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## CHAPTER 5

### **People and Environmental Interrelationship in Tibetan Culture**

This chapter identifies how Tibetans' local knowledge (also referred to as traditional knowledge) is related to their religious belief to protect their environment. Firstly, the vital role of mountain and water deities in Tibetans' life is examined. Secondly, the importance of worship rites and rituals in the daily lives of herders and their families are shown. The chapter concludes with an exploration of the meaning of 'mother earth' in Tibetan traditional belief as an analysis of the place and role local (traditional) knowledge has in relation to environmental conservation on the Tibetan Plateau.

#### **5.1 Mountain and Water Deities on the Tibetan Plateau**

In Tibetan Buddhism, all aspects of this earth's physical environment are alive, for example, mountains, rivers, the grass, birds, fish and insects are all considered living organisms deserving of respect. Although these are not human life, according to the Dharma, all lives are equal. To take life is considered the action resulting in the worst karma. Similarly, if someone does good things, they will have a good karma resulting in a good rebirth. While it is permissible to kill a domestic animal for family consumption, hunting of wild animals for any reason is not acceptable. A person who does this will go to hell in his or her next life or be reborn as an animal.

Particularly, Tibetan herders do not dare to dig the natural resources from the mountains and/or to pollute the rivers since they believe that these mountains and rivers all are possessed by deities. Tibetans regard mountain deities as the master of land, and water deities as the master of the waterways. Therefore, as Tibetans, we believe it is necessary to pay our respect to the mountain and water deities since we need to depend on land and water to survive on this earth.

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The mountain deity, known as ‘Sa Bdag’, has his own jurisdiction to protect a group of people. Tibetans believe that mountain deities have different positions and powers in accordance of their jurisdiction scales. The jurisdiction scales can be divided into the village, township, county, prefecture and regional levels. For example, some mountain deities are worshiped locally, while others are worshiped regionally. Therefore, the mountain deities’ position and power is also based on their jurisdiction scales. Tibetans believe that the mountain deities are male deities, who are very tall and they ride horses to send different messages into people’s dreams.

As mountain deities are masters of the land, the water deity known as ‘Khlu’, are masters of the Tibetan waterways and equally deserving of worship and respect. The ‘Khlu’ are everywhere in the rivers, seas and lakes; the springs and headstreams become their palaces. To dig or pollute those places will offend and raise anger from ‘Khlu’, and the anger creates various kinds of diseases, flooding and erosion; hence protecting the springs and headstreams is seen as the way to keep the ‘Khlu’ happy and calm. The trees beside the waters are called ‘khlu sdong, meaning the tree of Khlu, and people offer ‘Kha Btags’ (ceremonial white scarves of respect) to these trees. These trees cannot be cut down all creatures living near the ‘Khlu Sdong’ or in the water such as snakes, fish and turtles are seen to be physical representations of the ‘Khlu’ and liquids such as milk for snakes and alcohol for the water life are offered. People will never build, wash clothes, urinate or damage plants near the headstream, in respect for and fear of offending the Khlu

In this way, the deities are central to Tibetan life. In all life aspects, for example, birth, marriage, planting and harvest times, setting out on a new venture, Tibetans will go to worship and request the deities to give them blessings, protection and prosperity.

## **5.2 Worship, Rites and Ritual Practices of Tibetan People**

Worship of deities comprises of many different rites and rituals. As a traditional Tibetan myself, I practice these rites and rituals, and in my interviews with herders in my two field sites, the interrelationship between the environment and their religious belief was constantly apparent. In specific, altars, pilgrimages, livestock and funeral

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rites have relevance to Tibetan traditional belief interrelated to their environment.

### Altars – ‘Lab ze’



**Figure 5.1** The mountain deities’ altars

Tibetan people build altars (Lab Ze) to offer various foods to mountain deities. As Tibetans believe that mountain deities live on the top of the mountains, people construct a ‘Lab Ze’ to make the religious offering. The ‘Lab Ze’ is always Shaped square often made of stones and bricks.

Wooden arrows, spears and swords are placed inside and it represents the palace for the deity of that mountain.

Worship at the ‘lab ze’ is believed to engender the mountain deity to be benevolent to those living in its environs; to give good luck, good health, harmony in the community, prosperity and peaceful life. Mountain deities have the power over environmental forces such as climate, seasons, and natural disasters. Contrarily, if people do not show their respect in the form of worship, deities then the mountain will bring bad fortune and unexpected natural disasters to both individuals and the communities to which they belong .

### Pilgrimages

Pilgrimage practice is another way to worship mountain deities. In Tibetan, the pilgrimage is called ‘Kora’ or ‘Nekor’. Actually, pilgrimage means a ‘circumambulation’ or ‘revolution’ made by pilgrims to cleanse themselves from bad luck. This kind of belief is still widely practiced among Tibetan people today. Pilgrimages take two forms; one to the holy city of Lhasa in the Tibetan Autonomous Region and the second to sacred sites in people’s own local areas. Tibetans believe that the practice of pilgrimage is the way to express their most honest hearts to the Lord Buddha and mountain and water deities.

For the pilgrimage to Lhasa, those who live in other regions of Tibet often need to spend several months or even a year to arrive to Lhasa by ‘walking’ or ‘full body’s prostration’. Pilgrimage by walking has less challenge for the pilgrims compared to full body’s prostration. Normally, young pilgrims choose full body prostration, while older pilgrims will walk. Even so, both pilgrimages encounter various challenges and difficulties and respect and admiration is given to all adherents.



**Figure 5.2** Local herders doing the pilgrimages around Saizong Temple

While a person may only do a pilgrimage to Lhasa once in their lifetime, many will also undertake several pilgrimages around sacred mountains and waterways within their local regions. In Xinghai County, herders from Gser Thang and Rna

Thang regularly undertake pilgrimages to Saizong Temple located in the Saizong Valley surrounded by a sacred mountain range. Saizong Temple is very mysterious for people, because there are many natural images on the face of its surrounding mountains such as snakes and birds as well as the Lord Buddha. Unlike the many months needed for a pilgrimage to Lhasa, it only takes a half day for a walking pilgrimage to the Saizong Valley with three circumambulations around the temple and five to seven days for a full body prostration pilgrimage.



**Figure 5.3** Some of my relatives on the pilgrimage along the Amyi Rma Chin in October, 2014.

Herders from these two rangelands also make pilgrimages around Amyi Rma Chin, a holy mountain within Guoluo Prefecture. They travel as a group, which might be among their friends, relatives or family to spend five days (walking) or half a month (prostration) commemorated to the worship of mountain deities in Tibet.

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During my fieldwork in this year, I observed a number of Tibetans leave their homes for up to six months to undertake pilgrimages during this auspicious time. I, included, joined my parents, brother and extended family on a walking pilgrimage to Amyi Rma Chin in October 2014.



**Figure 5.4** my extended families burying the wheat and barley on the mountainside

This kind of pilgrimage is not only practiced by young adults and elders, but also among the youngsters whose ages are above five. Interestingly, these pilgrims don't eat meat or drink alcohol when making their pilgrimages around holy mountains, because they strongly believe that this is the way to show their respect to the mountain deities. Restaurants in the locale of the holy mountains especially cater for the pilgrims by offering only vegetarian menus. Many pilgrims bring special offerings of wheat, barley and ore which they bury on the mountainside believing that their offering will bring nutrition to the ground soil.

### Livestock

In the Tibetan rangeland, we frequently see livestock wearing small bells around their necks producing a harmonious, relaxing and unique sound. These livestock are very relaxed and feel free because they are the offerings of herders to the local deities, meaning they are protected and blessed by the local deities. To harm them in any way is as if blaspheming the deities. These animals are called 'srung zog'; 'srung' means to protect and 'zog' is a general word for livestock such as yak, horse and sheep. They are also called 'lha zog' the blessed one; they are protected to live their own life by their own choosing. It is common religious practice for herding families to offer one of their 'zog' as a special offering to the deity in this way. The ceremony begins by inviting a lama to the home to choose the animal to be 'pardoned from all work unto its natural death'. Often the whole community will join in this special celebration. The 'srung zog' are easily recognizable on the open rangeland, as besides the bells on their neck, they have much longer horns and fur, and have their ear pierced with

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colorful cloth strips (their fur cannot be cut; it must be allowed to fall naturally). Even thieves and bandits will not put their hands on those ‘srung zog’, ensuring their lifelong protection.

### Funeral Rites

Both the white and black vulture are considered as a blessed bird which are connected to human life. Traditionally, when a Tibetan dies, his or her body will be offered to the vultures. If the vultures descend and eat the corpse, this is deemed auspicious that the person who died was a good person who did many good deeds in his or her life and surviving family will be blessed. Adversely, if the vultures do not attend to the corpse, this is deemed that the person who died had committed many bad deeds in his or her life and is a bad omen for



**Figure 5.5** Vultures – the blessed birds

surviving family members. Tibetan communities wish their dead to have a pleasant journey to the next life; as such, these blessed birds are protected from all harm.

### **5.3 The Mother Earth – Intersection of Local Knowledge and Environmental Conservation**

Related to their religious faith, Tibetans believe that the earth is the mother of humankind, and the water that flows on the earth is the same as mother's blood, meaning we need to love the earth like our mother. Tibetan belief is that if we destroy the earth, it is like we cut our mother's flesh and if we destroy rivers, then it is like we cut our mother's blood vessels. This strong belief system results in most Tibetans not wanting to do or be involved in anything that will cause destruction to the environment. This is how my grandparents and my parents educated me when I was young. This belief was also shared with me by herders I interviewed for this research.

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For example, an elderly herder from Xinghai County explained:

When I was a child, my parents educated me that if I cut down the trees, then my parents' limbs will be paralyzed, or if I killed birds, then my parents also will die. This kind of lesson deeply touched the bottom of my heart. I still remember one story happening in my life; that is one time when I went to fetch water and collect firewood in the mountain area. However, I unexpectedly encountered a snake, then I use my wooden stick to beat that snake, because I was extremely terrified of the snake. At that time, a grandma from my village saw me and she told me that my mother will now suffer because I hurt the snake. I returned home, full of worry, thinking that my mother was suffering. When I got home, I asked my mother whether she had any pains. When my mother said she has no pain, I thought probably the snake had recovered. After that, I promised to myself that I would never again hurt any wild animal (Record of notes taken in interview with XHG5, September 2014).

As this conversation shows, Tibetans are tightly bonded with the environment upon which they are dependent on, and there are very unique and special methods of conservation among their daily life. Tibetans dare not to dig the land, they dare not to cut the trees and destroy the plants, even dare not to urinate on mountains which have the holy "Lab Ze". If one dares to do so, the mountain deities will be angered. Wild animals living on these mountains are deemed to be the holy and protected by the deities, which is the reason that we can see flocks of wild animals comfortably relaxing on these mountains. This traditional belief makes Tibetan people even willing to give up their lives to protect their "Lab Ze" and mountains, believing that unexpected disasters will happen at any time if someone damages the natural resources.

The following passage from Tibetan scripture chanted during offerings to mountain and water deities shows the great concern Tibetans have for their environment. Shown in Tibetan language with English translation, the passage illustrates that if nature is harmed, local deities are offended and this in turn, results in

harm to human and animal populations.

**Figure 5.6** Excerpt from Tibetan Scripture

bdag cag yon mchod khor bcas kyis rdz gnyan g.ya ma bcag pa dang sa gnyan gad pa slog pa dang rtswa gnyan rtsad nas phyung pa dang chu gnyan gting nas dkrug pa dang me la gzhob slog shor shor ba dang chu la btsog pas bsal pa dang ngan shag ku cho byas pa dang ri dwags gcan gzan bsad pa sogs gzhi bdag khyod dang gal gyur ba bya ngan spyod ngan gang byas kun bdud rtse bsang gis bshags bur bgyi	we as your servants know that if we destroy the rocks of the mountains, dig up the soil of the earth, pluck the roots of the grass, stir up the water and dirty the water with substances, kill your creatures, fire will come the odor of burned flesh, neighbors will fight and argue with each other and the bad thing will come to us. For all these bad acts violate and offend your wishes (cited in Tsering Bum, n.d., p. 11)
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Relating this Tibetan scripture to my field site of Gser Thang, all the herding families I interviewed attributed the increasing environmental problems – pikas destroying rangeland grasses, low crop yields, polluted waters and decreased livestock on their rangeland – as punishment imposed by the mountain and water deities of their valley for their failure to properly respect their environment and protect it from the mining company’s activities.

A particularly detrimental aspect of the mining venture in the Gser Thang valley and its surrounds has been that increasingly, the Gser Thang herding community is being denied access to their mountains to practice ancient religious rites and rituals to their mountain deities. The top of the mountain is considered to be the most sacred part for Tibetans, because they believe that the areas where there are no humans are the holiest places. In effect, this denial of access to their most holy places to worship and offer gifts to the deities, is estranging this herder community from the practice of its

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local knowledge as a means of protecting their environment and living harmoniously in their land.

The interconnection of livestock, culture and local knowledge is further impacted by these interrelated spiritual and environmental concerns. Reduced numbers of livestock means the loss of the unique culture of nomadism of these Tibetan herding communities. Tibetan herders cannot live without these plateau livestock, because to live in the frigid climate of the plateau, they must develop resistance to maintain good health, requiring they eat rich foods such as meat, milk, butter, cheese and yogurt that are produced from their livestock, and barley and wheat that are grown in the ground.

Indeed, livestock products are the substance of a unique culture which has been passed down generationally for thousands of years, upon which they depend for their daily life. For example, the dung from sheep and yaks are used to build fires. Herders use sheep and yak wool, as well as the lambskins of the lambs who freeze during the winter, in order to make their traditional clothes. Traditionally, herders only trim the sheep and yak wool for making clothes in consideration for the health of the livestock. Today, loss of livestock means that herders have to rely on outside markets to purchase the staples for their lives that for generations were an integral part of their community.

In an interview in Mo Rdo monastery, a local monk spoke at length of this interconnection of faith, culture and environment:

In recent years, Tibetan environment has worsened although elders are aware of the importance of environment protection. They know that mountains and grasslands should not be destroyed. Nowadays, however, people exploit natural resources for their own benefit. In order to prevent such actions, I think we need to use traditional cultural knowledge and laws. For instance, we can combine the traditional environmental concept and State regulations to make people aware of the importance of mountains, rivers and grasslands. We should further make use of state regulations to fine the companies who are doing illegal mining. Only in this way, can we maintain the sustainable development of the environment. As a monk, especially as a teacher, I always ask people around me to protect our

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environment and culture. I use Buddhist dharma to emphasize the importance of the natural environment and the sin of destroying it. In the future, I hope to establish a grassroots NGO to prevent individuals and groups from destroying the environment and I hope to extend the work greatly. Everyone knows that when we lose our mountains and rivers, we also lose our livestock. And the weakening of our culture is an unavoidable consequence; so many people have moved to cities and start a new kind of life. This is the sign of losing the traditional culture, even the loss of our ethnicity (Record of notes taken in interview with XHM1, September 2014).

The personal accounts and review of traditional herders' lives in this chapter highlights how Tibetans' local knowledge is tightly connected to their religious belief and their environment. It is true that, "knowledge cannot be divorced from the natural and cultural context within which it has arisen, including their traditional lands and resources and their kinship and community relations" (Higgins-Zogib et al, 2010: 173). Further, Yos Santasombat (2003) stated that knowledge is based on someone's belief; for example, the belief that nature is alive and has a soul, like human beings, and this soul will die without the constant loving care, nurture and support from human society. According to Tibetan culture, the Tibetan traditional education passed down orally for generations has protected the environment and created harmony between people and nature in Tibetan communities.

Tibetan culture has long realized that without nature, human beings cannot survive; people depend entirely on the earth to live. Similarly, without minerals, the grasslands and mountains will be empty and unable to survive. Tibetan herders depend on the rangeland and the rangeland depends on minerals; therefore, these minerals need to be protected by the herders and religious leaders. However, the mining company operating in the Gser Thang Valley of Qinghai Province does not value Tibetans' local knowledge, dismissive of their age old beliefs. This has led local herders to attempt to protect their holy mountain by campaigning to local government and the mining company to cease the mining company's expansion that is threatening their livelihood, property and cultural rights.

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The writings of Tsering Bum (n.d.) have relevance here, whereby he claims that the roles of mountain deities are shifting in terms of social-political, cultural, economic and environmental conditions of communities. In the past, holy mountains were only considered within a cultural context, but within a modernist development society, they necessarily need to be considered also in the political context. Hence, local herders are using local (traditional) knowledge and beliefs to negotiate on a political level for the protection of their communities. Their actions support Yos Santasombat's findings that "knowledge production should be seen as a process of social negotiation involving multiple actors and complex power relations and must therefore be understood in terms of change, adaptation and dynamism" (Yos Santasombat, 2003: 43).

#### 5.4 Summary

In Tibetan Buddhism, all aspects of this earth's physical environment are alive, thus to take any living beings' life is considered the action resulting in the worst karma. While it is permissible to kill a domestic animal for family consumption, hunting of wild animals are not acceptable. Similarly, the herders do not dare to dig the natural resources from the mountains and rivers since they believe that these mountains and rivers are possessed by the deities. Tibetans regard mountain deities as the master of land, and water deities as the master of the waterways, so it is necessary to pay respect to the mountain and water deities since humans need to depend on land and water to survive on this earth. Contrarily, interference to the mountains, rivers and trees by human action such as mining, will offend deities resulting in disease, flooding and erosion of herding communities.

The worship of deities comprises of many different rites and rituals. For example, Tibetan people build altars to offer various foods to mountain deities for receive blessings. The practice of pilgrimage is the way to express Tibetan people's most honest hearts to the Lord Buddha and mountain and water deities by walking and full-body prostration. Tibetans will offer some of their livestock to the local deities and those livestock later become holy livestock, meaning they are protected and blessed by the local deities. Funeral rites are also connected to local deities through white and black vultures considered as a blessed or holy bird possessed by the local deities, and Tibetans

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will not harm those birds. Therefore, Tibetans are tightly bonded with the environment upon which they are dependent on, and there are very unique and special methods of conservation among their daily life.

However, all the Gser Thang herding families I interviewed stated that it is now increasingly difficult to protect their surrounding environment by using their local knowledge and rights. The local people believe that pikas destroying rangeland grasses, low crop yields, polluted water and decreased livestock on their rangeland are punishment imposed by the local deities for their failure to properly respect their environment and protect it from the mining company's activities. The mining company denies local herders to access to their holy mountains to practice ancient religious rites.

The interconnection of livestock, culture and local knowledge is further impacted by these interrelated spiritual and environmental concerns. The reduced numbers of livestock means the loss of the unique culture of nomadism of these Tibetan herding communities.