

Stanzin Dazang Namgail

ENDANGERED ORAL TRADITION IN ZANSKAR VALLEY

MA Thesis in Cultural Heritage Studies: Academic Research, Policy, Management.

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by

Stanzin Dazang Namgail

(India)

Thesis submitted to the Department of Medieval Studies,
Central European University, Budapest, in partial fulfillment of the requirements
of the Master of Arts degree in Cultural Heritage Studies: Academic Research, Policy,
Management.

Accepted in conformance with the standards of the CEU.

Chair, Examination Committee

Thesis Supervisor

Examiner

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I, the undersigned, **Stanzin Dazang Namgail**, candidate for the MA degree in Cultural Heritage Studies: Academic Research, Policy, Management declare herewith that the present thesis is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

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Abstract

The present thesis aims to document the endangered oral tradition of Zaskar valley in the Indian Himalayan Region. Zaskar due to its geographical location remained isolated and hard to access in the past. Moreover, because of its strategic location close to border with Pakistan and China, Zaskar was declared a restricted area and was reopened to foreigners only in 1974. During my research, I recorded various songs, tales, riddles and oral history interviews in Zaskar, which are deposited in the Open Society Archive (OSA), Budapest. It will be openly accessible for both researchers and Zaskari people interested rediscovering their cultural and historical identity.

In the past few years, oral tradition has suffered great losses and the people of Ladakh/Zaskar have included themselves in the fold of unchecked globalization. Modernization, new lifestyles, practices and social mores in the recent decades is rapidly changing the traditional culture, including oral tradition. With a road being constructed to connect the valley with the Indian road system, the number of visitors will increase exponentially, causing drastic changes in the region's traditional lifestyles. There have been a few attempts to document the rich cultural tradition by some researchers on Ladakh: A.H Franke and Tashi Rabgias can be cited as an example- still the need to document the tradition remains overarching. Oral tradition in Zaskar valley used to play a vital role and, in some aspect, it still continues to do so (like the wedding songs), though its importance is gradually diminishing.

The primary objective of the thesis is to involve local experts, to cooperate with the local community and raise awareness about the cultural importance of oral tradition among Zaskari people through the cooperation with the educational activities of the NGO Csoma's Room

Foundation. It may involve youth collecting text and the collected material in the future will be deposited in the database in OSA.

Acknowledgements

This thesis could not have been completed without the help of number of people I met throughout the time I spent working on this thesis. It is my great honor to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to them.

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor Eszter Spat for her generous support, motivation, enthusiasm and immense knowledge. I would have been lost without her constant assistance and valuable comments.

I would also like to thank my classmates who help me shaping my ideas with their valuable comments during the two-year period of my study in Central European University. I also want to express my gratitude to my informants for sharing their valuable knowledge and experiences.

Last but not the least I would like to express my thanks to my family in Ladakh and Debrecen for their continuous support and prayer.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The aim of this thesis was to document the endangered oral tradition of Zanskar valley and make it accessible for future generation of both researchers and Zanskari people. Various recordings, songs, tales, riddles and oral history interviews were deposited in the Endangered Intangible Cultural Heritage Digital Database at the Open Society Archive (OSA-CEU), Budapest. This database is accessible to the public, so the collected material can be studied by anyone whether they be academic researchers interested in fast disappearing oral tradition of a small community of people in Indian Himalaya region (Western Tibet) or they be children of Zanskar seeking for their roots and cultural-historical identity.

Furthermore, through cooperation with the educational activities of the NGO Csoma's Room foundation, I will attempt to familiarize children with at least a small part of this collection of Zanskari oral tradition. While in the past children would have been enculturated into local oral tradition as part of the community, listening to other community members, the fast-paced changes in the previously isolated culture and life style of Zanskar means that new methods have to be found to prevent the loss of such tradition and keep it alive in the mind of the next generation.

The future aim is to engage local experts to cooperate with the local community and raise awareness about the cultural importance of oral tradition among Zanskari People. The teaching plan in cooperation with the local community and the Csoma's Room Foundation will hopefully contribute to this aim.

1.1 Description of Zanskar

1.1.1 Geography

Zanskar is a part of Larger Ladakh Region (see figure 1 Map of Larger Ladakh region). Ladakh Region covers about 45,000 square miles (117,000 square km) and contains the Ladakh range, which is a south-eastern extension of the Karakoram range, and the upper Indus river valley.¹ In the northwest part of Ladakh Region lies the Zanskar valley deep in the Indian Himalayas (also referred to as West Tibet by earlier researcher). Zanskar Tehsil of Kargil district has total population of 12'000 inhabitants. The surface area is about 7000 km² ranging at an elevation between 3500 and 7000m (11,500-23,000 feet).² Due to its remote location, the difficulty of access and the fact that it lay far from major trade routes, it was characterized by an unusual degree of isolation until recently. As Deboos points out, Zanskar was not even a part of the Silk Road. If Zanskaris wanted to trade such local products as butter salt, they had to scale the high passes of Penzi La and Omasi La, two mountains dividing Zanskar valley from the outside world.³ This is not to say that neighbouring cultures, Tibetan Buddhism, Indian Hinduism or Islam did not leave its impact on this region. In the mid-twentieth century, there was a border conflict between India, China and Pakistan which urged the restriction and closing Ladakh and Zanskar valley to Foreigners and even for non-Ladakhi Indian nationals. However, the restriction was lifted for foreign and domestic tourists in 1974 by the Central Government.⁴ Zanskar isolation has diminished in past few decades. The region started attracting tourism in

“Ladakh | Region, Kashmir Region, Indian Subcontinent, Asia,” Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed May 26, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Ladakh>.

² Rebecca Hertzog, “Access to Healthcare in Zanskar Valley” (MA thesis, University of Geneva, 2014) 6. Accessed May 24, 2019, https://www.academia.edu/8532710/Access_to_Healthcare_in_Zanskar_Valley_-_A_Community_Assessment.

³ Salomé Deboos, “Religious Fundamentalism in Zanskar, Indian Himalaya,” (*Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 32 no.1, Article 12. 2013) 40.

⁴ John Bray, “Recent research on Ladakh,” (*Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol.18 no.1, Article 10. 1998): 14.

the 1990s.⁵ In recent years the people of Zaskar have seen more and more visitors flocking to the region. In addition, with the new roads being built connecting the valley with the Indian road system the number of visitors will increase exponentially, causing drastic changes in the region's traditional lifestyle (which will be described more in detail in the chapter: Transformation of Socio-economic Factors in Zaskar and its impact on Oral Tradition)

The Tibetist scholar, Tadeusz Skorupski, who visited the region (on foot and horseback) in the mid-seventies, could still write:

“Access to Zangskar is difficult from all sides. Communication with the neighboring Himalayan areas is maintained across mountain passes and by the tracks which follow the river gorges. The easiest approach leads from Kargil through the Suru Valley and over the Penzi La. Thus, it is along this track that the Jammu and Kashmir Government has decided to build a road to Padum, thus connecting Zangskar with the main road from Srinagar into Ladakh. In 1977 the Public Works Department was completing the first stretch of a road from Kargil to Padum, the first road ever built into Zangskar.”⁶

The complex and even controversial nature of building such roads – connecting previously isolated cultures – to the larger world – is well demonstrated by the recollections of the Gyalses Nima Nurboo usually referred to as the “king of Zangla” (the seat of one of the two royal families which once ruled the Zaskar valley.) According to his recollections, Henrich Harrier (the author of *Seven Years in Tibet*), asked Nima “not to build this road, as it will destroy the culture of Zaskar.” However, he remains firm to his ideas and being a leader and representative of Zaskar, he thought it is important for the Zanskari people to have the road. He saw how the people struggled carrying goods on their backs to Leh to barter for

⁵ Salomé Deboos, “Religious Fundamentalism in Zaskar, Indian Himalaya,” (*Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 32 no.1, Article 12. 2013) 40.

⁶ Skorupski Tadeusz, *The Cultural Heritage of Ladakh, Zangskar and the Cave Temples of Ladakh*, Vol. 2. (Warminster, Arts and Phillips. 1980) 3.

commodities like salt, sugar, oil, kerosene. He went to every village in whole Zaskar and Lugenak valley and told them, for three months no one can consume chang (locally brewed beer) and from every household one person had to go and help build the road.⁷

LADAKH IN INDIA

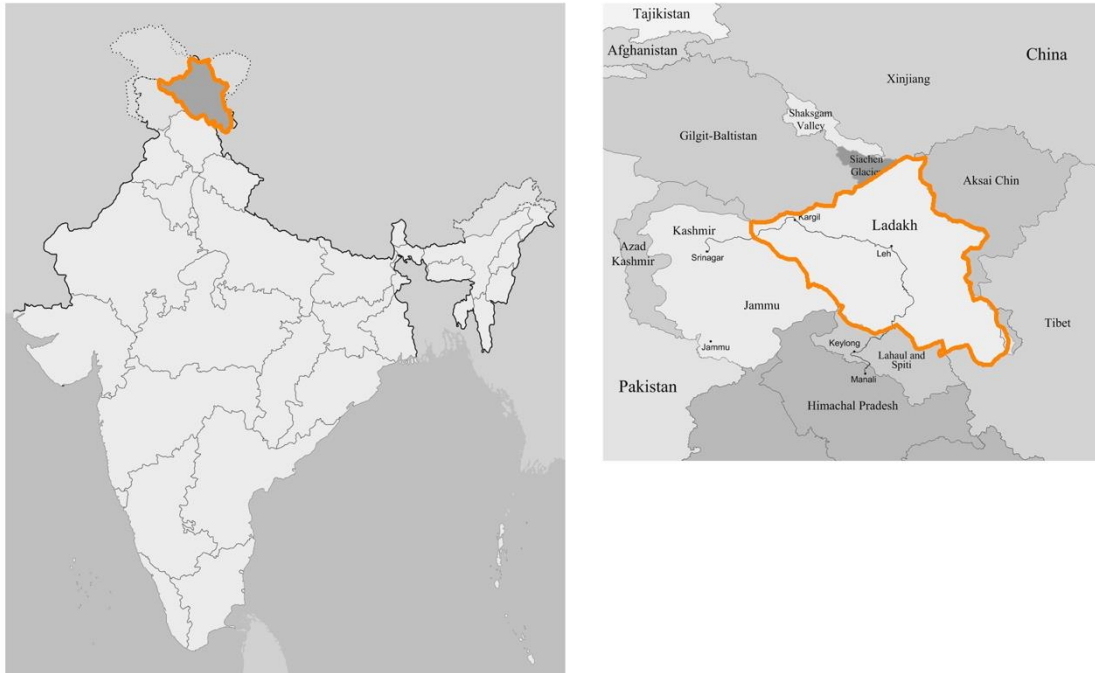


Figure 1 Map of Larger Ladakh Region in India

1.1.2 History

In a survey made by Skorupski in Zaskar, he states, “Very little is known about the history of Zangskar. From the materials available to us we learn something about some periods of its history, but no overall picture is discernible. “Unlike the ‘Chronicles of Ladakh’, the ‘Chronicles of Zangskar’ are very short and contain only very general information namely an account of

⁷ Personal communication with Gyalses Nima Nurboo, during summer research 2018

the origins of the country, its dependency upon Kashmir in Pre-Tibetan times.”⁸ Until the seventh century, Zaskar and Ladakh were populated by an Indo-European speaking populations, the Dard tribes who adopted a form of Buddhism long before the Tibetans came to this region.⁹ When the Tibetan dynasty lost its power in Tibet because of the widespread discontent and uprising, by the mid-ninth century, King Skildey Nyimagon came from Tibet and invaded territories in the west of Tibet (Ladakh region.)¹⁰ Later King Skildey Nyimagon divided his kingdom between his three sons and the youngest son Ldey-Tsug Gon became the king of Zaskar.¹¹ This led to the further adoption of Buddhism by the people. Zaskar followed similar lines as those developed in Tibet when Buddhism was introduced there during the seventh and eighth centuries.

According to Skorupski, “the 'Chronicles of Zangskar' firmly state that before the arrival of the Tibetans the country was subject to Kashmir.”¹² In 1380s and the early 1510s, many Islamic missionaries propagated Islam and proselytised the Ladakhi people, which resulted in rapid decline of Buddhist influence on Ladakh and Zaskar. However, Zaskar’s isolation due to low accessibility through the high mountain ranges has enabled it to remain a Buddhist region upto the present day (now with a small muslim community in Padum.) In 1834, the Dogra Zorawar Singh, a general of Maharaja Ranjit Singh of Kashmir, invaded and annexed Zaskar and Ladakh and imposed taxation agreement.¹³ From 1842 onwards, Zaskar, together with Ladakh became a part of Jammu and Kashmir state.¹⁴ In 1947, at the time of the Partition, the

⁸ Skorupski, *The Cultural Heritage of Ladakh*, 9.

⁹ Eva K Dargyay, “Buddhism in Adaptation,” (*History of Religions*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (1988), 124.

Eva K. Dargyay, “Buddhism in Adaptation: Ancestor Gods and Their Tantric Counterparts in the Religious Life of Zaskar,” *History of Religions* 28, no. 2 (1988): 124.

¹⁰ Eva K. Dargyay, “Buddhism in Adaptation, 124.

¹¹ In an Interview with Gyalses Nima Nurboo, Zangla. During summer research 2018

¹² Skorupski, *The Cultural Heritage of Ladakh, Zangskar*, 9.

¹³ Robert A. Huttenback, “Gulab Singh and the Creation of the Dogra State of Jammu, Kashmir, and Ladakh,” (*The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 4 August 1961) 480.

¹⁴ Skorupski, *The Cultural Heritage of Ladakh, Zangskar*. 14.

Dogra ruler Maharaja Hari Singh signed the Instrument of Accession which agreed to accede to the Dominion of India.¹⁵

1.2 Zaskar Today

Today, Zaskar is still relatively isolated from the outside world. In winter, it is accessible only by air and through walking on the frozen Zaskar river. According to Salome Deboos, in winter, when the snow comes, Zaskar is still cut off from the rest of the world for six to eight months, “when the road passes are closed and the Chadar (the frozen Zaskar River) provides the only access or way out of the valley.”¹⁶ During the summer, there is also government provided helicopter service, a project commenced in 2018. However, this helicopter is active during the summer and not coming in the winter. According to Hertzog “only army helicopters can bring urgent supplies to Army camps established by the Indian Army, just outside Padum, the administrative centre at the southernmost tip of Zaskar.”¹⁷

With the current construction of the Padum-Leh road will connect the Zaskar valley to Ladakh will boost the process of modernization. Presently there is no built road between Ladakh and Zaskar, one has to first go to Kargil to the north-west, which means a considerable detour. By private car the new road would mean a four-hour journey instead of a sixteen hour one. By public transport, that is by bus, the difference is even greater. There is another road being built, nearly finished, connecting Zaskar to the town of Darcha to the road leading to Manali in Himachal Pradesh state to the south. Manali, a mountain resort is another very popular tourist destination, it is possible that many travellers may want to make a detour to Zaskar. It is

¹⁵ Vincent Iacopino, *The crackdown in Kashmir*, (1993), 10.

¹⁶ Deboos, “Religious Fundamentalism in Zaskar,” 38.

¹⁷ Christopher Hertzog, *Zaskar Undiscovered* (Booksmango, 2018), 8.

assumed that these roads will be cleared and open even in winter as well. (Check figure1 for Map)

There are also plans to build an airport in Zaskar with the site already chosen (in Ufti Thang). The road (not to mention airplane connection) would mean much easier access, and an explosion of tourism. Ladakh itself is drawing tourists at a fast-increasing rate.

1.3 State of Research

So far, most research in the area concentrated on Ladakh proper (that is the Ladakh valley, lying east of Zaskar.) Zaskar has hardly received any attention from these researchers. Perhaps due to its smaller size and more remote location, which was hardly accessible. However, Ladakh and Zaskar share a common culture and their oral tradition shows many similarities, therefore research done on the Ladakh valley should be included here.

One of the most remarkable scholars of the era was A.H Franke, the great author of many books on Ladakh such as ‘Antiquities of Indian Tibet,’¹⁸ which contains the Tibetan text of Ladakh chronicles and a number of minor chronicles with translation and notes. In addition to translating historical text, Franke worked on Ladakhi oral literature/oral tradition. He collected, translated into English and published various versions of the Gesar epic, ‘The Story of the Eighteen Heroes,’¹⁹ and wedding songs which are narrated and sung on festive occasions In Ladakh, ‘Ladakhi songs.’²⁰

Samuel Ribbach, a Moravian missionary, who had also worked with Franke translating folk stories came to Ladakh and made a study of Ladakhi culture and tradition and later published

¹⁸ A. H Franke, “The Chronocles of Ladakh and Minor Chronicles,” in *Antiquities of Indian Tibet*, ed. F.W Thomas (1913) 83.

¹⁹ A. H Franke, *The Story of the Eighteen Heroes: Preface of the Kesar Saga* (Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1905)

²⁰ A. H Franke, “Ladakhi Songs,” *Indian Antiquary*, (1902)

the same in a book “Culture and Society in Ladakh,”.²¹ In this book he describes the wedding rituals and practices, which I will be using as reference in chapter on Bagston glu or wedding songs and the changing pattern of Zanskar wedding ceremonies.

One of the leading composers and cultural activists in Ladakh is the scholar and poet Tashi Rabgias to realize the cultural importance of preserving the Ladakhi folk songs. Thus, he convinced the Jammu and Kashmir state Academy of Art, Culture and Language to commissioned him to compile series of devoted “Folk songs of Ladakh.”²² After seeing the importance of these traditional culture. It was the first attempt to establish these folk songs systematically. “with the count now at eighteen numbered volumes, plus two unnumbered volumes on marriage songs. The later volumes have been compiled and edited by various scholars, including Ngawang Tsering Shakspo,”²³ who also wrote a book on “Ladakhi Folk Songs”.²⁴

Noe Dinnerstein, in his thesis “Ladakh Traditional Songs: A Cultural, Musical and Literary study” examines the place of traditional songs in Ladakh. Through this text, he articulates how Ladakhi songs represent cultural self-images through associated musical, textual and visual expression. It reflects the socio- political structure of Ladakhi society. He also describes the transformation of Ladakhi music into modern media space and influences from Nepali popular music and Bollywood songs. Just like Dinnerstein, Barbara Aziz Nimzi also refers to the change taking place in her article on wedding songs (although this was not her primary focus.) Reflecting on the change, Barbara Aziz Nimri, using written records of marriage songs (recorded by Tibetan themselves) from Dingri (a Tibetan town near the Indian border) justifies

²¹ Samuel H. Ribbach, *Culture and Society in Ladakh* (Ess Publications, New Delhi.1940) 43-78

²² Tashi Rabgias, *Ladvags kyi Yul Glu* [Ladakhi Folk Songs] (Leh, Ladakh: Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture and Languages, 1971)

²³ Noe Dinnerstein, *Ladakh Traditional Songs: A Cultural, Musical and Literary study* (Phd diss, The city university of New York, 2013) 4

²⁴ Nawang Tsering Shakspo, *Songs of Himalayas: Ladakhi Folk Songs* (Leh, Ladakh, India, 1985)

her use of written text to analyse a marriage song. She implies that instead of a live performance “the performance of such marriage songs had become a thing of the past”²⁵ and therefore would not be representation of the traditional marriage song.

While wedding songs are still performed in Zaskar or neighbouring Ladakh in the Indian Himalayas, there is no doubt that serious changes are taking place and oral tradition (whether wedding songs or other genres) is concern as shall be describe later.

In the 1960s Morup Namgyal walked hundreds of miles throughout Ladakh, making visit to villages and documenting their folk songs. This journey began his lifelong efforts to preserve Ladakh’s vanishing folk songs and recording them.²⁶ Morup Namgyal, who is a folk musician from Ladakh, a composer, dramatist and was the director of AIR (All India Radio)²⁷ He was awarded Padma Shri (highest civilian honour) by government of India, in 2004, for his contribution to Ladakhi music. According to Mehboob, “Namgyal’s song collection is also a community cultural repository. In the long-held oral tradition, a folk song is sung with every stage, aspect and major milestone in life, like marriage and cultivating agriculture. Other songs reflect the dying language and historical milestones, like when India’s economic pressure began spurring new development to displace the Ladakhi way of life. These song stories are especially significant to a people who have no written tradition of passing on history to the next generation.”²⁸

²⁵ Barbara Nimri Aziz, “On Translating Oral Traditions: Ceremonial Wedding Poetry from Dingri,” *Soundings in Tibetan Civilization*, (Manohar, delhi 1985)

²⁶ Eric Koto, “The Song Collector - a Documentary Film,” Kickstarter, accessed May 27, 2019, <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/763330243/thesongcollector>.

²⁷ “All India Radio,” Accessed May 25, 2019. <http://allindiaradio.gov.in/>.

²⁸ Danish Mehboob, “Film ‘The Song Collector’ Shows a Lost Buddhist Culture’s Revival in India,” The Seattle Globalist (blog), June 5, 2016. <https://www.seattleglobalist.com/2016/06/04/song-collector-captures-a-lost-buddhist-cultures-revival-in-india/52264>.

While Francke, Tashi Rabgias, collected only the text of traditional songs (in writing) Morup collected them recorded. However, (apart from the fact that he did not work in Zanskar), only a very few of these are available online, either for free or for money.²⁹

1.4 Actors/organization active in trying to preserve

Intangible Cultural Heritage in the region

There is a growing awareness in the region (Indian Himalayas/Ladakh Region) among the emerging middle-class that modernization and the transformation of life-style is inevitably leading to a loss of traditional culture and customs – in fact, it has already led to it to a certain extent. In response, efforts are made to prevent this loss or at least to try and preserve some aspects of traditional Ladakhi culture.

This includes local cultural organization, which are creating archives (for films and audio recording), publishing magazines on local culture and attempts to revive traditional festivals which have been discontinued or discarded in the course of the past few decades.

1.4.1 LAMO, Ladakh Art and Media Organization³⁰

LAMO is a public charitable trust established to articulate an alternative vision for the arts and media in Ladakh. LAMO is also an award winner of UNESCO Asia-Pacific for Cultural

²⁹ The twelve songs on this webpage are basically the extent of songs collected or recorded by Morup Namgyal which are freely available on the net.

Morup Namgyal, "Amazon.It: Morup Namgyal: Musica Digitale," Accessed May 25, 2019.

https://www.amazon.it/s?k=Morup+Namgyal&i=digital-music&search-type=ss&ref=ntt_srch_drd_B06W2L7Y3G.

"Where the Mountains Meet the Sky: Folk Music of Ladakh, by Various Artists." Sublime Frequencies.

Accessed May 25, 2019. <https://sublimefrequencies.bandcamp.com/album/where-the-mountains-meet-the-sky-folk-music-of-ladakh>.

Morup Namgyal also produces CDs and Cassettes:

Namgyal, Morup. 1999. Folk Songs of Ladakh. Leh, Ladakh: Music Centre cassette MC DD4. ———. 1999. Jaabro: Folk Songs of Nomads. Leh, Ladakh: Music Centre cassette MC-017. ———. 2003. Folk Songs of Ladakh. Leh, Ladakh: Music Centre CD.

³⁰ "LAMO - an Alternative Vision for the Arts and Media," accessed May 26, 2019, <https://lamo.org.in/>.

Heritage conservation for 2018.³¹ So far, LAMO was not involved in recording and archiving, but at present they feature a collection of songs and an audio room where people can listen to such recordings. They organize live music concerts with local professional singers, promote and exhibit the work of local artists. Their primary target audience is the youth of Ladakh, for whom they organize workshops and arrange interactive space between the younger and the older generation to facilitate the sharing and learning from each other. LAMO publishes weekly and monthly printed magazine and newspaper. They keep the people updated about the events happening at LAMO through their online media platform.

1.4.2 Himalayan Cultural Heritage Foundation

The main objective of the foundation is to promote and preserve the Himalayan indigenous cultural heritage. This includes built, cultural and natural heritage, such as: art and crafts skills, rituals and village handicrafts, folk traditions, community-based management of cultural and natural resources and language and literature.³² It aims to teach young people about their cultural heritage and its relevance. Beside organizing activities aimed at restoring built heritage, like stupas, they also concentrate on the intangible cultural heritage of the region and organize festivals.³³ They have also initiated organizing a week-long workshop for twenty people on traditional instrument (Daman and Surna), folk songs and folk dances in collaboration with the village communities of Yar-zhung, Nubra.

The foundation also conducted a project called “My Culture, My Heritage” which mainly focused on the youth of Ladakh. During this many folk stories were collected from the students. Students from several schools attended the workshop. In last three years HCHF has made

³¹ “LAMO : Latest Current Affairs and News - Current Affairs Today,” accessed May 25, 2019, <https://currentaffairs.gktoday.in/tags/lamo>.

³² “Himalaya Cultural Heritage Foundation,” accessed May 26, 2019, <https://heritagehimalaya.org/>.

³³ “Silk Route Festival – 2016,” accessed May 26, 2019, <http://heritagehimalaya.org/silk-route-festival-2016/>.

concerted efforts in documenting the intangible heritage of Ladakh, including folklores, traditional songs, music, dances and folk stories. They also have printed magazines and online publication

1.4.3 Reach Ladakh Bulletin³⁴

This started as a printed magazine, but recently started to feature an ‘E-paper.’ It publishes articles on various aspects of Ladakhi culture, from marriage ceremonies³⁵ to cultural events and festivals, to material culture (for example traditional crafted shoes).³⁶ There are events organised for the youth, teaching them the importance of culture by giving example of people, who made a tremendous contribution towards society and making them understand that development and cultural identity do not go hand in hand in Ladakh. It seeks to deliver the message that people should change with time but not at the cost of one’s identity.

Reach Ladakh is also organizing polo festival in collaboration with Chushot Polo Club (Non profiteering Organization) with an aim to preserve and promote the heritage game Polo. Polo used to be a traditional sport played in every village, especially on ritual occasions, but has practically disappeared since horses were replaced by machines in the fields.

1.4.4 Ladakh Buddhist Association³⁷

The Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA) was founded in 1933 and is a registered charitable organization, who works for the betterment of the lives of the people of Ladakh. It was founded

³⁴ “Reach Ladakh Bulletin- Ladakh Online News Portal,” accessed May 26, 2019, <http://www.reachladakh.com/>.

³⁵ Reach Ladakh, <http://www.reachladakh.com/news/oped-page/the-changing-face-of-ladakhi-marriages>. Last accessed 23rd May 2019.

³⁶ <http://www.reachladakh.com/news/art-culture-and-languages/know-your-culture1>, Last accessed 23th May 2019.

³⁷ “Ladakh Buddhist Association – Social, Cultural and Educational,” accessed May 26, 2019, <http://ladakhbuddhistassociation.org/>.

to look after the Buddhist interest and to bringing social reforms in Ladakhi society and to preserve its art, culture, language and tradition. LBA is also trying to preserve or even ‘purify’ culture and bring regulation like people cannot play modern music and cannot slaughter animals at festivals.

Ladakh Buddhist Association with the support of Cultural Academy Jammu and Kashmir, also organised Tse-Tse (New Year’s moon watching ceremony) as part of Losar celebration at Leh. It aimed to revive the traditional customs and practices of Losar celebration to inform the traditional customs to younger generation and encourage them to participate.

1.5 Novelty of Research

My thesis adds to the previous research on oral tradition of Indian-Tibet/ Greater Ladakh region on the following points.

Previous researchers in the area had concentrated primarily on Ladakh proper (Ladakh Valley) making a close study of Ladakhi tradition. Larger Ladakh Region is divided into three districts (Leh-Ladakh, Kargil and Nubra) and the districts are further divided in blocks and sub-blocks. Zaskar falls under the Kargil district. Zaskar is similar to Ladakh, but still has some differences, for instance, Zaskar has a different Ladakhi speaking dialect. Most of the wedding songs in Ladakh and Zaskar are the same, however, the wedding rites and ritual are different from those describe by various authors. Popular Ladakhi Folk songs have not been studied in the past. Most of the songs have neither been published or recorded. With the exception of Franke’s work in this field. More interest has been shown recently and in 1968, the Jammu and

Kashmir, Academy of Arts, Culture and Languages entrusted Tashi Rabgias to undertake the work of compiling a volume of Ladakhi folk songs.³⁸

Previous scholars like Franke had collected songs and Gesar epic (but not other tales). My research includes not only songs but also tales and riddles. I had also conducted interviews on oral history of Zangla dynasty and about the influence of royal house over the villages. I had also made interviews with *Amchi* (traditional doctor) and on the cast system and crafting in Zanskar.

Previous researchers have mostly concentrated on documenting the texts on paper and no recordings were made (or at least were not made available to others). There were only few local musicians like Morup Namgyal, who transcribe the music, recorded and made available to others. Some of these Ladakhi folk songs are available online as well (as mentioned above). Unlike other researches my work counts to be the first documentation of the oral tradition (songs) and other forms of oral tradition (tales and riddles) in the form of audio recording in Zanskar.

Finally, the audio material I recorded in Zanskar valley has been deposited to the Open Society Archive (OSA, CEU, Budapest) where it will be included in the planned Digital Database for Endangered Cultural Heritage. The Database provides open access to the material to anybody for educational and research purposes. This means that anybody can listen to the tales, songs, riddles I have collected, as well as the interviews I have made on various aspects of traditional Zanskari life. Making it accessible will give the Zanskari people a chance to reclaim their own culture at their own pace. Historical experience and research show that while the first generation or two rush to “modernize” and acquire newness and sophistication, the next

³⁸ Nawang Tsering Shakspo, “Ladakhi Folk Songs,” *A Cultural History of Ladakh*, ed. Kyle Gardner (Center of Research on Ladakh, Leh, 2014) 169.

generation, looking for their cultural roots and recovering their own identity, often feel a deep interest in what is usually referred to as “folklore” and “tradition.”

1.6 Field Research in Zanskar

My thesis is primarily based on material I collected in Zanskar. This material is comprised of recordings of Bagston glu or wedding songs, rungs or tales, tsot-tsok or riddles as well as interviews conducted with the people during the research period.

I was born in the Zanskar valley, in the village of Zangla. I left my native village when I was a five-year-old in order to go study in a private school in Mulbekh (Kargil district, Jammu and Kashmir state). Later, I went to a boarding school in Dehradun (Uttarakhand state), where I stayed for twelve years. Even though, the government education system had been introduced to Zangla before my birth. Still the government school education standard was not that good at that time and had one teacher teaching the whole school. My father the first university graduate from Zanskar with a bachelor’s degree, knew the importance of education and to provide good education took me to Mulbekh. After studying for a few years in Mulbekh, a war took place between India and Pakistan in 1999 and for months the schools were shut down and people started sending their children outside Ladakh to study in a boarding school. Even though, when the war got over and the government and private schools were re-opened, by that time it had become a trend among Ladakhis to send their children outside for studies. I went to high school in Dehradun and then to university in Chandigarh (Punjab and Haryana state). In other words, though a native of Zangla, I lived a huge part of my life outside Zangla and visited only during summer vacations.

As a result, my own perception of Zanskar and its tradition is unique: it comprises both the view of a native and of an outsider. I spent the first five years of my life in Zanskar and made a frequent visit. The local dialect is also my mother language and I have numerous close

relatives there, including my parents, brother and sisters. At the same time, having spent such a huge part of my life outside, I am capable of seeing Zangla's culture and local traditions with the eyes of an outsider, and of not taking things for granted, as an unquestionable aspect of life, but something that differs from what can be found elsewhere.

In the summer of 2018, I spent two months (July-August) in Zanskar. I devoted a part of my time there to research to collect oral tradition in Zanskar valley and to consciously learn more about socio-cultural context of such traditions. I was working with the organization Csoma's Room at the time, a group of four people (consisting of a social anthropologist, an architect, an expert in irrigation system, and I, acting as their local liaison and translator. The aim of our work was to help devise a future plan for Csoma's Room to pinpoint the village where building a solar school (one that would enable students to attend school even during the winter months, when state schools are closed due to the inclement weather) would be the most needed. Besides making a survey about the number of potential students, we also tried to map what other help people felt they needed. (The most pressing problem is that of water. Climate change has caused some of the mountain streams used to irrigate the fields through a complex channel system dry up. As a result, some village villages no longer have an adequate water supply anymore. Csoma's Room has long-term plans to help with the reconstruction of such water channels, not only with schools.)

Traveling around in Zanskar with the group of Csoma's research team, enabled me to meet people not only from my village, but also from other Zanskari villages expanding the scope of my own research (See figure 2 for the map of research area). It provided me with a good opportunity to ask people I met in these villages, if they knew any lurspon (wedding singer) or rungs shad-kan (a story teller.)



Figure 2 Map of research area Summer 2018

There is a new road being built to connect Zaskar to Leh and Manali, with no direct road connectivity between some villages. To reach some of the villages, like Pishu, to get there by car, on a road, I should have first gone to Padum and take the road from there leading to Pishu, meaning a huge detour. So, I went by car part of the way, and then walked the rest of the way. Villages Hanamur, Pidmo do not, even this day, have any roads connecting them with other settlements, though there are construction plans – so they could be accessed on foot only.

Reaching most of these villages I met mostly the elderly people. Younger men and women were away to work on the construction of the road (that would connect Padum with Leh), which they find a good opportunity to make money. They come back for the harvest, but most of the ploughing, harvesting, threshing is done by machines.

During my field research, many locals inquired as to the purpose of my interest and research in the orally-transmitted songs and tales. It took me time to explain to them the relevance and uniqueness of such oral traditions for the Zanskari culture, and I had to visit a lot of houses and talk to many people before I could find somebody who was knowledgeable about the oral traditions in the region. The result of my survey and research shows that around three out of a hundred people in the Zanskar region had some amount of knowledge about the oral traditions. An important aspects to be noted here is that almost all the well-informed people are in their late seventies and eighties. Sometimes, asking the younger people, they were unsure who should be asked among the older people and their information usually proved to be not correct (it will be describe more in detail in the chapter on Transformation.)

During the research, I was always treated with great hospitality. Sometimes this could even become a draw-back, since people insisted on feasting me with food and chang (local barley beer), leaving me with little time to do my research / taking away from the time I could spend on actual research.

Later, when working on my material at the university, I found that I failed to pay attention to some details, or I was not sure if I remembered everything correctly. Making good use of modern technology, I repeatedly contacted my family members for further information or asked them to contact the people I had interviewed. My father (Gyalses Nima Nurboo) who is in his eighties, and one of my respondents, remembers some part of Zanskari oral tradition could clear certain doubts I had while talking on skype as he stays in Ladakh in the winter.

Chapter 2: Literacy and Orality in Traditional Zanskar

This chapter deals with the role and position of oral tradition in Zanskar valley. Oral tradition used to play a vital role in Zanskar valley and in some aspect, it still continues to do so, though its importance is gradually diminishing. Different cultures utilize different forms of orality, again depending on situation and context. What Walter Ong has said of orality in general also applies to Zanskar.

“Oral cultures indeed produce powerful and beautiful verbal performances of high artistic and human worth, which are no longer even possible once writing has taken possession of the psyche.”³⁹

2.1 Literacy in Traditional Zanskar valley

In order to fully understand the role and position of oral tradition, it is important to understand the literacy and orality before the state education was introduced in Zanskar valley in the 1980s. The first government school was opened in Padum before India gained Independence (1947). By the late 1980's, there were many schools in the villages throughout the valley.⁴⁰

³⁹ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. (New York: Routledge, 1982) 14.

⁴⁰ John Cook and Henery Osmaston, *Himalayan Buddhist Villages*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1992)

While government education is a relatively new phenomenon, this is not to say that literacy was unknown in the region. However, it is limited to certain spheres of life. Furthermore, access to education and literacy was limited, while in its turn literacy was mainly related to the religious-spiritual (Buddhist)sphere. Prior to the current situation, the state-sponsored education / school system, literacy was limited to monasteries and aristocracy, and script and grammar were inseparable from the metaphysical essence of religious knowledge of literature which it sought to clarify and expand. Furthermore, literacy was until recently restricted to reading and writing in Classical Tibetan,⁴¹ also called Bhoti, which differs from the local dialects. In the past, most Ladakhis, who learnt to read were familiar with the writing system (or alphabet) of *choskat*, that is the ancient Tibetan grammar (literally religious language or classical Tibetan book language)⁴² which used Bhoti. The Ladakhi Buddhist scholars maintain that there is one, Bhoti language and spoken Ladakhi is simply colloquial dialect of it. They use the term 'Bhoti' to describe modern written Tibetan, which they say is common written language from the Kargil District in western Ladakh through Arunachal Pradesh in the far Indian North East; and through which the culture of all Himalayan Buddhism is transmitted.⁴³

In Ladakhi society, it was Buddhist monasteries which provided basic education to student for long centuries. The practice is well presented in Zaskar as well. Most families sent at least one of their sons (pu tsa) or daughters (po mo) to become a monk (lama) or nun (chomo) to the local Gonpa or Tibetan Buddhist monastery, where they got intensive teaching in Tibetan script, which enabled them to read the sacred texts. Once a person became a monk or nun, they

⁴¹ Classical Tibetan is the language of religion and the literature (the two cannot be separated). Classic Tibetan differs from the various Tibetan dialects or languages spoken by people today.

⁴² Pascale Dollfus, "Compte rendu de: Ladakhi histories: Local and regional perspectives," by John Bray, (*Leiden:Tibetan Studies Library*, 2005) 172-177

⁴³ Tsetan Namgyal, "Exploring the Linguistic Influence of Tibet in Ladakh," *Journal of Research Institute*, vol 49 (2013) 115-120 Accessed May 26, 2019, <https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=Tsetan+Namgyal,+Exploring+the+linguistic+influence+of+Tibet+in+Ladakh,+Journal+of+Research+Institute.&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8>.

lived a life segregated from the rest of the community, in the monasteries built outside the village⁴⁴ with the other monks and nuns. Today, this practice is on the decline. These days elder monks are going around visiting the villages and trying to convince people to send their children to the monasteries, because less and less people do so. However, there are still many aspects of Zanskari/Ladakhi life, where the participation of monks is a must/prerequisite.

Monks were and still are requested by village households to celebrate some religious events in their homes, in particular when the reading of sacred texts are necessary. In most of the villages there was and even today there is a monk assigned or doing this ritual. There are several other important occasions held in the villages for which either the village monk or the monks from some other monastery were called upon. In the past, there was a monk even in the palace specially assigned to do only the religious ritual related to the royal house.

While the ability to read and write the sacred scriptures was a requirement for a monk, a future king in his turn, had to become a monk and live a certain period of time as a monk, before he could become a ruler. This enabled them to understand and interpret the teachings of Buddha and to rule their people in a just and wise way. Naturally, the king's training as a monk also entailed that he received an education in literacy.

Thus, speaking of traditional Zanskar, one may say that the literacy rate was relatively high due to the institution of Buddhist monastery schools, but the monks had a separate social circle and lived a life segregated from the rest of the community. However, when they look at lay society of the past, a completely different picture emerges. Most people did not receive an education in religion or learnt to read and write. Most of them were dependent on orality, whatever they learn was orally transmitted.

⁴⁴ Traditionally, there was a monastery (or nunnery) next to every village in Zanskar.

There were still a few lay people who took interest in religious education and became *Amchi* and *Onpo*. *Amchis* are traditional doctors or medicinal healers, while *onpos* are astrologer and written texts played an important role in the education and activities of both. The profession of an *Amchi*, or medicinal healers, was often handed down within a family, and an *Amchi*'s training usually was a mixture of getting familiar with sacred medical texts (*nyams yig*)⁴⁵ and on-the-other hand, practical training. Being a full practitioner of *Amchi* was not an easy task, theoretically one needed to be both familiar with written texts consisting of six volumes of *Amchi* texts, which one had to master. According to one of my *Amchi* informants, *Amchis* possesses six medical texts or treaties, which they must read and memorized.⁴⁶ One also had to have a practical knowledge of making medicine and collecting herbs. However, much of the knowledge necessary for practising as an *Amchi* was said to be transmitted orally and for that one did not have to master the texts. During my fieldwork, I met an *Amchi* in one of the villages, who was still visited by locals for minor ailments, like a headache. He was semi-literate and had trouble reading the texts, but he had learnt which plants to collect and how to make medicines from his father, who was also an *Amchi*.⁴⁷

When people became sick, they first consulted an *Amchi*. However, if the *Amchi* failed to cure them they went to an *Onpo* or astrologer.⁴⁸ The *onpo* deals with astrology and relies on books of astrological charts. His work covers almost every aspect of village life: selecting sites for new buildings, determining the day to begin sowing and harvesting the fields, checking the auspiciousness of proposed marriage partners, selecting the day and time for wedding and naming the time for funerals as well.⁴⁹ He has eight basic texts, of which one the '*gyektsis*',

⁴⁵ Pordié Laurent, "*Buddhism in the Everyday Medical Practice of the Ladakhi Amchi*," (Indian Anthro- pologist 37 no 1, 2007) 96.

⁴⁶ Personal communication with Phuntsok Tongyot (*Amchi*), village Tsazar. During summer research 2018

⁴⁷ For further detail on medical texts see Pordié Laurent. *Buddhism in the Everyday Medical Practice of the Ladakhi Amchi*. (Indian Anthro- pologist 37 no.1, 2007) 93-116.

⁴⁸ They could also visit a *Lhaba* (or *lhamo* if female), that is, traditional oracles or soothsayers.

⁴⁹ Helena Norberg Hodge, (*Ancient Future: Learning from Ladakh*. Local futures.1991) n.p

deals exclusively with illness. With the help of another text the “*loto*”, the annually revised book of astrological computations, he is able to diagnose and recommend cures. Typically, his remedies involve the reading of sacred books or the performance of a prayer service. Throwing dice and interpreting patterns of grain are among the other methods he uses.⁵⁰

There was another aspect, “*Chab brjod*” or short chronicles, where Literacy and orality co-existed in Zanskar valley. There exist some written historical sources, short chronicles and written genealogies. Zanskari call these “*Chab brjod*” which is a short chronicle, which sometimes also contains information about some social aspects. “*Gyalrab*” is a sort of genealogy describing the lineage of the royal families. According to Gyalses Nima Nurboo,⁵¹ every royal family had its own written genealogy or *Gyalrab* and a person is assigned to write and mention every event which happened. Eva Neumaier claims that not only the royal family who had written genealogies, she found such documents in a few peasant families. From such texts they could learn their genealogical identity and sense of location and they consider them to be a priceless heirloom⁵² (personally, I have heard but never encountered of such written documents among villagers). In the case of Zangla, the *Gyalrab* of the Zangla royal family was destroyed in a tragic fire in Srinagar but the version of the *Gyalrab* is transcribed by August Francke 1899 and can be found in his book.⁵³ Furthermore, a version of this *Gyalrab* is transmitted orally in the royal family.

⁵⁰ Hodge, *Ancient Futures*, 1991. n.p

⁵¹ Personal communication, during a discussion with Gyalses Nima Nurboo, Zangla. 2018

⁵² Eva K Neumaier, “Histography and cultural identity in Zanskar,” in *Tibet, past and present*, ed. Henk Blezer (Leiden: Boston: Brill, 2002) 338.

⁵³ A. H Francke, and Frederick William Thomas. *Antiquities of Indian Tibet*. (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1992). 151-168

2.2 Oral Tradition

Apart from the examples of literacy described above, restricted to a clearly defined sphere, the majority of the lay population was illiterate in traditional Zanskar. They relied on orality to transmit any form of knowledge. Oral tradition was an integral part of their daily life, both for entertainment and for perpetuating information. Consequently, Zanskari culture includes a rich oral tradition, which was comprised of various categories of songs sung at various occasions, tales and riddle as well as oral (or group) history.

There were various occasions for the performance of different genres of oral tradition. Some of these were formal, others informal. According to my elderly informants, in the past, before the introduction of electricity and television, telling tales was an important pastime for families, especially in six-month long winter, when agriculture and most of life came to a stop. Family members often amused themselves by telling tales and riddles. Different social gathering were also important venues for telling tales (with people taking turns) and riddles, and especially for singing songs.⁵⁴

Summer was a time of social gatherings. Though there is much less work in winter, when snow made agriculture impossible, people tended to stay home, because of the cold and go to bed early. The most important social gathering during summer month is *Tsechu* – eight to ten of every lunar month. During *Tsechu*, each month a different family hosts the other villagers in their courtyards (or a guest room, provided they have one.)⁵⁵ The host family served *chang*, a local alcoholic beverage much like beer, and villagers read religious text book, drink, sing songs and tell tales and riddles. (These days *Tsechu* feasts are much less popular as people

⁵⁴ For changes see following chapter.

⁵⁵ These days, the community hall may also be used for this purpose.

prefer to relax in front of the television, watching Bollywood movies. Only a few people go, mostly attracted by the *chang*, and at best there is only a little singing).

In summer, there are also the *Yul lay taabs* or “community meetings” but in winter it occurs frequently. After the daily chore in the fields is finished, and there is a special issue to be discussed, a drum calls people to the meeting. There is an attendance list, making sure everybody (of both genders) attends. (One member should be there from every family.) After they are finished, sometimes people stay till late sharing stories and singing songs. Finally, there is “*Boom skor*” (literally, the “circle/procession of the *Boom*”), (see figure 3.) The word *Boom* refers to a pile of volumes with the text of *Kangyur*. *Kangyur* is a canonical Buddhist text containing the “words of Buddha” and consisting of about 108 volumes. During the *Boom Skor*, people go to the “*Gonpa*” (monastery), where volumes of the *Kangyur* are secured with ropes and tied to people’s back. Each pile of volumes tied together is called *boom*, giving the procession its name. The number of people carrying the *booms* varies but can be as many as 25. Accompanied by drums and trumpets, the procession takes the *Booms* to the village community hall.⁵⁶ Those who can read (a growing number today) take turns in reading the sacred texts at the community hall, while other people, who cannot read are in another room making food and tea, while singing songs (and sharing personal stories.) In the past, they also

⁵⁶ In the past, this event happened in the field, as there was no community hall. Other events, today held in the community hall, were held at private homes during the winter.

used to tell tales, according to my informants.



*Figure 3 Local participating carrying volumes of Kangyur, during the Boom skor procession.*⁵⁷

Winter is slow times in the Indian Himalayas. Snow and cold makes most outside activities or even travel difficult or impossible. There is no work in the fields and Zaskar gets cut off from the other part of Ladakh by the snow. The main activity during winter months may be referred to as “crafting.” “Crafting” events, that is gatherings where traditional crafts were/ are practiced, were and still are also important occasions for telling tales or singing songs. Such traditional crafts include weaving baskets, carding wool, spinning wool, weaving. These days, women also make carpets, however, this is a new craft, recently introduced by the Indian government as an employment opportunity. During winter small groups of women weave carpets, in one of the members house (inside) or outside (green solar house) (see figure 4).

⁵⁷ Sheila, “What to See in The Isolated Nubra Valley of Ladakh?,” Travels With Sheila, May 21, 2013, <https://travelswithsheila.com/what-to-see-in-the-isolated-nubra-valley-of-ladakh.html>.

Traditionally, they did not weave carpets, but worked on making a kind of cloth, made from goat hair, called *Nambu*. Making *Nambu* was always an art, which only some of the locals mastered. First thin strips of this cloth are made on simple loom. Then the cloth is dyed, a process which needs great skills and physical strength. They immerse little wooden sticks or stone in a sticky mixture of flour and water, then they wrap the cloth around them/it and tie the bundle very tightly. They put this bundle in a pot or vat containing paint⁵⁸ mixed with the urine of *Dzomo* (a female hybrid of yak and domestic cattle) and leave it there for weeks. From time to time (depending on the colour they want to achieve) they take out the bundle, rub it and put it back. The colourful design of the final product is particular/peculiar/special to Zanskar. *Koncha*, the traditional dress/clothing sewn from Zanskari-made *Nambu* is easily distinguishable from Ladakhi and other regional clothing.⁵⁹ In the past, before carpet weaving was introduced, pieces of such cloth were also used as rugs or mattresses (filled with hay) for sitting on. Making *Nambu* is a craft which is slowly disappearing. While many people still keep goats and sheep to cut their hair, the hair is then given to the few, elderly people who still

⁵⁸ Today people use paint bought in stores.

⁵⁹ Today many people prefer to buy their clothing in shops, and to wear modern Western-type of clothing. *Koncha* is worn only to marriage ceremonies or to special religious rituals, where there is a “dress-code” announced by the Ladakh Buddhist Association.

do the weaving, who get paid for making the cloth.⁶⁰ Some other traditional crafts, like making felt shoes (*Zjato*) have fallen out of use, though some people still make it on



Figure 4. Local women weaving carpet in green solar house during winter

Beside crafting, there are also some other events during winter when people congregate. The most important is a religious occasion, when people come together to read the *Kangyur*. While in the summer, there is a procession around the village (*Boom Skor*), in the winter they just take the volumes to the building of the Women's Association who organize the event.⁶¹ At the gathering, everybody (who knows) reads a different page, others make food and tea for them. During the day, people do not drink alcohol, in the evening, after they fold the texts, then they sing songs and tell tales and drink *chang*. In some villages the reading of *Kangyur* can take as many as five days, but it must take at least three days.

There is also the New Year or *Losar*.⁶² During New Year people go visiting relatives and friends for five days. There are certain songs which are sung on *Losar*, songs welcoming the New Year and asking for blessing for the coming year. These *Losar* songs are sung during New

⁶⁰ In the past, it was enough to give a jar of *chang* or beer to someone for making a strip of *nambu*.

⁶¹ The Women's Association, supported by government grants, is twelve to thirteen years old. However, before no such events took place, according to one of my informants.

⁶² Zanskaris celebrate *Losar* or New Year two months before the people of Tibet do.

Year visits, when a group of people come (at an hour specified by the host). They are feasted by the host and they sing these *Molam*, auspicious songs.⁶³

Other social events not tied to the seasonal cycle include marriage ceremonies and the *Lda-gang*. *Lda-gang* (literally: “complete month”) celebrates the birth of a child. A month or so after a child is born,⁶⁴ the father invites the whole village for a feast.⁶⁵ He treats them to food and *chang*. The villagers bring some gifts (today usually money) and they spend the night celebrating. Traditionally, there was much singing and telling tales at *lda-gangs* (today there is mostly eating and drinking, and perhaps a little singing.) Songs play a very special part in marriage/weddings. Taking several days, weddings consist of various rituals, most of them associated with special songs.⁶⁶

As can be seen above, there were various occasions where oral tradition could play an important role. This oral tradition can be described as falling into various categories, depending on the occasion of when and where they are/were performed and who the performer is/was. In the following, I shall follow locals’ perception of what constitutes a genre.

2.3 Songs

As is natural in the case of oral tradition, we do not know the creators of these songs. As shakspo writes in this article “Ladakhi Folk Song”.

“The tradition, whose creator are unknown, is an oral one handed down from generation to generation. Little is known about the precise origin and chronologies of the songs. Obviously,

⁶³ These songs are sung only on Losar, so I have not had the occasion to record them during my summer fieldwork, as Losar is in winter.

⁶⁴ If a child is born during the winter, the festivities are usually postponed until the weather is better as the *lda-gang* is usually celebrated in the courtyard of the royal family (a space open to the skies.) If it is celebrated in winter, then people go to the community hall these days.

⁶⁵ For first child this is considered obligatory, for further children it is up to the parents.

⁶⁶ Details will be described in the chapter on marriage songs.

they have been composed in different periods; as such they shed considerable light on prevailing cultural styles, attitudes and personalities of the region.”⁶⁷

2.3.1 *Gjung-glu or Congregational songs:*

At the social gathering which is called *Gjung-glu* or Congregational songs, can be sung by anyone who knows the song.

2.3.2 *Bakston-glu or marriage songs:*

These songs are performed during wedding ceremonies. They are sung by professional singers called *Lurspon*.⁶⁸ In the past, these songs were memorised and transmitted orally. Wedding rituals used to take seven to eight days, which are shortened to one to two day and there were different rituals and different songs assigned to each day.⁶⁹

2.3.3 *Chos-Glu or religious songs:*

Chos-glu, are songs, which have some religious theme, they are sung at religious events, where the whole village takes part. The songs are composed to celebrate the pilgrimage sites, which are sung in praise of the monastery, describing the beauty of the building. There are songs which are sung in praise of *Lha* (deity/protector) of which some are included in marriage ritual and festive events like *Losar*.⁷⁰ The Ladakhi kings are portrayed in Zung-Glu as protectors of faith, often identified as either Buddhist protector or semi-divine saviour.

⁶⁷ Nawang Tsering Shakspo, *Songs from the Himalaya: Ladakhi Folk Songs*, 1985, 97.

⁶⁸ For more on *Lurspon* see chapter on “marriage songs.”

⁶⁹ For more detail see chapter on *bags-ton glu* or wedding song and the changing pattern of Zanskar wedding ceremonies.

⁷⁰ The *losar* marks the beginning of the New Year, considered to be an important festival in the Himalayan region.

They are composed and sung by lay people, not monks, at important religious occasions. Contrary to what might be expected lay celebration on religious occasions were introduced only some thirty year ago. Before that celebrations were purely monastic.⁷¹

2.3.4 *Las-glu* or work songs:

Work songs are beginning to disappear as work practices change. In Zanskar, the majority of the lay people are illiterate and work in agriculture. During summer, the people of Zanskar form groups and take turns to work in each other's fields. While working in the fields, people were singing work songs. These songs were sung by people while working to help keep up the rhythm of work and keep them going. There are songs which are sung to boost the animal while ploughing the field. Children learnt working alongside their parents, when and how they had to sow, plough, harvest. The songs and tales were passed on while this work was done. These were the times when the whole village united to work together, and this helped to create a strong social bonding among people.

However, the introduction of modern agricultural machinery has changed traditional working patterns and working environment, which has affected the position of *Las-glu*, in its turn. When working with machines, work songs are not only less necessary for helping keep up the rhythm, but their noise also makes singing difficult. As a result, during my summer research I could not record the work songs.

⁷¹Shakspo. *Songs from the Himalaya: Ladakhi Folk Songs*, 99.

2.3.5 *Chang-glu or Drinking/ Beer song:*

Chang Lu or Drinking/beer songs are sung in praise of the Chang. The *chang* is a kind of alcoholic beverage, very much like beer, made from Barley and wheat and widely consumed all over Ladakh. Most of these songs tell the description of the beverages in which it was made and the way *chang* is made. The songs are sung in praise of the texture and taste of the Chang. In other song *chang* is described as *dur tsi* (*bdud-rtsi*), the nectar of the gods. *Chang* is very much a part of Ladakhi culture. Even a funeral is considered incomplete without *Chang*, so every house must have large stores of barely beer for its own consumption and to serve guests.⁷² During such occasions there is always someone who serves the *chang*. This person is referred to as *Gopa* (*Rgo-pa*). A *Gopa* can be both a male or female and he or she is responsible for ensuring that no guest is left with a cup half-filled or empty.

A number of the songs recognize that it is impossible to follow a dedicated Buddhist asceticism and party at the same time, yet they mention the attainments of Buddhist yogins and equate *chang* with the food of the gods. Similarly, some *chang lu* will lay out a mandala focused more on the rural environment and its human and numinous inhabitants, propitiating the latter. There is no attempt at fully justifying *chang* from the point of view of high religion. This is small tradition religion.⁷³

⁷²Shakspo. *Songs from the Himalaya: Ladakhi Folk Songs*. Leh, Ladakh, India: Ladakh Ecological Development Group, 1985.

⁷³ Dinnerstein, *Ladakhi traditional songs: a cultural, musical, and literary study*, 2013.

2.4 Tales or Brungs

Other than the traditional folk songs there are traditional *Rungs* or tales. Just like the songs described above, these tales, used to entertain generation after generation, were transmitted orally. In the past the village lacked any other means of entertainment than telling tales to each other. To be a teller of tales one did not need to be specialist, anybody who was interested and possessed the ability to memorize and tell tales was free to learn and narrate such tales.

The purely oral tradition or primary orality is not easy to conceive of accurately and meaningfully. Writing makes words appear similar to things because we think of word as the visible marks signalling words to decoder: we can see and touch such inscribed words in texts and books. Written words are residual. Oral tradition has no such residual or deposit. “When an often-told oral story is not actually being told, all that exists of it is the potential in certain human being to tell it.”⁷⁴

Most of the tales retold by the people of Zanskar are local version of the epic hero *Ling Gaser*. In the traditional Zanskar the main occupation of people used to be animal husbandry and agriculture. Thus, there are many social gatherings and during such gatherings the people ask someone to tell tales or take turns in telling tales. Families at home, after they have had their night meal (Gong-zan), share stories and the elder member of the house tells tales to the young ones.

⁷⁴ Walter, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. (New York: Routledge, 1982) 11.

2.5 Riddles or Tsot-tsot

Not only tales, but *Tsot-tsot* have also traditionally played an important role in entertaining people during social gatherings. The majority of the lay people being illiterate teach their children some basic knowledge which sharpen the young children, helping them explore various aspect of vocabulary through riddles. It is a favourite form of competitive entertainment between teams or individuals, both young and adult. According to Zdenek, “Riddle- puzzling question based on some unexpected connection with a solution that is guessed are as traditional as proverb and serves as a good example of oral folklore that is constantly renewing itself.”⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Salzmann Zdenek. *Language, Culture and Society: An Introduction to Linguistic Anthropology*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998)

Chapter 3: Transformation of Socio-economic Factors in Zanskar and its impact on Oral Tradition

3.1 Social and Economic Changes in Zanskar Valley in the Last Decades

My chapter studies the transformation of economic and social life in the Ladakh Region and the impact of this transformation on the oral heritage of the region. Though the focus of my research work is the oral tradition of the Zanskar valley, I will have to utilize literature written on Ladakh.

Zanskar is unique, but rapidly changing territory in the Indian Himalayas with rich Cultural Heritage. However, it is facing more and more challenges as modern technology transforms the economic and social environment. Even Sandhya Chatterji, who conducted her research in Zanskar valley had noticed the change when Zanskar come in contact with the world industrial economy. Chatterji writes, “Till the early eighties, the way of life all throughout Zanskar was self-contained and more or less the way it had been for centuries. With a tradition of frugal material lifestyle as in the rest of Ladakh”⁷⁶.

There have been much more research works written on Ladakh, because it was more accessible to outsider in the past, compared to Zanskar which was more isolated until recently. However, since Ladakh used to have a culture and economy very similar to that of Zanskar, I think it is

⁷⁶ Sandhya Chatterji, "The Indigenous Culture of Zanskar," (India International Center, 1992) 234.

justified to use material on the socio-economic transformation in Ladakh, along with the sparse literature on Zaskar and my own personal observations.

3.1.1 Economic and Social Changes

Researchers writing in the 1980s' first called attention to the encroachment of modernity in the region and its possible impact on unique Ladakhi culture.

One of the first to call attention to the changes was Helena Norberg Hodge, who first arrived in the region 1975 when Ladakh had not yet been affected by the Western world in any significant way. In her book *Ancient Futures* she describes "how until then the region had been sheilded from both colonialism and development by its lack of resources, its hospitable climate, and its inaccessibility."⁷⁷ To quote her words, she saw a world, where "life in the villages was still based on the same foundations as it had been for centuries, evolving in its own environment, according to its own principles."⁷⁸ During the years she traveled back and forth to Ladakh, she saw and experienced the change happening first hand and in her book she described various aspects of this transformation.

Prior to this date this was a very isolated region deep in the Himalaya mountains. After the creation of India and Pakistan, the region was a restricted military zone because of the tensions and military clashes between India and Pakistan and China. After independence, foreigners were banned from travelling to Ladakh and the restriction were not lifted until 1974⁷⁹ and the region was still hard to access. The greatest change was brought about by the building of roads connecting the region with the outside world. Raghuvanshi writes: "with the opening of Srinagar–Leh highway after 1962, the process of modernisation became faster and new

⁷⁷ Helena Norberg-Hodge, *Ancient Futures: learning from Ladakh* (1991) no page

⁷⁸ Helena, *Ancient Futures* (1991) no page

⁷⁹ Hoare-Lovell Max and Sophie, *Kashmir: Jammu. Kashmir valley. Ladakh, Zaskar*. (The Globe Pequot press, USA. 2014), 79.

lifestyles, practices and social mores have pervaded the Ladakhi community against a backdrop of secular indigenous traditions and culture”⁸⁰ (see Figure 1)

As for Zaskar, the first road was constructed only in the mid-seventies. It connected Kargil and Padum (see figure 2). As chatterji writes, “The beginning of vehicular traffic has begun to change this self-sufficient system. Trucks plying from Kargil to Padum constitute the major means of importing industrial commodities into Zaskar and, therefore, setting up trade establishment”⁸¹. When the construction of the Kargil-Padum road was finished in 1978, the first truck crossed the *Penzila* pass in the Trans Himalaya and entered the Zaskar valley as mentioned by Sandhya Chatterji. With the arrival of the new mechanization, it brought new changes as well:

“In 1970, there was only one part-time shopkeeper in Zaskar. Located at Padam, this peasant entrepreneur used to sell or barter essential commodities like green tea and matches. In 1972 the first cooperative store was opened at Padam by the State Government. By 1975, there were three shops, which increased to 15 by 1981 and over 40 by 1990.”⁸²

⁸⁰Mahinder Singh Raghuvanshi, “Struggle from Subsistence to sustainability and threat to local biodiversity under changing climate,” (research gate. 2017), 60.

⁸¹ Chatterji, "The Indigenous Culture of Zaskar," 238.

⁸² Chatterji, “The Indigenous Culture of Zaskar”. 239.

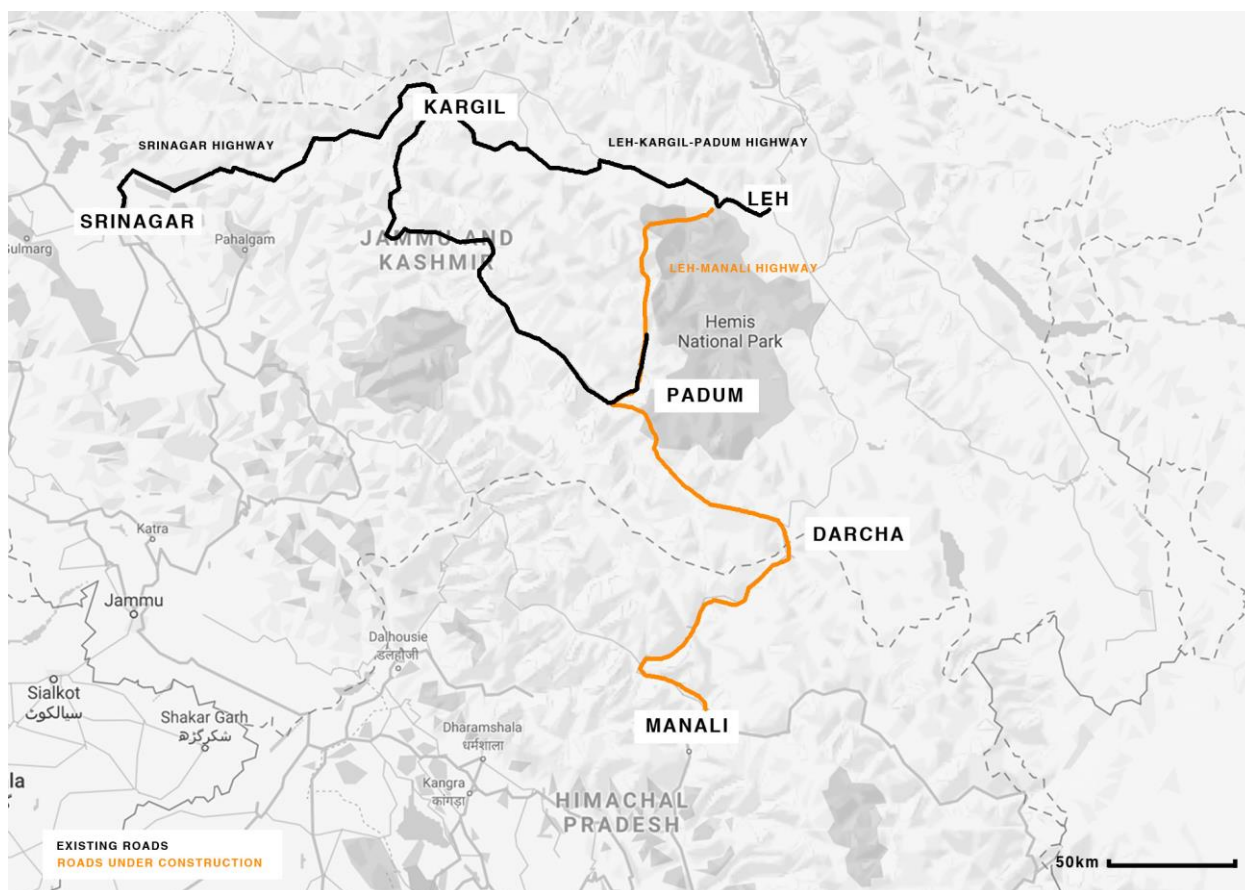


Figure 5 Showing existing road between Leh-Srinagar and Kargil-Padum (in Black) and road under construction between Padum-Manali and Padum-Leh (In Yellow)

Presently, another road is being under construction connecting Zaskar valley to Ladakh, as well as a road connecting Padum to Darcha, that is Zaskar to the state of Himachal Pradesh which is almost ready. (See figure 1)

3.1.2 Mechanisation of Agriculture

In Traditional Ladakh/Zaskar the main occupation was agriculture and animal husbandry. As arable land was scarce in the high-altitude regions, all possible land in river valleys was carefully cultivated by the locals. In the region people were using the animal Dzo (crossbreed of cow and yak) and Yak for ploughing their field. For centuries people shared a close tie

helping one another by turn. Now this tradition is getting replaced by monetary relations when locals expect a remuneration for lending help – an alien phenomenon for the local communities. More than that, the fee asked for the job exceeds the daily wage paid to the labourers coming from Bihar and Nepal. This undoubtedly affects the maintenance of social bonding and a sense of togetherness.

Recently animal and migrant labour has increasingly been displaced by modern machinery, which is used for such labour-intensive tasks as ploughing and winnowing. In the traditional Zaskar the whole village united to work together, and this helped to create a strong social bond among the people. However, the introduction of modern agricultural machinery has changed traditional working patterns and working environment, which, as shall be seen below, has also affected some of oral tradition.

Now the people show less interest in farming because the changing economy makes it difficult to remain a farmer. As described by Raghuvanshi, “state-subsidised food brought into Ladakh by trucks over the Himalayas is often cheaper in the *Bazaar* than food grown five minutes’ walk away.”⁸³ As a result, people prefer buying things in the *Bazaar*, rather than working in the fields. In 1992 a researcher had still noted that “very little land is left fallow,” while, today, by my own experience, much of the former agricultural land is left uncultivated.⁸⁴

3.1.3 Role and Impact of Central State Bureaucracy

The growing role (or we can even say ‘intrusion’) of the State (the government of the Indian Federal State of Jammu and Kashmir) in everyday affairs, from administration to job

⁸³ Mahinder Singh Raghuvanshi, “Struggle from Subsistence to sustainability and threat to local biodiversity under changing climate.” (Research gate. 2017) 63.

⁸⁴ Chatterji, “The Indigenous Culture of Zaskar.” 238.

opportunities to education and culture, has also had a great impact. Through its subsidy system, the state has exercised a great impact on people's lifestyle in the region.

Now the state provides people with basic provisions, importing large quantities of food grains and distributes it at subsidised price or for free to the people holding government ration card in the public distribution system (PDS)⁸⁵. There are two kinds of ration cards, one is Above Poverty Line card (APL) which shows a family member has some source of income from the government or is a government employee but still gets goods at subsidised rate. Every family gets the APL card, regardless of their financial circumstances. There is also the BPL or Below Poverty Line card. Families holding the Below Poverty Line card (BPL) get most of the things cheaper or free. They also get financial help from the government to build a house for themselves. State provision providing for the basic needs of people makes life easier than in the past and acts as a disincentive when it comes to hard physical work in the fields. As a result, less people are willing to work in the fields and some fields now remain uncultivated. The change had been noticed by Dame and Nusser who call attention to how the PDS is changing agricultural (and culinary) patterns: Moreover, the subsidised rice supplied through the public distribution system (PDS) is increasingly replacing locally grown barley as the main staple of the summer diet.⁸⁶ Subsidized agricultural products are often cheaper than locally grown ones, therefore agriculture is seen as "uneconomic" and many people are abandoning the land and seeking job opportunity in the towns or outside the region⁸⁷.

Change in work patterns, and consequently in life style is also connected to the initiation started by the Government of India: National Rural Employment Guarantee (NREGA). This was first proposed by Narsimah Rao and was later renamed as the Mahatama Gandhi National Rural

⁸⁵ On the topic of the PDS and its impact see also Raghuvanshi, "Struggle from Subsistence to sustainability," 60

⁸⁶ Juliane Dame and Marcus Nüsser, "Food security in high mountain region", *Food Security* 3(2) (2011) 185.

⁸⁷ Raghuvanshi, "Struggle from Subsistence to sustainability," 63.

Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 (MGNREGA). It was enacted on September 7, 2005. “The mandate of the Act is to provide at least hundred days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to every rural household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work”⁸⁸.

Through MGNREGA the money comes to the *Goba* or village head, who decides how to invest it. In Zaskar, for example, if the irrigation channel gets blocked and people work on cleaning it, they get a salary. According to my observation, a negative side effect of this program is that most of young people are now used to doing work in exchange for ready cash. They no longer want to work in the fields, “getting burned by the sun” as they say, if this work does not generate instant income in form of cash. Local agriculture now seems to be ‘uneconomic’ and many Ladakhis are abandoning their farm in pursuit of paid jobs in Leh and outside Ladakh⁸⁹.

3.1.4 New Employment Patterns

There can be seen a change in work patterns as well. There are new employments forms, some of which take people outside their traditional villages or even the region. In the past, Ladakh region was dependent mainly upon subsistence agriculture and pastoralism.⁹⁰ As a result of the processes described above, this has changed (or is changing) with new jobs replacing traditional agriculture and animal husbandry. People now work less in the village and new job opportunities are offered outside the traditional village framework by:

- Wage labour/Road construction

⁸⁸ Shridhar Gangaramji Bhombe, *Wage employment program and rural development*, (Lulu, United States, 2016) 77.

⁸⁹ Raghuvanshi. *Struggle from Subsistence*, (2017)

⁹⁰ Raghuvanshi, “Struggle from Subsistence to sustainability,” 59.

- Tourism industry
- Army
- Government jobs
- Market-oriented Crafts (tourism)

As Pelliciardi writes,⁹¹ these days Ladakh is a region that is undergoing a profound transition, with new off-farm income opportunities. Wage labour for the government, especially working on the new roads that will connect Zaskar to Leh and to Darcha, is an important source of income for those villagers who have opted to remain in Zaskar. Tourism is another new opportunity for finding a job that will secure a salary. Though the Ladakh/Zaskar region was a restricted area for years (tourism started in Ladakh only in the 1970s', while Zaskar was opened for tourism only in the late 1990's),⁹² in the past few decades tourism has exploded in the region exponentially. Deboos observes that "Since the beginning of 1996, the civil war in Nepal has encouraged tourists to turn to Ladakh and especially, since 2002, to the Zaskar trek, a 20-day expedition with guides and Sherpas."⁹³ It must also be mentioned, that despite the growing interest in the Zaskar trek, there is still relatively limited tourism in Zaskar, so many young people leave Zaskar to work as a tourist guide for tourist agencies in Leh. In other words, in the case of Zaskar tourism means not only a new type of occupation taking people away from the land and traditional agriculture, but also out of their villages and valley. The army provides yet another important opportunity of employment, especially for those without an education. There are many young men joining the army (approximately ten out of fifteen), who come back home only in the summer and sometimes

⁹¹ Vladimiro Pelliciardi, "From Self-Sufficiency to Dependence on Imported Food-Grain in Leh District (Ladakh, Indian Trans-Himalaya)," *European Journal of Sustainable Development* 2, no. 3 (October 1, 2013): 109-122–122, <https://doi.org/10.14207/ejsd.2013.v2n3p109>.

⁹² Deboos, "Religious Fundamentalism in Zaskar," (2013) 40.

⁹³ Deboos, "Religious Fundamentalism in Zaskar," (2013) 39.

they send money to their parents to get the seasonal work done by hiring local labour or machinery. There are also older men retired from the army, living again in the village (now in their fifties, sixties). For people with education, employment in the civil administration is also a desirable job opportunity, though those working for the government sector are often sent to other parts of India.

3.1.5 Education

Yet another factor which is exercising a great impact on traditional life-style (and thus indirectly on oral tradition) is education. Traditionally, the only education available in the region was provided by Buddhist monasteries for their novices (young monks and nuns.) Most laypeople had no access to education, something which has also changed with the modernisation of the region. The first government school was open in Padum before India gained Independence (1947). By the late 80s, there were many schools in villages through the valley⁹⁴. However, these village schools usually do not provide a very good level of education and an increasing number of parents want to provide good education for their children in the hope that they will secure government jobs or make their fortune in some other way in the modern world. In the face of development, and the pressure to secure the best education for their children most of parents in the village send their children to schools in Leh or outside the region for modern education.⁹⁵ Many children are sent to TCV schools (Tibetan Children's Village School)⁹⁶ where tuition is cheaper, but where everything is in Standard Tibetan, which differs considerably from the local dialect. Usually when children go outside for studies, they

⁹⁴ John Cook and Osmaston. *Himalayan Buddhist Villages*. (Motilal, India. 1992)

⁹⁵ Deboos, "Religious Fundamentalism," 40; My own experience aligns with her claim.

⁹⁶ Tibetan Children's Villages (TCV) – an integrated charitable organisation – is to ensure that all Tibetan children under its care receive a sound education, a firm cultural identity and become self-reliant and contributing members of the Tibetan community and the world at large. <https://tcv.org.in> Accessed on 15th May 2019.

come back only for a short period in the summer. I have seen children from Zangla who had spent most of their childhood studying outside Ladakh had difficulty having a conversation with their parents, as they forgot speaking their local dialect. In the past, children also meant a helping hand for their parents working in the fields and children learned by working alongside their parents the techniques of traditional farming, songs and tales, which were passed orally while work was being done.

In the absence of the children, many families were forced to hire migrant laborers from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Nepal to help with field work. Education outside the village or the region also results in widening cultural gap between the young and the old generation. Young people interested in modern lifestyle (including modern music) show little interest in traditional culture. On the other hand, they display a growing interest in obtaining consumer goods, which in its turn, leads them to look for job opportunities (for cash salary) outside the village.

To sum it up, education (that is, sending children to boarding schools), and seeking jobs in the army or civil administration, all of which take locals outside this formerly isolated region, makes the region more susceptible to external influences, including new fashions, life-style choices and interest in consumer products. Tourism, which 'invites' strangers into the region (whether from India or from abroad) intensifies this process. At the same time, all these new job opportunities, coupled with the decreasing lucrativeness of agriculture in the face of state subsidies, have led to a decline working in the fields and animal husbandry and to the transformation of traditional, close-knit village society and village life.

3.2 The impact of Cash-economy and Consumer Goods on Social Costumes and Oral Tradition

Ladakh has witnessed some dramatic changes in the last few decades that has impacted its economy, and as a result, its culture. This is a still ongoing process: as the region continues to modernize, further, more profound changes are to be expected. Already three decades ago the cultural and social transformation brought about by the building of roads linking the region to the outside world, the arrival of tourism and modern education, was detectable, as analysed by John Crook in his article “Tradition Development and Conservation in Ladakh.”⁹⁷ All these could not help but lead to changes in all aspects of traditional life, including oral tradition.

Even such ultimately beneficial development as the introduction of agricultural machines has had some negative cultural impact. The introduction of modern agricultural machinery has changed traditional working patterns and working environment, which has affected the position of *Las lu* or work song, in its turn. When working with machines work songs are not only less necessary for helping keep up the rhythm, but their noise also makes singing difficult.

Development in the Ladakh/Zaskar region has brought not only tourism, but also consumer goods, as has been mentioned above. Such consumer goods include machines that make life easier (for example, washing machines), but even more importantly they include technological devices which provide new sources of information (prompting people to aspire to new life-styles) and new forms of entertainment: radio, and more recently television. Television has, by our days, become an ubiquitous item watched for hours a day, despite the fact that in the rural areas of Ladakh/Zaskar there is a major shortage of electricity. (Mostly, villages having less households getting electricity from Solar power plant provided by the SECI (Solar Energy

⁹⁷ Cook and Osmaston. *Himalayan Buddhist Villages*. (Motilal, India. 1992)

Cooperation of India). Villages with more households are provided with a generator.) Villagers, however, make good use of these few hours of electricity to watch TV.

After providing people access to electricity, the BSNL (Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited) has placed two new mobile towers last year (2018), which will bring further changes, giving people access to internet, which usage will be to get more access to pop Ladakhi and Bollywood songs.

Radio, and then television has brought new forms of entertainment. A local researcher Abdul Ghani Sheikh mentions that “TV transmission was commissioned on September 1984 and few families in Leh did own TV set. It was a source of great pleasure to visit the house to watch Republic Day Parade. Sometimes member (sic!) of these families would privately grumble about the number of visitors and resulting compulsion to prepare and offer meal and tea”.⁹⁸ Now television sets, complete with satellite dishes can be found in every house. As Helena had observed that, “Now that the radio has come to Ladakh, you do not need to sing your own songs or tell your own stories. You can sit and listen to the best singer, the best storyteller”⁹⁹ sitting at home. As a direct result (a phenomenon observed all over the world), instead of visiting neighbors or going to social gatherings, people prefer to sit passively listening and watching their favorite Bollywood movies or serials. Other modern forms of entertainment have also impacted traditional cultural forms and even social norms. Thus, Chatterji writes about Padum, the ‘capital’ town of Zaskar: “By 1985 evening entertainment for young men meant a visit to the local video parlour, or meeting friends at the restaurants that thrived on tourist business”¹⁰⁰.

In the past village feasts and festivals played a central role in the life of the people of the region: during such festivals, people used to sing songs or even tell tales, taking turns (while consuming

⁹⁸Abdul Ghani Sheikh, “The changing face of leh,” (*Stawa, Ladakh*. 2014), 7.

⁹⁹Hodge, *Ancient Futures: learning from Ladakh*, (1991) no page

¹⁰⁰Chatterji, “The Indigenous Culture of Zaskar,” (India International Center, 1992) 238.

great quantities of *chang*). This has changed to a great degree. For example, as mentioned in the chapter on ‘Oral Tradition and Literacy in Zanskar’ one of the most popular social events during summer (while people were working in the field during the day) was the *Tsechu*, with a different family hosting other each month. In the past this was an occasion of reading religious books, and also for singing (secular, ‘folk’) songs and telling tales and riddles, as a sort of relaxation after the hard work in the fields. Today, though *Tshechu* is still organized, much less people go to take part as they prefer to sit in front of the television, watching their favourite shows and romantic Bollywood movies. Only a few people go, mostly attracted by the *chang*, and at best there is only a little singing, but no telling of tales or riddles anymore. Similarly, *Lda-gang*, a festive event organized to greet the birth of a new baby¹⁰¹ meant an evening, in the past, spent in celebration, complete with singing and telling tales. Today, the event mostly consists of consuming food and drink, served by the family of the new-born. At best, there may be a little singing, but this has become ‘optional’ – with other modes of entertainment, interest has declines and people leave the festivities much quicker.

Beside the change in social mores and entertainment customs, television and other voice-carriers have also introduced new musical styles in the region. Modern music, especially music popularized by Indian cinema and television dramas, that is, “Bollywood music,” is replacing traditional songs and musical forms/styles. People prefer to sing and to dance to such music. Dinnerstein, in his thesis on ‘Ladakhi folk songs,’ notes this transformative impact of modern mass media: “Ladakh has been bombarded with Hindi-language TV, radio, movies, and recordings. Being part of modern India, Ladakhi youth, especially in Leh, are active consumers of popular music of all sorts: Bollywood, Nepali pop and *lok pop*, as well as Anglo-American genres of all types. This is in addition to the growing Ladakhi pop music scene with its syncretic

¹⁰¹ See chapter on Literacy and orality in Traditional Zanskar.

mixture of all the previously mentioned genres.”¹⁰² The phenomenon noted by Dinnerstein is also well-reflected in what a Google search on the terms ‘Zanskar song’ and ‘Ladakh song’ brings up.

Though boasting of the title ‘Zanskar song’ and showing ‘traditional’ images of Zanskar (Buddhist monasteries and statuary, people dancing in folk costumes), these YouTube videos sometimes have little to do with traditional songs, either in their wording or their musical style.¹⁰³

As was hopefully demonstrated above, the transformation of entertainment possibilities and leisure options, along with the introduction of new ‘tales’ (i.e. cinema/television stories) and musical styles, has had a radical impact on local oral tradition, leading to its sharp decline. Shapso, who published his article on Ladakhi Folk Songs in 1985, writes that “Every Ladakhi possesses a large repertoire of songs which he or she will sing at the slightest opportunity”¹⁰⁴. While we may assume that there may be some exaggeration in this statement, this implies that three and a half decades ago traditional songs were an integral part of Ladakhi culture, and a researcher had no difficulty finding singers to record. Though we have no concrete data about neighboring Zanskar, there is no reason to assume that the situation there was radically different. However, when I did my fieldwork in the summer of 2018, my experience was very different, as will be explained in detail below.

¹⁰²Dinnerstein. *Ladakh traditional songs; a cultural, musical and literary study*, 189-190.

¹⁰³Tenzin jamphel, *Zanskar Song-5*, accessed May 26, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DLdHgEac-G0>.
Rinchen Tundup, *Ladakhi Album Song - Spang Chenmo Skeel Na Dul Kan Zhig Duk*, accessed May 26, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=13cPuy1lt3U>.

Rinchen Tundup, *Ladakhi Music Album Song - Cho Cho Neyrang Tangpo Rang Jal*, accessed May 26, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-O2JVwiazEk>;

Tenzin jamphel, *Zanskar Song / My Zanskar.*, accessed May 26, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=96jCBw1mNJQ>.

Tenzin Jamphel, *Zanskar Song 2014*, accessed May 26, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qw4joJftM>.

¹⁰⁴Shakspo, *Songs from the Himalaya: Ladakhi Folk Songs*, 98.

3.3 Personal experience during field trip

In the summer of 2018, I spent two months (July-August) in Zangla, my native village. I devoted a part of my time there to a deliberate research to collect oral tradition in Zanskar valley and to consciously learn more about the socio-cultural context of such traditions.

During the summer, I was working together with Csoma's Room Organization with the objective of devising the plan for constructing a solar school and making a survey about the other needs of the villagers in Zanskar valley.¹⁰⁵ Travelling around Zanskar with the Csoma's Room group enabled me to meet new people (that is, people not only from Zangla but from other villages) and expanding the scope of my own research. Whenever I had time at my disposal, after we finished with our official survey, I asked villagers if they knew any *lurspons* (experts in marriage songs) or anyone who could sing old songs or recite tales. I soon learnt, with some surprise, that my query was bound to cause confusion. It became evident that the situation was no longer as Shakspe described (as quoted above.) People were often at a loss to name a person who would meet my requirements. Sometimes they pointed out someone or other – but when I went to see that person, it turned out that they claimed to no longer remember old songs/tales or at least were not able (or willing to recite them). Sometimes they sent me to a person, who then claimed no to be able to recite anything either and sent me on to yet another person. Quite often people did not say that 'they did not know' (i.e. had never learnt or known such songs/tales), but that they had forgotten them. As they explained, there simply was no 'need' for such performances anymore. No one had come for years and years asking them to sing or tell tales. One of my informants, Tsewang Norzom, an old lady of eighty-three from the village of Kumik, who was able to recite some tales and riddles for me, reminisced about the old times, when people still asked her to tell her tales and how people used to share tales.

¹⁰⁵ See Introduction

She recalled, how a few years ago the teacher at the local school asked the children to collect some riddles as a homework. The children went and asked her a few times, but then any interest soon disappeared again.

Quite often, people asked me, confused, what interest I had in such songs and tales. I spent a lot of time explaining them my research and its purpose and importance: the preservation (or at least documentation) of a disappearing cultural form that was in its way unique to local, Zanskari culture. When they understood the relevance of my work and sent me to another person, on and on, sometimes making me go practically from house to house, until I found someone who could actually help me with my work. All in all, I would say that out of hundred people, perhaps three had some knowledge of oral tradition, and only was could be said to have been really proficient or knowledgeable. As a rule, these were elderly people, in their seventies or even in their eighties. When I tried to interview younger people (those in their middle ages), I found that even this generation had little knowledge of oral tradition (other than remembering how once people used to sing or tell tales.) As for younger people (those few who were in the village, rather than working on road constructions), they didn't even have any idea who I should ask, clearly indicating that for them Zanskari oral tradition is no longer a part of their life or cultural experience.

Due to the building gap between the old and the young generation there is lack of transmission of such knowledge. The people whom I interviewed, told me about how oral tradition used to be in the past when they were young. There were no sources of entertainment like television or radio at that time, so they used to entertain themselves by telling tales, singing song and asking riddles. The children at home were told and taught tales by the elders of the house. There used to be more social gathering where the who village community joined under 'the dim light of the burning kerosene lamp.' They sang traditional songs and recited tales to each other till late night.

Those ceremonial event, which traditionally take place at night are still celebrated. However, they are attended by fewer people and are often much shorter. As Wangail, the wedding-singer or *lurspon* from Pidmoo village told me, “today if there is any community gathering other than wedding there are only few people who come, and those who come there are mostly old”. Though weddings are still great community events, lasting one or two days, they are shorter than in the past (when they used to take a whole week) and there are many other changes as well, as will be described in detail in the following chapter on wedding songs and the changing pattern of Zanskar wedding ceremonies.¹⁰⁶ During my interviews, I realised that it was hard for people to recite the songs and tales and they kept asking me “why do you intend to record these songs and tales as one cares or shows interest in listening to them these days.”¹⁰⁷

I had a very interesting experience in the village of Pishu, one that demonstrated how changing lifestyle (and the decline and forgetting of oral tradition) may meet and mix with modern attempts at preserving oral tradition, thanks to modern technological devices. An old man from this village, Tsultrim Falke, about seventy-five, first asked me to come back after a week so that he could revise his memories and try to recall and recite the tales. When I asked him why it is hard for him to recall the tales right there. he replied that, “you are the only one in the last 15 to 20 year who showed interest in listening to it, otherwise it has been ages, and no one came asking about such things.”¹⁰⁸ It also turned out that, despite this apparent disinterest in his knowledge on the part of his fellow villagers, he was conscious of the importance some Ladakhi folklorist attributed to such oral tradition.¹⁰⁹ He told me how he once went to visit a famous folklorist from Ladakh, Morup Namgyal. Morup Namgyal is a well-known singer and also a collector of traditional Ladakhi songs.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, he was also a director of the music

¹⁰⁶ The same phenomenon was observed by Dinnerstein in Ladakh (Dinnerstein, Ladakhi traditional songs, 99).

¹⁰⁷ During my summer research 2018.

¹⁰⁸ Tsultrim Falke, a local resident of Pishu Village, in his sixties. Interviewed summer 2018.

¹⁰⁹ On the work of some Ladakhi folklorist and musicologist working to preserve and document local music and songs, see introduction, ‘state of research’

¹¹⁰ Morup Namgyal, see also Neo Dinnerstein. 106

program of Ladakh Radio Air India, in charge of music programs airing traditional Ladakhi music. As a result, people knew about his interest in traditional music through listening to the radio. After hearing him singing on the radio, he went to Leh to see Morup Namgyal, offering to recite (his version) of the Gesar epic, the most famous epic of the whole wider region about the legendary king Gesar. (This epic is probably of Tibetan origin, but it is sung all over Central Asia, from Mongolia to Ladakh to Buryistan, even in Muslim lands.) However, Namgyal allegedly was not able to take him up on his offer, saying it was a long epic and recording it would take several days and would also need a team of professionals in order to make a good recording, which he didn't have available at the moment. When I asked him about the lack of interest of the young generation towards their disappearing heritage of oral tradition, he said that most of young people migrate to big cities to acquire good education and jobs. Even those who stay on in the villages, are more interested in modern music and other modern cultural forms. Thus, even this old man felt that there was an urgent need to safeguard this losing tradition and was glad to learn about my own work.

Chapter 4: Bags-Ton Glu or Wedding Song and the Changing Pattern of Zanskar Wedding Ceremonies

Wedding songs provide an aspect of Zanskari oral tradition, which still continues to play a vital part in Zanskari life. Unlike other forms of oral tradition, like working songs or tales, which no longer have a place due to the transformation of traditional life, *bags-ton glu*, or wedding songs, are still sung at weddings. On the other hand, while weddings have retained some of their traditional features, they have become much shorter than in the past. Some rituals have been discarded, in order to save ‘valuable’ time, with the result that some of the wedding songs performed at weddings have also been discarded from the repertoire.

In order to demonstrate the importance of the *bags-ton glu*, and its position in today’s Zanskari society (with both the society and the position of wedding songs in flux), this chapter aims to describe the wedding ceremony event in Zanskar valley and its changing pattern among the Zanskari people. I will explain the progress of traditional marriage rituals and the songs sung at the various wedding stage. It must be emphasized that songs must be sung at each stage of a wedding, and each stage is associated with different songs.

Bags-ton or wedding is an important festive event celebrated with full triumph in the Ladakh and Zanskar valleys. It is the time when the whole village community and relatives from different places come together to witness and bless the *Pag-mo* or bride and the *pag-pho* or groom. The Zanskari people consider marrying as an essential part of life. When the parents

become old, they need an additional hand to look after the family and to procreate to keep the family lineage (*ruspa*). In the traditional Zanskar, people used to strictly follow the tradition of *Baks-ton* or wedding ritual. Traditional weddings involve a lot of work and many ritual stages, sometimes taking place over seven to eight days. In the following sub-chapter, I shall describe a traditional marriage ceremony, as known from past travellers,¹¹¹ and sometimes add my own observations. After that I will explain how things are changing today.

4.1 Te-chang: The First Formal Step for *Baks-ton* or Wedding

In traditional Zanskar, searching for a suitable bride was left to the parents. When the boy reached an age suitable for marriage, the parents start searching for a girl. The girl is expected to possess certain qualities in order to be a good housewife, who would take good care of the family. Education is given least importance because if the girl is educated, she is considered not to be able to do all the household work properly. Ribbach also mentions that a suitable girl is one who “was hardworking and understood house and field work.”¹¹² After finding a suitable girl, who meets the requirements of the family, a proposal is made by the father and the maternal uncle of the boy to the girl’s parents. This proposal is called *Te-chang*.¹¹³ For the *Te-chang* a few liters of *chang* or locally brewed beer has to be prepared. The cans of *chang*, wrapped with a white scarf called *Khataks* are carried along to the girl’s house. Before contacting the girl’s family, a religious specialist called *Onpo* or astrologer (as mentioned in the previous chapter on literacy and orality in Traditional Zanskar), consults for the future prospects of the match on the basis of the birth years or *Loh*¹¹⁴ of the boy and the girl to check

¹¹¹Ribbach. *Culture and Society in Ladakh*. 43-78.

¹¹²Ribbach. *Culture and Society in Ladakh*, 42.

¹¹³ *Te-chang* or proposal beer is a formal step a boy’s family has to follow, when they want to get the consent of a girl’s family for marriage.

¹¹⁴ *Loh* is the twelve years such as Piwa, Lung, Tak, Yoz, Dug, Rul, Stah, Luk, Speh, Chah, Khee, Phak.

if they are a suitable match for marriage or not. After finding the two are a suitable match and getting approval from the *Onpo*, the process of marriage is initiated by the boy's family, who then approaches the girl's family with a proposal.

Ladakhi scholar, Stanzin Namgail writes that there are three possibilities of accepting the Te-chang or proposal made by the boy's family.

“The girl's parents have three choices. They may refuse to accept the beer (Chang) and indicate their opposition to the proposal, a course[s!] usually taken only if the request is unexpected and the girl herself is disinclined to accept the proposal. Alternatively, her parents may accept the Chang and tell the visitors that they will think about the proposal and consult their daughter. The third possibility is the acceptance of both the Chang and the proposal, and this happens in cases when informal agreement has already been reached or the young people have been lovers for some time. In this case, the ceremonial proposal only regularizes an existing.”¹¹⁵

4.2 The Wedding Rites- *Bagston* and songs sung

After the proposal have been accepted by the girl's family, the boy's family have to take *Chang* and *Khatak* to all the relatives of the girl's family as recommended by the girl's family. After that, there comes a ritual called *Amay omai brin* or price of mother-milk. According to the concept of the the *Amay omai rin*, the bride's mother has to be rewarded for bringing up and nourishing the bride. “According to traditional Ladakhi custom, the price of the mother milk should be a good quarter of the rinto [price-list what the girl carries to the groom's house].”¹¹⁶ An *Onpo* or a monk is then requested to determine an auspicious date for the wedding day.

¹¹⁵ Stanzin Namgail, “Marriage and Changing Pattern among the Changpa Tribe of Ladakh,” (*EPRA International Journal of Economic and Business Review* Vol - 3, Issue- 12, 2015) 84.

¹¹⁶ Ribbach. *Culture and Society in Ladakh*, 53-54

After a confirmed day get from the *Onpo* or a monk, both the families start preparing for the wedding. It is important to discuss the suitable day for the wedding with both the families, so that they could have enough time to prepare for the marriage. When the actual day of marriage is about to approach the families to invite the members of their *phasphun*. According to Maan, “*Phasphun*, as defined by Ladakhis, is a social group composed of a few families whose members worship a common god and help one another on all festive and sad occasions.”¹¹⁷ They also invite the most important ritual actors of the forthcoming wedding, for a small gathering accompanied by *Chang* or food. After everyone is gathered each member of the *phasphun* is assigned a task to be performed during the wedding.

A day before the main *Bagston* or marriage ceremony the *phasphun*, *Lurspon*¹¹⁸ and *Nyopa*¹¹⁹ meet again for the last discussion of the arrangements and to fix a time for their meeting to start the wedding procession to the girl’s house. According to one of my elderly respondents, “the bride’s family indicates the exact time when they have to reach the bride’s house (often in another village), otherwise (if they are late), they get scolded by the bride’s party.”¹²⁰ The *Lurspon* and the *Nyopa*, accompanied by the *Daman* or kettledrum sing *mi-lam gug-ches se lu*¹²¹ and the *Stamdal glu* or auspicious song asking for a safe journey to the bride’s house.¹²² The event ends discussing the time to meet the next day and to start the marriage procession leaving for the bride’s house. During my research, I had an opportunity to participate in one of the pre-wedding events held in Zangla village and could record the discussion described above and the songs.

¹¹⁷ R.S. Maan, *The Ladakhi: A Study in Ethnography and Change*, (Anthropological Survey of India, 1986) 78

¹¹⁸ The *Lurspon* or *Nyerpon* is a wedding singer, who sing songs at different stages of wedding and are accompanied by the *Nyopa* singing.

¹¹⁹ The *Nyopa* as it were the witness to the marriage.

¹²⁰ Respondent Rabstan, Zangla village, summer 2018

¹²¹ It sings about how the villagers will participate in the wedding and help to unite two souls in marriage. Recorded during summer research, in Zangla village.

¹²² My recordings of pre-wedding preparations (see chapter on database for Endangered Intangible Cultural Heritage) includes the singing of these two songs.

During the wedding, relatives called *Thon mi* (the uncle and other family members) take part distributing money at different wedding stages from groom's side and the father of the groom also accompany them to the girl's house. The groom stays at home welcoming the guest and remain active helping and looking after the guests through the whole wedding. According to Shakspo, "the *Dadar* (Tib. *Mda'dar*) and the *Tashispa* songs mark the original departure of the wedding party from the groom's house."¹²³ Most of the wedding songs begin with, *om bkra shis par gur shig; bkra shis bde legs dan ldan par gyur shig*, meaning "Om, may everything be auspicious, may everything bear auspiciousness."¹²⁴ The procession leaving the groom's house have to calculate the time given by the bride's family and the time they have to spend attending *Kalchor/pungpa* or the ritual collection of *chang* pots.¹²⁵ *Kalchor* is arranged by the neighbouring village on their way to the girl's house as a gesture design to ensure that the wedding party success in bringing the bride and no misfortune befall the wedding ceremony. At this point the wedding party have to get off their horses. The *Nattipa* dippes his arrow in the *chang* and bless the pots and the *Lurspon* sing *Dkar 'chol spyir gi glu* or universal libation song. The villager serves them with *arak* or locally produced spirit and *Chang*. Before resuming their journey, the uncle of the groom had to pay some money and to give a white scarf to the *kalchor* following the custom.

After they reach the bride's village late at night there is more rituals to follow before they enter the house. The groom's party is questioned by the bride's party or *Thus mi*. This ritual is called *Tho thapches*: the bride's party previously arranged some stones, each a few meters from the other, forming a path leading to the bride's house. The stone-path starts some fifty or a hundred meters from the house and finally stops at the door. The groom's party have to stop at each stone and has to answer a question raise by the party of the bride. Both the

¹²³Shakspo, "Ladakhi Folk Songs" in *Songs from the Himalaya*, 1985.

¹²⁴Dinnerstein, *Ladakhi traditional songs: a cultural, musical, and literary study*,

¹²⁵ *Kalchor* consider of brass *chang* pot which is decorated by *mentok* or flowers and *khataks* or white scarf.

question and the answer are in song form. The *lurspon* of the bride's party have a willow stick in his hand and if he is not satisfied with the answers, he beats the members of the groom's party. The ritual begins with singing *Tong-lang nyilo-mai zung lu* which is later followed by another song *skitpa nyarap ki zung lu*.¹²⁶ After getting a satisfactory answer to every question ask, they reach to the main door of the bride's house where they had to answer a few more questions asked. According to Dinnerstein "in the early twentieth century the bride's party is barricaded in the house and demand proof of the purchaser's identity."¹²⁷ Again, it follows by a song in the form of question and answer the *Gongpheb (sharchok yang sang karmo la)/Goglu* or door song is sung.¹²⁸ According to Dinnerstein, "the question and answer format is quite common in Ladakhi songs, especially with the answer coming from or looking at phenomena of four directions- again situating the listeners in the centre of a mandala, specially Orgyan, the mystical abode of Guru Padmasambhava, known also as Guru Rimpoche (the precious guru) who occupies a special place as one of the founders of Tibetan Buddhism. Drawing from the pre-Buddhist tradition the singer possesses his purity, claiming unaffected speech."¹²⁹

If the answer is not satisfactory the door is immediately close and the *Nyopas* are insulted and beaten with a willow stick called *Nyenber*.¹³⁰ But as far as my observations, I have never seen anyone being beaten or insulted. After the *Nyopas* enter the house they sing *Tashispa lu* or auspicious song, *chos-jnas mjal glu* or meeting the priest song, *mda'dar gi glu* or song of the arrow and *chab gzhi* or the beer song.¹³¹ Afterwards *Nyopas* are well received and get food to eat and *chang* to drink. Now it is the time for the *Nyopa* to take rest.

¹²⁶ Recorded from Wangail (Lurspon or wedding singer) during the summer research 2018.

¹²⁷ Dinnerstein, *Ladakhi traditional songs: a cultural, musical, and literary study*. (University of New York. 2013) 67

¹²⁸ Recorded from Wangail (Lurspon or wedding singer) during the summer research 2018.

¹²⁹ Noé Dinnerstein, *Ladakhi traditional songs*. 70

¹³⁰ The *Nyopas* were sons of the gods and could be beaten with twigs of the world-tree which had its roots in the spirit world beneath the earth and grew up through the earth, the world of men and into heaven, the world of gods.

¹³¹ Lobsang Shastri, "The Marriage Custom of Ru-Thog," in *Tibetan Studies*, ed. Per Kvaerne (1992), 755-767

Next morning there are other rituals to take places such as the ceremony called *Tserab-thu* or bridal hair washing, which is done by the friends of the bride called *Yato pa*. The *yato pa* usually hides the bride at one of the friends' house and to get her released the *Nyopa* have to make negotiation with the bride's friend with money for her early release. Until and unless the bride friends get a satisfactory amount of money, they do not let the *Nyopa* enter the room where the bride is kept. In Zanskar, most of the ceremonial and social event happens at night but the bride releasing ritual starts in the afternoon. However, the wedding becomes more difficult if you have to travel back and forth at night. The time of departure is so adjusted that the bride should enter the bridegroom's village in the darkness of the night, and she should not enter during the day time.¹³²

The *thom*,¹³³ which is best described as a wedding banquet tent is prepared and the *Nyopa* led by *Lurspon* enter the stage and sing *bag ma len du 'gro skabs kyi glu* (song for the stage of going to get the bride). The *Thon mi* (maternal uncle and other family members of the groom's party) brings the bride, she is made to sit on the sign called *gakshis* (an auspicious sign made of grains). At the *thom* the *Nyopa* perform the song *Bag ma thob pa'i ries kyi glu* (song of getting the bride).¹³⁴ Afterward, the ritual of *Raktak* (dowry)¹³⁵ starts with this song *Zongs glu* or dowry song when the bride's dowry is displayed, hang on a rope called *zongthaks skangches*.¹³⁶ All such gifts, which were previously promised by the bride's family is recorded in a document. This document also contains all the items of the *Rak-tak* given by the bride's parents, kinsmen, friend and co-villagers, read aloud in detail by the *zongs yig dikhan*, that is

¹³² Namgail, "Marriage and Changing Pattern among the Changpa Tribe of Ladakh," 85

¹³³ *Thom* is usually set outside the house in a tent (*kur*) where the whole villagers and kinsmen of the bride sit together. They are served with food prepared by the *phi-chen* (outer kitchen) and also given Dangey (a local bread given according to the member of the household).

¹³⁴ Dinnerstein, *Ladakhi traditional songs: a cultural, musical, and literary study*, (University of New York. 2013) 274-278.

¹³⁵ *Raktak* which comprises of jewellery, clothes, money and also many other essential things like cooking wares etc are sent by the bride's parents.

¹³⁶ Ribbach, *Culture and Society in Ladakh*. (Ess Publications, New Delhi.1986) 94.

the person who makes the list. According to Namgail “Indeed, no distinction is made between the *Rak-tak* and the gifts of kinsmen and friends; both are known as *Nor* (property).”¹³⁷ Afterward, the ritual of departure starts where the *lama* or Buddhist monk who are busy with their religious ceremony comes to the stage and performs the ceremony of *yang-kug*, which is supposed to ensure good fortune to the bride and her family and to destroy the power of hostile demon. Then the *lama* performs the rites of *lha-grol* to release the bride from the bonds of her family’s patron deity or *Lha*. According to Ribbach, performing such rites means, “from that moment on the young woman would no longer be permitted to enter the shrine in her parents’ house. From now she would be within the protection and power of the gods of her husband’s house and she must take care not to arouse the jealousy of either party.”¹³⁸

Now, the bride takes leave from her parents, friends, kinsmen and the villagers by thanking and requesting them not to forget her by striking her *tung laag* or conch shell bracelets and bowing down to them.¹³⁹ She is then accompanied by *pagmai anay* (maternal aunt) to the bride’s house. The *nyopa* then perform their last dance known as *nyopay ses or nyopa* dance, which is performed before leaving for the groom’s house. The wedding rituals for the *Nyopa* does not end here. Receiving the bride or *pag-ma* they have to perform certain other rituals at the groom’s house. On their way back, they have to make a stop in front of every village where the *Nattipa* had to bless the *Kalchor/pungpa* (the pots of *chang* bought by the neighbouring villagers) again and sing *Stamdal glu* or auspicious song. They also perform other songs or dances, if the villagers ask for it. They have to pay homage to the village deities or *Lha tho* to attain their blessings, which cannot be neglected. Usually, they *hari-pa* or drummer

¹³⁷ Stanzin Namgail, “Marriage and Changing Pattern,” 85.

¹³⁸ Ribbach, *culture and society in Ladakh: the wedding*, 95.

¹³⁹ I have seen this ceremony several times at different wedding ceremony also the event was recognized by Ribbach, “Culture and Society in Ladakh” page 95.

accompanied by a flute player beat *lhar nga*.¹⁴⁰ However, sometimes the *nyopa* dances to the beat of *damman* and *surna*.

Reaching the groom's house, the *rak tak* or dowry are put before the stone marked by the monks. The monks have been preparing for the rite since morning. This time they perform the rite of *lha dogs*, which includes performing some *cham* or mask dance¹⁴¹ and reciting prayers, which are meant to bind the bride with the bridegroom's patron deity or *lha*.¹⁴² The monk while reciting the religious texts asked the patron deity to bestow their blessing on the bride and bring no harm to her. This rite ends with the monk flinging a clay pot filled with the left-over food from the wedding feast at the stone marked by them and those present kick the stone. The breaking of the clay pot on the stone is done to avert any misfortune which may accompany the bride. The new bride is led to the groom's house now but before entering the house an important event relates to the bride's relationship with the mother-in law. The mother-in law welcomes the bride with *amai lduru* (mother's porridge) to assure her of good treatment and protection in the new house.

When they enter the house, they are laid down on the carpet on which a monk had drawn the Buddhist swastika or *yun-drun* with grain and barley. Next to it was a luck circle or *dga skyil*. The groom then sit on the swastika and the bride on the luck circle with a corn measure between them.¹⁴³ The *lurspon* sing, *Bkra-shis lha-gyal gyi gdan-glu* or the song in praise of the carpet. Afterward, the *Nattipa* take off the heavy wedding head-dress or *perag* from the bride's head.

¹⁴⁰ *Lhar nga* which is played showing respect and while welcoming someone.

¹⁴¹ Cham or mask dance is highly choreographed sacred Buddhist dance exclusively performed by lamas. Dancers also hold ayudhas such as dagger, spear, bells, vajra, skill and damrus in hands symbolizing the destruction of evil spirits. (Ajay Kumar, Ladakh's cultural heritage: its unique festivals and dances. Vol.1 Issue 12, December 2012, ISSN 2277 3630)

¹⁴² This part of the wedding rituals is considered a religious obligation and is still being observed, as I myself have seen.

¹⁴³ Ribbach, *Culture and society in Ladakh*, 99

¹⁴⁴ Afterward, a ritual called *Zal rakis* is held. Here the bride and the groom is fed food and serve with *chang*. The food is served on a single plate, first to the *Pagpo* or groom and then with the same spoon from the same plate to the *Pagma* (bride).¹⁴⁵ The same general practice has been noticed by Ribbach who writes, “the two now ate from the one plate, their first meal shared together in their common house. With the food they drank tea and the groom some beer as well.”¹⁴⁶ Afterwards, the *nyopa* also removes their golden hat and they wear a black hat instead. However, before removing their hat they sing *Thod-bkrol gyi glu* or a song of taking off the hat. Afterward, the *hari pa* or the musician goes to receive the *nyopa* followed by a welcome tune (*lhar-nga*) to the *thom* or wedding banquet tent which are pitched in an open space around the house. The villagers and the relatives of the groom are already sitting there according to their rank and position. Reaching the stage the *Lurspon* sing the *amai dkar chol glu* or mother’s libation song, which according to Dinnerstein, “guest are welcomed with beer offering made by groom’s mother to various universal and local deities by flicking drops of beer from the listeners’ cups.”¹⁴⁷ After the singing is done they perform the *queshen ses* or silk robe dance before the *dangey* or dough cake is dismantled and distributed.¹⁴⁸ They also sing the *stamdal glu* or auspicious song at many occasions during the wedding. The *nyopa* having a bit rest are taken to the *phi chen* or outer kitchen where they sing *yado mza’ boi skyabs ki glu* or helper section song and following the same song they sing *thegs zan skabs gi glu* or departure food section song, which is distributed among the people. After everyone is served with the food, the *nyopa* sing *Dar-rgyas kyi glu* or scarf offering song. This ritual usually required

¹⁴⁴ *Perak* is a headdress worn in the Himalayan Ladakh region. It is composed of a strap of leather studded with semi-precious stones, such a turquoise. It is transferred from one generation to the another by replacing and adding a turquoise in the front.

¹⁴⁵ I had noticed this ritual practice during a wedding ceremony in Zangla, 2018.

¹⁴⁶ Ribbach. Culture and society in Ladakh. page 99

¹⁴⁷ Noé Dinnerstein, *Ladakhi traditional songs: a cultural, musical, and literary study* (University of New York. 2013) 64.

¹⁴⁸ Sahapedia, *General Wedding Practices and Rituals in Rong Chu Rgyud, Changthang, Ladakh*, Accessed May 26, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=POrGM8aNRkw&feature=youtu.be>.

enough time as every household have to offer *khataks* or white scarf and money or gift accordingly from the relatives, friends and villagers. When the people are done offering their gift and scarf to the bride and the groom, the *nyopas* ' sing their last song *Tashis pai glu* or a farewell song and were joined by other people.

The celebration continues for the next day where the people are served with *chang* and food and there is no more singing by the *lurspon* but there is a ritual where the bride, groom, father and mother of the groom have to dance to the tune of the *Daman* or kettledrum and *surna*/flute. At any social gathering or wedding ceremony people are always sitting according to their rank and position, where the men and women sit separately. However, further wedding celebration like *ajang nge tsalma* or feast held by the groom's uncle for the villagers and the relatives, do not last until late night as compare to other wedding days but still people who drink *chang* stay until late. Afterward, the wedding celebration is over, and the newly wed couple are being invited to every house in the village and are treated with food and drinks.

4.3 The Changing Face of Traditional Zanskar Wedding:

With modernization and the passage of time, there has been a vast change in the Zanskari *bagston* or wedding ceremony. The arranged marriage system that has been practiced among the Zanskari is changing with time and situation but unlike the other part of Ladakh, it is changing at a fast pace with the growth of modernization and tourism. These days in Zanskar instead of practicing wedding following the traditional form, people prefer to hold shorter weddings, ignoring certain wedding rituals and songs. In the past, people used horses during the wedding, but today, since motorized vehicles are available, there are few horses around. The change happening in the Ladakhi wedding was noticed by Franke and collected some of these songs, which he mentions that,

“I was fortunate indeed to get hold of these wedding songs, just before they had vanished altogether. In Central and Upper Ladakh only mere reminiscences, are left of them, although the gorgeous dress of the Nyopas and the scene before the house are still in vogue. In Lower Ladakh the songs have been preserved much better, but a large portion of them have ceased to be intelligible to the people. Thus, whilst the first nine of the songs I collected were, certain passages excepted, generally understood by the ordinary man, the latter half of the collection consists more or less of a succession of unintelligible sounds.”¹⁴⁹

There is even a sharp decline in polyandrous marriage. They preferred monogenous marriage. Such a trend started in the 1940s and since then there is reported a constant decrease. According to Mann, “when in the early 1970s it is showed 7.7 percent, in the late 1990s it is hardly one percent.”¹⁵⁰

Earlier people got married following the tradition of arranged marriage. The girl was chosen by the parents and the boy showing his respect to the parents’ consent marries the girl. But now love marriage or *rang thad* and stealing bride or *skyus-ty khyongches* is replacing the traditional arranged marriage. In the case of second marriage due to death or divorce, a different form of ceremony is practiced called *Skus-ty khyongches*. The bride is quietly brought to her new home and several days later, the relatives and friends are informed by inviting them for a meal.

During the wedding, the *phasphun*¹⁵¹ played an important role in conducting and concluding the wedding successfully. However, this day no one follows the tradition of inviting *phasphun* as most of them are considerable not available due to the change work pattern and modernization. Thus, they are being replaced by skilled village individuals who are especially known for their cooking, managing, singing, serving skills and are paid certain amount after

¹⁴⁹ A.H Francke, *The Ladakhi Pre-Buddhist Marriage Ritual*, (Indian Antiquary. 1901) 133.

¹⁵⁰ R. S Mann, *Ladakh then and now: cultural, ecological and political*, (Mittal publication, New Delhi. 2002)

¹⁵¹ *Phasphun*, as defined by Ladakhis, is a social group composed of few families who help each other on all festive and sad occasions and whose members worship a common god.

the wedding. In the traditional Zanskar, the host family do not have to pay for the *phasphun* for their help as they bind to help each other in exchange either in happiness or sorrow. In traditional Zanskar, marriage ceremonial ritual used to be a very elaborate and big wedding. However, the elaborate wedding seems to slowly vanish. Most weddings happening these days are one-day affairs called *go-res*.¹⁵² However, they may still include a shortened performance of the *Go glu* or door song between the bride's and groom's party. According to respondent, the *lurspon* Wangail, there are many wedding songs and rites which are skipped and are not sung anymore such as the song *Shitpa-nyarap ki zung*.¹⁵³ In traditional Zanskar after the wedding ceremony, every individual house used to invite the newly wed couple to their house for breakfast, lunch or dinner which goes on for several days or month. However, nowadays to save time and money people divide themselves in a group and finish treating the couple in a day or two.

The Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA)¹⁵⁴ have made some attempts to try and preserve traditional wedding practices by raising awareness and implementing certain actions to be followed regarding how the wedding should be conducted throughout Ladakh including Zanskar. They had banned serving meat as according to Buddhist religion harming animals is against the religion. Serving shop-brought alcoholic drinks rather than locally produced *chang* or locally brewed beer and *arak* were banned during weddings. During the wedding, there were many rites and rituals had to be followed, where the maternal uncle of the groom had to spend money, had also been fixed by the Ladakh Buddhist Association. LBA regulated how much money the groom's party can ask for and fixed the amount to be offered. In the past there was

¹⁵² *Go-res* is when the bride is brought stealing and a small piece of cloth is tied round the head of the girl, indicating her willingness to marry. Which follows with the feast for the relative and the villagers.

¹⁵³ Wangail (a *lurspon* or wedding singer) village Pidmoo, summer research 2018

¹⁵⁴ Ladakh Buddhist Association- social cultural and educational ladakhbuddhistassociation.org/ accessed on 20nd May 2019

a tradition that during marriages a goat was sacrificed, and the blood was offered to the household protecting deities. This tradition is, however, no longer observed today – possibly also banned by LBA.

LBA took further steps by banning playing any Bollywood, Nepali pop and *lok pop*, as well as Anglo-American genres of all types during the wedding and any ceremonial cultural event taking place. In an interview with LBA president, Mr Tsewang Thinles, talking about the different initiatives to preserve the Ladakhi Traditional culture, laid by the LBA was a successful initiative and was supported by the local village head, *goba*. So, under the strict guidance of the *goba*, the youth dare not to play any pop songs, when the cultural event takes place.

Martijn Beek talking about the evils of modernisation mentions the privately published booklet – *Yrabs them skas* by Thupstan Paldan 2001. In this booklet, Paldan commented on the usual modern social evils of alcohol consumption and smoking, but also 'traditional' practices such as hunting, excessive spending on weddings, and yak slaughter by suffocation are mentioned.¹⁵⁵

4.3.1 Lack of *lurspon* or Wedding Singer

Zanskari wedding is not complete without a *lurspon* or wedding singer. There are many *bagston glu* or wedding songs to be sung on several occasions during a wedding procession. Today, there are only a few elderly people left who participate in Zanskari wedding ceremonies in the various villages. Since, the younger generation are more focused on receiving modern education and giving more importance to governmental jobs.¹⁵⁶ During my field research, I

¹⁵⁵ Martijn van Beek, "Imaginarities of Ladakhi Modernity," (IATS, 2003. Volume 11: Tibetan Modernities, 2000) 24

¹⁵⁶ For more detail see chapter on Transformation of socio-economic factors in Zanskar and its impact on oral tradition.

witnessed, when two people from another village came searching for a *Lurspon* but could not find anyone. Consequently, they had to postpone the wedding according to the availability of the *Lurspon*. The traditional way is to request the *Onpo* or a monk to fix the wedding date. However, it has changed the other way around, now instead of considering the day from the *Onpo* the family had to get confirmation from the *lurspon* about his availability.

During my summer research, I met Wangail who is a *Lurspon* or wedding singer. In an interview made with him, he told me how he became a *lurspon* and what interest him becoming a *lurspon*. From him I got much information about the qualities a *lurspon* must possess. Wangail also made some comments on how social transformation changed the traditional way of wedding. The complete interview will be elaborated more in detail in chapter on Digital database of endangered intangible cultural heritage.

4.4 Conclusion

In traditional Zanskari wedding, there are many rituals and practices that are related to interdependence and auspiciousness. However, nowadays the people follow a few of those rituals and many people do not observe these rituals because a wedding ceremony has become much shorter, often shortened into a one-day event. If these traditional wedding rituals and rites continue to further changes, the traditional form of Zanskari wedding celebration will vanish completely. Therefore, documenting these wedding practices and the songs accompanying the various wedding rituals is of great importance, both for future generations of Zanskaris and for scholars interested in the culture of Zanskar valley, or generally in the culture of western Tibet or the Indian Himalayas.

Chapter 5: Digital Database of Endangered Intangible Cultural Heritage

As part of my Master Thesis work, I have donated the material I recorded in Zanskar valley to the Open Society Archive (OSA, CEU, Budapest) where it will be included in the planned Digital Database for Endangered Cultural Heritage. The Database provides open access to the material to anybody for educational and research purpose. This means that anybody can listen to the tales, songs, riddles I have collected, as well as the interviews I have made of various aspects of traditional Zanskari life. While it is not possible (let alone ethical) to force people to ‘preserve’ their culture (for example, one cannot insist that they sing the old songs instead of listening to modern Western or Indian pop-music), it is possible to document at least some of this culture and make it accessible for future generation. I am hoping that my own research will raise local interest in and appreciation of Zanskari oral tradition. Even if a gradual erosion is not evitable, given the realities on the ground, my collection (which will hopefully grow with time) will help not only foreign scholars, but also local people to get (re-)acquainted with Zanskari oral tradition.

The collection includes a number of tales, riddles and songs (some of them sang only for me, others recorded during actual rituals), as well as interviews on various aspects of Zanskari culture and oral history, and a live recording of a traditional pre-wedding preparation for the bride-bringing procession. Below is a description of the material which will be uploaded in the Database:

5.1 Tales

5.1.1 *Ling Kesar tales -Tales of King Gesar*

The epic, or rather epic cycle of King Gesar is an elaborate oral epic tradition known widely throughout Central Asia and the North East of South Asia and as far West as Kalmykia. It enjoys especially great popularity in Tibetan lands (including Indian or Western Tibet), as well as Mongolia and Buryatia. It also unites motifs traceable to various historical and cultural strata over a wide geographical expansion. As Hummel writes: “The Gesar Saga is a type of reservoir in which are stored very different kinds of mythological, eschatological and historical traditions from the steppes of Eurasia, from Asia Minor, from Central Asia, from East Asia, but also from the Mediterranean area.”¹⁵⁷

The epic cycle consists of a vast corpus of texts, made up of many versions and episodes, each with many variants. Oral performance and improvisation have played the primary role in the transmission of the epic. The first written forms appeared only in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. According to the Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion, “there are now over 200 published volumes of non-duplicating Gesar epic narrative and song, mostly from eastern Tibet,”¹⁵⁸ most of it being the direct transcription of oral tradition. It is widely, assumed, however, that these volumes do not cover all of the King Gesar epic, which continues in many places as a living tradition, still performed by singers or bards.

The epic is built around the figure of the Buddhist culture hero, King Gesar (Ling Gesar, Gling gesar or Geser Khan), whose divine mission is to lead the forces of White side in the fight

¹⁵⁷ Siegbert Hummel and William R. La Fleur, “The Motif of the Crystal Mountain in the Tibetan Gesar Epic,” *History of Religions* 10, no. 3 (1971): 204–10. 204.

¹⁵⁸ Solomon George FitzHerbert, “Tibetan Buddhism and the Gesar Epic,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, September 26, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.560>.

against the Dark side, that is, again the demonic powers of ignorance. This dualistic struggle between the powers of darkness and of the gods may possibly have its roots in ancient Eurasian mythical strata, but in today's Buddhist cultures the hero's mission is interpreted as an explicitly Buddhist one.

The King Gesar Epic Tradition is included in UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage List (albeit only for China).¹⁵⁹

Below are two examples of the King Gesar epic collected in the Zanskar valley. Further collection is planned.

5.1.2 Tsultrim Falke: Two Tales from the King Gesar Epic

Tsultrim Falke is in his sixties, from the village Pishu. He is the head of the village Pishu and a traditional farmer. Farming the village lands of Pishu has lately become very difficult due to scarcity of water to irrigate the lands. Tsultrim Falke claimed to be the only one who knew this tale in the village (consisting of about thirty houses).

Tsultrim Falke himself can be said to represent the meeting of traditional and modern culture. Unlike most people his age, he can write in Tibetan and he has also traveled outside the valley. His understanding of the Gesar epic also reflects both oral and modern written tradition. According to his account, he learnt the Gesar epic (or the tales he was familiar with) in the traditional, oral way from his elders, that is, from his grandmother and another female relative from the village of Hongchat. Though he probably listened to these tales as a child, he consciously started to pay attention to them and committing them to heart at the age between

¹⁵⁹“UNESCO - Gesar Epic Tradition,” accessed May 26, 2019, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/lists>.

fifteen and twenty. As he recalled, these stories were never the same, each woman told something different. Though in the recent decades, people were no longer interested in these tales, and he had started forgetting them, he still retained some of it in his memory, because of some of his old village friends. Sometimes, when they were sitting together, these old friends asked him to sing a little of it. Other people (that is, younger people), however, were not interested. As a result, when he was asked to recite the tale for recording, he requested some time to refresh his memory and I had to return on a later date to do the recording.

It must also be mentioned that Tsultrim Falke was familiar with written, book-versions of the Gesar epic, as well as the fact that Gesar epic is known “everywhere,” that is over a wider geographical region. During his travels, he had found a book in Varanasi (India), in which there was a text of Gesar epic, complete with pictures. He claimed to have another book of the Gesar epic in his possession, brought from Tibet by his grandfather. How far these bookish versions influenced his own recall of what he had first learnt in the oral way, remains to be determined.

Finally, he was also aware of folklorists and other researchers’ interest in these texts (which made securing his cooperation easier.) He was also familiar with the work of Morup Namgyal, the singer and collector of Ladakhi folk/traditional songs, which made him feel that his own tales should also be recorded. He went to see Morup Namgyal in Leh, even taking his volume of the Gesar epic along, where he requested that they make a recording together. However, Morup Namgyal declined his request, saying that recording the singing of a long epic tale like that would need special preparations and a team of technicians.

During being recorded, Tsultrim Falke first explained the storyline and then sang the epic. This mixture of poetry and prose, or the *chantefable* style, is the traditional way to perform the Gesar epic.

It is noteworthy and demonstrates the role of the Gesar epic in traditional Tibetan society, that Tsultrim Falke used an episode in the tale of King Gesar to explain the world around him. In the tale, Gesar burns a whole mountain and it becomes red. There are some red-colored mountains in Ladakh, and he related the color of these mountains to this episode.

Khar ray lingfa khi-thit ('Story of a King'): A story about a king seeing a dream foretelling his death *Link*

Story without title: A long account, in prose and song, of the deeds and adventures of King Gesar *Link*

5.1.3 Tsultrim Falke: Skit-tsil

Tsultrim Falke also told a 'funny tale,' the story of Skit-tsil, a dumb boy who takes to thieving and robbing and becomes rich. He does a lot of stupid things, but somehow they always turn out well for him. Two brothers want to murder him, making up ways to kill him, but he always escapes. The brothers eventually fall in their own trap and are thrown into the river shut in a box.

Link

5.2 Tales by Tsewang Norzom

Tsewang Norzom, aged eighty-three, is a farmer's wife in the village of Kumik. She comes from a family which is very well-known in the village, due to the legend associated with an ancestor.

The other inhabitants of this village uniformly denied knowing any songs or tales. Most people suggested that I interview Tsewang Norzom as someone who still may know tales. She was also the oldest person in the village, and there is a famous connection between her family and the story of the mysterious wall surrounding the village. (No other village in the Zanskar valley is surrounded by such a wall Photo). This wall is believed to have been built by a *Balu*, a small human-like supernatural creature (or 'dwarf') possessing magical powers. According to the local legend, the grandmother of Tsewang Norzom caught the *Balu* and took his cap and stick so he couldn't escape. He had to follow her orders, which included building the wall around the village. (This story is known to everybody in the village and even in other villages, though not in such detailed form as her account.) There is even a stone in the field next to the village with footprints. Villagers say this is the footprint of the *Balu*, when he was carrying the stones for building the wall and took a rest at this spot.

She learnt the tales from other people as a child. She can still recall the times when people were still coming and asking her to recite the tales.

Her accounts included the detailed version of this story as well as three other tales. (She even showed the old house of her family, where her grandmother was supposed to have lived.)

The Tale of the *Balu*

Link

She also told some tales:

Taklay Bumba: The story of a king with seven sons, for whom he wants to find wives. The tale tells the story of how the sons find themselves wives, after going through a number of adventures. *Link*

Sharchok ling gyalpo, yorchok lu gyalpo (Heavenly King and the Subterranean Lu King): A story about the King of Ling (Heaven) and the King of Lu (Subterranean Kingdom) and their meeting in the mythical place of Ling and their agreement to marry their future children.

Link

Abi May-may (Old lady – Old man): Tale about the daughters of a very poor old couple, who are abandoned by their parents. After a number of miraculous events, the girls meet the Gold King and the youngest sister marries the Gold King and the other sisters became her servants. The two older sisters become jealous of their youngest sister and try to destroy her children. They thwarted several times and at last throw them into the river in a box. They are rescued by a (Muslim) old man, who brings them up, building a palace for them. After further adventure, their evil aunts finally meet their *karmic* punishments and are swallowed by the earth.

Link

Riddles or Tsot-Tsot

Link

5.3 Tsetan Angmo

Tsetan Angmo (photo), in her seventies from the village of Stongdey. Her name was suggested by Tsewang Norzom (link) from Kumik village. As she said, Tsetan Angmo's father was a man famous for knowing many tales, and she had learnt from him. When I reached her, she was busy carrying grass from her field and first showed less interest in telling any tale. However, on emphasising her she agreed on telling a short tale, which was recorded. Asking her about how she knew the tale, she answered that her father used to recite tales to her but without practicing them for a long time she forgot them. On mentioning about the tale about Ling Gesar, she said people must be lucky knowing and remembering such tale.

Gyalpo Dawa dang lunpo Dawa zangpo

The tale is about the king Dawa and his minister *Lunpo Dawa*. The king was a very generous person and fulfilled everyone's wishes. However, knowing his generosity, once a demon named *Bimbursur* seduced the greedy minister or *lunpo* of the king, promising to make him rich and powerful, if he got the head of the king for him. The *lunpo* went to the king asking for his head. The king cut off his own head and gave it to the *lunpo*, who took it to the demon. The demon, however, died when seeing the head of the king, and the *lunpo*, frustrated in his ambitions, died as well.

Link

5.4 Weddings and Wedding Songs

5.4.1 *Chol lu – Proposal Song*

This song was sung by Nima Dolma, in her fifties, from Tsazar village.

Chol lu or Proposal Song, is an engagement song, or to be more exact, it is sung when the parents first inform the girl of marriage plans for her. (This happens before the *chang* or beer ceremony, where the groom's family formally asks for the hand of the girl.) A group of female relatives come together, and they start singing a special kind of *chol lu* (this informs the girl that there are plans to get her married). The song talks about how the daughter does not want to get married and leave her mother, but the mother is telling her daughter that she had also got married and marriage is a good thing.

According to the informant, this song is not being sung anymore. (According to Nima Dolma's explanation, marriages arranged by parents have become rare. Most young people choose their partners for themselves, so the occasion to sing this song does not rise anymore.)

Link

5.4.2 *Pre-wedding Preparations*

These are recordings of preparations and discussions, as well as of auspicious songs, preceding a marriage ceremony.

The day before the marriage, the *lurspon*, the *nygopa* and men from the *phasphun* come to the groom's house and they discuss what time they should leave for the bride house in order to reach there at the time specified by the bride's family. The *nygopa* also sings *mi-lam gug-ches*

sei glu and *rtendel glu* or auspicious songs, complete with playing the kettle-drum (*daman*) to ensure that they reach the bride's house safely the next day. The recording also includes the explanations of one of the man from the wedding party (from the *phasphun*) about the proceedings and the songs.

[Link](#)

Milam Gu ches se glu

This song is specifically sung the day before the wedding, during the preparation. It sings about how the villagers will participate in the wedding and help to unite two souls in marriage.

[Link](#)

5.5 Wedding Songs - *Bagston Glu*

These recordings of wedding songs were made with the wedding-singer or *lurspon* (*May-may*) Wangail. Wangail is in his seventies and used to be *lurspon* or semi-professional wedding singer. He participated in many Zanskari wedding ceremonies in various villages. Being famous for his skills as a *lurspon*, he was invited to many weddings all over the valley. Though he does not sing in marriages anymore, on account of his age, in his free time he still sings the songs for himself, when sitting at home. Working with him and recording his songs posed no difficulty, as he had memorized every song. He also had a hand-written manuscript of the songs containing the songs he knew. He said, he used to study these songs, because it was easier to decipher the deeper meaning of the texts when seen in writing, than when he was reciting them. He became a *lurspon* under the influence of his elder brother and father, who were also *lurspons*. He was not under any obligation to follow in the footsteps of his father and brother, but the idea of becoming a wedding singer appealed to him, as he thought it would offer him many chances at having fun. His own son has learnt some of the wedding songs from him,

however, he was not interested in becoming a *lurspon*. He never participated at weddings and today he works as a teacher in his village, so the family tradition of being a *lurspon* will die out with Wangail. According to him, there were a few children from his village, who came and asked him to teach them some songs, both wedding songs and *zhung glu* or congregational or praise songs ([link to zhung glu](#)) However, when some ceremonial event happened, quite often these youngsters did not show up to sing, but were busy dancing to modern music with their friends. Thus discouraged, Wangail decided to stop teaching them.

In the interview made with him ([link](#)) he talks about how weddings were celebrated in the past, before modernization and the consequent social transformation changed the traditional way. He also shared some of his personal experience of being a *lurspon*. According to him, being a *lurspon* is not an easy task. In order to become a *lurspon*, one must possess qualities of being *na-ringmo* or having patience and *tog-chenmo* or having the ability to give lead and control others. Other than this, one must have strong self-control and a strong head, as *lurspons* have to drink a lot of *chang* or locally brewed beer in the course of the marriage ceremony – and then still be able to ride a horse back to the bridegroom’s house.

I recorded several weddings songs with him. Some of them are still being sung at today’s weddings, but others, like the *Shitpa-nyarap ki zung* are no longer sung, as weddings are shorter than in the past and consequently some traditional songs have become discarded in an attempt to ‘save time.’

Tong-lang nyilo-mai glu

This is a wedding song sung in a traditional question-and-answer format.

As part of the wedding ceremony, the groom’s party is going to the bride’s house to collect the bride from her father. The bride’s party previously put some stones, each a few meters from

the other, forming a path leading to the bride's house. The stone-path starts some fifty or hundred meters from the house and finally stops at the door. The groom's party has to stop at each stone, and they have to answer a question raised by the party of the bride. Both the question and the answer are in song form. The leader of the bride's party has willow stick and if he is not satisfied with the answers, he beats the members of the groom's party. (After a successful answer is sung, each stone is kicked over.)

The recording contains both the questions of the bride's part and the answers of the groom's party. *Link*

Shitpa-nyarap ki zung

When the last stone is reached during the ceremonial procession to the bride's house, this song is sung (after the last stanzas of the *tong-lang nyilo-mai zung*). According to Wangail, this song is no longer sung these days.

Link

Gonpheb (sharchok yang sang karmo la)

This is the song sung at the door of the bride's house, after having 'finished' the stone-path. According to traditional custom, the bridegroom's party come to 'purchase' the bride. The bride and her wedding party are barricaded inside the house and they demand proof of the purchaser's identity, before opening the door. The questions and answers of the *gonpheb* song form a ritualized dialogue.

Link

5.6 Other Songs

Kai Sangtang

A religious song

The singer, a woman in her sixties, asked that her name be withheld. She is from Tsazar village in Zanskar valley.

My visit to the village of Tsazar coincided with the visit of a Buddhist monk, who was traveling around the villages to preach to people. The women of the village congregated to listen to him (most men and younger women were away, working on the construction of the Zanskar - Leh road.) I took advantage of the fact that the women were already in a group and asked them to help find people who were able to sing traditional songs. The women selected two elderly ladies (out of a group of approximately twenty-five women). They were first very shy and reluctant, but were eventually convinced, when I explained the aim and relevance of the project. I specifically asked for songs which were *not* being sung anymore.

The other women chose her and were exhorting her to sing, because she was considered by the others as someone with a very good voice. However, she consented to sing only one song, one of a religious nature.

The song she sang is about the Dalai Lama, asking him to visit and bless people. It also describes how people go to visit the Dalai Lama, but those with a pure heart are lucky, as they can see him in their mind's eye when they look at the *stupa*. The song sounds traditional; however the singer is calling on the Dalai Lama by his given name (Tenzin Gyatso), suggesting that this is a song using traditional formulas and music patterns, but some of the content, or at

least the name, may be changed. (The singing pattern suggests that it is usually accompanied by the musical instruments, *daman* and *surna*, a kind of kettle-drum and double-reed oboe.)¹⁶⁰

Link

Stamdal Ngypa Glu

Auspicious Song of Five

Sung by Gyalses Nima Nurboo, aged eighty-four, the descendant of the royal lineage of Zangla. He is still referred to locally as the ‘king of Zangla.’ (*link to Sharchok and interview*)

This is a so-called ‘auspicious song’ or *stamdal*. ‘Auspicious songs’ are sung various happy occasion: during marriages, childbirth (*Lda-Gang* ceremonies), or when one is going to ask for a girl’s hand (when people are already seated inside the house). They are sung not only in Zanskar, but all over Ladakh as well. They are among the few songs that are still widely sung, despite the decline of traditional songs in the region. There are different kinds of *stamdal* songs, this one is referred to as the ‘fifth.’

The song talks about how before celebrating anything, happiness comes first; the language of the song belongs to a formal, high register, not to the everyday spoken language. It is near to Classical Tibetan.

Link

¹⁶⁰ *Daman and surna* are today indispensable part of Zanskari and Ladakhi music at festive events. However, was imported from the Muslim West, in this case specifically Baltistan, where they were symbols of royal power and general prestige. It is believed to have been introduced in the sixteenth century by the entourage Gyal Khatun, a Muslim Princess married to a Tibetan King, Jamyan Namgyal. According to Dinnerstein, “This instrumental combination derives from the West Asian military processional ensemble,” and today “Even into the 21st century, no Ladakhi music performance is considered to be complete without the accompaniment of *surna* and *daman*.” Dinnerstein, *Songs, Cultural Representation*, 75.

Sharchok riva karmo

This is a *zhung glu*, that is, a congregational or praise song

The singer is Gyalses Nima Nurboo, a descendant of the royal lineage of the former kings of Zangla. *link to Stamdal and interview*

Sharchok riva karmo is praise song about a *stupa* or *chorten*. It describes the blessed nature of the *chorten* and how uniquely it was built. It is addressed to a mythical *chorten* which, today at least, does not physically exist. As a *zhung glu*, it is sung at social gatherings. If there is a religious event, which ends with a social gathering and drinking, it may also be sang during the latter part (however, not during the ritual part itself). According to Gyalses Nima Nurboo, a slightly different version of the same song exists in Ladakh, called *golang ba la serai yi thi*.

[link](#)

5.6 Interviews

Interview with Gyalses Nima Nurboo

Gyalses Nima Nurboo is a descendant of the royal lineage of the former kings of Zangla. (*Link to Stamdal and Sharchok*)

Zangla Gyalgyud is an account of the oral history of Zangla, or rather of its royal family, as told by Gyalses Nima Nurboo.

Link

5.6.1 Interview on local caste system, village life and traditional crafting

Interview with Tashi Lamo, a woman around thirty, village of Zanskar. Tashi Lamo is originally from Karsha (village in the Zanskar valley), but she got married in Zangla. Husband works as a wage-laborer. They both belong to the community of Lakshes, considered a low or ‘untouchable’ caste. In the interview she talks about her life as a low-caste orphan, the local caste system (in a Buddhist setting) and the discrimination and difficulties faced by her children. She also explains how the village community works and how important chores, like cleaning the irrigation channels, are assigned among the villagers.

She also talks about her traditional (winter) crafting activity, explaining how they buy their wool from other people, or sometimes from a shop, as they don’t have their own sheep. They first spin the yarn from wool and then make *nambu*, the local home-made and home-died cloth used for traditional clothing. (*photos*) She describes the process of making *nambu* in detail, including how to dye it and how to make it look thicker, more luxurious. Though these days *nambu* is often made for tourists rather than for local wear, Tashi Lamo’s family still makes *nambu* for their own use.

Link

5.6.2 Interview with an Amchi

Amchi Phuntsog Tonyot is an *amchi* or traditional medicinal healer, as well as a farmer. He is a native of Tsazar, village in Zanskar valley

In the interview he explains how he had learnt the art of being an *amchi* from his father. He talks about the volumes of medicinal texts (six volumes according to him) that an aspiring *amchi* has to become familiar with before he can start to practice. He himself inherited his volumes from his father, who had brought it from Tibet.

He also tells about the changes happening in the village and how they are influencing the work of *amchis* as opposed to the past. Today *amchis* are slowly disappearing as people prefer to go to Western-type hospitals and modern doctors. *Amchis* can no longer support themselves as people only come to them for medicine in case of minor complaints (like getting medicine for headaches.) Amchi Tsazar is not making the medicine himself, but buying it in Leh, from an ‘*amchi*’s pharmacy’ (*men-tse-khang*). This *men-the-khang* is an innovation, it opened only a few years ago. Before that *amchis* made their own medicine. Amchi Tsazar himself used to go to the Rangdum valley (north-west of Zaskar valley) to collect special herbs on the mountain side. Amchi Tsazar also works as a farmer, supporting himself from the land.

Link

Conclusion

During a short period, in Ladakh/Zaskar the process of modernization has affected local culture. In my thesis I have described how life is rapidly changing in Zaskar and the impact this has had on the traditional culture, including oral tradition. Oral tradition used to play a vital role in Zaskar valley and in some aspects, it is still continuing to do so, though its importance is gradually diminishing. In the past there were various occasions for the performance of different genres of oral tradition. However, the introduction of electricity and television, it affected the performance of oral tradition. People, instead of participating the social gatherings prefer to relax in front of the television or listen to the radio. The transformation of some socio-economic factors in Zaskar also made a negative impact on oral tradition. *Bagston glu* or wedding songs, which still continue to play a vital part in Zaskari life are also changing due to the transformation of traditional life.

My aim was to develop strategies that would help to preserve at least some of the oral tradition in the face of change. The material I recorded in Zaskar valley during the summer research has been deposited in the Open Society Archive (OSA, Budapest). This database provides open access to the material to anybody for educational and research purpose. Being part of an openly accessible database, the collected material can be used by academic researches as well as Zaskari people seeking to learn more about their cultural and historical identity.

The Csoma's Room Foundation is a non-profit organization, committed to cooperative development in the Himalayan region of India especially Zaskar. The foundation has been working with volunteers since 2008, focusing on heritage conservation, local education and sustainable development, in cooperation with the local community. The organization has already built two winter solar schools in Zangla and are currently planning to build more solar

schools in other villages in Zanskar. Solar schools, built with a special technique, make it possible to have classes in winter (when state schools are closed due to the extremely cold weather). Using the Foundation built winter solar school as a teaching platform, I will attempt to teach children at least small part of this collection of Zanskari oral tradition. This way my research does not remain theoretical, but there is possibility of (doing the actual work) sharing the results of my work with the locals in cooperation with the educational activities of the Csoma's Room Foundation. I also have further plans to involve local experts, to cooperate with the local community and raise awareness about the cultural importance of oral tradition among Zanskari people. The teaching plan in cooperation with the local community and the Csoma's Room Foundation will help to contribute to this aim. New cultural engagement groups like Ladakh Arts and Media (LAMO) are trying to collect and teach songs. Similar initiatives can be undertaken in collaboration with the Csoma's Room to make further recording of songs and tales and publish them in written form.

I will deposit the material collected in the future to the existing database at Open Society Archive, Budapest. I will initiate projects aimed at the collection of texts and documentation of oral tradition involving local people, like children or youth can try record their grandmothers, grandfathers. Not only songs or tales, but also oral history- how life used to be in the past (as some old people are good at talking about such things, though not all). That could provide interesting material.

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