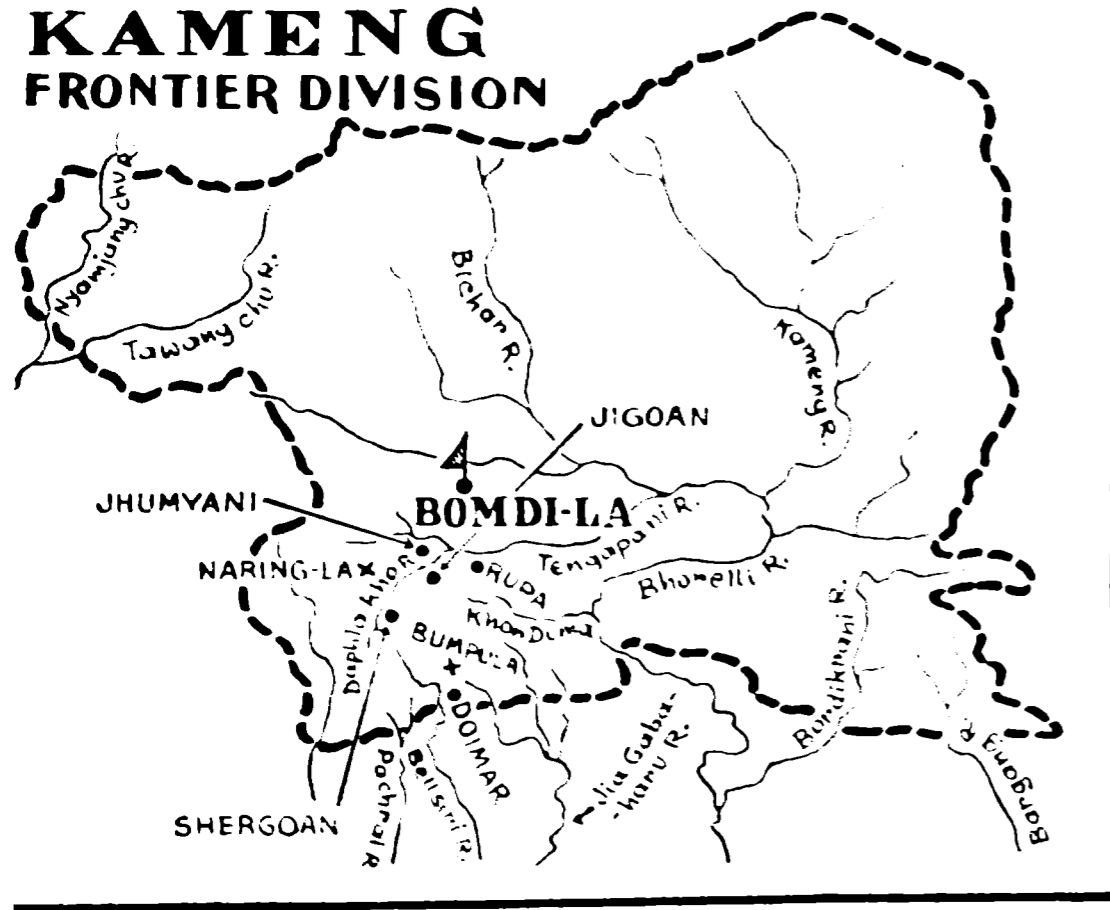
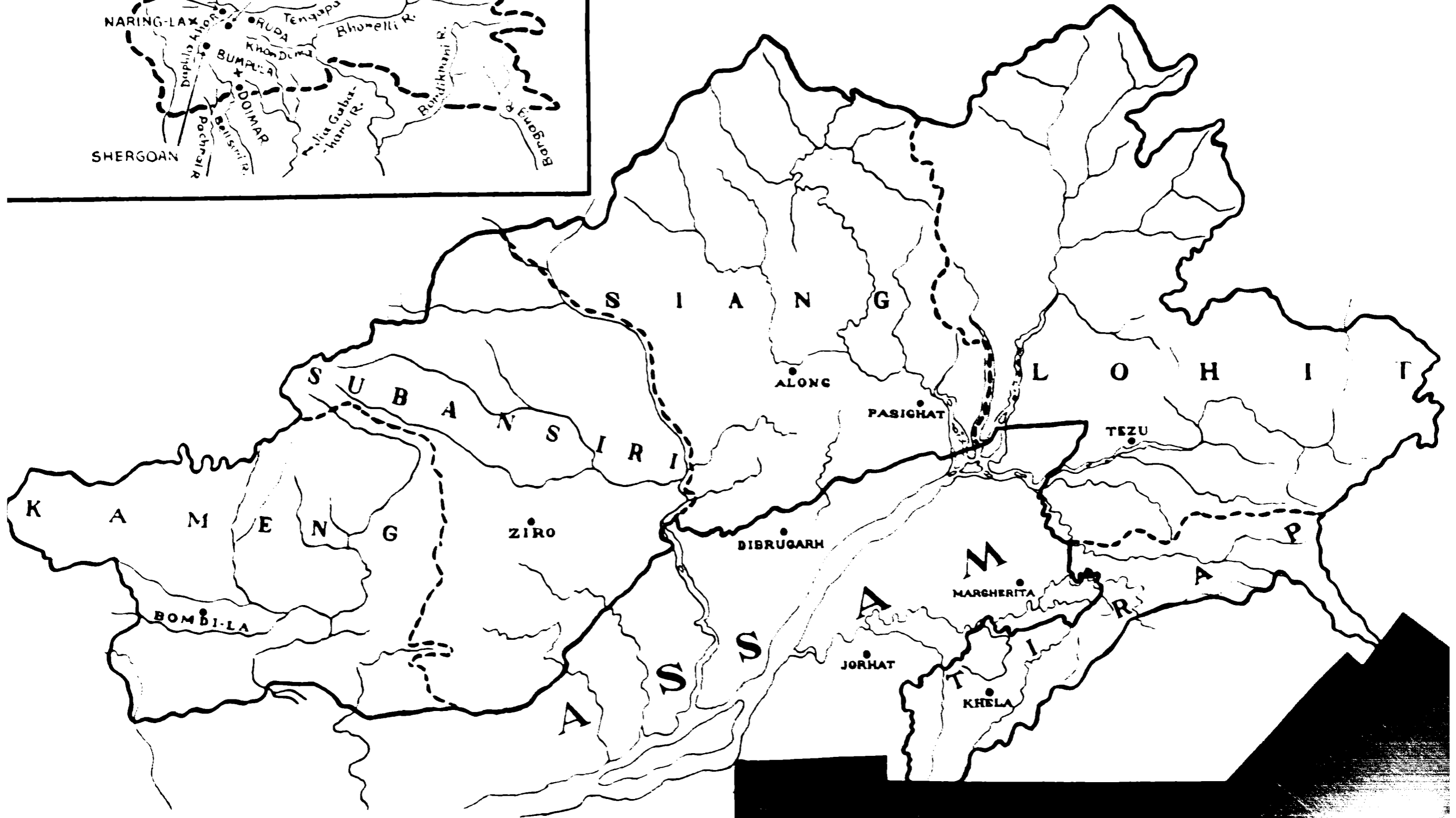


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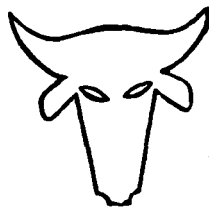
NORTH-EAST FRONTIER AGENCY



THE PEOPLE OF NEFA

THE
SHERDUKPENS

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North-East Frontier Agency



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1961

**TO
DR VERRIER ELWIN**

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Bomdi La

RAKESH SHARMA

27th February 1960

NEFA, the North-East Frontier Agency, is a wild and mountainous tract of about 30,000 sq. miles in the Assam Himalaya bounded by Bhutan, Tibet, Burma and, valley of the Brahmaputra. It is divided for the purpose of administration into five Frontier Divisions—Kameng, Subansiri, Siang, Lohit and Tirap—with their headquarters at Bomdi La, Ziro, Along, Tezu and Khonsa respectively. It is inhabited by a large number of Indo-Mongoloid tribes, speaking some fifty different dialects.

This book describes the Sherdukpens a small but important tribe living mainly in the two villages of Rupa and Shergaon in the south of the Kameng Frontier Division.



A young Sherdukpen boy



Sherdukpens dressed in colourful costumes for Ajilamu dance

LAND AND PEOPLE

I. THE COUNTRY

The Sherdukpens live in the important villages of Rupa, Jigaon and Shergaon in the south-western part of the Kameng Frontier Division in the North-East Frontier Agency and number about 1200.

The Sherdukpen country lies at the foot of the Bomdi La Range and is accessible from Misamari Railway Station on the Rangiya-Tezpur line of the North-East Frontier Railway, the distance being about 80 miles which has recently been connected with the plains by a jeepable road. It is bounded in the north by a high hill rising some 2,000 feet above the level of Rupa, itself 5,500 feet above sea-level. To the east lies the area occupied by two tribes, the Buguns (Khawas), and the Hrussos (Akas); towards the west, it extends up to Shergaon, and is separated from the Kalaktang area where the Southern Monpas live, by a high hill known as Thongpu La. In the south, the area extends up to Thungri and Jabrang.

Besides the three important villages, the Sherdukpens are dispersed over small settlements which are known locally as *pams* or *lurek* (*lu*-hill, *rek*-cultivation). This dispersion was originally brought about by their *jhum* method of cultivation, and by the necessity of living in proximity to the forest clearings. Some of the important *pams* are : Thungri, Mukhuthung, Memachhur, Jhumyam, Brukpublang, and Gacham.

The local names for Rupa and Shergaon are Thongthui and Senthu, and the people living in these villages are known as Thongjis and Senjis respectively.

The word *thu* means village, and *ji* means people. The Senjis originally lived with the Thongjis at Rupa, but after a few generations, under the pressure of population, shortage of land, and an epidemic of cholera which ravaged Rupa, they migrated to the place which came to be known as Senthu (*sen-new, thu-village*). These two principal villages maintain cordial relations and are closely inter-related by marriage.

The Sherdukpens practise both shifting and permanent cultivation. An interesting feature of their community life is their annual migration during the winter to a place called Doimara where they stay for about three months in temporary structures, in malarious surroundings. They have many friends among the Kacharis and other plainsmen living within a few miles beyond Doimara, and have also business relations with them.

The hills in the Sherdukpen region have deciduous forests which are rich in timber and grow fir, tsuga, oak and rhododendron trees. A variety of small-sized bamboo grows on top of the hills. Wild sago, poma, walnut, shirna, mechailus, chano, koken, pine, chir, kail and other conifers and aconite (used for manufacturing arrow poison) are also found in small quantities. Strawberry bushes, citrus plants, and some three species of Rosaceae including pyrus, grow wild. Various kinds of orchids are also found.

Bears, wild dogs and barking deer are present in small numbers in this area. Leopards, monkeys, panthers, wild sheep, and squirrels are also found.

Fish is abundant in the streams and rivers, the common variety being the hill-trout. Dim-dams, butterflies, moths, beetles, and honey-bees abound in the inhabited area and in the forests around.

The Sherdukpen area lies in the path of the Divisional Headquarters, Bomdi La. Rupa is an administrative circle and comes in close contact with people from outside.¹ However, the new road which is being

¹Administrative circle at Rupa has since been abolished. Now the entire Sherdukpen area falls under Kalaktang administrative centre.

constructed from Bomdi La to the plains will by-pass Rupa and so the main traffic will be diverted from it.

The villages are connected by bridle paths and mule tracks.

II. CLIMATE

The Sherdukpen valley is long and narrow, and is traversed by many streams, some of which are non-perennial. They flow with strong and swift currents, and rise and fall rapidly during the monsoon, often overflowing their banks and washing away the embankments and temporary bridges. The drainage is from west to east.

The most important river of the Sherdukpen area is the Duphla Kho. It, like many other rivers of the area, ultimately flows into the basin of the Bharelli which is the largest river of the Kameng Frontier Division.

The Sherdukpen valley is surrounded on all sides by steep hills: the Bompou La to the south, the Naring La to the west, and the Bomdi La to the north, and is, therefore, a rain shadow area. Consequently, the rainfall is comparatively low, barely 30 to 32 inches a year.

The climate is salubrious, but the climatic and topographical factors are not conducive to large-scale cultivation. The altitude of the area ranges from 5,000 to 6,500 feet above sea-level. The terrain is parched and rocky with a top layer of sand, and with a low capacity for retaining moisture.

A pronounced and well-marked winter, with occasional snowfall, is followed by a short, mild summer, succeeded again by a capricious monsoon which at times supplies too little water and thus hinders the healthy growth of crops in the area.

The hot spell generally starts about early May. The temperature seldom goes beyond a hundred degrees Fahrenheit, and the sun is never too hot. The weather, on the whole, remains bright and temperate.

This is the agricultural season when sufficient crops must be won from the soil to enable the people to subsist through the lean winter months. This is succeeded by a break in the monsoon, and the rains continue till early September, the highest rainfall being recorded in the month of June. From September onwards, the temperature begins to fall, and the cold increases. October and November are the most delightful and invigorating months with a bright and pleasing sun and cool nights. During this season, the people must procure food, fodder and fuel enough to last them through the winter.

Few winters pass in which the temperature does not fall to freezing point, the cold spells occurring chiefly between the middle of December and the middle of March. During these months, cultivation is not possible, and the villagers migrate to the plains for trade and barter, and to escape the rigours of the winter. The intensity of cold diminishes towards March when the Sherdukpens return from their winter camp at Doimara. This is a season of much activity; the people are busy ploughing the nearby fields, and sowing seeds of maize, chillies, soya beans and pumpkins.

III. PHYSICAL FEATURES

The Sherdukpens are an attractive people, belonging to the Tibeto-Mongoloid stock, with fair complexions and expression almost invariably mild and prepossessing. They have well-built bodies, refined features, and are generally of medium height.

IV. CHARACTER

The Sherdukpens are by nature gentle and affectionate and have a cheerful disposition. They are calm, quiet and unassuming by temperament, and courteous, respectful and good-humoured in address. They generally give the impression of rather being

shy and reserved and even sceptical on first contact with strangers, but, with a little familiarity, they readily repose their confidence in those they have to deal with. They are, as a rule, sincere, faithful and honest. However, due to their contacts with the plains, they have, to some extent, acquired a considerable business acumen and shrewdness in economic matters.

V. ORIGIN, MIGRATIONS AND HISTORY

Sherdukpen tradition claims that the tribe originally came from Tibet.

The Tibetan king Be Srongtsen Gompo used to live in Devalajari in Lhasa with his Tibetan queen, Be Mu Za, by whom he had a son called Gepu Roding Dorjee Chhung. In course of time he heard that the king of Assam had a very beautiful daughter and he began to long for her. He, therefore, sent his ablest minister, Rigpu Chhan, to Sibsagar to ask for her hand in marriage. In the beginning, the Ahom king was reluctant to send his daughter to a distant unknown land and made the minister pass through a series of severe tests before he agreed to the alliance and sent his daughter with the minister.

At last they set out on their journey homewards and came to the Brahmaputra and crossed over the far side. There the minister seduced the princess. The party finally arrived at Devalajari after passing through Sibsagar, Satiya, Morshing, Bumla and Tsona. The king of Lhasa was delighted to see his new bride and married her with great pomp and ceremony. Soon afterwards, however, he noticed to his great dismay that his wife was pregnant. He realized that his minister had betrayed him and so had the minister imprisoned and punished.

The child that was born, had the body of a human being, the face of a dog and the horns of a goat, and was accordingly named Khi Bu Rowa. When the

king saw him, he had the child taken to the forest and left there to die.

As the king deeply loved his beautiful young wife, he forgave her previous act of infidelity. In course of time, he had two sons by her—the elder was named Jabdung Ngowang Namje and the younger, Japtang Bura. When the boys grew up, Jabdung Ngowang Namje succeeded to Bhutan while Japtang Bura took over the present Sherdukpen territory and thus became the first Sherdukpen king.

Japtang Bura first came to But and Khoina, and found that the neighbouring tribes (the Akas and the Mijis) were at constant war. He toured the entire area including Buragaon and Jamiri, and promised to give salt, cloth and cattle to the Aka king, Nimmo Chhonjee, provided he maintained law and order in his area. He held out similar promises to the Miji kings and the Monpa chiefs so as to ensure peace and harmony in the area. It was possibly the payment of these tributes that brought these tribes on the side of the Sherdukpens in their feuds with the Thembang people over the issue of forced inter-marriage. These tributes continued to be paid for a very long time and were stopped only about in early forties.

The details of the payments to the Mijis were as follows: Each of the six Miji kings received annually one bullock, one load each of salt and *jabrang* spice, two goats and a cowrie waist-band. In addition, three cows, one goat, one large and one small piece of *endi* cloth and one dao were paid every fifth year. This payment was for the Miji chiefs alone; their followers, however, used to raid the houses of well-to-do men and take away whatever they could lay their hands on.

To each of the Aka kings, the Sherdukpens paid an annual tribute of three bullocks, ten woven bags, one large and six small pieces of cloth, ten loads of salt, twelve loads of *jabrang* seed, twenty-three fowls and two goats.

The Sherdukpens also paid every three years to the local Monpa rulers of Tawang 18 pieces of *endi* cloth, 20 seers of rice and 40 seers of paddy. The Tawang Monpa officials made return gifts of coats, hats, shoes, blankets, and necklaces.

Japtang Bura came to be held in high esteem by the neighbouring tribes, and was regarded as an apostle of peace.

He afterwards shifted his capital from But to Rupa and, while there, he once went out hunting, in the course of which he chased a wild pig and overtook it near Doimara. There he met the Kacharis, from whom he came to know about his maternal grandfather, the Ahom king, who was then ruling from Sibsagar. Japtang Bura went there to meet the king who was so happy to see him that he ceded him all the land between the Dhansiri and the Gabru (Belsiri) rivers and its revenue. The Sherdukpen tradition of going to Doimara every winter is held to have started from this date.

After his return from Doimara, Japtang Bura visited the Kalaktang area, where he soon became popular and his influence began to be felt. There he met Lama Khambu Takha who had killed a man-eating snake and saved the people of the area from its depredations. He invited the Lama to visit the Sherdukpen territory once every three years in order to conduct worship and receive gifts from the king.

When king Japtang Bura came to Thongthu (Rupa), he was accompanied by a large number of porters and servants, who formed his retinue. The descendants of the king himself are now called Thongs, while the descendants of the porters are called Chhaos. The villages of But, Rahung, Khudum and Khoina, according to the Sherdukpens, are inhabited entirely by the Chhaos. Whether this is correct or not, the inhabitants of these villages do have marked affinities with the Sherdukpens in their way of life, physical features, tradition of origin and marriage customs.

The Sherdukpens have traditionally collected taxes from the Kachari villages which they regarded as their own territory, and from the Monpas of the south-west. They also used to collect taxes from Bhutanese immigrants until some three generations back. For example, it is said, that eight families from Kuri Topu in Bhutan (which was under the jurisdiction of Tashigong Dzongpon) migrated to Pengleng, about a mile south of Shergaon, and became subjects of the Senjis. A year later, the Dzongpon of Tashigong demanded their return, but they refused to go and the Senjis paid nine mithuns as a sort of ransom on their behalf. Some three decades back, these families moved to Chhuk in the Dirang area to escape from the exactions of the Akas and the Mijis. During their stay at Pengleng, the Bhutanese were paying an annual tax of five rupees to the Senjis. When they left Pengleng, they gave them five ponies, but the Senjis claimed that the Bhutanese still owed them four more to make up for the nine mithuns given to the Dzongpon.

Another group of Bhutanese immigrants called Khengpa settled at Sakchi about two miles east of Shergaon. These people, some fifteen families in all, had come from Kheng village, west of Tashigong, but they too found themselves unable to bear the exactions of the Akas and, after two decades, returned to Bhutan. They also paid an annual house-tax of three rupees.

The Yanlos of Jigaon Adok are also believed to have immigrated from Bhutan. Though subjects of the Thongjis, they do not pay any tributes or taxes to them.

VI. LANGUAGE

Sherdukpen dialect, as far as my information goes, has not been properly studied so far. Available linguistic data in this dialect do not go beyond a few specimens taken by persons whose main interest lay

elsewhere. That it belongs to the Tibetan group of the Tibeto-Burman languages, however, is fairly certain. Though the people live concentrated on a comparatively small area, yet there exist slight variations in the dialects spoken by the Rupa and Shergaon people. The dialect spoken by Maichhopo, the people of But, Rahung, Khudum and Khoina, appears to bear great similarities to that of Sherdukpens on casual observation.

The exact nature of relationship of Sherdukpen language with that of Monpa, Bhutanese and Tibetan is not yet known; slight lexical resemblances, however, have been noticed between it and Monpa.

It is a pre-literate language without any script of its own. People being pre-dominantly Buddhists, the use of Tibetan in Tibetan script on prayer flags, Mānes, Kakalings and Gompas is fairly common in Sherdukpen area, but it is extremely doubtful if anybody, except the initiated brotherhood, can read and understand it. With the advent of the present Administration, they are picking up Hindi. They also know Assamese because of their contacts with the plains.

VII. TRADE

Sherdukpen economy depends to a considerable extent on external supply of common requirements and luxuries procured through trade and barter. The people are good businessmen and trade with all their neighbours.

On their annual migration to Doimara, they carry with them cattle, poultry, chillies, dried radishes, the *jabrang* spice, daos and woven bags, and sell them in the plains. In exchange they buy from the bazars there *endi* silk, mill-made cloth, salt, rice, beads, bangles and cooking utensils made of metal.

With the Hrussos (Akas), they exchange cows for

mithuns which they sell to the Monpas and the Bhutanese at a good profit. With the Buguns (Khawas) they exchange cloth, salt, betel-nut and pine-resin. From the Monpas, they get butter, coats, shoes, carpets, saddle bags, blankets, masks and yak caps in exchange for horses, cows, *endi* cloth and animal skins.

Trade is partly by barter and partly in cash, the main source of cash income being payments received from the Government for portorage and development works.

DOMESTIC LIFE

I. THE VILLAGE

The important villages of the Sherdukpens are situated in a flat valley along the banks of the Duphla Kho river. Hamlets, which are locally known as *pams*, are snuggled in the niches of towering hills or are picturesquely clustered on sunny slopes, not far away from water supply and cultivable lands. They vary considerably in size. Rupa, the largest village in the area, consists of about 60 houses, while Brukpublong, which is perhaps the smallest, has barely four houses. Each village has a well-defined territory for hunting and cultivation.

The habitations, made up of stone and wooden planks in a traditional pattern, illustrate the effect of environment on the life of the people. They are scattered at random without proper streets, though there may be passages between them. The houses do not always face the same direction, for they are constructed more in conformity with the physiography of the ground than on a conscious plan or pattern. Sometimes, a village is split up into several parts with different names.

In important villages, there is a common place where the villagers meet and discuss their affairs. In smaller ones, however, any convenient level ground between the houses is good enough for the purpose. Ususally, such gatherings are held near or in front of the house of the village headman, the latter invariably sitting on a slightly higher place than the others.

In the case of *pams*, water is usually obtained

from small hill streams caught in a hole. Important villages are served by bigger streams.

The Sherdukpens generally have small fenced kitchen gardens attached to their houses.

Sanitation

The sanitary conditions in the Sherdukpen area are not very satisfactory. There are no latrines, and there is no drainage system. People go to the fields to answer the call of nature and wash their hands in the nearby stream. They often use the same streams for taking bath, washing clothes, and drawing water for drinking and cooking purposes.

Health

The general health of the Sherdukpens is good. The climate is, on the whole, bracing and conducive to health. Local infection is rare.

There is an eight-bedded hospital at Rupa which provides facilities for outdoor and indoor treatment. The Sherdukpens have come to realize the benefits of modern medicine and surgery; they willingly undergo operations and are even prepared to accept the services of a doctor in maternity cases. They come to the hospital in large numbers but, side by side, submit to treatment by local priests.

Diarrhoea and dysentery are the common diseases. These are largely due to drinking contaminated water, an unbalanced diet, and the habit of taking unripe and raw food. They take raw maize when food is in short supply. Unhealthy habits and lack of personal and social hygiene are other contributing factors. Scabies and other skin diseases are less common. Respiratory diseases exist, but do not present a serious problem. No case of leprosy has so far been reported in this area. There have, however, occurred in the recent past, some isolated cases of gonorrhoea, syphilis, soft-sore and yaws. A few cases of deaf-mutism and goitre among the Sherdukpens have also been known.

Outbreak of cholera or small-pox has not been reported since long.

During their annual migration to Doimara, the Sherdukpens often catch infections of different diseases which are not prevalent in their own area. These infections are carried back home on their return. Malaria and typhoid are the patent examples.

II. THE HOUSE

The Sherdukpen houses are generally erected on a substantial stone foundation, five to seven feet high; the basement is used for sheltering goats and other animals. The lower half of the wall is constructed with timber and the upper half with bamboo matting.



A Sherdukpen house

The roofs are built with light planks, bamboo matting and occasionally grass-thatch, weighed down by heavy stones. The floors are of thick wooden planks.

The houses are generally double-storeyed. The lower apartment is used by the household, while the upper one serves as a store-room and granary. The Sherdukpens do not have separate granaries.

The living apartment of a typical house has two rooms with a portico in front. The room next to the portico is used as kitchen, dining room and bed-room. The other room is used for storing important household belongings, and is at times utilized as a bed-room or for the performance of religious rites.

Entrance to the house is usually by a rough wooden ladder. The living room has usually two iron hearths, one near the entrance and another at the other end. A stone platform behind the hearth is used for keeping the cooking utensils. A bamboo structure called *bakhi* (four by two feet) hangs usually four or five feet above the hearth and the warmth of fire from the hearth dries and preserves the foodgrains and meat kept on it. Sometimes, a long table is kept on one side of the room for keeping various odds and ends. The family members sleep by the side of hearth, on bamboo mats which are spread on the wooden floor.

A number of big rectangular bamboo containers for storing a variety of grains, millets and pulses is kept in the portico which is reached by a staircase.

There are no windows or chimneys in the Sherdukpen houses. The interior is often dark, smoky and ill-ventilated.

The walls of some houses are fitted with racks over which household articles are kept. Sometimes, such articles are suspended from pegs inserted into the wall.

Among the Sherdukpens, there is no separate cabin reserved for the expectant mother, where she could lie in private and be delivered of her child.

The doors of the houses are made of bamboo and can be bolted, but locks are rarely used. Poles decorated with prayer flags of paper or cloth are found on tops of the houses.

In winter, chillies are spread on the roof to dry.

In the courtyard, women pound grain with pestle and mortar to the accompaniment of pleasant songs. The process involves a good deal of hard toil; a stout pole is driven with considerable vigour into a hollowed-out log which contains the grain.

As among other tribes, the construction of a house is a solemn occasion in the life of a Sherdukpen, and involves consultations and ceremonies for the selection of



Laying the foundation of a house

the site, for bringing wood from the forests and laying the foundation. There are ceremonies at the completion of the first roof and again after the entire house has been built. The Lama is frequently consulted during the various stages of construction. Friends and neighbours help in the work and are compensated in kind. There is a house-warming feast before the building is occupied, when maize-beer and even the potent spirit, distilled from maize or rice, is liberally served.

III. DRESS

The dress of the Sherdukpens is well-suited to the rigours of the climate. They wrap themselves in several layers of clothes for protection against the weather. On formal occasions they put on colourful garments and adorn themselves with ornaments.



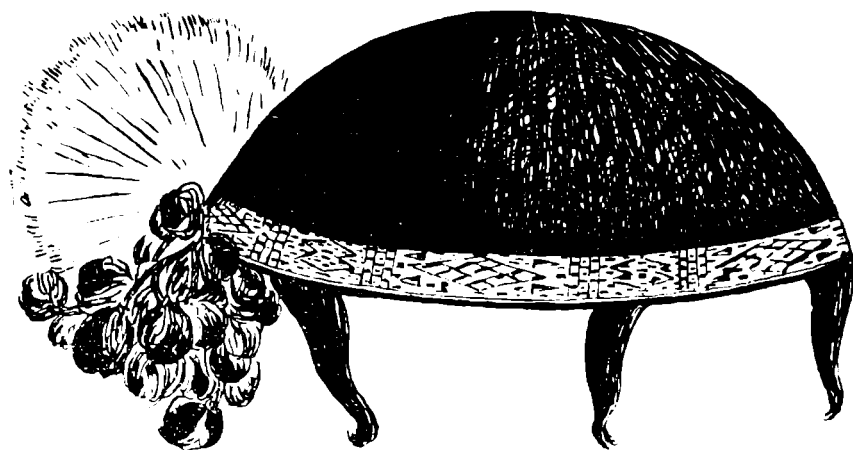
A silver pin studded with beads

Men's Dress

Men wrap a piece of cloth, either mill-made or of *endi* silk, diagonally about the upper part of their bodies. It is locally known as *sape*, and is about $2\frac{1}{2}$ yards in length and $1\frac{1}{2}$ yards in width, and forms the main constituent of their dress. Two ends of the border are pinned on the shoulders. This garment is sleeveless and reaches down a little above the knees. No vest or singlet is worn, nor any shorts or drawers.

A full-sleeved jacket, reaching below the hips, is worn over the *sape*. It has a round neck, and is open in front. To keep themselves warm in winter, some people wear a short coat over the jacket, and over it another longer one as well as loin cloth or trousers.

Men do not allow their hair to grow very long. They get it cut at intervals and, unlike the Akas and the Mijis, do not tie it in a knot. For headwear, they use an attractive black felt skull-cap, like a pudding-basin, which is made from yak's hair. The cap is locally known as *gurdam*, and has small tassels jutting

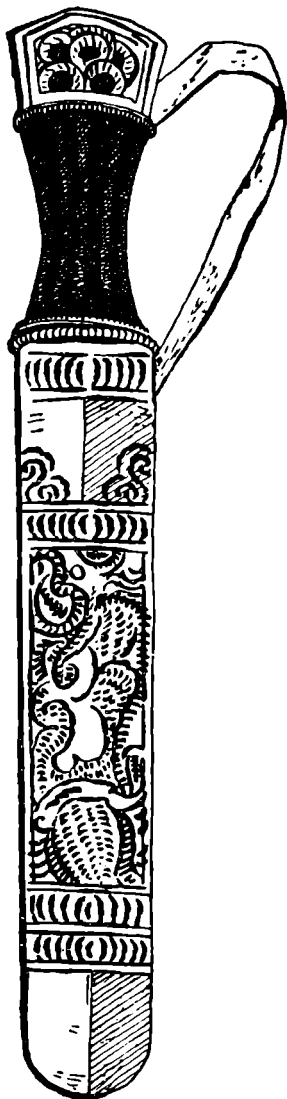


A Sherdukpen cap with cockade and tassels

down over the face of the wearer and often a white cockade at the side and a colourful band round the brim. Influential members of the village sometime

wear splendid hats of fur and yellow brocade obtained from Kalimpong.

A sash of thick coloured handloom cloth with decorated borders six to eight feet long and 11 to 12 inches wide, is wrapped round the waist. A sword or dao in a sheath is tucked crosswise in this waistband. On formal occasions, they carry highly prized artistic swords in silver sheaths.



A decorated Sherdukpen dao

An attractively woven bag of distinctive patterns is also worn on one side. A hand-woven cloth, decked with pretty patterns, is tied round the shoulders to form a fold at the back, which is used as a pouch or

pocket for keeping eatables and other articles of use. This cloak, known as *bogre*, is a speciality of the Sherdukpen area, and is made from the fibre of local plants known as *hongchong* and *hongche*.

Women's Dress

Women dress themselves in loose, collarless and sleeveless shirts which cover the body from shoulders to knees. Over it, they sometimes wear small full-sleeved coats made of mill-cloth. In some cases, these are embroidered with coloured cotton threads.

Like men, women tie a coloured sash, known locally as *mukhak*, round their waists. They also wear a cloth round their calves to keep off the dim-dams. This consists usually of mill-made white cloth, about 20 inches long and 12 inches wide, with its two edges sewn together. Its upper end is tied below the knee with thread or bead strings and the lower end hangs loose up to the ankle.

Young girls cut their hair round the head. When, however, they get a little older, they let it to grow long and fall over their face so as to act as a sort of veil. This is thought to be very attractive. After marriage or after the birth of a child, girls tie up their hair at the back of the head in a loose bun, just above the nape of the neck.

Women usually do not cover the head. On ceremonial occasions, however, some of them use small attractive caps imported from the Tawang area.

Sherdukpens generally go bare-foot, but sometimes use Monpa shoes.

Some Sherdukpens, especially those who have come in contact with the outside world, have given up a part of their original dress, and are now wearing coats, collared shirts, woollen pyjamas and canvas shoes.

Decoration

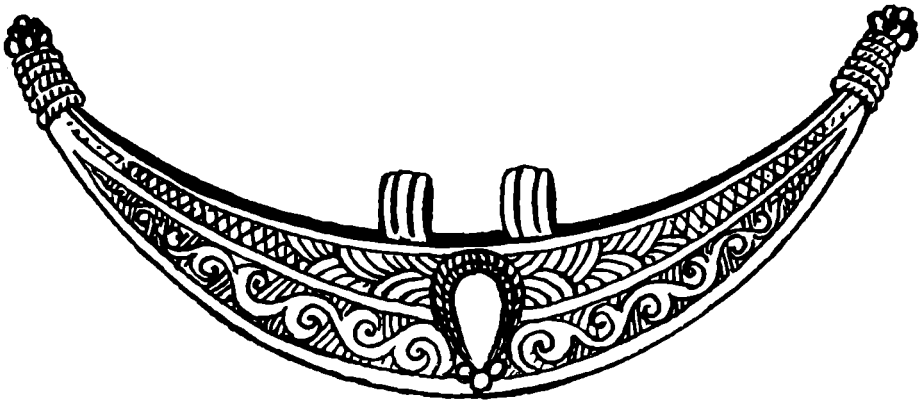
The Sherdukpens do not tattoo their bodies. Women and children, however, sometime use a vase-

line called *bachichlong*, which is a black sticky substance prepared out of pine-resin mixed with charcoal dust, for painting their lips and making geometrical designs on their cheeks. It is believed that application of this extract adds to one's beauty and charm, and protects the skin from getting dried up.

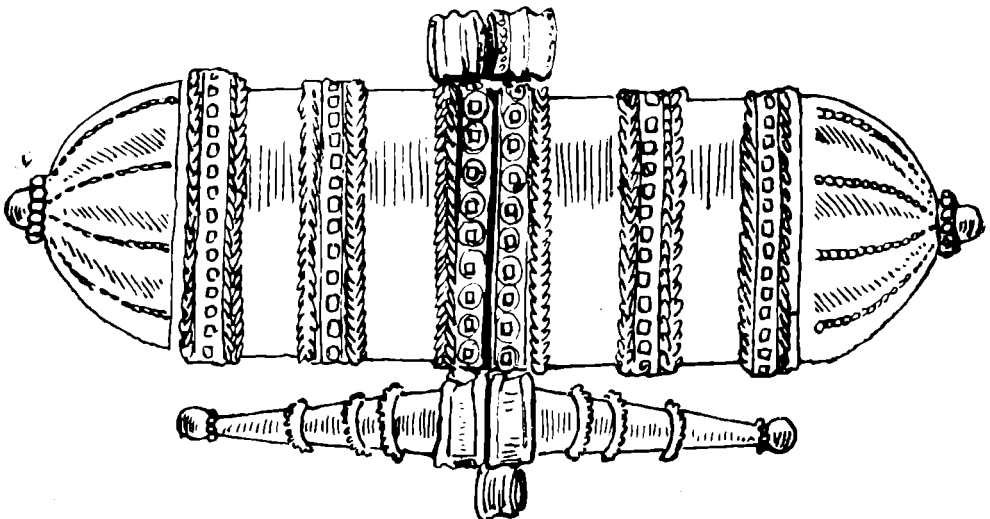
The designs are painted by applying the mixture on the cheeks with the help of thin bamboo sticks or are stamped with wooden moulds.

Ornaments

As elsewhere, ornaments are an indication of prosperity and wealth in the Sherdukpen society. These are especially worn on festive occasions, and

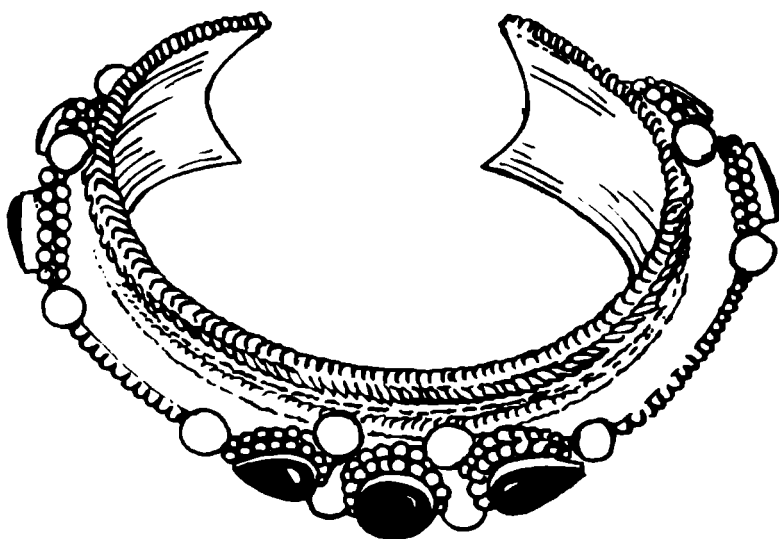


A silver neck-ornament

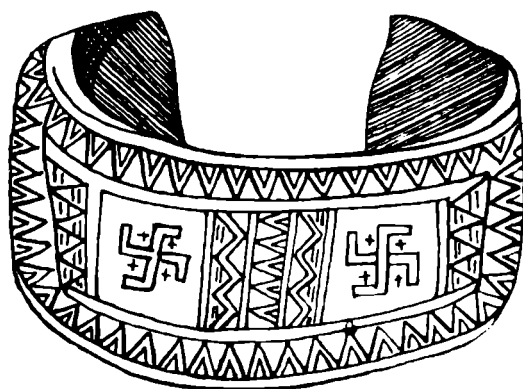


An ornament worn on the neck

also while visiting neighbours. The rich who possess valuable ornaments usually keep a part of the possession in hidden holes dug in the jungle known only to the owners and sons who are to inherit them.



A silver bangle studded with beads



A silver bangle

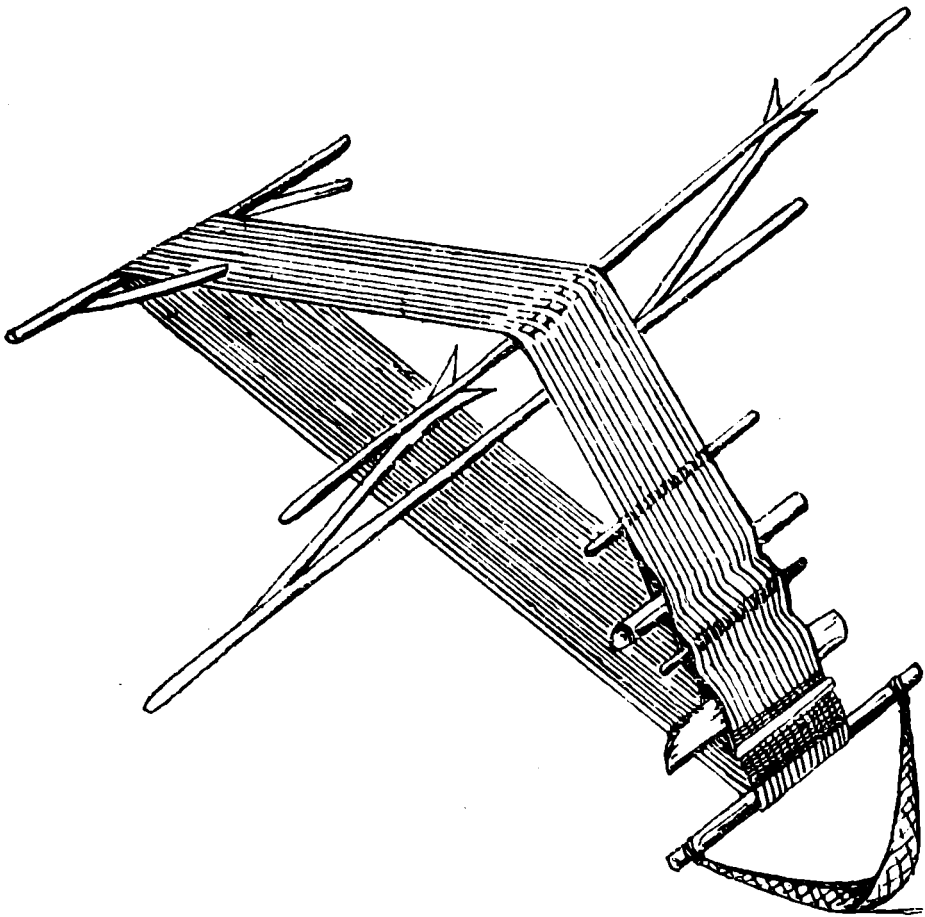
Men wear bead necklaces round their necks and silver or brass rings on their fingers. Women wear bead necklaces of different varieties and colours, bangles and rings, made locally by melting rupee coins. They also wear silver lockets and brooches purchased from the plains.

When a man dies, the family members, among other things, stop wearing ornaments, especially beads, for about a year.

IV. HANDICRAFTS

Weaving

The Sherdukpen women are skilful weavers. There is no fixed place for weaving, nor are fixed structures required, for their loom is simple, light and portable. The articles woven are mainly attractive coloured bags with geometrical designs and rectangular pieces of cloth called *bogre* which are used for carrying things.



A loin loom

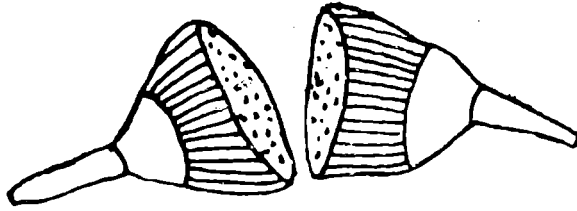
The yarn is obtained from the plains or is manufactured locally from the bark of plants known as *hongchong* and *hongche*. The local yarn prepared from *hongche* is strong and is used for making fishing nets and bow-strings. The bark of *hongchong* is poisonous, and as such, women cover their hands with



An old woman spinning yarn while returning from field



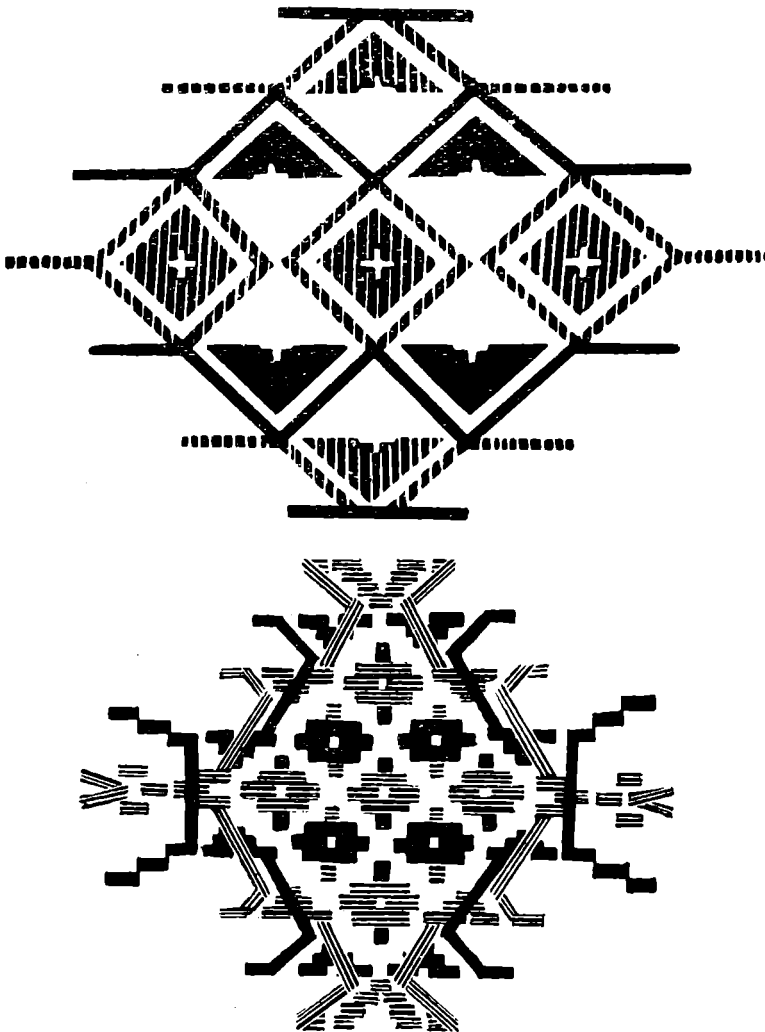
A Sherdukpen woman at her loom



A wool and cotton carding implement

cloth when removing the bark which is then soaked in boiling water, and washed several times till it decomposes and becomes pulpy. The fibre is then extracted and, after drying, is spun with the help of a bamboo spindle and fly-wheel.

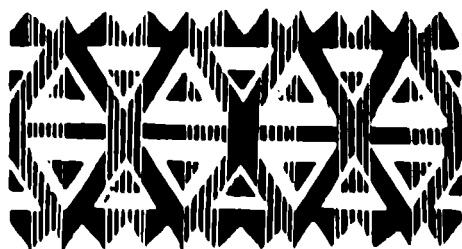
The *bogre*, which is characteristic of the Sherdukpen



Textile designs on the *bogre*

area, has invariably a Swastika¹ figure in the centre around which are woven variegated patterns such as the eyes of yaks or pigeons, face of a sheep, and Tibetan flags. Sometimes, scenes of arrow-shooting or pictures of flowers, leaves or trees are also woven. The borders of the cloth are usually multicoloured.

The bags are of different designs, and are accordingly known by different names; for instance, *sit-man daon* has a design of seven vertical lines, and *daon-dhum dham* has horizontal patterns.



Textile designs on a Sherdukpen bag

Cane and Bamboo Industry

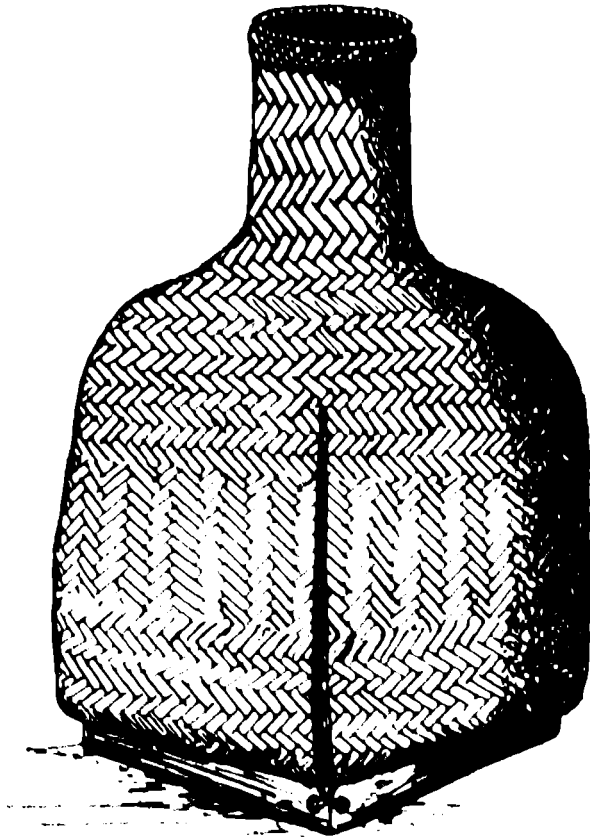
Household utensils and baskets and mats are the main items prepared with cane and bamboo. Mugs,



Flattening bamboo for making mats

¹This is a common symbol of luck among the Buddhist people.

jars and containers for the preparation and storage of beer are of various shapes, and are also made from these materials.



A cane bottle for carrying beer

Carpentry

The Sherdukpens are keen carpenters and use wood for making doors, boxes, tables, chairs, benches and saddles. Cups and bowls for taking food and drinking are also carved. With more and more Sherdukpen boys learning carpentry work in the Cottage Industries Training *cum* Production Centre at Bondi La, they are reviving as well as improving their own indigenous methods of carpentry by learning the use of saws and other carpentry tools for making various articles of manufacture.

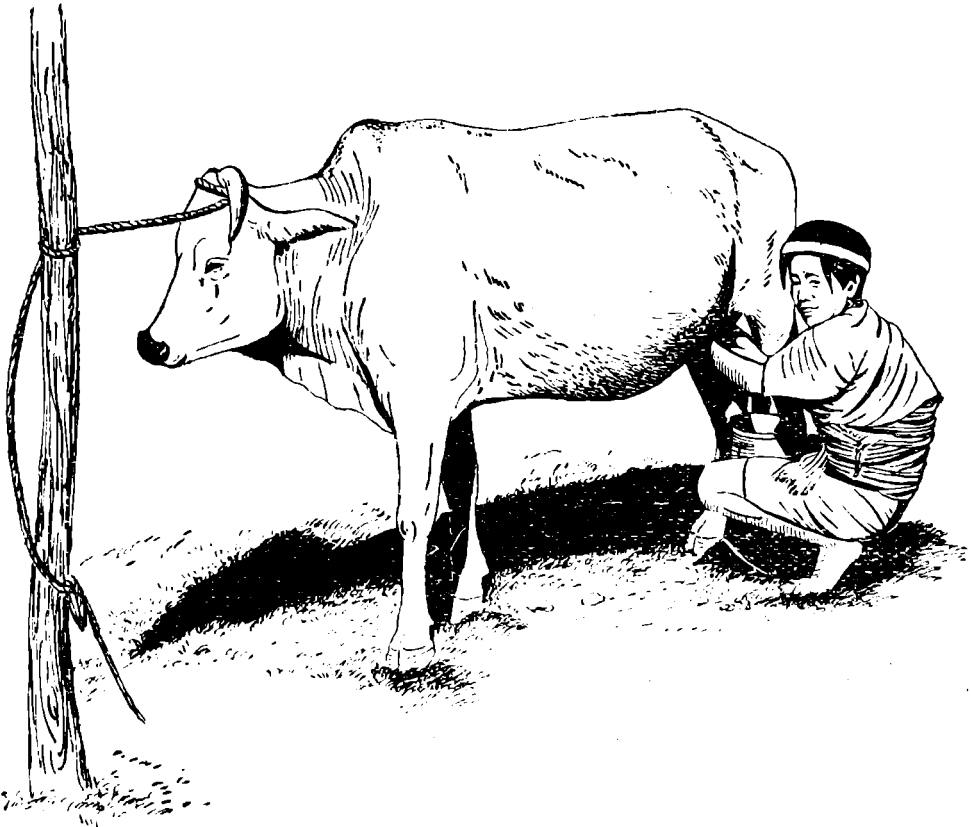
Smithy

The people of Jigaon are known for their skill in smithy and produce daos, knives, hatchets and sickles out of iron imported from the plains. There is also a well-known silversmith who makes attractive necklaces, pins, bracelets, cups and sheaths for daos.

The forge is worked with charcoal fire, the charcoal being prepared by the smith especially, and is furnished with bellows manipulated by pulling strings. The anvil may be either of iron or stone. Pig iron and scrap are used widely.

V. LIVESTOCK

The most prized livestock are the ponies, cows and bullocks. The Sherdukpens also rear goats and fowls, and keep dogs and cats as pets but not usually pigs and sheep.



Milking a cow



A Sherdukpen girl carrying water



A Sherdukpen fixing a trap for fishing

They keep fowls in pens made of closely woven bamboo. In some houses the hens are put in a separate basket placed high against a wall of the house for laying eggs. The Sherdukpens do not eat eggs and fowls but keep them only for trade.

They do not look after their animals well and often let them wander in the forests.

VI. HUNTING

Sherdukpens resort to hunting in their leisure to supplement their food. Both individual and community hunting are practised.

Bows and arrows are the weapons mainly used. The arrows sometimes have poisoned tips and are carried in quivers of bamboo tubes. Bows with trigger arrangements are also used.

The organization of group hunting is informal. All the dogs belonging to the participants in a hunt are entrusted to the charge of one man who usually goads them forward to comb out the jungle. The barking dogs and yelling hunters make sufficient noise to frighten away the game towards some selected spot where the pick of the marksmen wait in ambush all round. The hunters release their poisoned or non-poisoned arrows when the animals get close to them. Bamboo enclosures are sometimes constructed to entrap the animals. The hunters lie in wait and as the animals unwarily enter the trap, they spear them easily. They also hunt animals from platforms built on trees. The game hunted by the Sherdukpens includes deer, bear, tiger and leopard. All the hunters get their shares. The leader of the party and successful marksmen, of course, get larger shares.

VII. FISHING

Fish is abundant in the streams and most of the Sherdukpens devote themselves to the sport some time or the other. The most common method of catching fish on a large scale is by damming the water

with logs and stones, and diverting it on to a dry land on a higher level. The water surges forward and then subsides, leaving the fish on dry ground where they are readily caught by hand. Essentially a communal method of fishing, this requires a great deal of labour. The results are, however, commensurate with the efforts and the huge catch is dried and smoked and kept for future use.

Traps are also used for catching fish. These are conical in shape and are closed at one end. The traps are placed in the streams with their mouths facing the direction of the current and are secured in position with bamboo strips and are hemmed in with stones.

Angling is practised with rod which has a string dangling at one end. The end of the string is looped into a noose, the bait being fixed a few inches below it. It is slung gently out and is moved to and fro rapidly. A fish rising to the bait is caught by the noose behind the gills and is played till exhausted. The resulting catch, by this ingenious method, often yields a large number of fairly big fish.

Fish forms an important item of the Sherdukpen food and contributes a good amount of protein to their diet.

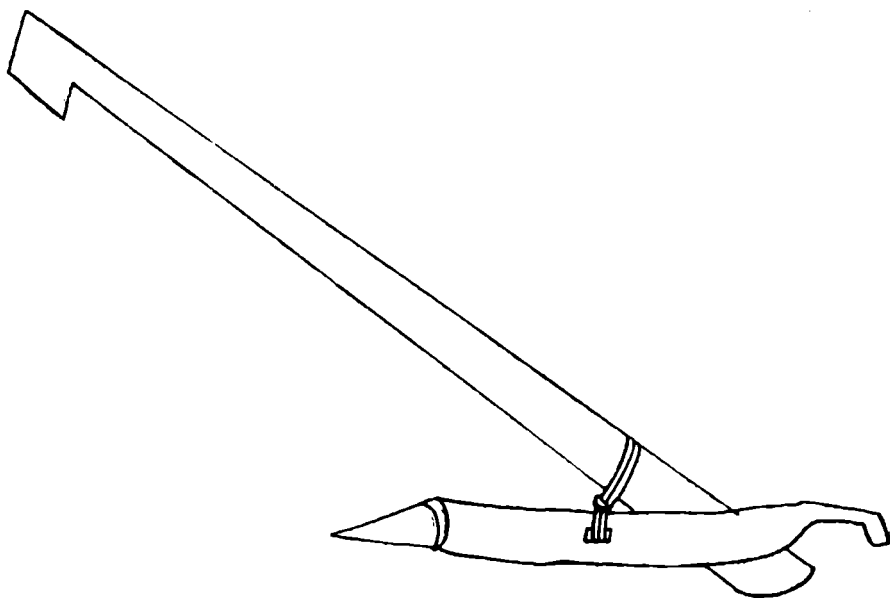
VIII. AGRICULTURE

The economy of Sherdukpens is a subsistence one providing them only the bare necessities of life. Agriculture is their main occupation. It is not an easy one; in fact, it is very toilsome and precarious. The labour put forth in agricultural operations is great as the soil is hard and rocky. The cultivators have always to be on guard against their numerous enemies: occasional heavy frost, paucity of water supply, raids by wild animals such as bears and monkeys, and hungry cattle. The fields are rocky and small. In addition, the absence of proper paths to the fields and in some cases their remoteness from the

homesteads, are some of the other important factors with which the hardy inhabitants of this region have to contend with. Agriculture is a task requiring great expense and immense labour. However, in spite of all these handicaps, it has come to stay as the main occupation of the entire population.

Types of Cultivation and Varieties of Crops

The Sherdukpens practise both shifting and permanent cultivation but are not particularly skilful at either. They frequently suffer from a deficiency of food which they have to make up by trade and other means. The jhuming conforms to the same pattern as is followed in other tribal areas. A portion of the



A plough

jungle is cut down, and the felled trees are allowed to dry. When completely dried, they are set on fire, and maize and millets are sown after the rains. The fields in which permanent cultivation is practised are in many cases strewn with stones which are often left as they are. The main agricultural implement is a very primitive type of plough which is drawn by bullocks and has an exceptionally broad yoke and requires

two men to operate it. The lands are usually ploughed twice before sowing.

The first phase of their agriculture actually starts immediately after the Doimara winter camp. The distant fields where maize, *gacham* and other varieties of millets are grown are taken up first. Then they turn their attention to the nearer plots. By the time the plots close to the village have been cultivated, the crops sown in the distant fields are ready for reaping.

In the permanent fields, the Sherdukpens practise rotation of crops: wheat and barley are followed by maize and millet. Their fields are fertilized by tying up cattle in them when they are lying fallow. Ploughing is done by men only.

The fields are not irrigated and depend almost entirely on rain, artificial irrigation being seldom practised. They do not dam streams for this purpose; nor do they ordinarily cut channels from the neighbouring rivulets for irrigating their fields.

The Sherdukpens also maintain kitchen gardens with bamboo fences around them. Droppings of the cattle, fowls and goats and also the garbage from the house are used as manure for these gardens. Maize, pulses and vegetables such as potato and sweet potato, are grown in them.

Cultivation Cycle

The agricultural schedule round the year is intimately connected with and governed by nature's signals and sounds. It also depends upon certain astronomical observations.

According to the Sherdukpen calendar, there are twelve months in a year. Lang-Do, roughly corresponding to July-August, is the first month which sees the beginning of agricultural activities with the people sowing millets like *nakhoo*, *jumu*, and *khichin*. Maize and *gacham* too are harvested and the weeding is done. Lap-Song, the agricultural festival, falls in this month.

The second month is Tak-Do (August-September).

The fields are likely to be attacked by bears, monkeys, rats and wild pigs. The main activity during this month is to guard the maize crops from their ravages. The people do not have any effective check against these wild animals at night though in the day time they



Harvesting

prevent them from raiding their fields by shouting or throwing stones at them. Their fields are usually without enclosures or fences, but the jungle around them is cleared so that the wild animals and birds may not find easy lurking places. The women too assist in the task of guarding the fields in addition to their

household work and weaving, a great deal of which is done in this month.

In Yosee-Do (September-October), the third month, barley (*phu*) and wheat (*bukku*) are sown while maize is harvested and stacked in temporary granaries in the fields for drying.

Brik-Do (October-November), the next month, is occupied with the clearing of jungle for the jhums and preparation of jhum plots. The first part of the clearing operations—clearing the bushes and undergrowth is the responsibility of women while the felling of trees, leaving short stumps standing, is done by men. The trees are left to dry and afterwards fire is set to them. Assistance of other members of the village is taken in the felling operations.

It is also in the fourth month that women spin yarn from the fibre of the *hongchong* which is used in weaving bags called *bogre*. They also engage themselves in such operations as pounding of grain. Millets like *gacham*, *jumu* and *nakhu* are also harvested during this month. Wang is the festival which falls in this month.

The fifth local month is Bree-Do which falls in November-December. During this month, harvesting operations are continued and seeds of barley are sown. The people also build or repair houses and celebrate the Khiksaba festival.

The next three months, Luk-Do, Pree-Do and Jai-Do, corresponding to January, February and March, are spent in Doimara—their winter camp—from where the Sherdukpens carry on trade with the plains. During these months, they find enough leisure to go out for hunting or visiting friends in the plains. They return from Doimara by March or April.

In Khik-Do (April-May), those fields which are adjacent to the villages are ploughed for sowing maize, chillies, soya beans, pumpkins and mustard. In Phak-Do (May-June), maize and millets are sown in the fields and *pams* which are distant from the village. Jee-Do (June-July) is also devoted to the cultivation

and the sowing of maize and millet in the nearby fields.

Thus works the yearly cycle of Sherdukpen agriculture. It will be observed that they do not engage in paddy cultivation as their area is not suitable for this purpose.



Pounding maize

Standing crops of millets in the fields with their wide expanse of vivid green present a beautiful view during September-October.

After harvest, when the sheaves get completely

dried up, they are thrashed and pounded to remove the stalks and are then winnowed in a sifting tray. The grain is then stored in rectangular containers made of bamboo.



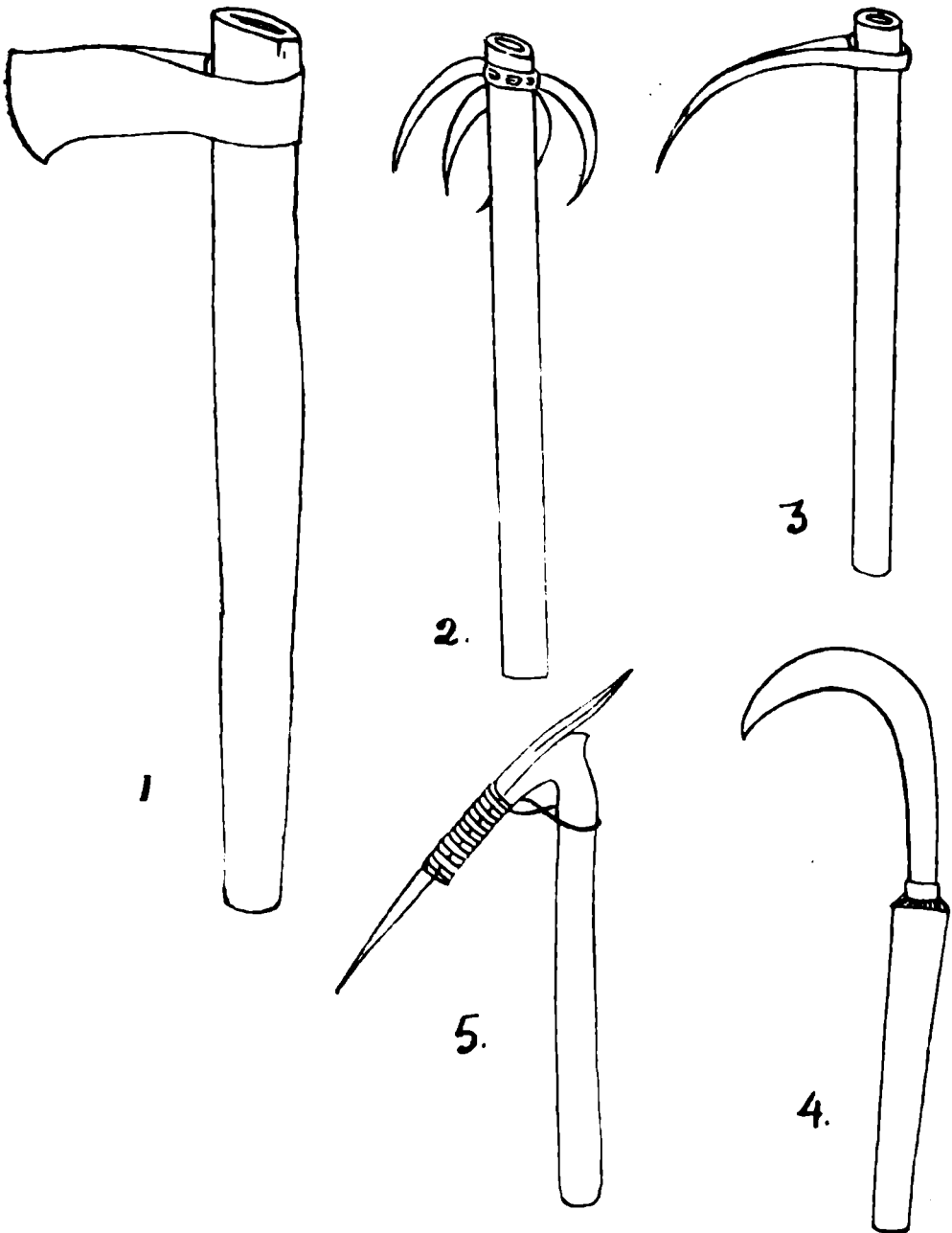
Drying millet

Agricultural Implements

The agricultural implements are devised to cope with the environmental necessities of the region. Though primitive, they are still effective and closely resemble those in cultures of similar level. They are comparatively cheap, easy to handle and cost little in maintenance and repair.

The chief agricultural implements employed are:

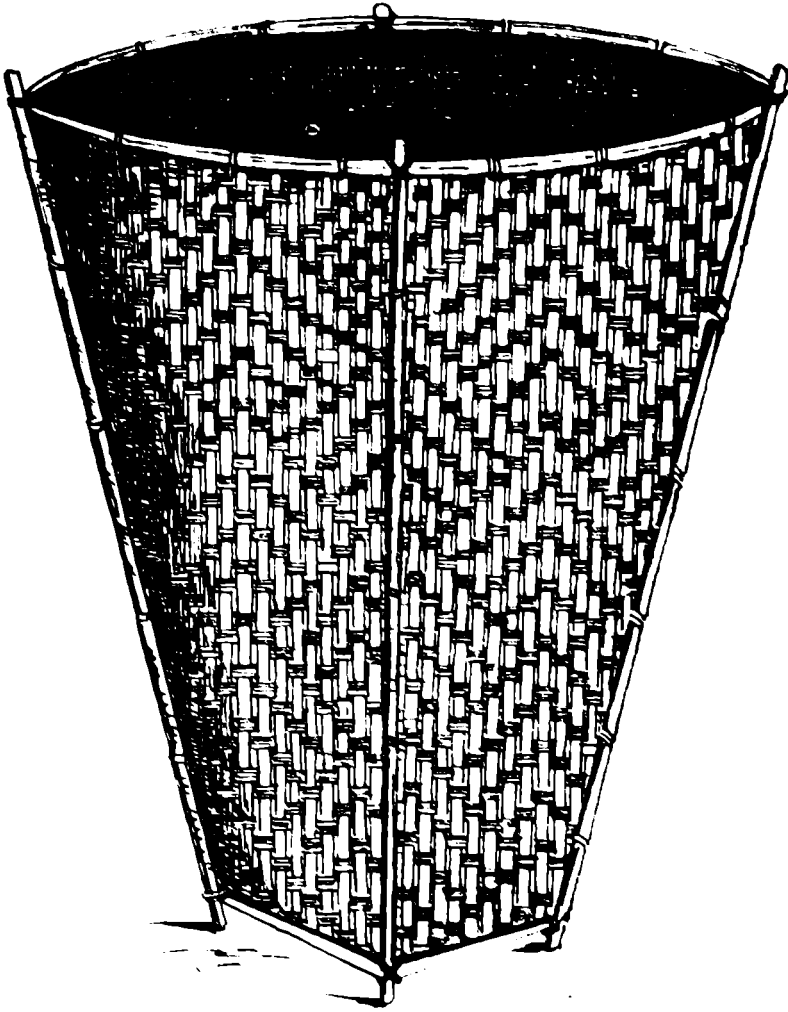
- (a) The *ganga*. It is a plough made entirely of wood and has an exceptionally broad yoke. It is drawn by a pair of oxen and is used for ploughing soft soil.
- (b) The *handu* or *dao*. It is used for felling trees and clearing the undergrowth.
- (c) The *breksing* or rake. It is made of bamboo about $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet in length and is split into three or four prongs at the outer end. The imple-



Agricultural implements: 1. Felling axe 2. Rake 3. Dibbler
4. Scythe 5. Weeder

- ment is used for scratching the top of the fields after they have been properly burned.
- (d) The *chhampok* or weeder. It is a wooden implement with pointed end and is used for weeding, scraping and drilling holes in the fields. Maize seeds are inserted into these holes which are then filled with earth.

- (e) The *tong*. It is a wooden implement with bifurcated handle and a central loop. It is used for loosening the top soil.



A conical basket

- (f) The *yung*. It is a conical basket made of bamboo which is carried on the back for carrying field produce, fuel and vegetables.
- (g) The *chhakhi* or dibbler. It consists of a stout wooden handle with an iron blade and is used for turning the hard soil and digging the fields.
- (h) The *brachok*. It is a scythe used for harvesting the crops and weeding the fields.
- (i) The *chom chhanke*. Equivalent to mortar and

pestle, it is an indispensable implement for pounding grain.

- (j) The *flu*. It is an axe used for felling trees and branches.
- (k) The *khao*. It is a winnow used for separating grain which is allowed to fall from some height to enable the straw to be carried away by the wind.

Sources of Labour

The greater part of the labour employed by a Sherdukpen farmer during these agricultural operations is furnished by his family. There is, however, no very strict or rigid division of family labour, inasmuch as personal aptitudes and preferences and aversions have to be taken into consideration. Men normally reserve for themselves a majority of the less onerous and fatiguing jobs, leaving for the women the bulk of the tedious tasks. For instance, except during the sowing and harvesting seasons, the men are inclined to while away their time in comparative ease; but not so the women. They enjoy no slack season, the whole of the year being spent in hard toil.

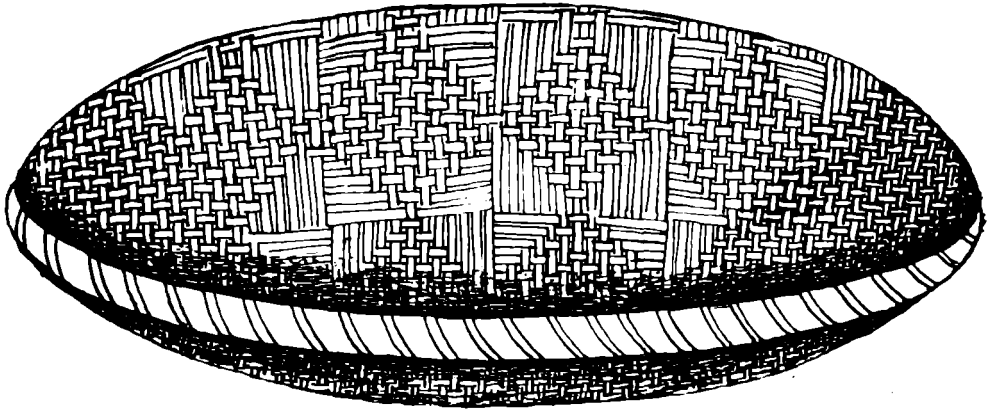
The Sherdukpens also have a tradition of giving help to each other when needed. Friends and acquaintances combine to help in any undertaking which requires extra hands and give their services *gratis* to the person who needs them; the person thus helped repays in his turn, when those who have helped him need his services.

IX. FOOD

The Sherdukpen diet is simple. It consists chiefly of cereals, fish, vegetables, and beer brewed from maize and millets. They are fond of chillies and take a variety of beans which are sometimes cooked like pulses. They are also used to milk and butter but very few consume rice which is not grown in the area.

The cereals are usually pounded into small par-

ticles and ground to form powder which is then cooked in boiling water till it turns into a thick paste. This is taken either with chillies and salt, or with fish, or cooked vegetables such as pumpkins, radishes, cabbages, and potatoes. Sometimes maize and millets are fried in a pan. People also use wild honey.



A cane tiffin carrier

The food habits of the people are very simple. They are not fastidious about food, and relish whatever is cooked in the house. Buddhist influence has, however, created certain food taboos. They do not, for instance, take beef, pork, fowl or goat-meat. They take fish and meat of only non-domestic animals, such as deer, and certain birds.

They rear cows, fowls and goats, but only for trade purposes. Orthodox people do not even take eggs although instances of relaxation in such matters are becoming common, especially among the school-going students.

The Lamas are permitted to take fish and meat of wild animals, only if the killing is done by other persons.

Tea is taken rarely and has not yet come to take a strong hold on the people.

Local beer brewed either from maize or millets is an important item of the Sherdukpen food. It rarely leads to intoxication. They sometimes distil a liquor called *ara*, which is taken only occasionally.

The people depend a good deal on jungle produce to tide over the lean periods when crops are bad. Varieties of roots, tubers, yams, fruits, berries, mushrooms and leaves are gathered and consumed as food, when necessary.

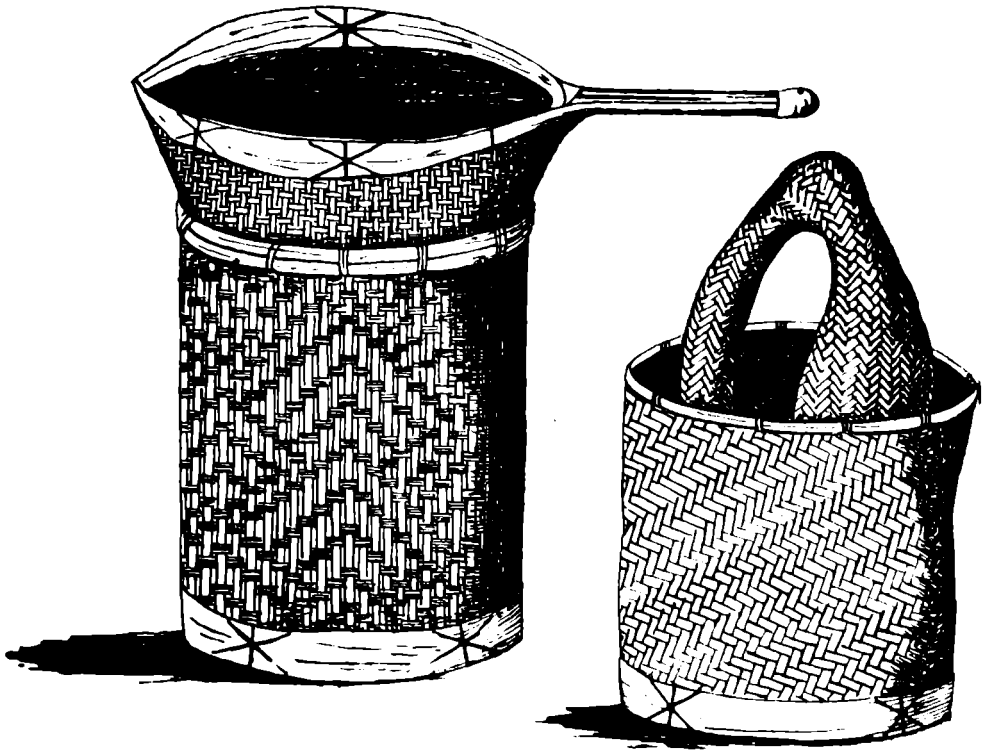
Grain-grinding

The Sherdukpens grind their grain on the grinding stones, which are found in every house. They also have indigenous water mills or *sachkhar* for this purpose which are found in all important villages.

The water mills are situated by the sides of rivulets or streams, usually near a fall where the flow of water is very strong. A typical water mill is a two-storeyed structure. The lower chamber contains the water wheel with horizontally inclined blades which are driven by the water power, and the upper one contains two mill-stones each about $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet in diameter. A long iron bar which passes through the central hole of the lower mill-stone connects it with the centre of the water wheel. Water is conducted into the lower chamber through wooden pipes and is made to fall on the wooden blades from some height. The force thus generated succeeds in turning the wheel. Grain is fed into the mill through a funnel-shaped basket which passes in between the mill-stones through a hole and is ground to flour. Slight raising or lowering of a lever increases or decreases the gap between the grinding stones thus providing an arrangement for regulating the fineness of the flour.

Liquor-distilling

This is a side occupation of the Sherdukpen women. The indigenous drink, called *phak*, besides being served on all social and festive occasions, is an important item of diet. It is taken by everyone in the family irrespective of age and sex. The rich and influential people drink in small wooden bowls chased with silver on the outside.



Appliances for making beer

The beer is brewed in every house from powdered maize or other cereals. The cereal is boiled, spread out and allowed to cool after which yeast derived from certain herbs is mixed with it to set in fermentation. On the following day the paste is placed in a large earthen pot and a small quantity of water is added. The mouth of the vessel is securely fastened for a few days until the required degree of fermentation takes place. The contents of the pot are then squeezed through a sieve. The resultant brew is the local beer.

The brew is stored in rectangular bamboo or wooden receptacles and is offered to every guest who visits the house, as a sign of hospitality. The use of beer, it is held, makes the people joyful and high spirited.

Honey-collecting

The Sherdukpens collect honey called *chhi* from hives found in the jungle and do not themselves keep

bees. The method of extraction is crude. First a fire is lit and its thick smoke directed towards the hive so as to drive away the bees. Then a rope ladder along with a basket is hung from the top of the rock in such a fashion that the basket is poised right below the hive. A man goes up to the top, covering his entire body with bite-proof clothes, and detaches the combs with certain implements made of bamboo.



Wooden drinking cup

The contents of the hive fall into the basket kept below. Raw honey thus collected is taken home where it is churned in a churning machine so as to separate the wax. The honey thus obtained is then filtered through a piece of cloth to get the pure product. The honey is taken with food; with fried maize it is considered a delicacy. It is also used as a medicine for curing cough and cold.

X. DANCING

The Sherdukpen pantomimes have a great variety and are remarkably similar to those of the Monpas. There are more than two dozen masks at Shergaon which are used in various types of dances. These masks are artistic and have been obtained from Dirang Dzong and Tawang.

Each pantomime is associated with a story and some of them have a definite moral purpose intended to emphasise the fate of sinners after death. These are usually performed during different ceremonies to portray the teachings of religious books and legendary stories. Only men do the dances and they are trained in this art for several years. The women also dance but only indoors. A group of them stand in a row and hold one another's hands, swing their arms backwards and forwards. They move their feet very slightly at the same time and sing in a chorus. From time to time, they break off to sip beer for themselves and to offer it to others.

The principal dances of the Sherdukpens are as follows :

| <i>Local name</i> | <i>English equivalent</i> |
|-------------------|---------------------------|
| Jiji Sukham | Yak Dance |
| Zuk Suba | Deer Dance |
| Ajilamu | |
| Tadong | Hare Dance |
| Jachung Chham | Eagle Dance |
| Takdong | Tiger Dance |
| Bridong | Snake Dance |
| Phadong | Pig Dance |
| Kiddong | Dog Dance |
| Jadong | Bird Dance |
| Pradong | Monkey Dance |
| Yosidong | Cat Dance |
| Jiadong | Rat Dance |
| Brukdong | Sky Dance |
| Langdong Suba | Cow Dance |

Yak Dance

In this dance a large dummy animal with body made from bamboo frame and covered with black cloth, and the wooden head depicting a cross between a horse and yak, is carried by two men concealed under the cloth. The figure of a goddess with lifted



Yak dance

arms rides astride the animal. Three masked men representing Apapek and his two sons accompany the yak and dance round and with it. From time to time, they sing and a party of drummers beat the rhythm.

The story associated with this dance is as follows:

'In Tibet lived an old man Apapek and his wife Jammu. They had three sons Gappasamburu, Tepagalu and Dagesamburu. The two old people, who were very rich, divided their property between Gappasamburu and Dagesamburu but they gave nothing to Tepagalu. He went to them and asked for his share, but they refused to give him anything.

'As a result of this Tepagalu was very sad and said to himself, "I have no share of the property and I have nothing to eat; what is the use of living here?"

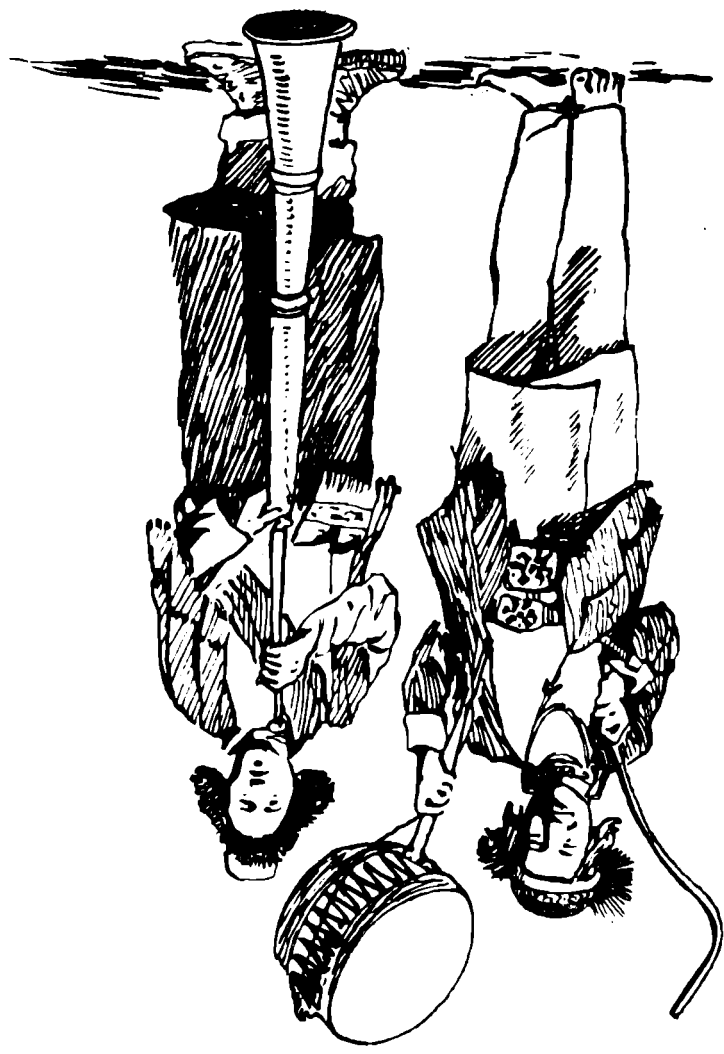
I will go anywhere I can get food.” He left his home and went to Chungba-Sangyat and told him his story. “Tell me,” he said, “if I will ever get a share of my parents’ wealth.” Chungba-Sangyat said, “You will never get it.” He went to the spirits and said, “Tell me if I will ever get a share of my parents’ wealth.” And the spirits too said, “You will never get it.” Then he went to the Wind and said, “Tell me if I will ever get a share of my parents’ wealth” And the Wind too said, “You will never get it.”

‘So at last in despair Tepagalu went to the forest. As he pushed his way through the trees, he came to a great cave in the side of a hill. There were streams of water flowing down both sides of the cave leaving a dry path in the middle. The boy went into the cave, and, though it was very dark, made his way deep into the ground. After he had gone a long way, he found an enormous bird called Jatung-Tung-Karmu sitting on three great eggs. He greeted the bird and said, “Whatever do you eat in a place like this?” “I eat rice,” said the bird. “I have been hungry for many days,” said the boy, “and I am weak through fasting. Could you give me a little rice?” The bird replied, “I have no rice myself, for I usually go out and find it. But I can get some for you. The difficulty is that I am sitting on these three eggs and if I leave them they will get cold and be spoilt.” The boy said, “Go and get the rice: I’ll keep your eggs warm.” The bird agreed to this but said, “Whatever you do, don’t turn these eggs upside down.” The boy promised that he would not touch the eggs at all but would simply hold his hands above them to keep them warm. So the bird went away and the boy warmed the eggs with his hands.

‘But presently he got curious and picked up the eggs to examine them and put them back upside down.

‘After some time the bird returned with the rice and gave it to Tepagalu, but when she saw that her eggs were upside down she was very angry and went away.

When the bird had gone, the boy wept for loneliness and wondered what he should do. But presently he remembered that God was merciful and that He might allow something to come out of the three eggs.



Musicians ready for yak dance

He took one of the eggs in his hand and called on Chungba-Sangyat saying, "Have pity on my despair; allow something to come from this egg to help me." He broke the egg with his stick, and a white yak came out of it and went flying through the air to Chungba-Sangyat. The boy broke the second egg and a red yak came out of it and went flying to the spirits of the

forest. The boy cried, "There is but one egg left; allow this at least to be of use to me."

He broke the egg open and a black yak came out of it and went down into the water. The boy then came out of the cave and, taking a rope in his hand, sat outside by the stream for a whole year. All this time the black yak remained in the water, but at the end of the year she raised her head above the surface and Tepagalu caught her with his rope. He took her home and kept her with him. After a time she bore a calf and the boy got milk and ghee. In three years the yak had three calves.

'When Apapek heard of this, he came with his two other sons and they all lived together and danced in honour of the animal that gave them their food.'

Deer Dance

This dance is a pantomime of the tale of an old shepherd and his two sons with a dog who passed their leisure hours hunting in the jungle. It depicts how the deer are tempted on to a trap by the hunters.

One day the two sons and the dog entrapped a deer and took it to their home and sought permission of the father to kill it. The villagers came to see the deer and requested the old man to set it free. Since then it has become customary to set free such animals as deer, sheep and goat and the custom is followed by the people uptill now.

A set of seven persons is required to perform this dance. They take the parts of an old man, his two sons, a dog and the deer, called Apapek, Milingchu, Btha, and Zuk, respectively, and need different kinds of wooden masks and costumes for their roles. Two more men are required to play cymbals and drums.

This dance teaches that indiscriminate hunting and slaughter of animals can completely wipe out the animal population and should, therefore, be avoided.

¹. Verrier Elwin, *Myths of the North-East Frontier of India* (Shillong, 1958), pp. 429-430.

Ajilamu Dance

This dance is popular with the people of Rupa. In this number two figures masked to represent demons with ferocious faces and flowing hair dance with one man dressed as a king, and two others representing queens.

The story behind this dance bears a slight resemblance to that of the capture of Sita by Ravan.

A king of Lhasa called Chajernurjan had two queens, Lamu the senior, and Lamu the junior. One day they went to take bath in a river. They were both very beautiful. The same day it so happened that two demons, Nyapa and Nyaro, were going along the river bank fishing, and when they saw the beautiful queens, they carried them off.

When the king found that his queens had disappeared, he became alarmed and went in search of them. He heard that they were imprisoned in Nyapa's house and hurried to the place and, standing outside, sung to them in a language that the demons would not understand. The queens replied that they had gone to bathe in the river and that as they were returning, Nyapa and Nyaro came fishing and caught hold of them. They said that they had tried to escape but could not succeed.

When Nyapa and Nyaro came to know that they were the wives of a king, they were frightened and begged the king to forgive them. The king agreed. The doors were opened; the king and demons made friends and they all danced together with the queens.

Eagle Dance

The story of this dance is that long ago, a pair of man-hunting eagles, with horns on their head appeared in a country. They were believed to be the incarnation of man-eating devils. The eagles devoured the entire population of many a village and reached a place where a Lama named Khampa Dungzur and his two monks lived.

The Lama forced the eagles to appear before him and put them into an iron cage through his spiritual power. The people killed the eagles and ate their flesh and the bones were given to their dogs. Since then the man-hunting eagles never appeared in that country.

For performing this dance, at least seven or eight persons are required to take the parts of Lama Khampa Dungzur, two monks, one dog and a pair of eagles. Six different wooden masks and colourful costumes are required for the participants. Two persons play the cymbals and drum. The dance shows how the eagles are enticed on to a trap and killed.

All the other dances are performed to teach the moral of kindness towards animals and birds. Thus, for example, Langdong Suba has the moral that if any one should kill a cow it will wait for him in the other world. When the slayer's soul arrives there, Sangothung, the god of death, sends the cow to chase it and torment it. Similarly Tadong dance demonstrates that if anyone beats or overloads his horse, Sangothung will send a horse to trouble his soul after his death.

Again the Phadong dance shows why the Sherdukpens are reluctant to eat pork, for it demonstrates how a great pig punishes those who kill and eat too many pigs.

The Brukdong dance illustrates the domestic conflict of a mighty figure and his wife Nimibatapa who live in the sky.

SOCIAL LIFE

I. ORGANIZATION OF SOCIETY¹

The Sherdukpen society is based on a fundamental division into two classes: the Thongs and the Chhaos.

The Thongs are regarded as the descendants of the Lhasa King's third son, Japtang Bura, and form the aristocracy. The Chhaos, on the other hand, are considered to be the progeny of the porters and servants who accompanied Japtang Bura on his way south to Rupa.

Japtang Bura himself had three sons, named Thongdok, Thonga and Khrame, and these became the ancestors of three exogamous clans. Afterwards, there was further sub-division of these clans, *e.g.*, Karmu came to be considered as a sub-clan of Thongdok, Musabee and Wangja of Khrame, and Thongchi and Lama of Thonga.

Similarly the Chhaos are divided into five clans. There were five chief porters who accompanied Japtang Bura and they came to be regarded as the progenitors of five clans bearing the names: Migenji, Mijiji, Monoji, Sinchhonji and Dingla. Rangla, Kamo and Romu are other clan divisions found among the Chhaos, but it appears that they came to be formed into clans much later than the five original clans.

Besides these, there is another class which is termed as Yanlo by the Thongjis. Jigaon Adok village is exclusively inhabited by the Yanlos—a term which signifies their lower social status. The Yanlos are believed to have emigrated

¹Table of organisation of Sherdukpen Society is given as in Appendix at page 103

from Barsan village near Tashigong in Bhutan about seven generations back. The Yanlos are good carpenters, and are known for their skill in smithy. They are grouped into two distinct exogamous clans: the Kenkhar and the Barsan Nai Atthok. In the beginning, the Yanlos had a distinct dialect of their own, but now they speak the Sherdukpen language. They have now lost their identity and have become completely assimilated with the Sherdukpens. It is said that, in the older days, the Yanlos were not treated well by the Sherdukpens.

These classes are mutually exogamous. There is social equality within the clans and in each of these three classes.

Inter-Relationships

The Thongjis enjoy a high social status and wield a dominating influence upon the lower strata of society, the Chhaos and the Yanlos. Relations between these classes are, however, cordial and intimate; for there is no discrimination in dealings in daily life. Though the Yanlos and the Chhaos are subservient to the Thongjis, there are no restrictions on inter-dining or inter-drinking amongst them. There does not also seem to be any difference in the forms of their dress or in their ways of life and physical features; nor is there any demarcation of areas for the classes within the village. There are, of course, the rich and the poor in each of the three classes; the standard of living of the Yanlos and Chhaos is, in general, lower than that of the Thongs.

Each Chhao clan is attached to a Thong clan—the Migenjis to the Thongdoks, the Monojis to the Thongchis, the Mijijis to the Thongas, and the Sinchonjis and Dinglas to the Khrimes—and is expected to perform certain menial as well as ceremonial duties for it. If a Thong requires the services of a Chhao belonging to a clan which is not attached to his, he is expected to take permission from the member

of the Thong clan which exercises authority over it.

In the matter of marriage alliances, however, the Thongs have a fairly rigid code. It is regarded as a serious breach of custom for a Thong girl to marry a Chhao or Yarlo boy. Such a marriage is possible, but a heavy fine is imposed on the bridegroom's family and paid to the village council. Clan exogamy and class endogamy is the general rule.

The Chhaos have certain customary privileges as well as duties on the occasion of marriages and funerals. When a Thong girl gets married, her father is expected to give a scarf to each of the Chhao families related to his clan, who in turn give the bride certain presents, such as utensils of various kinds. The bridegroom's father also presents sheep to the Chhaos, and feeds them throughout the ceremony.

At Thong funerals, the Chhaos attached to the clan of the deceased Thong have the duty of washing



Sherdukpens enjoy a mid-day meal after a strenuous march

the corpse, wrapping it in a piece of new cloth and carrying it for cremation or burial, for it is a taboo for a Thong to touch a dead body. The Chhaos are given a token gift of five rupees and a feast for this service.

Unlike the Thongs, the Chhaos enjoy a certain relaxation of the food taboos. They can eat mithun flesh which is forbidden to Thongs. It is possible for a Chhao to be a Jiji (tribal priest) or a Lama, but the rules are stricter in his case. The Chhaos are expected to sit behind the Thongs in religious ceremonies.

Family

The family set up is patriarchal, and the father is the head of the family. On his death, the eldest son succeeds him. Descent is patrilineal and marriages patrilocal.

Joint families are common, though the tendency for such families to break up into separate units has already manifested itself. Polyandry and polygyny are unknown amongst the Sherdukpens. Although indulgence in illicit relations is frowned upon, laxity in sexual morality is by no means uncommon. Frequency of divorce is not high, and widow remarriage is permitted.

In the domestic affairs of the family, the father usually wields a dominating influence, and his will generally reigns supreme. It is he who mainly provides for their comforts, and arranges the necessities of life. This is not, however, to suggest that the other grown-up members of the family do not contribute their share towards its maintenance.

Kinship

Kinship system among Sherdukpens, to a large extent, is of classificatory type; that is, a single term of address is used to denote more than one relationship. The terms of classificatory relationship among the Sherdukpens are as follow :

Terms of Relationship

| <i>English Equivalent</i> | <i>Sherdukpen</i> |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|
| Elder Brother | Abu |
| Father's brother's son | |
| Elder sister | |
| Mother's sister's daughter | Anno |
| Father's brother's daughter | |
| Mother's brother | |
| Father's sister's husband | Azang |
| Husband's father | |
| Wife's father | |
| Son | |
| Mother's brother's son | Ara |
| Father's sister's son | |
| Daughter | |
| Father's sister's daughter | |
| Husband's sister | Azu |
| Brother's wife | |
| Wife's sister | |
| Wife's mother | Anni |
| Husband's mother | |
| Father's father | |
| Mother's mother | Asu |
| Father's father's father | |
| Father's mother | |
| Mother's mother | Abbi |
| Mother's mother's mother | |
| Son's son | Chhduma |
| Daughter's son | |
| Mother's younger sister | Moro |
| Father's elder brother's wife | |

Many of these classificatory terms are used to address the members of the same clan and generation.

The following terms of relationship, however, do not belong to the classificatory category as they are restricted to indicate one particular relationship.

| <i>English Equivalent</i> | <i>Sherdukpen</i> |
|---------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Father | Achhi |
| Father's younger brother | Achhe (Rupa) Aku (Shergaon) |
| Father's elder brother | Chhlo |
| Mother | Amo (Shergaon) Ami (Rupa) |
| Mother's younger sister | Atung (Shergaon) Ateeing (Rupa) |
| Father's sister | Khnee |
| Husband | Aaya |
| Wife | Aayu |
| Younger sister | Mirang |

II. MARRIAGE

There are various methods of arranging marriage alliances, but the most common is by negotiation between the parents, though the consent and wishes of the would-be-couple play an important role in deciding the alliance. Class endogamy and clan exogamy are the essential features of their marital system.

Both parallel and cross-cousin marriages are known to exist. Marriage with the son of mother's brother or, conversely, with the daughter of father's sister is preferred. Selection of the daughter of the mother's brother or sister as a bride is not popular, and is avoided as far as possible.

Elopement usually takes place when the parents of either the boy or the girl are against the proposed marriage. In most cases, they ultimately reconcile themselves to the alliance.

Marriage by service is also not unknown. This method is usually resorted to, when the father of the girl has no son or other male relation to help him in the fields. In such cases, the boy goes to the house of the girl and renders service for some months in agricultural operations during which his capabilities, character and working capacity are carefully watched.

Marriage by exchange is possible, but is uncommon.

Marriage by capture is also sometimes resorted to, particularly when the bride is unwilling, but her parents or the boy's parents are quite agreeable.

The levirate form of marriage is practised in the event of the death of a husband. No elaborate ceremonies are gone through in such a case; nor is any bride-price paid. Both junior and senior levirate exist.

Sororate, the marriage of a man with the wife's sister after the wife's death, is also not uncommon. Both junior and senior sororate prevail. Marriage with wife's sister, whose husband had died, can also take place.

Widow-marriage is permissible, and is not looked down upon.

Monogamy is the rule. Polygamy and polyandry are never practised. Concubinage is not tolerated. A Sherdukpen cannot have two wives at the same time under any circumstances.

It is to be noted that the ceremonies, feasts and festivities in the various forms of marriage like levirate, sororate, marriage by service, widow-remarriage and remarriage after divorce are considerably simplified and entail relatively less expenditure of money. In all important forms of marriage, however, bride-price is always paid.

One peculiar feature of Sherdukpen life is that young boys and girls do not normally sleep in their own houses at night. On attaining puberty, they start sleeping separately with their friends in batches, and thus get opportunities for making love and

choosing mates. They may exchange their sashes in order to show their willingness to marry. Soon the matter also comes to the notice of the boy's father who takes into consideration his son's choice,



A girl on a visit to her relatives

judging by such qualities as physical appearance, grace, temperament and social status of the girl. The parents of the boys also consult a Lama about the

selection of the bride, and about the day on which the bride should be brought to the boy's place. On the appointed day, the groom's friends, in a body go and bring the girl to the boy's house by a show of force. The girl is made to stay there for three days after which she runs away to her father's house before dusk. The groom does not remain in his house during this period. The groom's father next searches a suitable go-between (*achung jering*) for further negotiations. He is sent to the bride's father's house to persuade him to accept the proposal. He offers local drinks and one scarf each to the girl's father, mother and elder brother to indicate that the proposal has been finalised. Thereafter, a day is fixed for performing the formal marriage ceremony after consultation with the Lama. On this day, the marriage party consisting of the groom's father, mother and other near relatives, the Gaonburas and influential members of the village go to the bride's house. Presents are exchanged between the two sides on this occasion. The boy's father offers cow, sheep, *endi* cloth and scarves to the bride's parents. He also presents a scarf each to all the important relatives of the bride and the Chhao families attached to her father. After this, all the people, gathered there, are entertained by the bride's people with local drinks and food. Meanwhile, the bride gets ready and adorns herself with new clothes and ornaments given by her parents. As she comes out to depart, she first bows down to her father who gives her a cow, iron hearth and scarf; then to her mother who gives scarf and cooking utensils, and finally to her brothers and uncles from whom she receives *endi* cloth, scarves and other things.

This over, the girl starts for her new home escorted by her relatives and friends. On reaching there, the groom's father offers drinks and food to all the members assembled. Songs are sung to celebrate the occasion. The groom, significantly enough, is not present during all these ceremonies. He is not also seen during the ceremony performed on that

day by the Lama to bless the home and the new couple for prosperity and happiness.

At the conclusion of the marriage ceremony, the go-between and the Lama get drinks, scarves and about five rupees each.

The groom is not allowed to sleep with his new wife for the first ten days or so after the marriage. Thereafter, he is persuaded by his friends or elders to sleep, at his own house, with his wife.

Divorce

Divorce amongst the Sherdukpens is not very difficult, and is normally effected with the consent of both husband and wife. In cases, where divorce is claimed by the wife, she or her parents have to return the bride-price to the groom's people.

The more important grounds for divorce are: disobedience, misconduct and adultery; bad temper and frequent quarrels, leading to domestic unhappiness; desertion by husband or wife; and barrenness, impotence or sterility.

Pre-marital and Extra-marital Relations

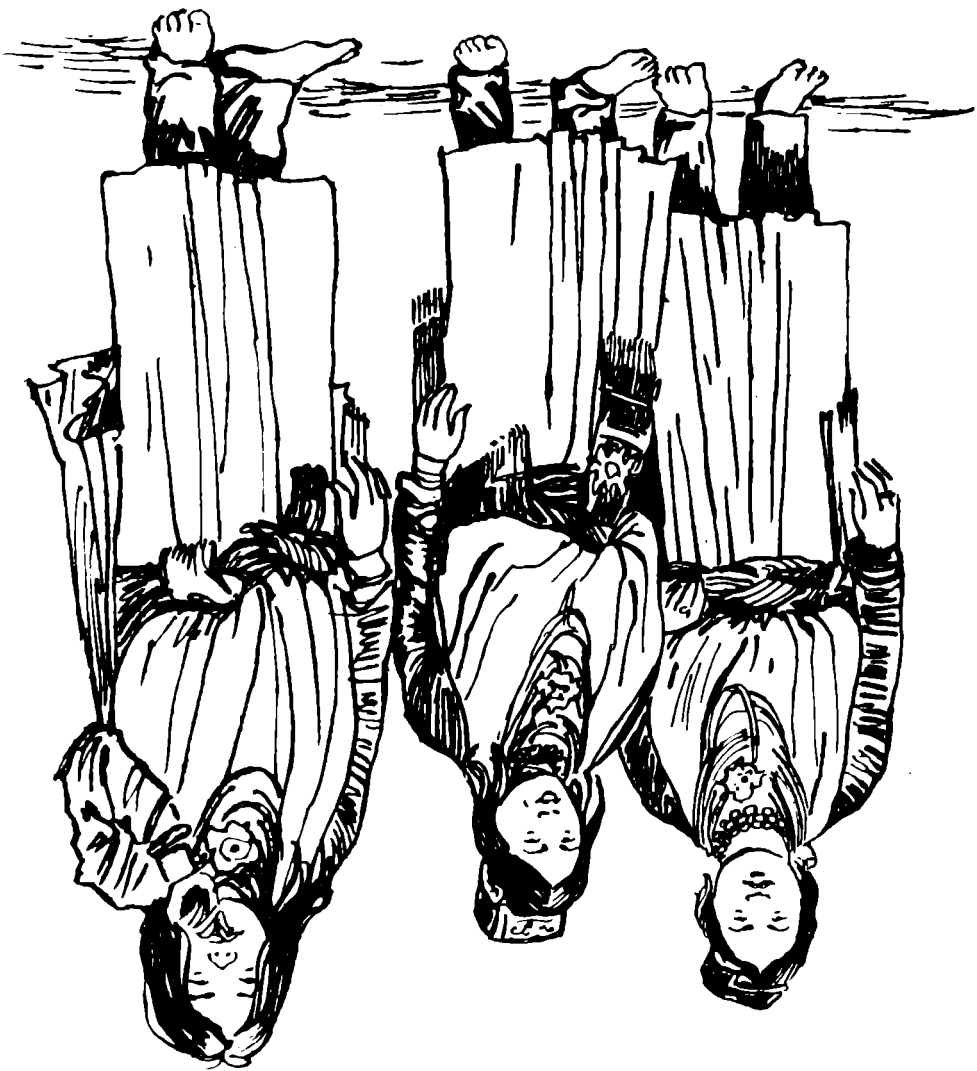
Pre-marital relations are common among the Sherdukpens. Extra-marital relations, however, are looked down upon. Adultery and incest are considered to be crimes and, when detected, do not go unpunished.

If a girl becomes pregnant and delivers a child, she is forced to disclose the name of the father who is compelled to marry her, if he is a bachelor; otherwise he has to bear the expenses of the child born from such relationship.

Position of Women

As already noted the father is the head of the family in Sherdukpen society. All the same, the mother does not in practice have a lesser status. She sets the general pattern of family life, and is invariably consulted in all matters of family importance.

Women, however, play an insignificant role in administrative matters, though they can freely take part in practically all festivals, and are not secluded from any social gathering or public amusement. They are also free to move about, and can call on each other.



A group of Sherdukpen girls

The marriage customs of the Sherdukpen people give a high status to women. It is the boy's father who requests the girl's father for his daughter in marriage to his son. In place of the dowry system of the plains, the system of bride-price is prevalent, and it

is the boy's father again who has to pay a substantial price for the bride.

However, society has imposed certain restrictions on women in matters of religion. They have practically no part in religious rites; it is taboo for them to officiate as priests.

During the course of sowing and harvesting, the women help their husbands in the fields. In domestic matters too, they have to work hard. Their primary duties are cooking, pounding and sifting of grain, fetching fuel from the jungle and the like. By nature they are conservative and dislike change in the family pattern and traditions.

They are, as a rule, gentle-hearted and amiable. Their gay disposition and modest demeanour are attractive. They are open and frank in their conduct, and readily join in conversations. Generally speaking, the sexes have equal rights in Sherdukpen society, and stand almost on an equal footing in social intercourse.

III. INHERITANCE OF PROPERTY

The immovable property of a Sherdukpen family consists of the house, the cultivable lands and the areas reserved for fishing, collection of honey and fuel gathering.

The movable property includes livestock, household belongings, clothes, ornaments, domestic utensils, agricultural implements and so on.

If a member of the family produces, manufactures or acquires a piece of property through his own efforts, he exercises exclusive rights of ownership over it and can dispose it of at his discretion. Domestic animals are owned by the men-folk, but ordinarily they are not disposed of without the consent of the elder members of the family.

Inter-village boundaries are well-demarcated, and are based on the position of natural features, like hill-slopes, streams or stones. The same is

true of cultivable lands. Individual hunting and fishing areas are also clearly demarcated, and no trespass is tolerated.

Non-jhum land can be purchased on payment in cash or in kind in the form of cattle. Distribution of jhum land is made after deliberation among the clan members, according to individual need and convenience.

A poor man who does not possess any land, can help a land-holder in cultivation, and in return get half of the crops produced. Individual right over a jhum land exists so long as it is under cultivation.

Women do not have any right or claim over immovable property. They are, however, encouraged to rear poultry and breed cattle which they can sell on their own, and retain the sale proceeds for personal use.

The following points may be noted in regard to inheritance of property :

- (i) Property is not divided equally amongst the sons on the death of their father. The eldest son gets a major share, and the rest is divided equally among the other sons.
- (ii) Personal garments are generally placed in the grave along with the dead body. Any surplus garments that he may leave behind, are divided equally amongst the sons.
- (iii) If a man dies without leaving any son, his estate goes to his nearest male relative. For instance, if the deceased has no sons but has brothers, the property is distributed equally among them.
- (iv) The bride-price, obtained during marriage of a daughter, always goes to the father but, when the father is dead and the brothers perform the marriage of their sister, the bride-price is shared by all the brothers equally.
- (v) The person who gets the major share in the

estate left by the deceased person, has to accept the obligation of performing the death rites and to bear the expenses of the funeral feast.

- (vi) Adoption of a son is permitted by the customs of the society. The adopted child is treated like a real son, and is entitled to inherit the property of his foster-father, but not that of the real father. In cases, when the foster-father gives up the adopted child, he has to pay a stipulated compensation to his real parents.

IV. LIFE CYCLE

Daily Routine

The Sherdukpens usually get up early in the morning. They begin their working day with a draught of local beer and breakfast. The older members of the family then leave for the fields, where work starts round about eight o'clock. The women do not plough, though they assist their husbands and other men in other agricultural operations such as, reaping, sowing, manuring and digging. They work till mid-day, when they break off for a little rest and some refreshments. They return home usually before sunset, and then assemble for a hearty dinner. The men-folk retire, and relax by indulging in local drinks, gossip, and even music and dancing when these suit their moods.

Children remain at home for most part of the day. They play about or fetch water from the nearby streams and gather vegetables from their kitchen gardens. Grown-up girls and boys go out to collect firewood. They also tend fowls, cattle and goats. Babies are left in their care, when the parents go out to work in the fields.

In winter, when there is not much work to do in the fields, the people usually spend their time in weaving

and other handicrafts. Women and young girls are usually occupied in pounding grains during this season. The Sherdukpens have a fairly busy time in all seasons of the year, and every member of the household, when sufficiently grown up, contributes his or her mite to the maintenance of the family.

Both men and women work hand in hand in all kinds of work, including lifting of loads.

Pregnancy

Pregnancy is recognized by the cessation of menstruation for two continuous months. The pregnant woman occasionally feels tempted to eat clay and satisfies her desire.

In earlier stages of pregnancy, the woman is allowed to do normal work. In advanced stages, however, she is given lighter work and she does not have to perform any heavy tasks in the field. She is also required to cut down her consumption of *ara* to a minimum. During this period, the husband is expected to take great care of the wife and pay special attention to her. The period of pregnancy is considered to last for about ten months.

The Sherdukpens seem to be aware of the elementary principles of physiological paternity. But they still retain their belief that, unless blessed by divine power, natural process by itself cannot produce any result.

Parturition

There is no separate room reserved for parturition. It usually takes place in the living room. When the expectant mother feels the stirring of a child and is in labour pains, she retires there. Any elderly experienced woman performs the functions of a midwife. Men are not allowed to attend on a woman in child-birth. The local priest may be asked to

propitiate the evil spirits in case of a difficult labour.

As soon as the child is born, it is taken by one of the women who gives a hot water bath to the baby and dresses it in new clothes. Similarly the mother of the baby also takes a bath, and puts on clean clothes. Prior to bath, the umbilical cord is cut by a Chhao woman with the help of a knife, and is then buried in a field, far away from the house.

The mother is normally not allowed to do work for some days after child-birth. She abstains from cooking food, carrying loads, and is given nourishing diet in the shape of meat, fish, butter, milk, rice, wheat, onion and the like during this period. The consumption of chillies is restricted to the minimum. She takes sufficient rest until she recoups her strength.

It is a taboo for the father to touch the new born child for the first seven days. Three old women are entertained with local drinks to celebrate the birth of a male child.

If a daughter is born, a decorated cup is given by her father to his sister.

Name-giving ceremony

The child, when three days old, is given a name by the local priest. But in choosing an appropriate name, the priest has to take into account the date of birth of the child, and also has to consult sacred books. At the conclusion of this ceremony, beads are put round the neck of the child.

On the fifth day, the child is taken out so that he may see the world around him, and the sun and the moon. This ceremony is known as *Nini Aho Aho Saba*. The Lama performs the ceremony, and mostly women participate in the function. The kinswomen offer ceremonial scarves to the child, and local beer to its mother. Thereafter, they share a feast held to celebrate the function.

Hair-cutting ceremony

When a child completes one year, its hair is cut by its maternal uncle. The day for this ceremony is fixed after consultations with the local priest. The hair is collected and preserved in the house.

Early Childhood and Training

The infants and young children are treated with great kindness; their early childhood is spent in the care of their mother, elder brothers and sisters. They are seldom punished for the wrongs they do. Formal education is seldom imparted to them; they learn things through a continuous process of imitation and observation. Babies are normally carried on the back and sometimes in the arms in a receptacle. They are breast fed until they are two years old and sleep with their mothers up to three to four years. Their feeding habits become regulated in course of time. In the beginning, of course, they are allowed to take food whenever they desire.

There is no segregation of sexes during the period in matters of training and upbringing. The children's attempts to walk and talk are guided by the adults, they are encouraged to speak and learn the first terms of address—mother, father, brother and sister. As they grow, they pick up knowledge and skill casually and learn so many things. At about four or five years, they start playing in the company of their age mates. Soon afterwards they start performing simple tasks like bringing water from streams and vegetables from kitchen gardens or running errands. When they cross the age line of seven or eight, they start collecting firewood from the jungle, looking after the livestock, and carrying the infants on their backs. When they reach the age of ten to twelve years, they start going to fields to help their parents in cultivation. The girls also learn cooking and the technique of weaving. Thus the correct

behaviour and customary rules of the society are learnt through this continuous training which is meant to prepare the young boys and girls for their future careers.

Puberty

As the boys and girls grow up, they dress better and become conscious of their responsibilities as members of the tribe. Among the girls, puberty is marked by the onset of first menstruation at the age of 13 to 15 years, and among the boys it starts by the growth of pubic hair at the age of about 13.

From now on, the girls start showing signs of being reserved and less familiar with boys who were earlier their playmates.

With the attainment of adulthood, sex distinction becomes marked and the grown-up boys and girls start joining the dormitories which are organized by the youths according to group divisions at their own initiative. It is interesting to note that little part is taken by the community elders in organizing this institution. Boys and girls of almost the same age form separate dormitories and start sleeping in batches in different houses. Separate buildings for dormitories are not considered necessary; these are generally housed in buildings occupied by small families and hence having surplus accommodation. Any member of the boys' group, desirous of sleeping with any of the girls' group, goes to the house where the group of girls sleep. Such persons may carry with them such presents as *bidis* and other things which their sweethearts are fond of. They slip into the house in the silent hours of the night, unnoticed by the elders of the village. The boy generally sleeps with his own beloved but there is nothing to prevent him from sleeping with any other girl with her consent, provided the clan exogamy is respected. Such visits of the boys to the girls help them in selecting their marriage partners. In course of time, as they grow attached to

each other, they exchange their sashes as a vow of future partnership in life. This marks an initial step in the engagement of the boy and girl concerned. Henceforth, the boy is not supposed to sleep with any other girl and the girl, in her turn, is also not to sleep with any other boy.

This institution provides the boys and girls not only with opportunities for initiation into the mystery of sex and selection of marriage partners but also in preserving their traditional arts of dance and music.



A young Sherdukpen couple

When a case of a girl becoming pregnant occurs, the boy with whom the pregnant girl has become familiar accepts responsibility and a marriage generally results. The Sherdukpen society also provides for a system of

fine of Rs. 18/- only or a compensation in kind where such a marriage does not follow.

The organization of the boys' dormitories is traditionally believed to have originated in the years immediately following Sherdukpen migration to the Tenga Valley, when the unsettled relations with the Dammais and Hrussos necessitated a system of village guards which was provided with by the youths who were readily available for defending the settlements.

Marital Life

The marriageable age for the boys ranges between 18 and 20 years, and that for the girls between 15 to 16. Marriage lays the foundation of an individual family which expands gradually as children are born. Both husband and wife work in close co-operation for sustenance and happiness and for performing their duties towards the society.

Old Age

Old age among Sherdukpens is respected; it is not considered as a burden on the family. The major part of the work is now entrusted to the grown-up sons who look after the needs of their aged parents. The old man is held in high esteem for his experience. He guides the young in all spheres of life. His advice is sought invariably in settling the village disputes and conducting the socio-religious functions. Though his interest towards the active life gradually wanes, he finds himself occupied with social affairs of the village and such indoor work as weaving of baskets, looking after the children. This sort of work becomes a routine of his life till he has to cast off the material bondages to join the yonder world.

CHAPTER FOUR

POLITICAL LIFE

I. VILLAGE COUNCIL

In each important village, there is a village council which is responsible for the internal administration of the village. This council consists of the Thik Akhao (Gaonbura) Jung Me (the village council members), the Kachung and the Chowkidar. All these officials work in an honorary capacity and do not receive any salary or remuneration.

The Gaonbura who, as the representative of the Administration, is responsible for the maintenance of law and order in the village, is assisted by a village council called Jung, consisting of members elected by the villagers. He presides over the village council which settles all petty cases, such as local quarrels, thefts, boundary disputes, disputes regarding division of property and adultery. The council decides cases by majority. The final decision, however, rests with the Gaonbura who invariably respects the consensus of public opinion. There may be more than one Gaonbura in a village. It is the senior Gaonbura on whom the ultimate responsibility for organizing the village council devolves.

The Gaonbura is elected by all the villagers in a general meeting. His name is then put up to the local authorities for approval. The office of Gaonbura is not hereditary; the son or younger brother of a Gaonbura, however, stands a good chance of obtaining the post after his father or elder brother. As a rule, once elected, the Gaonbura holds office for life or until he becomes infirm. If the Gaonbura, however, displeases or loses the confidence of the villagers, he

can be removed from his office at any time, and a new Gaonbura elected in his place.

The head of every household is expected to participate in the proceedings of the village council. There may be two or more Kachungs in a village to help the Gaonbura in the discharge of his daily duties. The Kachungs are usually elected every one or two years. Their duty is primarily to inform each household of the next sitting of the village council. They also act as messengers in all other important village affairs.

The Chowkidar patrols the village at night and generally assists the Gaonbura. He also looks after the village water supply, sanitation and hygiene, the staging hut and helps the touring Government officials.

Most petty disputes are settled by the village council, and it is rarely that the parties turn to the Government for legal settlement. Some of the cases are decided by oaths and ordeals in which the Sherdukpens have a good deal of faith.

Arrangements regarding construction of proper paths, bridges and buildings, fixation of dates for communal hunting and fishing, organization and celebration of festivals, helping the poor, sick and invalid—all these also fall in the purview of the village councils.

II. CUSTOMARY LAW AND JUSTICE

Procedure of the Council

Important villages have separate buildings where the proceedings of the council are conducted. First, the plaintiff makes a complaint to the Gaonbura. The village council then assembles to hear both sides. The case is discussed at the meeting and the opinion of the majority usually prevails. The award is given by the Gaonbura and is final, subject, however, to certain limitations.

If the dispute cannot be settled by discussion, it is solved by oath or ordeal. If, however, even this is not acceptable, the aggrieved party can appeal to

the local administrative officer who may, if he considers necessary, refer the case to the Political Officer.

Oaths and ordeals

Oaths and ordeals, through which the aid of supernatural agencies is invoked, are resorted to when the ordinary methods of ensuring justice fail. They are essentially a class of evidence by themselves and are practised to affix responsibility or to determine the true culprit for a particular offence. After the truth is established, fine is imposed upon the guilty.

The accused may prove his innocence to the council by offering a scarf in the name of the local deity and swearing 'If I am responsible for the crime, blood will come out of my nose within three days.' If no blood comes out during the period, the complainant has not only to drop the charge, but also to give compensation to the accused in the shape of cash or kind.

Another form of trial by oath is for the local priest to administer the oath, and kill a chicken. The blood of the chicken is poured into a hole and covered with stones so that it may not be touched by anybody. If the person is guilty, he will, it is believed, meet with some calamity (such as snake-bite, death of someone in the family or falling from a hill top) within ten days of taking the oath.

The Sherdukpens also observe ordeals for determining guilt. Two stones, white and black, are put into boiling water which is coloured by using local dyes and the accused is asked to pick out one. If he picks up the white stone, he is held innocent and if he takes out the black stone, he is held guilty. The ordeal is conducted under the supervision of the local priest.

If a man is not proved guilty by the above procedure, amends are made to him by the presentation of a ceremonial scarf or a drinking party in his honour given by the village council.

The village councils are popular as they provide speedy justice. They also enjoy and often restore goodwill between the opposing parties. Even when the parties cannot be persuaded to come to a compromise, the awards of the village council are in consonance with the traditions and conventions of the people.

RELIGION AND CEREMONIES

I. GENERAL CHARACTER OF POPULAR BELIEFS

The Sherdukpen religion is a curious blend of Buddhism and local beliefs. The people venerate the Buddhist spiritual leaders and worship in the Gompas which have images of Lord Buddha and his disciples. They also have a good deal of faith in their own local deities and spirits whose help they invariably invoke in times of distress and suffering. Every village has its own presiding deities to look after its welfare.

Lord Buddha, known locally as Konchosum, is regarded as a great and powerful being and a teacher of righteousness. He is compassionate and merciful. Temples and shrines are erected in His name and festivals and sacrifices observed in His honour.

II. SPIRITS AND DEITIES

Given below are some of the important deities who are the protectors of human beings.

- (a) Gombu Chha Dakpa: He has six sons and wields different weapons to protect human beings from evil spirits. He is represented by the *tarmus* of wheat flour.
- (b) Dam Chan Chhe Ge: He has the shape of a human being with horns of an animal. He cures human beings affected by evil spirits or influenced by magic.
- (c) Gepu Namse: He tries to meet the wishes and desires of the people who pray to him sincerely.
- (d) Phakwa Chandre Zi: He is worshipped so

that he may be pleased to guide the soul to the heaven after death.

- (e) **Jamu Wang Sing:** It is a deity presiding over all forest areas.
- (f) **Phu Sawang Sorra:** It is a deity residing in the Rupa area.
- (g) **Phu Servi Mangbi:** It is a forest deity of Shergaon.

Other important deities are **Chungba Sangze**, ruler of the animal kingdom, and **Lopon Rimbu**, protector of mankind against birds who prey upon men. They are regarded as great, powerful and benevolent, but by no means omniscient and omnipotent.

The spirits which reside in water are: black water spirits—**Basu Ta**, **Ne Gawa**, **Subanti**, **Lui Gepu Tinki Raja**, **Lui Nakpu** and **Chhadur**; white water spirits—**Lui Gepu Gawa Dang**, **Lui Gepu Ichhan**, **Lui Gepu Nagaraja**, **Lui Gepu Norjin**, and **Lui Karpu**; yellow water spirit—**Lui Sirpu**; and red water spirit—**Lui Gonpu**.

Black water spirits are not benevolent and are responsible for spreading diseases among men. **Basu Ta** alone is believed to be responsible for as many as 148 diseases. He also holds the power of rain in its less conducive aspect. When dysentery or any other water-borne disease breaks out in the village, the Lama or Jiji ties a row of flags across a stream to assuage his wrath. At the confluence of two streams where the water is muddy and dark, there lives a spirit called **Chhadur**.

Lui Karpu, **Lui Nakpu**, **Lui Sirpu** and **Lui Gonpu** live in springs and therefrom rise to the sky and wander across it in search of wives as lovely as themselves. Whenever a rainbow appears, it indicates the path traversed by them across the sky and the drops of rain that follow are the spill-over from the cups of tea and rice beer they take on their journey to refresh themselves.

The sky has two mighty beings—**Brak** and his

wife, Nimibatapa. When Bruk desires his wife, and approaches her, she gets frightened and flies from him. As she flits across the sky, her body flashes like lightning, while thunder is the noise caused by her husband's pursuit after her.

According to the Sherdukpen belief, there are seven suns, all feminine, and they live together. There is only one moon, and he is a man.

A malicious spirit, called Thebrang, lives on the great rocks amongst the hills. It catches hold of children, and makes them cry.

Sherdukpens believe in another class of supernatural and harmful beings whom they call Sinpus, if male, and Sinmus, if female. They are believed to live beyond the Himalayas where there is a land of women. The Sinpus were the chief enemies of the Lamas in the early days and are believed to have sent mosquitoes to torment men, and rats to eat the sacred books. A specially troublesome Sinmu, or female demon, is Eskandome Jaima. She comes to men in dreams, and robs them of their strength and happiness.

Tribal Priests

The Sherdukpens have a class of priests known as Jijis, who are capable of counteracting evil spirits. They are usually drawn from the Thong and Chhao sections of the community and initiated into their profession after a series of visions and are married to tutelary spirits.

The Jiji performs all rites and rituals for appeasement of spirits of the country side. He offers sacrifice to them, and presides over the festivals which are specially celebrated in their honour. He is also a diviner and a magic man. He divines the causes of illness and other calamities by examining eggs or livers while playing with a kind of dice. When he has successfully diagnosed the cause of a disease, he recites charms and offers sacrifice, and if necessary, may magically

extract alien substances, such as bones and worms from a patient's body.

III. RELIGION

Gompas

There are Gompas both in Rupa and Shergaon. These are spacious, three-storeyed buildings and have wall paintings by artists from Tawang. They contain many images of the Buddha in the Tibetan style, libraries of sacred books and Tibetan scrolls hung from the walls. Tall poles with prayer flags flutter outside and there are many prayer wheels in niches of the Gompas.

The images found in the Sherdukpen Gompas include those of Tenjan Norbu, Lopan Pemma Tung Ne, Man Sam Cham Dongma, Chhadur, Geva Dorjee Chhung, Demma Ku, Jo Rimbuche, Phakwa Chandre Zi and Chom Dande.

Rupa Gompa is the largest and oldest temple in the Sherdukpen area and is said to have been built over 162 years ago after the feuds of Sherdukpens with the Thembang people. It was once used as a fort, where the people took refuge when the village was raided by the Hrussos (Akas). The Shergaon Gompa was built more than 30 years ago. The names of all those, who helped in the construction of the temple, are recorded on the wall. After the construction, the great Lamas from Tawang were invited and Yak and Ajilamu dances were performed in their honour. The Lamas were treated with great hospitality and given a big feast. The scene of that occasion is portrayed in the paintings kept in the Gompa.

In the Gompa premises, there are special apartments reserved for community cooking and community feeding. There is also a special place for burning the incense so as to sanctify the atmosphere around the Gompa.

The Sherdukpen temples are tended, wherever

possible, by local Lamas some of whom get their training in Tawang. The duties of a Lama include looking after the temple, making offerings to the images of the Buddha, caring for the sacred books and presiding over religious festivals.

Mānes

Scattered about the country side and in the village, are stone shrines called Mānes. These are in the shape of walls, 10 to 20 feet long, two to three feet wide, and six to eight feet high. Tablets bearing the sacred inscription, 'Om Mani Padme Hum', are ranged on small shelves cut into the wall. Sometimes, some of the tablets have lotus flowers or the figures of the Buddha (Konchosum) carved on them. These shrines are erected where there is a danger from demons or where strange noises are heard. A rich man may have one built during his life-time as an act of piety or one may be erected in his memory after his death.

Chhorten

Chhorten is a *stupa*-shaped structure where prayers are held occasionally. The lama sits on a flat piece of ground in front of the *stupa* and leads the prayer. The people go round the Chhorten three times.

Kakalings

Kakaling is a gate about 15 feet high, with a domed roof elaborately painted with conventional designs and images of the Buddha. Both Rupa and Shergaon have a Kakaling each. It is built of stones with walls on two sides only and a passage right through it.

Kakaling is erected so that there may be better crops and people may not suffer from disease. Its construction is also believed to usher in an era of peace and prosperity amongst the people. It scares away

the evil spirits, and prevents outbreak of epidemic in the village.

It does good to those who pass through this gate. It is believed that even animals passing through it are blessed and will be born as human beings in their next lives.

The story goes that there was in Buddha Gaya a lotus flower called *minto pema*. Out of it came Sange Thumme Ge Sung Ba, who advised the people that if they erect such a gate, it will bring immense benefits to them—hence the tradition.

It costs over Rs. 1,000/- to make a Kakaling. To meet this expenditure, the people raise subscriptions from their village and the surrounding areas by displaying the Yak dance and Deer dance.

Rupa Kakaling

Rupa Kakaling painting represents a Gompa in the village with four gates having inside an eight figured circle depicting the Lamas who prepared a medico-religious book and around this are two rectangles, the last one containing 24 figures.

Manle Pechha is a sacred book resting on an altar in the centre of the Kakaling painting at Rupa (Refer outline sketch on the opposite page). Offerings in the shape of *norbu* (flowers and vessels containing precious beads) are placed above and below this book which is said to contain formulas of curing all possible diseases, as many as one thousand. This medico-religious book was compiled by the eight Lamas who are depicted round this circle. Greatest amongst these is Chom Dande or Sakscha Thuba. He was born in Jagar Dorje Dain (Buddha Gaya), and is said to have brought out all the religious books, numbering about 116, from a lake called Chho Pemma near the Ganges. Chom Dande has very great powers and is regarded as a patron of humanity. Other important Lamas represented by the eight figures are: Sange Nangba Thai Ye, who assigns places to



Sherdukpen landscape with the Rupa Gompa on the left of the
Kakaling-gate



A Sherdukpen boy with his favourite animal

the departed souls; Sange Manla and Sange Chhanlekpa who serve the purpose of doctors and know how to cure the disease.

Around this circle containing the eight images of the Lamas, there is a rectangle whose four corners are decorated with stylised patterns, collectively called Dayan Nanga, and are said to represent *regcha* (cloth piece), *ro* (food), *dra* (conch shell), *dre* (cymbal), and *zük* (mirror). These are the essential items which a Lama should take with him.

Above this is another rectangle containing sixteen images. Each wall of the rectangle contains an equal number of figures. Principal amongst these are those depicted in the South, East, North, and West, namely, Jambe Yang Serbu, Chandre Zi, Chhana Dorjee and Jigtun Jambe Gombu.

Jambe Yang Serbu can predict the course of events. He is also believed to shower intelligence and wisdom on men.

Chandre Zi is the dispenser of justice and gives punishment to those who commit sin. This god is worshipped so that man, after death, may go to heaven and be born as a better human being in the next world.

Chhana Dorjee protects the people from the evil effects of water gods like Luikarpu, Luinakpu, Luisirpu and Luigonpu.

Jigtun Jambe Gombu is a god who will rule over the world after 2500 years. The present day world is governed by Sange Chom Dande.

Other important images are those of :

- (i) Dorjee Sempa, who is worshipped to relieve the sufferings caused to those people who are fond of killing animals.
- (ii) Pemma Karpu, who looks after the animals and cattle.
- (iii) Sange Disan Jangu, who lives in the sky and is responsible for water supply and rains.
- (iv) Ngojin Karpu. If worshipped, this god removes the disabilities amongst human beings like blindness and deaf-mutism.

RUPA KAKALING

| | | | | | |
|--|--|----------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|------------|
| Manle Pechha (M) in the centre is a medico—religious book. | Eight-figured circle depicting the Lamas who prepared Manle Pechha | Dayan Nanga rectangle around (2) | 16-figured rectangle | 24-figured rectangle | four gates |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |

EIGHT FIGURED CIRCLE

| | | | | |
|-----|---|-----|-----|-----------------------|
| I | S | ... | ... | Sakcha Thuda. |
| II | N | ... | ... | Sange Nangba Thai Ye. |
| III | E | ... | ... | Sange Manla. |
| IV | W | ... | ... | Sange Chhanlekpa. |

DAYAN NANGA

| | | | | | |
|----|-----|-----|--------|-----|-------------|
| Re | ... | ... | Regcha | ... | cloth piece |
| Da | ... | ... | Dra | ... | Conch Shell |
| Ro | ... | ... | Ro | ... | Food |
| De | ... | ... | Dre | ... | Cymbal |
| Zu | ... | ... | Zuk | ... | Mirror |

16-FIGURED RECTANGLE

| | | | | |
|---|---|-----|-----|--------------------|
| a | s | ... | ... | Jambe Yang Serbu |
| b | e | ... | ... | Chhana Dorjee |
| e | n | ... | ... | Chandre Zi |
| d | w | ... | ... | Jigtun Jambe Gombu |
| e | | ... | ... | Dorjee Sempa |
| f | | ... | ... | Jambe Yang |
| g | | ... | ... | Chandre Zi |
| h | | ... | ... | Jambe Yang |
| i | | ... | ... | Pemma Karpu |
| j | | ... | ... | Sange Disan Jangu |
| k | | ... | ... | Jambe Yang Nakpu |
| l | | ... | ... | Dorjee Sempa |
| m | | ... | ... | Dorjee Sempa Karpu |
| n | | ... | ... | Jambe Yang Sarpu |
| o | | ... | ... | Jambe Yang Karpux |
| p | | ... | ... | Ngojin Karpu |

24-FIGURED RECTANGLE

Dur The Chhoking Chu

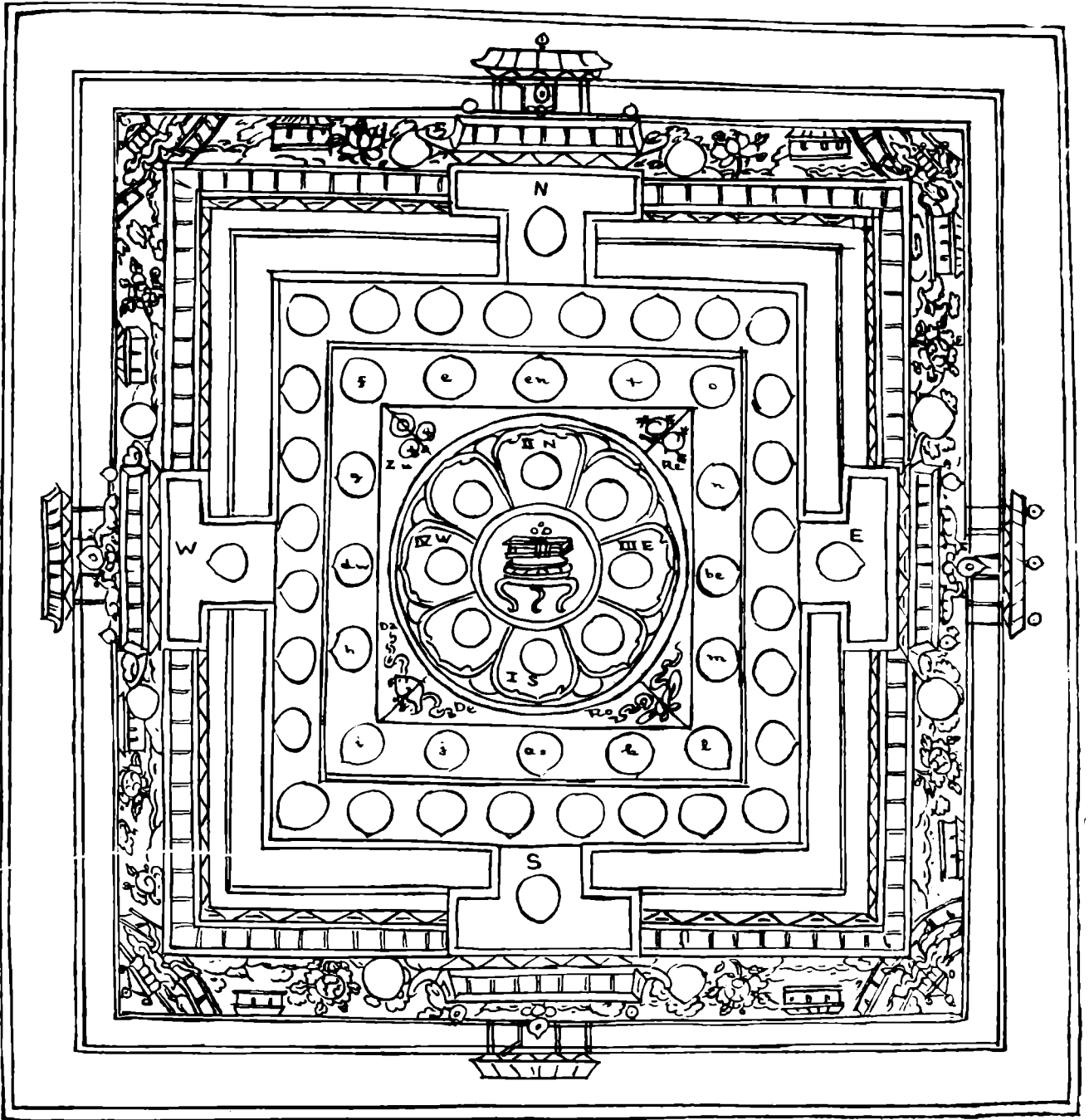
Comprises 10 figures N-W3, W6, S-W1. Are essentially spirits riding on animals which indicate the abode of departed souls.

Ne Jing Ge Chungni

Comprises 14 figures which are believed to be deities of cattle, property, dress and ornaments.

FOUR GATES

| | | | |
|---|-----|-----|---|
| S | ... | ... | Sarchho Gechhin Yur Khur Sung |
| W | ... | ... | Loso Gechhin Phagepa Loi Gola Zuik |
| N | ... | ... | Nuckchoo Gechhin Channe Zang Nupgola Zuik |
| E | ... | ... | Jangchho Gechhin Namthe Se Jang Gola Zuik |



Rupa Kakaling

- (v) Sange Jambe Yang: He was born in China, made five disciples, and sent them around the world to spread the message of Lord Buddha.

The above rectangle is surrounded by yet another and bigger rectangle which contains as many as 24 images. They can be broadly grouped into two parts:

(1) DUR THE CHHOKING CHU

This embraces 10 images: three on the North-West of the rectangle, six on the Western wall and one on the South-West wall. They are essentially spirits riding on animals like horse, cow, goat, and elephant, and indicate the abode of departed souls.

(2) NE JING GE CHHUNGI

This contains 14 images and covers rest of the figures on the rectangle. They are believed to be goddesses of cattle, property, dress and ornaments.

All these painted rectangles represent a Gompa with four gates, each of which bears an Ashoka Chakra. On each gate there is a soldier to keep watch. The South gate has a soldier called Sarchho Gechhin Yur Khur Sung. This part, it is said, is not inhabited by villages and men. The Western gate has a soldier called Loso Gechhin Phagepa Loi Gola Zuik. On the East gate resides a soldier by the name of Jangchho Gechhin Namthe Se Jang Gola Zuik. The North gate is looked after by Nukcho Gechhin Chhan Zang Nup Gola Zuik.

Around all this is a variegated scene. Houses are shown interspersed with pictures of Lamas, mountains growing useful herbs, flowers and plants. On the four corners are represented lakes whose waters possess healing powers.

The Kakaling has four side walls, each about seven feet long and $1\frac{1}{2}$ feet wide, which are elaborately painted. Each wall contains seven pictures.

One wall contains pictures of three brothers in

the centre, Chandre Zi on one end and Juzan Dremma and Demma Karma on the other. The latter two are worshipped to prevent spread of disease. The three brothers are Sange Ye Pema Gepu Thir, Song De Hen Cham and Lopan Pemma. They were born in Buddha Gaya where they built an imposing temple. They died soon after the completion of this Gompa and could not fulfil their desire to spread Buddhism. In the next life Gepu Thir Song was born in Lhasa whereas the other two brothers were born in India. When the latter grew up, they went to Lhasa and with the assistance of their brother erected a great temple there, known by the name of Samya Chibla Khang. Thus they fulfilled the ambition they had cherished in their previous lives.

Another wall contains images of Sange Mith Pa and Chhana Dorjee at the two ends, and five images of Dorsing god in the centre who have been given different names according to the colour of their faces. These gods are worshipped so that the misdeeds committed by human beings may be pardoned.

The third wall contains paintings of the previous Panchan Lama, the previous Dalai Lama (Sar Geva Chongkhapa Lo Zang Drakpa), the present Dalai Lama, Lord Buddha's mother (Sera Ningpur On Yun Chhinmu) and Tukar God.

The fourth wall depicts the following:

- (i) Ye She Khandro Sence Donce Ba Chan: a demon of black magic.
- (ii) Gonkare Sin Norbu, who, when worshipped, brings forth wealth in the shape of cattle to the people.
- (iii) Gompa Chha Drukpo Ne Rur Jemman and Tam Chan Chhai Gi Gepu: With the blessings of this god there ushers in an era of peace, plenty and prosperity.
- (iv) Pandan Lamu Magzorma: who revolves round the earth and looks after the welfare of people.
- (v) Gepu Namthe Se—is the god of wealth.
- (vi) Phu Sawang Sorra is a local deity residing in

Rupa Hills. It is worshipped at Khiksaba festival.

IV. CEREMONIES

The Sherdukpens observe a number of ceremonies. The important ones are :

The Chhakur

This is the festival of sacred books and is observed a month or two after the people return from Doimara. The Lama chants prayers from holy books in the Gompa for six days burning incense and ringing bells before the images of the deities. On the seventh day, the unmarried girls go in a procession round the village carrying holy books on their heads. They visit all the holy places including such places as the confluences of streams where sacrifices are made to the spirits of forests, hills and water. They also go round the fields and bless them.

The villagers remain engaged in their work during the period and scriptures are read, but from the date of procession they stop work for several days and spend their time in drinking, feasting and merry-making.

After Chhakur, the villagers may go to Rupa Lagong or Kro, the last named being a place on top of a hill near Shergaon where the village deity is supposed to reside. The Lama reads from the religious books. In the evening, the people get together and have their meals. The Lama places ceremonial scarves round the necks of such married women who have remained barren for many years. The women, carrying stones on their back, go round the Kro thrice; the stones symbolise the conception of child in the womb.

The youngmen assembled there cut jokes with women and mimic the sound of a young child crying. These women come back with maize seeds on their backs.

Those who do not have sufficient cattle, wealth

or food, go round the Kro in the belief that they will be blessed with what they lack.

On this day, the youngmen pat the young girls with affection and suggest to them that they should allow their hair to hang.

The women, who have only one child for many years, and desire another, perform this ceremony. If in the following year, a woman, who undergoes the above ritual, bears a child, she is required to give feast to her relatives and friends. The ceremony of going round the Kro is observed by different groups separately.

The Khiksaba

This festival is observed in November or December and is meant to appease the forest deities, especially Phu Servi Mangbi. The observance of this festival ensures that the forest spirits will not attack the people on their long trek through the jungles down to the plains. Offerings in the shape of rice, flowers and fruit are made. Goats and fowls also are sometimes sacrificed. On completion of religious ceremonies, people spend several days in feasting and drinking.

The Wang

This festival is observed by the people for two days in June or July in honour of Lord Buddha. On the first day, the images of Lord Buddha in the shape of *tarmus* prepared from wheat flour are worshipped. The top portions of the *tarmus* are coloured with red dye called *grima ku* which is obtained from Monpa area.

On the following day, food is distributed to the village people. Everyone contributes cereals for the preparation of food.

The Jonkhlon

This ceremony is observed soon after the Sherdukpens return from Doimara. Its purpose is to

ensure proper growth of crops through adequate supply of rain water.

Rek Lapsang Chhongba

The people observe this ceremony when the yield of crops is not satisfactory. The Lama goes to the field and reads religious books there for several hours. *Tarmus* are made. Some of them are eaten after the ceremonies and, the rest are thrown in the field.

The Lama worships the presiding deity of agriculture so that insects, pests and wild animals may not destroy the growing crops.

Photenya

It is a ceremony observed after harvesting of crops. Shoots of cereals are hung up in the temples, and the Jijis offer them also to the forest and water spirits.

Ba Jung Khloba

Known also as Spu Zibro Ra, this ceremony is observed by the people just before sending the cattle to Doimara. The main purpose of the ceremony is to ensure that the cattle, especially the cows, do not suffer from any epidemic during their sojourn at Doimara.

As in similar other ceremonies, the *tarmus* are prepared and the Lama reads from the sacred books for an hour or two.

Rituals for protection of homes and people

Some rituals are observed for the protection of homes and people. These are :

(a) Chhe Khloba :

The Lama reads several volumes of religious books for two or three days. *Tarmus* are not prepared to observe the ceremony.

(b) Kangsu Chhongba or Yangling:

This ceremony is observed by worshipping the home deity known as Chhesum. *Tarmus* are prepared. It is believed that if this deity is not worshipped at least once a month by the members of a household, they will not acquire immunity from the diseases.

(c) Lapsang Chhongba:

This ceremony is observed in the same way as Rek Lapsang. The only difference is that it is observed within the precincts of the house.

Holidays

The Sherdukpens observe the following days as holidays:

- | | | |
|-----------------|-----|----------------------------|
| (i) Sarjat | ... | Eighth day of local month. |
| (ii) Sankhu | ... | 15th day of local month. |
| (iii) Tongchhin | ... | 30th day of local month. |

During these days, people do not do any agricultural work, and the Lamas perform ceremonies.

V. DREAMS

Dreams, according to Sherdukpens, are caused by the wandering of a man's shadow. The spirits of the unseen world catch the shadow, carry it about and sometimes give it trouble. If any one has a bad dream, he usually consults the Jiji about it and the latter may recommend a small sacrifice to one of the spirits.

There are dangerous dreams as well as good dreams. If one dreams that one is drunk on hot rice-spirit, it can mean that somebody will die in the village or there will be an epidemic. If one dreams that a great storm blows away the roof of one's house, it indicates the death of one's father; if one sees in a dream that one is bathing in a river and massaging oil on one's body, it may indicate the death of one's mother. A baby will die if one dreams of a kite carry-

ing away a chicken. If one dreams that one goes to the river and washes one's hands, it may mean that the person dreaming is going to lose his money; and if one feels desire to make water it may imply that the person concerned is going to lose some kind of property.

A good dream, on the other hand, is that of a fire which suggests that the weather will be fine and that good luck will come, or of a maize cob which prophesies success in a hunt. If someone dreams of catching several fish and removing their scales, it means that he will shortly get some money. If one visits another village and sleeps there with a pretty girl in his dream, it means that somebody will give the person concerned a fine piece of cloth. If one is ill and dreams of giving away clothes, one is likely to get well. If one dreams that some one is flying, it means that one will get wealth.

VI. DEATH AND DISPOSAL OF THE DEAD

When a Sherdukpen dies, there is an atmosphere of profound sorrow in the house and the family members wail from time to time. Since it is a taboo for the Thongs to touch the dead body, the preliminaries in regard to funerary rites are performed by the Chhaos. The Chhaos attached to the clan of the deceased wash the corpse, anoint the head and face with butter, wrap a piece of cloth round the body and place some coins over it. They then consult the Lama as to the site where the corpse should be taken. The funeral procession is led to the burial or cremation ground by the village priest who recites charms on the way. In case of a rich man, the body is cremated, but in the case of an ordinary person, the body is buried. The grave is dug by the Chhaos and is about four feet deep and two feet wide. After the corpse is lowered into the cavity, it is covered with mud and plantain leaves and some drops of liquor are sprinkled over it.

When the pall-bearers come back from the burial or cremation ground, they wash their bodies, and are

fed by the deceased's family and given five rupees in cash for their labour.

On the third day, the village priest performs some ceremonies and offers water, rice and maize in the name of the departed. People present on the occasion are served with local beer. This is continued upto the seventh day and repeated on the 14th day and 21st day, when prayer flags may be erected.

Mourning continues for several days. The near relatives of the dead do not wear ornaments and caps for a week or so; they also abstain from taking meat and do not sing and dance for a year.

The Sherdukpens like to associate the dead in all those activities which are dearest to them. At every important ceremony that is performed, the dead are invoked. They celebrate the first death anniversary, called *Tung Sikpa Phow Sonba*, and erect a high pole bearing a flag with religious inscriptions written on it in placation of the dead. The Lama chants pieces from religious books in the Gompa or within the precincts of a Mane. The atmosphere is sanctified by burning 108 butter lamps. The *tarmus*, the conical figures, prepared out of wheat flour, with their top coloured red, are also placed on the altar for worship. On this day, the village members do not work in the fields. All assembled for the ceremony maintain a sorrowful and serious demeanour; they are given a feast by the relatives of the deceased and local beer, boiled rice, maize, potatoes, pumpkin and cucumber for the good of the departed soul. Before feasting, the family members bow before the altar and pay their respects to the departed soul.

If any shrine, road or bridge is constructed within a year of the death of a rich man, his heirs can, if they wish, serve wine to the villagers working for that construction. The expenditure incurred in treating the villagers for such a communal work is supposed to be an act of piety which contributes to the peace of the departed soul.

The Sherdukpens believe in rebirth and have

some idea of Karma. The man who has done good and virtuous deeds, according to them goes to Chungba Sangze. He sees the sun, is feasted on splendid food, and then sent back to the earth as a human being. But a bad man goes to Singchhan Gepu or Sango Thung, the god of death, who punishes him in various ways and sends him back to the earth as an animal.

EPILOGUE

These, then are the Sherdukpens who form a colourful pattern in the mosaic that is NEFA. An attempt has been made in the preceding pages to describe in a simple form their way of life, their origin, migrations and history, their agricultural and other occupations, their social and political life, and their festivals, dances and religion.

It was only after Independence that the Government of India began to take keen and live interest in this region and since then remarkable progress has been achieved in various fields. In fact, a comprehensive policy has been evolved by the Administration with regard to the development of the people during the last few years and is being implemented vigorously. Efforts are being made to give the maximum of help to the people in realizing the Good Life suited to their own traditions, and at the same time make available to them the blessings of modern civilization. They are associated in all the measures contemplated for their development and care is taken not to make any abrupt break with their past traditions and not to make them feel that something is imposed upon them. The intention is to preserve what is good in their own culture and to approach them in a spirit of understanding and partnership.

One of the important points which engaged the attention of Administration was to improve the means of transport and communications in the area. Villages have been connected by a number of bridle-paths and muleable tracks. Bridges have been built and roads constructed. With the completion of the Foot Hills-Bomdi La road recently, which by-passes Rupa, fresh possibilities of trade and contact with other people have been opened and movement of supplies is accelerated. This is expected to bring prosperity,

benefits and new ideas to the people. There already exist postal facilities in the area and recently a telegraph link has been established, thus connecting the region with the rest of India. In cases of emergency food supplies are provided through air-dropping operations. For instance, when in January, 1958 a part of Rupa village was destroyed by out-break of fire, relief to the affected persons was rushed from Bomdi La where required commodities were air-dropped.

The Sherdukpens are now progressively realizing the advantages of modern medicine and the utility of cleanliness. There are now hospitals at Rupa and Bomdi La. All possible facilities are provided to the patients and they now willingly seek the help of physicians and at the same time consult their local priests. The doctors frequently go out to render medical aid to the sick.

Before their annual migration to the plains, the Sherdukpens are given preventive medicines against malaria.

In the field of agriculture, improved techniques within the traditional frame-work are being attempted. More and more land is being brought under permanent cultivation, and the people are encouraged to maintain vegetable gardens and grow fruit trees. Better quality seeds and agricultural tools are supplied and exhibitions of local produce are organized on special occasions. Every year a group of local people is taken on a conducted tour of agricultural centres in various parts of Assam and NEFA with a view to widen their outlook and to improve their own methods of agriculture. Poultry and dairy-farming are encouraged and the Sherdukpens are now able to earn money from sale of poultry, milk and vegetables.

Schools opened in the area have found a popular support. Rupa, Jigaon and Shergaon each have a Lower Primary School and the instruction imparted to the students is through their mother tongue. Over a hundred Sherdukpen students are receiving education at present and some of them are studying in the High

School at Bomdi La. Text books are being prepared with reference to social, economic and geographical conditions obtaining in the area. Besides the usual subjects, stress is also laid on learning agriculture and gardening, handicrafts and painting, local songs, dances and games. The Lamas and village elders regularly visit the schools to impart religious and moral instruction to the students. Variety shows and dramatic performances are periodically arranged in which the Sherdukpens take active part.

Opportunities for training in smithy, carpentry, weaving, painting, and wood-carving are offered to Sherdukpens in the Cottage Industries Training cum Production Centre at Bomdi La. The indigenous art of silver-smithy is being revived by granting monetary aid to the only Sherdukpen silver-smith at Rupa. Other traditional crafts are also encouraged in various ways—by stocking the best tribal products in Museum and Emporium, by distributing them as people's presents and by making use of them as awards for special occasions.

The Sherdukpens have shown much interest in the co-operative society started at Bomdi La in 1958. They are now purchasing many of their daily necessities from the Co-operative Stores at Bomdi La and Chakoo at cheaper rates.

While material prosperity is coming to the people, efforts are also being made to bring about a cultural and religious revival in the area. The Sherdukpen songs have been recorded by the All India Radio and are regularly broadcast from its station at Gauhati. Painting competitions have been started and their folk-tales are being collected. All this is calculated to increase pride in their own culture. Their Gompas and stone-shrines have been repaired, and the Kakalings with elaborate paintings in traditional Buddhist style have been constructed. The High School and Cultural Centre in Bomdi La are being made according to local architectural design with suitable modifications. There has been a revival of their dances and other

recreations also. The Sherdukpens were invited to display their dances at Delhi during the Republic Day Celebrations in 1957 and at Gauhati during the Congress Session in 1958. Visits of the Gompatse Rimpoche in January, 1958 and the Dalai Lama in April, 1959 invoked great interest and enthusiasm among the Sherdukpens and these have done much to bring spiritual revival and enlightenment among them.

Thus, with the spread of Administration in these hills, a sense of awakening, a life of progress, prosperity and security is coming to these gentle people. There is an all-round development in the region and the people themselves are willingly and gladly extending their co-operation in the development activities initiated by the Administration. Though few, the Sherdukpens are one of the most progressive and promising tribes of the Kameng Frontier Division. Great personalities are in the making and there is no doubt that, as the years roll by, we shall know more and more of these simple, cheerful and friendly people. Who knows after a few decades they will direct the affairs of their Division and some of them may well rise to become the distinguished persons of our dear motherland!

GLOSSARY

- Achung Jering — Mediator in marriage negotiations.
- Ara — Distilled liquor.
- Bachichlong — A black sticky substance, prepared out of pine-resin mixed with charcoal dust, for painting lips and making geometrical designs on cheeks.
- Bakhi — A bamboo structure, four or five feet above the hearth, over which are kept foodgrains and meat for drying.
- Bogre — A hand-woven cloth decked with pretty patterns and used for carrying articles.
- Bukku — Wheat.
- Chhi — Honey.
- Chhorten — A *stupa* shaped structure where prayers are held occasionally.
- Daon-dhum dham — A hand-woven bag having horizontal patterns.
- Gompa — Temple containing images of the Buddha and its disciples, libraries of sacred books, and Tibetan scrolls, hung from the walls.
- Grima Ku — A kind of red dye.
- Gurdam — A black felt skull-cap, made from yak's hair.
- Hongche — Local plant from the fibre of which Sherdukpens weave cloth and bags.
- Hongchong — Local fibre-plant.

- Jabrang — A spice used for preparing food.
- Jiji — Priest.
- Jumu — A kind of millet.
- Kakaling — A gate with a domed roof elaborately painted with conventional designs and pictures of the Buddha.
- Khichin — A kind of millet.
- Lurek — A small settlement.
- Mane — A shrine in the shape of a narrow wall into which tablets bearing sacred inscriptions are ranged into small shelves cut into the wall.
- Mukhak — A sash tied round the waist.
- Nakhu — A kind of millet.
- Pam — A small settlement.
- Phak — Local beer.
- Phu — Barley.
- Sape — A piece of cloth wrapped by men diagonally about the upper part of their bodies.
- Sachkhar — Water mill.
- Sit-man daon — A hand-woven bag with a design of seven vertical lines.
- Tarmus — Conical figures prepared out of wheat flour with the top coloured red, which are used during worship.

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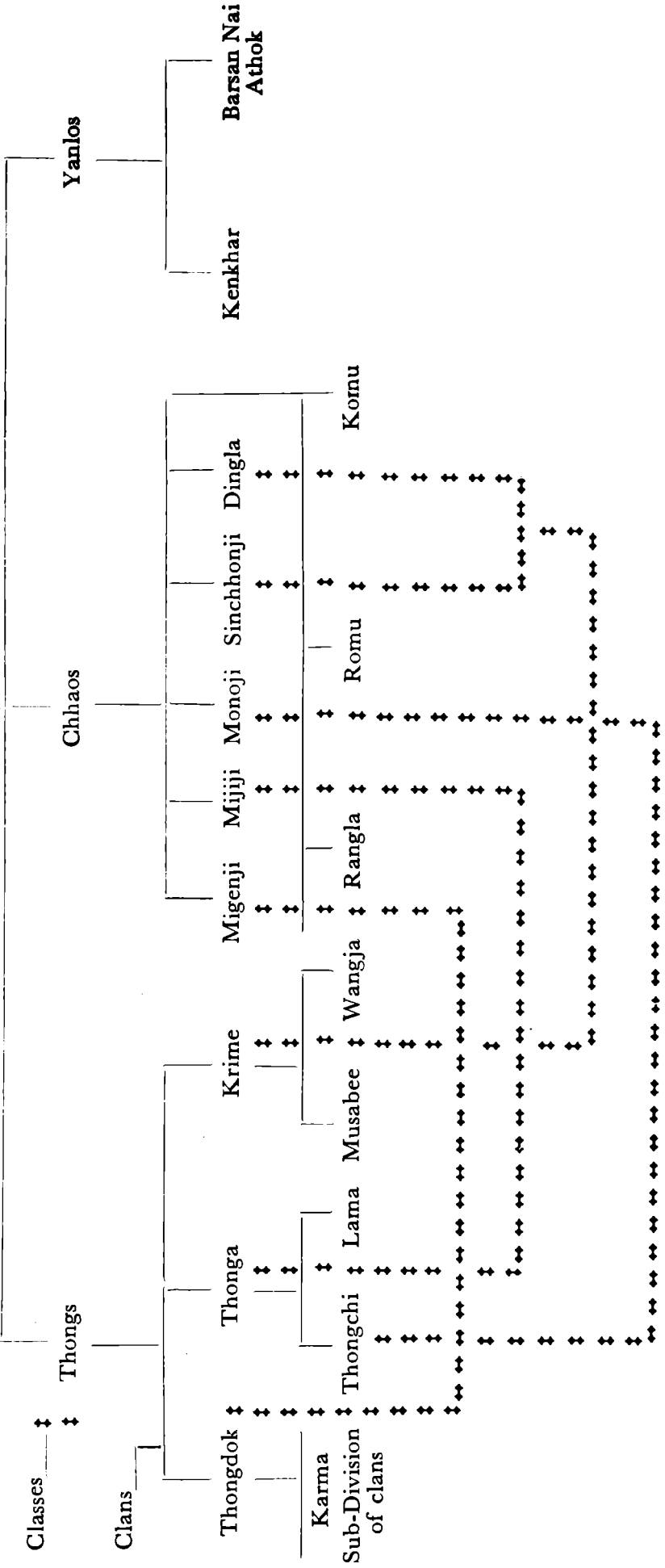
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APPENDIX

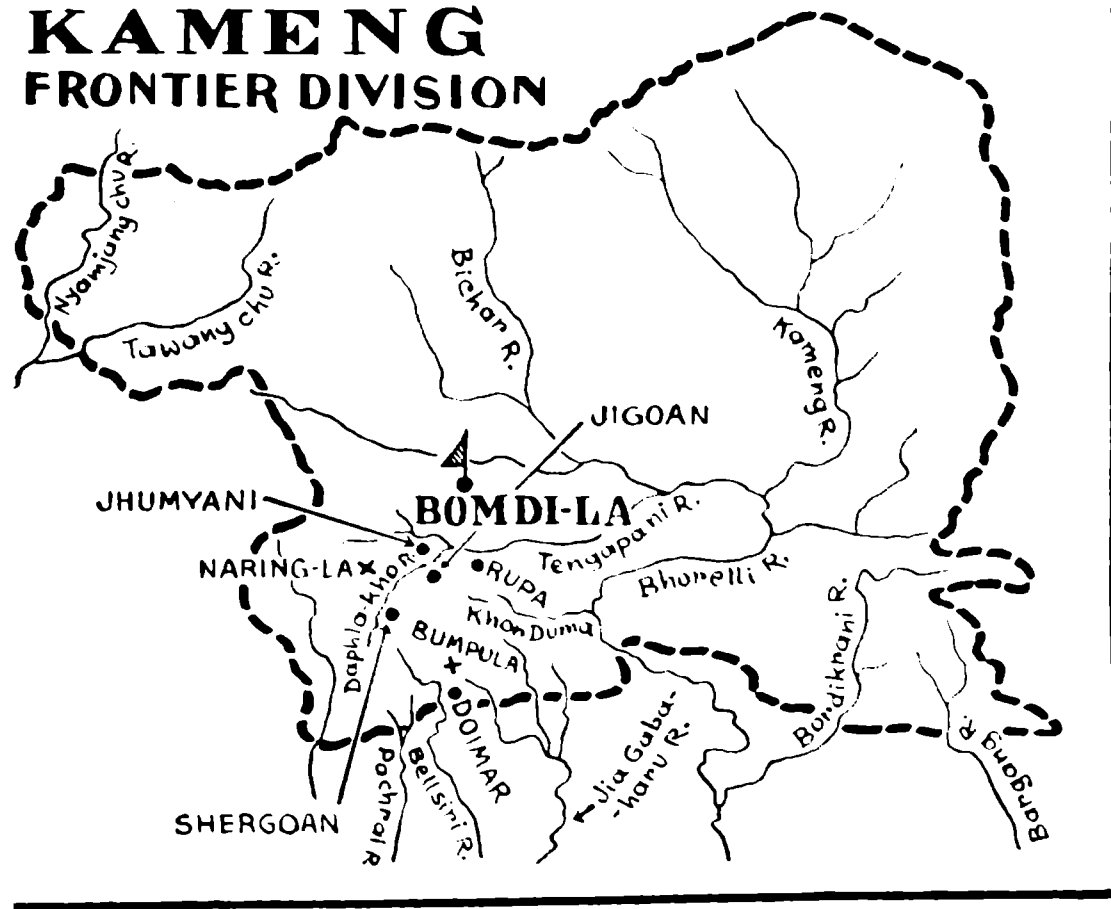
ORGANIZATION OF SHERDUKPEN SOCIETY

SHERDUKPENS



Note :—Star marks indicate relations among different clans.

KAMENGG FRONTIER DIVISION



NORTH-EAST FRONTIER AGENCY

