



*The Mountain Institute Presents*

# Sacred Sites

of Khumbu Region

THE MOUNTAIN INSTITUTE

A MESSAGE FROM

# The Director

I dedicate the second edition of the Sacred Sites Trail book to my colleague, mentor and dear friend, Mr. Mingma Norbu Sherpa, who tragically died in September 2006. Mingma was born in Khunde village, and was one of the first graduates of the Khumjung school, established in 1961 by Sir Edmund Hillary. Mingma embodied the "can do" exploratory spirit of Sir Edmund, and used his education to become a conservation champion for these sacred valleys, all of Solu Khumbu and throughout the Himalaya. While Mingma was a global conservation leader, he also never forgot his roots and provided valuable support and guidance to the Sacred Sites Trail project described here. Mingma was a good friend to the villagers of the Khumbu, The Mountain Institute and to many of us personally. Although physically no longer with us, Mingma Norbu Sherpa's passion, commitment and "can do" spirit continues to inspire us to conserve

## IN MEMORIAM

Mingma Norbu Sherpa: Defender of the Himalayas Born 31 October 1955 in Khunde village, Solukhumbu District, Mingma Norbu Sherpa grew up to dedicate his life to preserving the exceptional biodiversity of the Himalayas. Mingma believed deeply that conservation success depends on the inclusion of local communities, who, like himself, count the region as their home.

Mingma was a trailblazer and an advocate. In 1980, at Sagarmatha National Park, located in a region predominantly populated by Sherpas, he became the first Sherpa warden. Here, Mingma made bridging the gap between local communities and the park a priority. He conducted conservation education programs in local schools, mobilized local leaders in grass-roots conservation efforts, involved the park in village development activities, and engaged the local people in caring for the park.

Bengal tiger and the one-horned rhinoceros. In November 2005, during a presentation to his Holiness the Dalai Lama, Mingma highlighted issues of regional trafficking in endangered animals. A month later, at a teaching attended by thousands of Tibetans, the Dalai Lama urged his audience to stop wearing the furs of endangered animals. Within a week, demonstrations, including the burning of furs, were staged across Tibet in support of the request. Mingma recalled, "If the Lama talks, everybody listens. If it's a politician, nobody does."





Late Mingma Norbu Sherpa

Mingma joined the World Wildlife Fund in 1989, and in 1998, moved to Washington, DC as WWF Nepal/Bhutan programme director. In this role, he was key in developing trans-boundary conservation initiatives in Nepal, India and Bhutan, such as the Eastern Himalayan Corridor, Sacred Landscape, and Tarai Arc landscape programs.

He also initiated a number of projects to protect endangered wildlife, including the On 23 September 2006, Mingma was one of 24 people to perish in a helicopter crash while returning from a ceremony celebrating the return of the Kanchenjunga Conservation Area to community management.

Mingma continued his dedication to park-community partnerships throughout his life. With the help of the Tengboche Buddhist abbot, and funding from World Wildlife Fund, Mingma founded the Sagarmatha Pollution Control Committee (SPCC) in 1991. Throughout the 1990's, Mingma directed community-based conservation projects in both Khumbu and the adjacent region of Pharak, helped establish community forest users groups, and helped launch the Sagarmatha National Park Buffer Zone in 2002.

Mingma also revived the indigenous forest management system of shingi nawas. Traditionally, shingi nawas protected the forest from unauthorized cutting and were responsible for controlling its use. In 1981, Mingma arranged for shingi nawas to be paid an honorarium with funds supplied by the Himalayan Trust.

"We lost one of our heroes," Carter S. Roberts, President and Chief Executive of the WWF in the United States, said in Kathmandu. "There's no question Mingma was a real visionary. I've spoken with scores of people who have traveled with Mingma and who saw conservation come alive through his work and through his actions."

**Brian J. Peniston**  
Director (Himal Program)  
The Mountain Institute

# WELCOME TO Sacred Sites TRAIL PROJECT

Sagarmatha National Park (SNP), gazetted in July 1976, is Nepal's second most visited national park in the mountain region and is also of global, cultural, and environmental importance. SNP is one of the world's premier mountain tourism regions, containing four of the world's mountain peaks over 8000m. There are 3500 Sherpas living inside the SNP area for over four centuries and has continued to use traditional planting methods and indigenous natural resource management techniques.

SNP has witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of visitors totalling 3,600 in 1979; by 2001 this had increased to over 21,570. Trekking tourism has helped boost the local economy and standard of living with better health care, education, and building structure; but it has also degraded the region's fragile ecology and its cultural traditions. Moreover, the benefits of trekking tourism are not distributed equally throughout the park, and many areas remain culturally and economically isolated.

The Sacred Sites Trails project was proposed to create a new circular tourism trail, to encourage tourists to visit less known sacred sites and villages. Working through local communities, the project aspires to help restore and enhance local cultural skills and traditions and distribute tourism benefits more widely by encouraging tourists to visit villages off the established tourist route.

The Sacred Sites Trail offers unexplored yet significant cultural sites with beautiful mountain scenery and green valleys. Unlike the most popular trail, the circular route takes one to the uncharted and less known villages in the Khumbu where the turmoil of tourism is non-existent and one can enjoy the serenity of the surroundings. Majestic, rugged mountains and waterfalls flowing off the steep mountain sides are indeed a sight to sore eyes. All along the trail, ancient Monasteries, Mani stones and Chortens and Karis all insert and enhance a spiritual feel to the trail's pristine mountain environment.



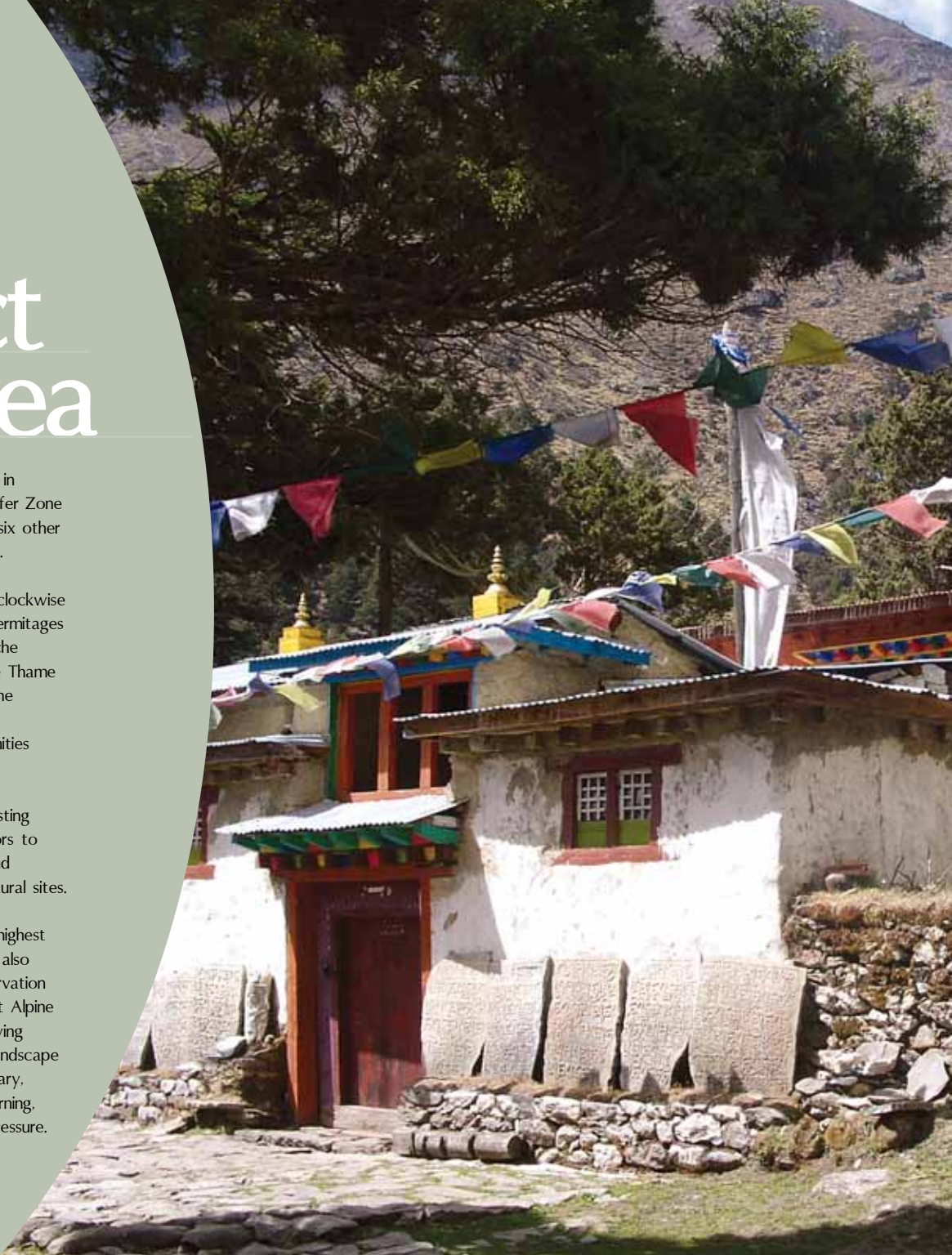
# Project Area

The Sacred Sites Trail Project lies in Sagarmatha National Park and Buffer Zone and includes Namche Bazaar and six other major settlements within the park.

The project's circular trail passes clockwise through 10 monasteries, caves, hermitages and nunneries, starting from Namche Bazaar, visiting several sites in the Thame valley and ending at the Tengboche Monastery. The project's target populations are the local communities living in the above areas.

The Sacred Sites Trail follows existing trekking routes, encouraging visitors to extend their stay in the region, and explore additional cultural and natural sites.

In order to conserve the world's highest ecology, sacred sites trail project also initiated Community-based conservation and restoration of the Mt. Everest Alpine zone this year to tackle the growing degradation of the fragile alpine landscape as a result of years of contemporary, unsustainable uses that include burning, overgrazing, increased livestock pressure.





# Goal

---

The project's goal is to promote indigenous culture and traditions through restoration of a circular route linking natural sacred and cultural sites in Sagarmatha National Park, improving livelihoods through mountain-based tourism and conservation.

# Objectives

---

- Promote the cultural traditions of lesser known sacred sites in the Khumbu region
- Strengthen local management skills in conserving and protecting cultural heritage and natural resources
- Conserve and restore fragile forests and alpine landscape of Mount Everest Region



# Monasteries, Caves and Hermitage

OF THE SACRED SITES TRAIL

Monasteries are the centers of practicing religious rites where various festivals are performed. A monastery can either be a common village property or an institution. The Mani Rimdu festival, held in May, is one example. The distance stated in the following Gompa profile is calculated from Namche Bazaar.

## 1. Namche Monastery

Namche Bazar is the trading center and the main gateway to the upper Khumbu region. It features a small 300 year-old Gompa (monastery), which is used for special ceremonies.



Like all the monasteries, the interior shrine is painted brightly with images of many deities. Unfortunately, the monastery fell into disrepair; and a restoration fund was recently started with the help of the local community and outsiders. Today, there is a Gompa management committee overseeing its maintenance. The Gompa received financial and cloth bags support from The Mountain Institute.

### NAMCHE

|                    |                          |
|--------------------|--------------------------|
| Place              | Namche                   |
| Name               | Sanga Thechok Dechenling |
| Sect               | Nyingmapa                |
| Established        | 100 years                |
| Altitude           | 3440m                    |
| Religious Festival | Nyingne, Dumji           |
| Distance           | 0 hour                   |
| VDC                | Namche                   |
| Monk               | One                      |

## 2. Thamo Monastery

In 1959, the Khari Rinpoche with some nuns and monks came to Thamo crossing Nangpa La after the Chinese invaded Tibet and destroyed thousands of monasteries including Khari Gompa taking all the valuable items to China. The Rinpoche was followed by other monks and nuns, becoming the first of many Tibetan refugees that now live in Khumbu.

In 1961, the villagers from Thamo kindly offered a plot of land for the monastery and approached Khari Rinpoche to settle in their village. The Rinpoche and his followers happily accepted the offer and with the help of the community, the new Khari Gompa was built in 1962 in a record time of three days.

Later, His Holiness the Dalai Lama named it Ganden Tenphelling, the Joyful Dharma Island. After Khari Rinpoche's death in 1970, the number of Gompa residents dwindled to only 35 nuns and 3 monks. The Mountain Institute provided financial support to renovate Khari Gompa which was on the verge of collapse.



### THAMO

| Place       | Thamo                         |
|-------------|-------------------------------|
| Name        | Khari Dhogan GandenTenpheling |
| Sect        | Gelukpa                       |
| Reincarnate | Khari Rinpoche                |
| Established | 1962                          |
| Altitude    | 2900m                         |
| Distance    | 2 hours                       |
| VDC         | Namche                        |
| Monk/Nun    | 35 nuns                       |

### 3. Thame Monastery

Thame Monastery was built 350 years ago into the steep, bluffed hillside high above the Thengbo Khola. Thami monastery was built at the same time as Kerok, Pangboche and Rimjung Gompas, when three brothers migrated from Rolwaling and settled in Khumbu. Residing in this monastery is a reincarnate who came from the adjacent Rowaling valley. Thame Gampa holds Manirimdu festival in May of each year. The Gampa received metal poles and gas stoves from The Mountain Institute to minimize use of fragile alpine shrubs which has both religious and natural significance.

#### THAME

| PLACE              | THAME                            |
|--------------------|----------------------------------|
| Name               | Dechen Choekhorling              |
| Sect               | Nyingmapa                        |
| Established        | 350 years                        |
| Altitude           | 3780m                            |
| Religious Festival | Nyingne, Dumji, Manirimdu, Yarne |
| Distance           | 3 hour                           |
| VDC                | Namche                           |
| Monk               | 35                               |



### 4. Kerok Monastery

Established 350 years ago by Rolpa Dorje, this is the sister monastery of Pangboche and Rimjung in the Pharak area. There are three permanent monks in Kyobra and also a small school that teaches Dharma and encourages youngsters to become monks. The Gampa received roofing support for Manilhang from The Mountain Institute.

#### KEROK

| Place              | Thame                                 |
|--------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Name               | Sangacholing Gampa Thechok Dechenling |
| Sect               | Nyingmapa                             |
| Established        | 350 years                             |
| Altitude           | 3540m                                 |
| Religious Festival | Nyingne, Dumji, Chojen                |
| Distance           | 3 hour                                |
| VDC                | Namche                                |
| Monk               | 10 monks                              |



Abbot Ngawang Gyaltzen (Thame Gompa)

## 5. Gendukpa (Gamu Phuk) Gamu cave

Gamu Phuk was discovered when Chatang Choying in Rangdul went to search for water to cease difficulties. The sites of significance at the Gamu Phuk are the foot and palm points near the cave, which is also named Gamu Phuk. Around the 28th of January each year, a special puja is performed to keep the area safe and prosperous.

On the 29th day of each month, there is another puja held to respect the god that protects the region and provides greater peace and harmony. Additionally, Lamju is held on February 7th each year to respect the deceased Chatang Choying Rangdul. Likewise, on February 27th, a special puja is performed to diminish evil spirits. The Mountain Institute provided roofing support for the main Genukpa cave.

## 6. Lawudo Retreat Center

In the Solu Khumbu mountains at 4000m, Lawudo Lama, a famous yogi and the previous incarnation of Lama Zopa Rinpoche, lived and meditated in a cave for many years. He belonged to the Sakya tradition of Tibetan Buddhism and had been a great master of the complete tantric teachings of the Nyingma tradition. He spent all his time either meditating or giving teachings and spiritual advice to the people of Solu Khumbu and neighboring regions.

The present Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche was initiated into Nyingma tradition by the head lama of the Thame Gompa. When he returned to Solu Khumbu in 1967, he restored the cave and built a small Gompa. Since then, some rooms, water supply and solar panels were added to facilitate retreat for locals and visitors. Lawudo has become an ideal place for solitary retreat, offering silence and solitude in a magic and spiritually charged atmosphere, a fitting place for meditation. At present there are fifty children in the monastery receiving a closely supervised monastic education that includes not only traditional Buddhist studies, but classes in Nepali, English, Tibetan, mathematics and art as well.



Lama Zangbu (Gendukpa)

Due to high altitude, Lawudo is cold all year round; one needs to be equipped with warm clothing and sleeping bag. Those with heart-problem should check with their doctors regarding the high altitude. Lawudo is a two day walk from Lukla airport.



## 7. Khunde Tsamkang

35 years ago, Lama Tenzing Chendum and his team, who migrated from Tibet, happily accepted a plot of land offered by the people of Khunde Village, to build a Tsamkang. With the help of local people, mainly from Khunde and Khumjung, the construction of Tsamkang monastery was completed in 1972.

Over its lifespan, the Tsamkang was extended several times. Its original small size and the weak foundation required renovation and restoration. The last renovation was completed in 2000 with thanks to the hard work of local craftsmen and the Sherpa community from Khunde and Khumjung.



Lawudo Cave

### KHUNDE

| Place              | Khunde               |
|--------------------|----------------------|
| Name               | Mtsam Kham Monastery |
| Sect               | Gelukpa              |
| Reincarnate        | Lama Tenzing Chendum |
| Established        | 1972                 |
| Altitude           | 3750m                |
| Religious Festival | Nyingne              |
| Distance           | 1.5 hours            |
| VDC                | Khumjung             |
| Monk/Nun           | 18 monks             |



## 8. Khumjung Monastery

At the foot of the sacred peak of Khumbila, lies the village of Khumjung, where the monastery was established approximately 340 years ago and where the skull of Yeti or the abominable snowman is preserved and displayed.

The Mountain Institute provided financial support for Gompa kitchen renovation, Maniwall restoration and cloth bags to be used for festivals.

### KHUMJUNG

| Place              | Khumjung                |
|--------------------|-------------------------|
| Name               | Decheling Gompa         |
| Sect               | Nyingmapa               |
| Established        | 120 years               |
| Altitude           | 3700m                   |
| Religious Festival | Nyingne, Dumji, Kengyur |
| Distance           | 1.5 hour                |
| VDC                | Khumjung                |
| Monk               | One monk                |

## 9. Phortse Monastery

Phortse was established 15 years back with the permission and blessings from the Dalai Lama and with the generous support from Tony Freak, a British Volunteer. Until then, the people of Phortse had to walk to Pangboche for 3 hours maximum to perform any religious festivals such as Dumji and Nyungne. The Gumpa received financial support for Manilhang roofing and courtyard construction from The Mountain Institute.



### PHORTSE

| Place              | Phortse             |
|--------------------|---------------------|
| Name               | Takri Choling Gumpa |
| Sect               | Nyingmapa           |
| Established        | 1997 years          |
| Altitude           | 3840m               |
| Religious Festival | Nyingne, Dumji      |
| Distance           | 6 hour from Namche  |
| VDC                | Khumjung            |
| Monk               | 1 monk              |

## 10. Pangboche Monastery

Pangboche is the last permanent settlement located at the height of 3900m along the trekking route to Everest region. Pangboche monastery, built 350 years back by Lama Sangwa Dorjee, is the oldest monastery within the Khumbu region. The Gumpa lost its main source of income when its yeti skull was stolen. The Gumpa received financial support from The Mountain Institute for the restoration of Kani, Chorten and Gumpa Kitchen.



### PANGBOCHE

| Place              | Pangboche       |
|--------------------|-----------------|
| Name               | Pal Rilbu Gumpa |
| Sect               | Nyingmapa       |
| Established        | 350 years       |
| Altitude           | 3900m           |
| Religious Festival | Nyingne, Dumji  |
| Distance           | 7 hours         |
| VDC                | Khumjung        |
| Monk/Nun           | 1 monk          |

## 11. Debuiche Nunnery (Ani) Monastery

Nestled among lush rhododendron-and-juniper forest, Debuiche Monastery was built by the founder of Tengboche, Lama Gulu, for the nuns or anis who earlier did not have a place of their own.



Currently there are nine nuns living in this tiny monastery which is quite old compared to other gompas and the nuns themselves are poor. Due to lack of facilities, some of the nuns have abandoned the area and have gone to India and Kathmandu to study.

### DEBUICHE

| Place              | Debuiche             |
|--------------------|----------------------|
| Name               | Sherap Choling Gumpa |
| Sect               | Nyingmapa            |
| Established        | 80 years             |
| Altitude           | 3800m                |
| Religious Festival | Nyingne              |
| Distance           | 5.5 hour from Namche |
| VDC                | Khumjung             |
| Monk               | 15 nuns              |

## 12. Tengboche Monastery

Built in 1919, Tengboche Gumpa is the largest and the most active monastery in Khumbu. The monastery was destroyed in an earthquake in 1934 and rebuilt a few years later. On 19 January 1989, a fire destroyed the entire Gumpa building; fortunately, many items of the monastery's extensive collection of books, paintings and religion relics were saved. The Sherpa people of Khumbu, with the help from many international organizations raised funds and reconstructed the Gumpa in September 1993. The support has kept the monastery thriving and many young monks living in the monastery receive excellent education. Tengboche holds the Main Rimdu festival in November.



Abbot Ngawang Tenzin Zangbu

### TENGBOICHE

| Place              | Tengboche          |
|--------------------|--------------------|
| Name               | Dawa Choling Gumpa |
| Sect               | Nyingmapa          |
| Reincarnate        | Yes                |
| Established        | 1919               |
| Altitude           | 3867m              |
| Religious Festival | Manirimdu, Yame    |
| Distance           | 5 hours            |
| VDC                | Khumjung           |
| Monk/Nun           | 35 monks           |



## NAGARJANG

|                    |                     |
|--------------------|---------------------|
| Place              | Dingboche           |
| Name               | Nagarjang Hermitage |
| Sect               | Nyingmapa           |
| Established        | 450 years           |
| Altitude           | 3800m               |
| Religious Festival | Nyingne             |
| Distance           | 3 days              |
| VDC                | Khumjung            |
| Monk               | One monk            |

## 13. Nakarjung Hermitage

The whole of Khumbu is considered sacred and there are many caves and hermitages that are used by highly regarded teachers, and monks for meditation and retreat. Most villages have a temple or Gumpa, which is supported by the lay community. The monks are invited to the villages to perform the important yearly ceremonies.

Perched precariously at an altitude of 4800 meters, one-hour above Dingboche village, Nakarjung Hermitage rests on the steep slopes of Nakarjung Ri, a sacred peak believed to be the abode of a Dolma, or goddess of prosperity. The hermitage is the oldest in the Khumbu region and one of the highest in the world.

The hermitage is believed to be built on the first meditation site of Lama Sangwa Dorje, the Tibetan lama who first brought Nyingmapa Buddhism to the Khumbu. Its spectacular location affords commanding views of the Imja Khola valley, Ama Dablam, and Makalu.



The hermitage is now used primarily for Nyingne meditation sessions: monks spend their days alternating in prayer and meditative fasts. Monks from Tengboche monastery often come to the monastery for spiritual retreats and intensive meditation, often staying for three months at a time. In mid June, the gumpa is the focal point of the local festival of Dukpa Chejik, when the small stream that runs by the monastery is celebrated for its healing powers (Dukpa means 'healing, holy water', and Chejik means 'first day').

The hermitage's initial sunjen—the main idol whose origin could be traced back to Lama Sangwa Dorje -currently resides in Pangboche monastery; its rare thangkas and architecture are the sole reminder of Lama Sangwa Dorje's visit to the Upper Imja Khola valley. The Mountain Institute has provided metal poles to hang prayer flags and also gas stoves and cylinder to substitute the use of alpine shrubs and has also provided revolving funds to perform Nyingne festivals.



# Religious Protected Sacred Sites of Khumbu

PROTECTING THE WATERS: LU BELIEFS IN KHUMBU \*

The smallest, though arguably the most important, level of religious protection in Khumbu is the protection of water springs and lakes, as well as large or singular trees. Nearly all springs and lakes, and some trees, are believed to be inhabited by unseen spirits called Lu.

The Lu is associated with locations where water, especially intermittent water, emerges from the ground. Lakes and water springs are associated with Lu, while rivers are not. Water running under the ground is associated with Lu – larger than normal trees are a sign of a Lu. It is said that an unhappy Lu will desert its home for good, causing the water source to dry up.

Some trees are not cut because people fear the wrath of the Lu that may inhabit them. This creates positive feedback cycle: trees grow larger because of people's fears, people's fear/ attachment to the trees increases as they grow larger, making the tree ever less likely to be cut down.

Lu is adverse to defilement of their areas, requiring very clean surroundings. Lu becomes angry when their area is despoiled through elimination of bodily waste, burning meat, or disposing of rubbish. At Losar, an annual puja should be done for the Lu. Butter is burned in a fire, and the Lu eats the smoke. In some villages, people designate a corner of the house for the Lu khang, and keep this area especially clean.



Sacred Spring (Lu at Namche)

## Locations of public lu

Lukla/ Cheplung: giant oak tree and water spring near trail  
Namche: small intermittent lake above gompa (may be gone now)

Thame: pond behind Everest Summiters Lodge  
Khunde: water near gompa flows Aug. – Dec. only  
Khumjung: small pond  
Tengboche: spring near main trail

\* Alison, E. 2004. Sacred sites trails to Everest : field Research

# Implications

---

FOR CONSERVATION \*

The traditional belief in an easily disturbed spirit inhabiting water sources has the obvious pragmatic consequence of keeping important water sources clean and undisturbed. By teaching young children to avoid disturbing water sources and disrupting the *lu*, villagers imbue a self-regulating mechanism of protecting essential water sources. The prohibition against releasing bodily waste near *lu* homes is especially relevant to protecting the quality of water sources. The prohibition against burning meat may be related to the preparation of meat prior to cooking, which could release contaminated fluids from the dead animal into the water source.

The *Lu* belief has the effect of keeping stagnant water free of the most hazardous contaminants. Using a different paradigm, it teaches the modern 'Leave No Trace' rule that requires all toilet activities be 30 meters or more from the nearest water source.

## Other Natural Sacred Places

There are other local religiously protected places and natural features with religious significance such as meditation caves inside the park. These natural features as well as meditations are found above Thamo, Phortse and Pangboche and Nagarjang.

Above Phortse, Lama Sangwa Dorji, who introduced Buddhism to Khumbu, is said to have hidden from a



Sacred Tree (*Lu* at Kyongma)

Tibetan king's demands of tax in a small, nondescript cave where lamas from Tengboche would come to seek his counsel. Nearby are many meditation huts and caves. These religiously important natural sites explicitly connect religion with locations in the natural environment. They are sites of occasional pilgrimage and devotion, and might be included in a religio-cultural tour of Khumbu.

Gokyo Lake is another natural sacred place, a holy lake, where the pure of heart can see their fortune. It is a site of pilgrimage for Buddhists and Hindus. Hindu Gurungs hope to see large herds of sheep in the lake's waters, indicating that their flocks will increase.

## Religiously Protected Forests

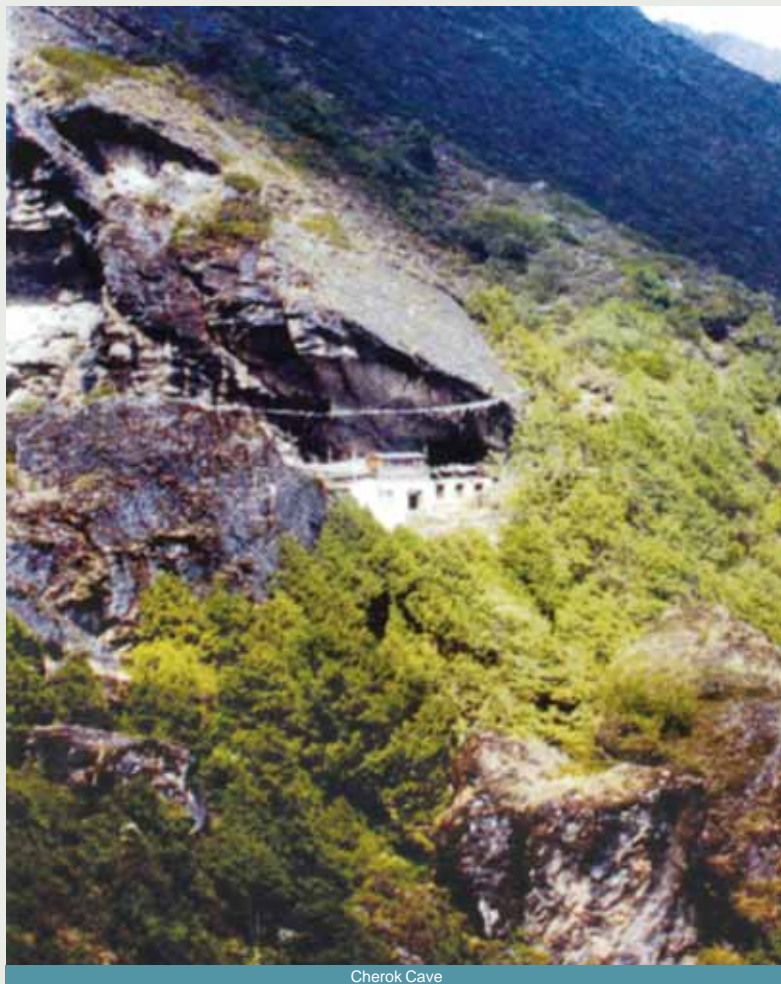
Religiously protected forests cover greater area than a single water spring or cave, and provide home for a variety of species. Phortse, a highly religious village off the main trekking route, but still in the heart of Khumbu, has the strictest, most traditional forms of forest management of any of the villages in Khumbu.

The forest immediately around the village is preserved because of the dictum of an ancient lama, who performed a ceremony in the forest, sprinkling around blood from his own scalp and requiring that the villagers preserve the forest into posterity, or face misfortune. To this day, the forest is protected, and people may collect only leaf litter from it.

Several gompas, including those at Kerok, Khumjung, Tengboche, Pangboche, Debuche and Namche have notable forests around them. The practice of maintaining a forest around the gompa is thought to extend back to the time of Lama Sangwa Dorji, who is said to have pulled out some of his hair and thrown it on the ground, causing juniper trees to grow up around Pangboche gompa. The gompa forest, established by Lama Sangwa Dorji, was then emulated at other gompas.

Many people believe that the Buddhism opposes cutting trees. However, for pragmatic reasons, they are not always able to follow this belief. Several reasons are given for not cutting trees:

- A tree is like a god, or home to a god
- A tree requires many years to grow, "like a child," cutting a tree is a sin equal to killing a person.
- As mentioned previously, individual trees may also be protected by the belief that they are home to a spirit called a lu.
- Some individual trees, such as those believed to be home of a lu, or believed to have been planted by one of the great lamas, gain great size as they are spared the axe.
- The larger and older a tree becomes the greater value of affiliation it may carry for villagers who have lived with the tree throughout their lifetimes. As the tree increases in affiliative value, it may



Cherok Cave



Protected Forest/Sacred Grove



Sacred Mountain (Mount Tawuche)



become more likely that its size and longevity are attributed to spiritual power.

- These gumpa forests are protected by the instructions of the lamas and the belief that Buddhism opposes the cutting of trees.

## Religiously Protected Mountains

Moving from forest areas to landscape level protection, religiously protected mountains put larger areas of the land off-limits for some activities. Some say that every mountain has a god, and people should not cut trees or break stones where gods reside. However, now that foreigners have climbed many peaks, some believe that the gods may have left. Villagers have noted that in past, there were many mountaineering accidents, suggesting that maybe the god was angry. These days, there are fewer accidents, so some assume that the mountain gods have shifted location.

Though it's the highest peak in the world, Everest is not an especially sacred mountain. It is home to Miyo Lang Sang Ma, whose name is shortened to Chomolungma, the Tibetan name for the mountain. Miyo Lang Sang Ma, one of the Five Sisters of Long Life, is the goddess who provides food. Another of the sisters, Tashi Tseringma, resides on Gauri Shankar in Rowaling.

Khumbila or Khumbu Yul Lha, Khumbu Country's God, is the central sacred peak of Khumbu, standing between Namche, Khumjung and Thame. Khumbila has never been climbed; one attempt prior to the 1980's ended when climbers were killed in an avalanche, and there have been no subsequent attempts.

Khumbila is said to be a powerful god, and an old one. The prayers for Khumbila are believed to date back to the time when the ancestors of the Sherpas were still in Tibet (more than 500 years ago). Khumbila is said to have been subdued and converted to Buddhism by Guru Rimpoche, the 8th century saint, considered to be a second Buddha, who spread Buddhism throughout the Himalaya. In fact, Guru Rimpoche is said to have spent some time meditating in a cave above Khunde, perhaps on the mountain Khumbila itself. This connection between Guru Rimpoche and Khumbila surely adds to the sacredness of the latter.



Sacred Mountain (Mount Khumbila)

Every house has prayer flags on bamboo wands to honor Khumbila. The flags are changed three times per year. At Dumji, a summertime festival that celebrates the Sherpas' connection to their home and each other, and honors Guru Rimpoche, Khumbila is welcomed on the first day the festival. The repetition and re-inscription of the Sherpas' association with and dependence upon Khumbila through the rituals offerings maintains the power of this reciprocal relationship, thereby maintaining the protection of the mountain itself.

# Religious

## STRUCTURE



### Mani (Mani Thungkyur)

A Mani Thungkyur is a big Prayer wheel, which contains many religious books and has sacred invocation of prayers. Its average size is 2m high and 1.50m in diameter. Some villages have a separate communal building for Mani-Thungkyur known as (Mani Lhang), which can be connected with the main 'Gondas' or in a private house.

### Lhang

A *Lhang* is a private chapel built in association with the main house. Access is gained from within the house. The walls are decorated with mural paintings and some statues and books.



## Chorten (Stupa)

A Chorten is a shrine usually built of stone with Buddha eyes on four sides guarding against evil spirits that can enter the village. These are generally found at the entrance to a village, along with the Mani walls or a kani. It contains relics of an important lama as well as prayer books.



## Kani

At the entrance to a village settlement or to a monastery, there is always a small gateway, or *Kani*, with its ceiling and walls usually painted with religious figures. These entrance gates and *chortens* stop the bad spirits that can follow a person from entering the village.



## Mani walls

Manis are stones engraved with the sacred invocation "Om Mani Padme Hum" which are either built in to the walls or piled around the Chorten. People pass these walls on the right side to gain sonam (Merit).



## Gompa and Gondas (monastery building)

A gompa can be a common village property or an institution. The lama in charge of managing them is usually a Reincarnate lama. A gompa is also a gathering place for the whole community especially in festivals such as Nyingne and Dumji.



# Religious Festivals

I N K H U M B U

## DUMJI

Dumji is a great festival in which the whole community takes part. It has been in practice for more than 300 years during the monsoon season. The local representatives provide food and drink for the whole community for 5 days. The responsibility for this festival falls on every household once or twice in a lifetime depending on the number of houses in each village. On this occasion rich and poor join the celebration on equal terms. Monks from Tengboche Gumpa are invited to recite the ceremony. The main purpose of Dumji is two-fold: it is both a request to various gods' power to subdue demonic enemies of the village and a celebration of the anniversary of the death of the patron saint Lama Sanga Dorji.



## NYINGNE

Nyingne is performed at the end of May or early June in village Gompas. The main purpose of this festival is to cleanse the worshippers of sin and to help them obtain more sonam (*merit*). This rite requires a lama, generally the Head Lama from Tengboche, to oversee it. The participants recite prayers along with the lama on the first day. The second day, everyone fasts and they do not speak to one another. Finally, on the third day after obtaining a blessing from the lama, they depart back to their own houses.

## KANGYUR

Kangyur along with Tangyur is known as the bible of Tibetan Buddhism, translated from the Sanskrit edition of Tripitaka to Tibetan presumably in the 13th century by Tibetan Guru Butten Rimpoche. It records the sayings of the Buddha. The Kangyur are dialogues accredited to the historical Buddha. The Kangyur contains 108 volumes comprising ethical works ascribed to Buddha. Kangyur is recited to ward off mishaps, misfortunes, calamities, violence, plague, wars, and natural disasters and bring peace, prosperity and harmony among humans. By the virtue of Kangyur recitation, a person is believed to add years to his/her life and can forever live in peace and prosperity devoid of sins.

*Translated from Nawang Tharwa Sherpa's (KBC) brief introduction on Kangyur.*





## MANI RIMDU

The first celebration of Mani Rimdu at Tengboche monastery probably took place sometime in 1930. The festival originated in Rongbuk Monastery in Tibet. Mani Rimdu is a prayer ceremony where the monks put on masks representing divine personages and perform ritual dances. The devotional spectators come from many villages to gain *sonam* from the Head Lama's blessings and to make corn and grain contributions to the monk community.

## CHIRIM

A village rite known as *Chirim* is performed in the village's gampa twice a year in April and October with a purpose to drive off evil spirits, which may threaten the community. It involves local lamas officiating and making *Torma* (figure made out of dough) resembling deities and evil spirits. Two families appointed by rotation from all the households organize the rite.



## O-SHO

Unlike the Chirim, Osho is celebrated one time with a procession encircling the whole village to provide supernatural protection for the newly sown crop at the beginning of the agricultural season. During the procession, four *tormas* resembling the 4 guardians of the village are placed in the 4 corners of the village land.







# Sherpa PEOPLE

*K*humbu is the homeland of the Sherpa people. According to researchers, Sherpas appear to have left their original homeland, the Tibetan Province of Salmo Gang, and crossed the Nangpa La (Pass 5,716m) into Nepal in the late 1400s or early 1500s. The Sherpa people follow the Nyingmapa sect of Tibetan Buddhism, which is an outgrowth of the Mahayana tradition; Gompas are the centres for practicing religious rites where various festivals are performed.

Throughout the year, Sherpas carefully worship the mountain god Khumbu Yul Lha. For devotion, they hang prayer flags on their roofs and make offerings. A good example of this religious practice can be seen during the Dumji festival held in June each year, where requests are made to the god for support against evil forces.

## Myth of the Himalayas : YETI

The yeti or abominable snowman is thought to live in the high Himalayas. The Sherpas distinguish three different types of yeti. *Drema* or *Telma*, the messenger of calamities; *Chuti*, which preys on goats, sheep and yaks; and *Mite* or *Midre* which also attacks animals and sometimes men. Nobody has ever seen a Yeti, only the findings of mysterious footprints in the snow and several incidents of yaks' killings support the legend.



# Social Festivals

IN KHUMBU

## LOSAR (New Year)

This festival usually falls at the end of January or early February. At this time, the ground is frozen, and often covered in snow. The main activities include spinning, weaving, feeding livestock and repair jobs. On this occasion, every household worships its clan god, throws away a year's dirt from the house and uses flour to decorate the house's panels with good luck signs for the coming year. Following this, children celebrate with new clothing and feasting. Feasting may go on for weeks depending on the number of household's participating.



## YARCHANG

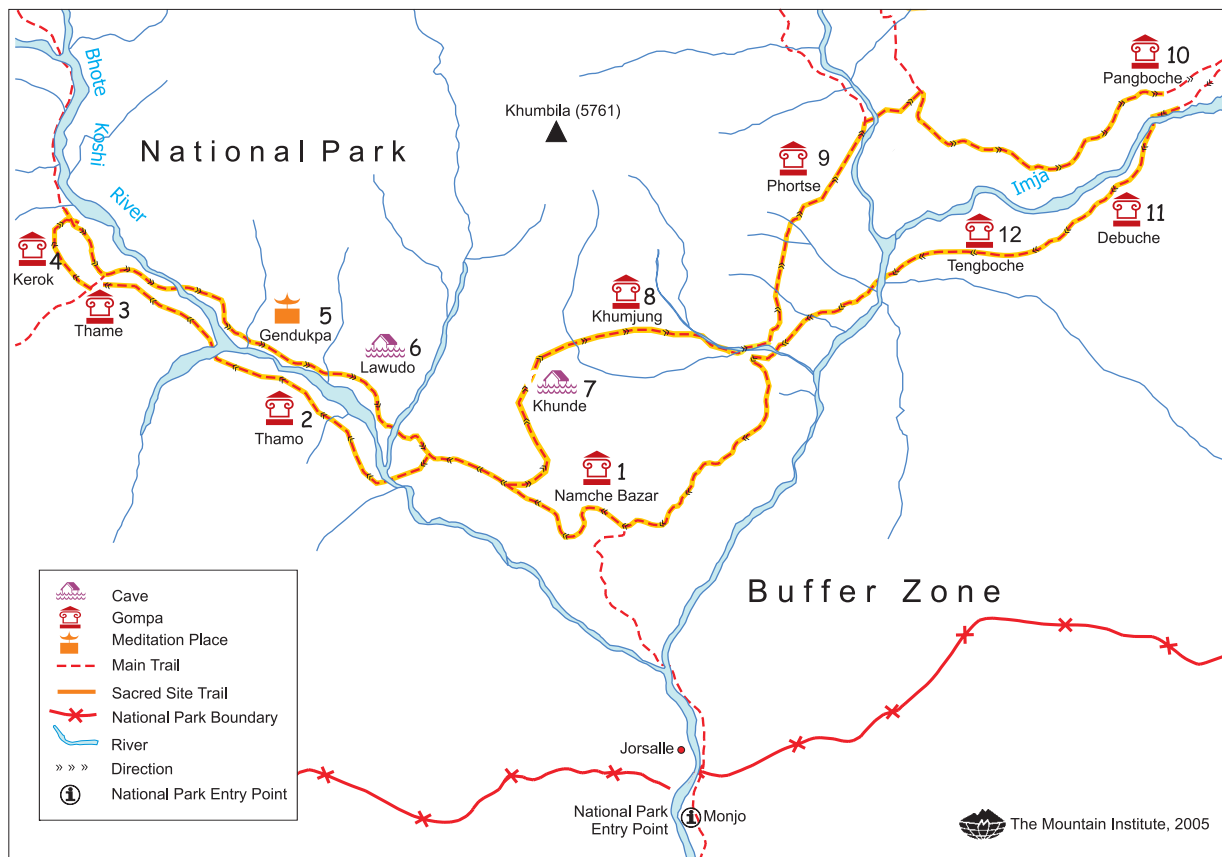
Yarchang is a summer rite to secure the welfare of the herds that takes place in the summer pastures higher up in the valleys. Here every household worships their own clan and local mountain god such as Khumbi-yul-lha. In the first day, all the families in the settlement area put prayer flags on their houses and gather in front of an altar. Like Osho and Chirim, the locals make *toma* resembling clan and local mountain gods. These *tomas* are distributed among the families after the recitation.

## PHANGNI

Phangni is a social festival celebrated during the month of July. Although the origin of this festival is not definite, it is presumed that it was fêted since the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. Besides tending the livestock, the month of July is pretty free of chores and a leisure time for the fun loving and high spirited Sherpas who then engage in a communal entertainment and amusement which is known as Phangni. Different groups organize Phangni that last up to 4 days. During these days, all the necessary items required for the festival is collected communally. People eat, drink, dance and jest around in merry the entire days. At the end of the festival, responsibility is specified on a rotational basis for the celebration of Phangni for the subsequent year.

*Translated from Nawang Tharwa Sherpa's (KBC) brief introduction on Phangni.*

## Sacred Sites Trail Project



## CULTURAL TIPS\*\*

- ♦ Walk on the left side of Mani walls as you pass them. This practice signifies that you respect the Buddhist tradition and turn prayer wheels in a clockwise direction. **Never** sit on mani stones or stupa.
- ♦ Don't litter local springs as it is believed that this will anger the water god, Lu.
- ♦ Don't put dirty items and food scraps such as meat in the fires of Sherpa hearths, as it is believed that offensive odors from such pollution angers the local mountain gods.
- ♦ Always make a small contribution to any temple or monastery that you visit. This is a time honored indigenous tradition.
- ♦ Ask permission to take photographs of people, and if you do extensive photography, it is polite to give the subjects a small gift.
- ♦ Don't ask a Sherpa to kill an animal for you to simply eat meat. This is forbidden in Khumbu both by village custom and by the Buddhist religion.
- ♦ A Khata (white/yellow scarf) is used to welcome, bid farewell, and to show gratitude. It is traditional to put the scarf round men's neck starting from the right hand and women from the left. Don't put scarves around the neck of a lama, simply offer it to his hand.
- ♦ Don't give things to begging children, however, please do give as generously as possible to a begging monk or nun as this is a time honored religious tradition.
- ♦ The seat next to the fire hearth in a traditional Sherpa home is reserved for the main person of the family whether alive or dead. Therefore, please do not sit there.
- ♦ Don't forget to smile back and try to remember the Sherpa word for thank you, which is *thuché thuché*

\*\* Sherpa, M. N. 1982. *Sherpa Culture: Sagarmatha National Park*



We hope you will enjoy the following information about the history and significance of Sacred Sites in the Khumbu Region. Publication of the updated edition of these materials has been possible through financial support from the Sir Edmund Hillary Foundation, Canada.

Contributions are greatly appreciated. Your generous support will benefit and further enhance these initiatives and promote the preservation of Sherpa cultural heritage. To make a donation please contact:

THE MOUNTAIN INSTITUTE  
**Sacred Sites Trail Project**  
P.O. Box 2785, Baluwatar, Kathmandu, Nepal  
Phone: 977-1-4414237, 4419356  
Fax: 977-1-4410073  
E-mail: [tmiregional@wlink.com.np](mailto:tmiregional@wlink.com.np), [angrita@mountain.org](mailto:angrita@mountain.org)

For further information on The Mountain Institute  
Please visit [www.mountain.org](http://www.mountain.org)

TEXT AND CONCEPT  
Ang Rita Sherpa - Senior Program Manager

PHOTOS  
Brian J. Peniston, Ang Rita Sherpa, Jeremy Spoon, Nawang Tharwa Sherpa (former KBC)

