

Dolpo: between myth and reality

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Steep paths carved into rocks and 5000 meters high passes 'connect' Dolpo with the rest of the world, in the few months where they are not closed by snow. The local community has a rich history, characterized by the spiritual appeal of the area and the ancient salt trade between Tibet and Nepal. Their traditional lifestyle is changing rapidly through the infiltration of aid agencies, businessmen, travellers and globalization in general. Depending on the point of view you wish to take, this is a loss of 'authenticity' or a necessary, even welcome reality.

After a failed attempt to take off and a last minute repair on the engine, we and our plane are finally ready to escape the heat of Nepalganj, a city on the Southern plains of Nepal. After a flight over ever higher mountains, we enjoy a bumpy landing on a sloping field full of stones in the village of Juphal, right on the flank of a mountain. For some mysterious reason we have to fill in a *Crime Investigation form* upon our arrival. It reminds me of the period when Dolpo was forbidden for foreigners, not so long ago. Probably the only form they found that was in English, as Dolpo is still not accustomed to receiving many visitors. It is late April 2006, but in the guest book of that year we find only one name: film director Eric Valli. Valli happens to be the man who inspired us to visit Dolpo, with his movie *Himalaya*. The film and the book *The Snow Leopard* by Peter Matthiesen create the image of an authentic community with ancient traditions and a hard, simple and semi-nomadic existence. They speak of hermits in their old monasteries overlooking an endless succession of snowy ridges, quietly painting *thangkas* and meditating. Dolpo approaches the fictional *Lost Horizon*, a novel by James Hilton.

In ancient Juphal, they speak a language which is spoken in only two other villages. Their belief in the gods of nature is reflected in the *dokpas*: wooden dolls with their arms outstretched, placed on bridges and roofs to keep out evil spirits and embrace the good ones. Although the houses resemble Tibetan architecture (flat roofs, multiple levels with terraces), the southernmost part of Dolpo is strongly reminiscent of typical rural Nepal: green hills full of terraces and tea houses where *dhal bhat* (rice with lentils) and *chiya* (milk tea) are served. For three days we walk north along a delicate path through a deep, narrow and uninhabited valley until we arrive in another world: *beyul* or "the hidden world".

Legend

Dho is Tibetan for "lower village". It once was the lowest village in the time when it belonged to Tibet. A few kilometres before the village, a landslide blocked the river, which then curved through a deep canyon. At this special place, the old border between Tibet and Nepal, a legend lives on. The story has it that an evil demon wanted to drown the people of Dho. She blocked the river with the Indian sand falling from the folds of her dress and the water rose. The good Lama Guru Rinpoche was just in time to cut a canyon with his sword and so the people of Dho were saved from drowning. The rock at this site is indeed unique in Dolpo. At the little pass formed by the landslide there is a small temple. Locals believe that the source there is actually the blood coming out of the heart of the demon. Those who take three sips, will be protected against evil spirits.

When the valley opens up, we get our first view of what is now known as 'Tibet in Nepal'. As the snow stops falling and the evening sun illuminates the white carpet, arrival in Dho lives up to our imagination. The next day, a path into the valley towards Charka takes us along an ancient *Bon-Po gompa* (monastery). *Bon-Po* is the religion that existed in Tibet before Buddhism. This religion lives on in a few remote areas of Tibet and here, in Dolpo. Pilgrims come from afar to one of the many sacred sites to visit. Some of the oldest *gompas* from around the Himalayas can be found here. We meet the local *lama* (monk) and are invited into his house to drink Tibetan butter tea. In

his house there's a small temple, full of masks and old books. There is no box for donations, no signboards and no English conversation at all. Still, it seems to us that the lama could use some money for the maintenance of his cultural heritage. Many young lamas went to Kathmandu or India to study and few come back. The harsh weather conditions also require additional care of the buildings.

Since the eighties, the Dutch development organization SNV has supported local organizations in their mission to make sure that tourism benefits the poorest people first. In honour of Marjan Rens, an employee who died in 1999 in Dolpo, SNV supported a local organization to renovate a *gompa*. They also published an illustrated information booklet on all the major cultural *sites* and festivals in Dolpo. Mainly due to the civil war, tourists stayed away and most of the funds were subsequently diverted to other places. Now that the war is over, the time seems ripe for the cultural heritage to get the attention it deserves. Sustainable tourism can certainly help to restore the heritage. On our way to the top of a hill just behind Dho, only the towers of a destroyed royal fortress stood up. The rich history of Dolpo is even clearer when we arrive in the more than thousand years old *Ribo Bumpa gompa*. This is the most important religious building throughout the region. Among other marvels we find a big old wall painting, which on closer inspection is actually a beautiful map of the entire area. All the monasteries, and the holy Phoksumdo lake are indicated. The painted Indian elephant shows that the Dolpo-pa (inhabitants of Dolpo) have been semi-nomadic for centuries, maintaining very distant trading relationships. *Ribo Bumpa gompa* is home to the legend of Guru Rinpoche and is a witness of Dolpo's rich past, but also a fragile treasure. The fact that we are free to walk around without anyone to welcome or guide us and the advanced state of weathering of the *gompa*, shows again that the protection of this magnificent heritage has a long way to go.

Globalization

In Dho we meet Angad. A highly educated, fluent English speaking Nepali with a vision of environmental management. He also happens to be an excellent photographer, a businessman and a cynical politician. It seems surreal to meet someone like this in Dho. He seems to be the ambassador of a new generation, probably as exotic to the Dolpo-pa as we are. His roots are in the south and he only settled here after his marriage. His presence is a sign that Dolpo is gradually joining the globalized world. From our Western point of view this is often regretted, because the authenticity which we also admire seems threatened. We are already seeing a few people walking around with a *Nike* sweater, sneakers and a portable radio. From the perspective of local people, things are different. The new currency of the tourists has become a necessity. In their harsh environment, the food which the Dolpo-pa can harvest is enough to feed everyone for a few months a year. Due to falling revenues from the salt trade, many no longer have enough to eat. In most regions of northwest Nepal the famine has become structural and every year more people migrate to Kathmandu. Ironically, it is therefore perhaps the tourists with their foreign currencies who can keep people in Dolpo and by doing so ensure its authenticity. However, often there is too little income from tourism for the local population. We choose to take a local guide and local porters instead of arranging everything with outsiders. By buying whatever few items are sold locally, we also pump a little money into the local economy. Just scattering money around is not the right solution to their poverty. Elsewhere in Nepal, where many Westerners come, all too often children quit school because begging is lucrative. Giving a donation to a school or a health post might work better if you have some spare money to give.

To the sacred lake

When we reach a village just behind Dho, only two 5000+ meters passes and three days hiking separate of us from the mythical Phoksumdo lake. From our camp at 4800 meters we search for *yarchagumba* with one of our porters. This libido-enhancing substance is a unique hybrid between an insect and a fungus. The weird creature only grows above 3500 m in some very remote areas in the Himalayas. According to Chandra, our guide, this little creature can be a saving grace for the

local economy. While a *yarchagumba* fetches a sum of one dollar per piece here, in Hong Kong they sell *yarchagumba* soup at \$ 100 per bowl. Businessmen from Japan sometimes come to Dolpo when *yarchagumbas* are harvested. But there is a dark side to this apparent good fortune. During the harvest all schools are closed and both the young and old participate in the high altitude search. Maoists and the government levy heavy taxes and the biggest gains go to the dealers who come from elsewhere. Moreover, the trade is not without dangers. At the end of May 2007 at least 16 Dolpo-pa were killed when a sudden and severe snow storm descended on their temporary high altitude camp. One can also wonder whether the intensive harvesting is sustainable.

From the 5300 m *Numa La* pass, we admire one snowy mountain ridge after another, up to the 8167 meter high tower watching over the whole area: *Dhaulagiri*. After a steep descent, we reach a campsite at the foot of our next pass, the *Baga La*. Although this pass is slightly lower than the previous one, the knee deep melting snow makes it just a little harder. We navigate around a beautiful summit while small avalanches on the other side create a beautiful spectacle. Finally, we leave the wilderness and after a long descent we reach the first grass, trees and abandoned houses in three days. We are now on an ancient trade route from India to Tibet. When we reach the first pasture, a yak caravan is waiting for the snow on the *Baga La* to melted sufficiently before the yaks can proceed. Early May, the people of *Upper Dolpo* - the most northerly, isolated part of Dolpo - come back from the warmer south, their yaks laden with food to make ends meet until the next harvest, sometime in August. After the descent through a path cut into the rock we turn a corner and suddenly we catch the first glimpse of the mythical turquoise lake. Phoksumdo lake is known for its beautiful colour as well as the total absence of marine life, the purity of its water and its sheltered location between huge cliffs. Long ago, a huge earthquake caused a massive landslide blocking the valley with a 165 meter high dam, now forming Nepal's highest waterfall. In the film *Himalaya* there's a dramatic scene where a yak falls in the water, somewhere along the cliff-side path still known as the death trail. This path is cut into the almost vertical rock face, sometimes supported by some shaggy timber bridges. In some places the path is so narrow that we wonder how even one yak can pass. Only their fresh droppings convince us that it is indeed possible.

Alternative healing

On the way back we pass a local *amchi* (traditional Tibetan doctor). He shows us part of the more than four hundred species of medicinal plants and herbs found in Dolpo, but also minerals and a scalp of the rare snow leopard are used in the drugs he makes. An *amchi* makes a diagnosis based primarily on the pulse, tongue and urine. Treatment often combines medication with burning fire points with a glowing iron rod. Their starting point is to achieve a healthy balance between *mind, body and spirit* on one hand and the natural environment on the other. Thanks to WWF support, the *amchis* made a practice where they can exercise their duties and where young lamas are trained. This gives young people the chance to work locally and ensures the survival of this ancient knowledge.

The survival of their unique community depends on how the Dolpo-pa can deal with the outside world. Businessmen, aid agencies and tourists bring Dolpo in closer contact with a world they hardly knew a generation ago. The idea that a unique and self-sustaining society now depends on input from outside is one, pessimistic, way of thinking. The optimistic view is that all the new inputs are rather keeping Dolpo authentic. Dolpo-pa who are starving and migrating to cities do not maintain their heritage at all, but with income from tourism and some training by NGOs this evolution might turn into a revival of their ancient culture. A balance will be needed, between the traditional semi-nomadic life and a new economy based on tourism. The time to remove the accumulating dust from the hidden treasures of Dolpo is now.

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This text is a translation from the original “Dolpo: tussen mythe en realiteit”, (Te Gast in Nepal, 2007)