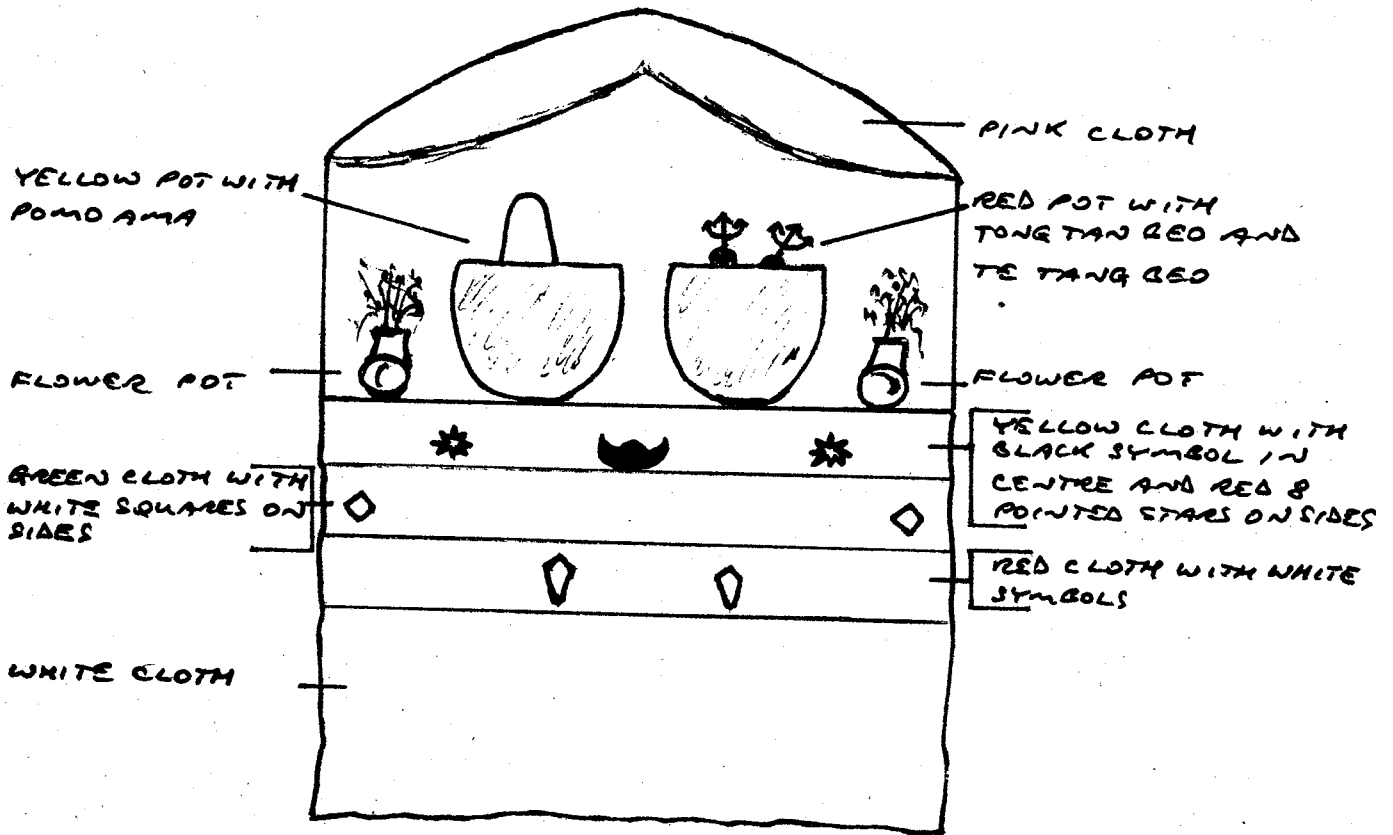
Finally the whole body was uncovered, exhibited to the people, and drenched in milk -- water. Admirants tossed rice grains in respect.

24. A typical Nepali dress with the string-tied shirt and wide-waisted pants with tight legs.

25. cf. Tib. *chha-tshe-wa* - prostrate oneself. This reverent action is done by cupping the hands in the lotusbud or *namaskar* position; putting the hands successively above the head, at head level, and to heart level; genuflecting; prostrating.

26. cf. Tib. *Kha-btags* - a white scarf worn to honour, or given to felicitate.

ALTAR OF POMO AMA



Next, the duplicate goddess Tong Tan Beo and the spirit controller Te Tang Beo were unveiled without the accoutrements and ceremony associated with Pomo Ama.

1:20 p.m. For 10 minutes priest #2 recounted the oral history.

1:30 p.m. In the closing minutes the faithful queued up to be blessed as follows:

1. Touched on head by Pomo Ama
2. Touched on head by Tong Tan Beo
3. Given milk-water, that had been poured over Pomo Ama, in hand; part of this was drunk, the remainder being smeared onto one's hair.
4. Given milk-water *tika*²⁷ onto forehead.

1:45 p.m. The goddesses were partially covered again, replaced in their boxes -- though with the lids off -- and positioned in the altar pots.

1:50 p.m. Concludes.

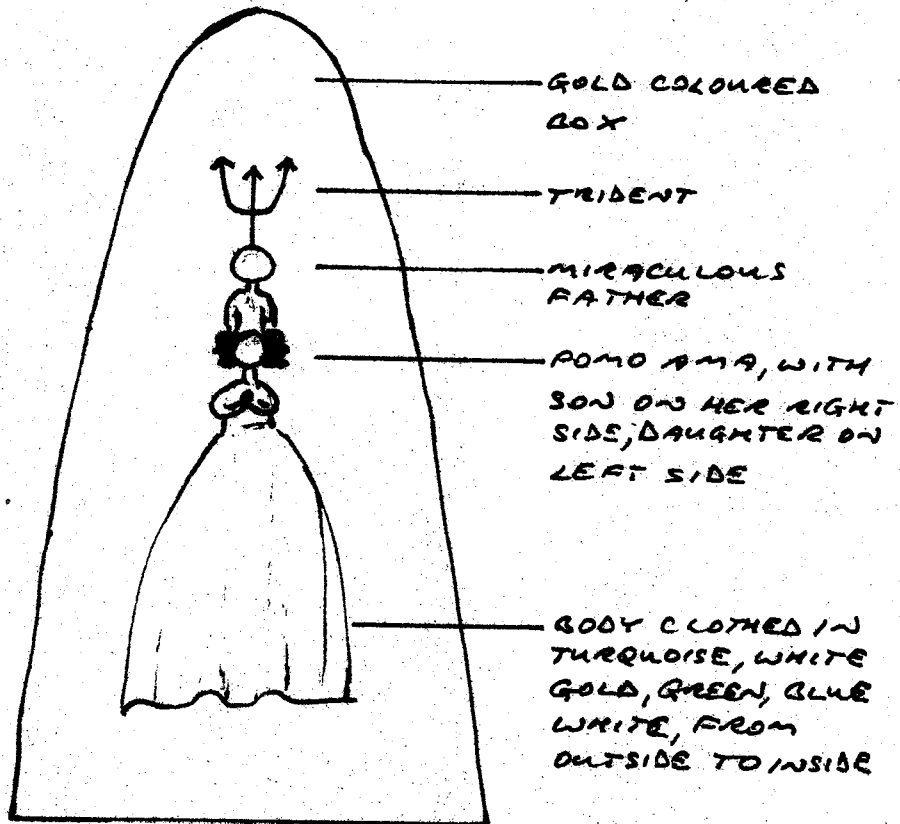
Days 2 to 14

These days, identical in the rituals observed, served to permit ex-inhabitants of Thini as well as the most reverent people, to pay a pilgrimage to the Hlakhang.

6:00 a.m. All three images -- Pomo Ama, Tong Tan Beo, Te Tang Beo -- were held in the hands of the priests and shown to the 25 to 30 present.

27. cf. Tib. *Thik-pa* - spot.

BOX WITH POMO AMA



SIZE OF GODDESS IS ABOUT 3/4 CM. x 5 CM.

Concurrently monotonous chanting accompanied the ceremony, broken only by intermittent drumming on the terrace. The body of Pomo Ama was uncovered, and henceforth all the proceedings paralleled those starting at 1:10 p.m. on Day 1.

9:30 a.m. Concludes.

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