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PILGRIMAGE

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Three times in their lives the dhami priests of Nepal's remote Humla Valley journey to Mount Kailas to renew their alliance with the Gods. Writer Ian Baker and photographer Thomas Kelly accompanied them on their final divine mission.

If we sing our pilgrimage songs here," the old shaman stated, "the Gods will come into our bodies and we'll be too tired to walk tomorrow." Gathered in a stone shelter en route to a sacred lake at the base of Mount Kailas in western Tibet, Mangali and the other dhamis, shaman priests, sang instead long sonorous songs that traced their shamanic lineage to the ancient land of Shang Shung, a pre-Buddhist civilization in the wild desert regions surrounding Kailas. Knowing that on the following day we had to cross a high pass across the border into Tibet, Tom and I retired to our tents, drifting off to sleep to the dhamis' enraptured evocations of the region we were about to enter.

Described in the earliest of Indian and Tibetan texts, Kailas is revered in both Hindu and Buddhist traditions as the earthly manifestation of the cosmic Mount Meru, the axis of this world system and the holiest of all places of pilgrimage. For the shamans, who predate the Hindu and Buddhist religions, the mountain rises at the center of the Earth and serves as a magical ladder into the sky, a place of visions where the divine

and human worlds intersect.

"Three times in our lives we must make this journey," Mangali told us, "initially when the Gods first enter us, later to strengthen that bond, and then towards the end of our lives when the Gods will soon have to find other bodies to carry out their work. The village sends us with porters and attendants and gives us food for the journey, but still it's not easy. Each time these passes seem higher and the road more difficult. We're getting old. This will be our last trip to Kailas."

Besides the three elderly dhamis, our party included Takpa Cholden, a charismatic Buddhist lama commonly known as Agu, and his son, Tsewang, who the dhamis continually reproached for renouncing his hereditary role as village lama in favor of political life in Kathmandu. Two years earlier Tsewang had been elected a member of the newly formed Nepalese parliament. But villagers were not always receptive to his modern political ideals. They wanted lamas, not MPs.

Dressed in their long undyed woolen robes and with great white turbans wrapped around their heads, the dhamis, despite their age, were imposing figures. Crossing treacherous mud slides on the steep slopes above the Karnali, the dhamis used their ritual iron tridents as walking sticks. Although a better trail had recently been carved out of the cliffs below, Tsering Dhami told us, "This is the way the Gods first came down into this region. We have to follow the same route." Laboring up the steep, largely unused trail, I wondered if the Gods were indeed so uncompromising.

Of Gods and men: The Gods enter into the human realm by possessing particular members of the community who function thereafter as oracles and healers. The job of intercessor, however, is not a popular one. "We never wanted to become dhamis," said Tsering. "In fact, we tried hard to get the Gods to leave us. We pleaded, performed pujas, even carried manure around with us to offend them, but nothing seemed to work. When calamities began to hit my family--when my brother died falling off the roof and our best horse drowned in the river--I realized I had no choice and had to make the initial journey to Kailas."

The dhamis' power as intercessors between the spirit world and human beings is only complete after they travel to Manasarovar, the sacred lake near the base of mount Kailas. Only after plunging into the frigid waters of this mystical lake--the watery gateway to the spirit realm--do the dhamis gain the power to speak the language of the Gods. "When I first entered the water," Pema Dhami recalled, "I didn't know if the God would come. Then I saw a strange silvery fish and I tried to catch it. Suddenly, currents of electricity ran up and down my legs and my whole body began to tremble. I knew then that the God Hilsa had entered me. Even though I didn't know how to swim, I dove deep into the waters trying to reach Hilsa's palace at the bottom of the lake. Thinking I would drown, my attendant rushed after me and pulled me out."

The Gods that enter the dhamis' bodies each have different qualities and characteristics. The more peaceful Deities enter into human form to settle land disputes; whereas more wrathful Gods like Gura and Hilsa take on more serious criminal cases--theft and even murder. As Tsewang recounted,

the dhamis serve as mediums for an authority that can be contested only with dire consequences, and their verdicts are rarely disputed. "People have great faith in the dhamis," Tsewang maintained, "Sometimes it makes it very hard to introduce political change in the area. People are very suspicious of decisions made in Kathmandu. They feel it has very little to do with their lives up here in the mountains."

As we climbed towards the border, we heard news reports of heavy flooding in the Kathmandu Valley. High in the Himalayas our once familiar urban world seemed suddenly remote and unalluring. Agu Lama was quick to remind us, however, that real pilgrimage isn't something you undertake forgetting the world you leave behind. "You do so on behalf of all beings," he told us, "your friends and even your enemies. Unless you do it in this spirit, it's just an ordinary journey without any spiritual significance." Agu and the dhamis were undertaking this journey to ensure the spiritual welfare of their entire community. Whatever insights or revelations occurred en route would, on their return, become part of the village's collective life. As Agu urged, "Pilgrimage is an opportunity to embrace all experiences--no matter how contrary or worldly they may appear."

We traversed the forty kilometers from Purang to Trugu Gompa on the closest shore of Manasarovar by truck. The vast surface of Manasarovar spread out before us like a glittering mirror, its colors ever shifting. The dhamis and the other pilgrims we had picked up along the way climbed out of the truck and, with their hands placed reverently in front of them, immediately began prostrating themselves toward the sacred waters and the peak of Mount Kailas rising above. Only Agu

looked slightly disturbed. "The lake's lower than before," he stated. "Manasarovar's linked with all other waters in the world. If it's low, it's a very bad sign."

The following morning Agu and the dhamis gathered by the lake to invoke their tutelary Gods and perform ceremonies for the nagas--the serpentine spirits that control the circulation of water not only in the outer world, but also within our bodies. The nagas are worldly spirits ultimately responsible for human well being, material as well as spiritual. When they're ignored, Agu told us, things go out of balance.

Manasarovar's shimmering surface was broken into small swells that seemed like porous doors to other worlds. The dhamis, possessed now by their Gods, began to tremble and shake. They discarded their robes, after which their attendants, the dangris, unwound their turbans revealing hair that had remained uncut for over half a century. Naked they entered the lake, their uncoiled, silver-banded hair floating around them like jeweled serpents on the surface of the water. "When their hair is down like that," Tsewang told us, "it acts like an antenna, a channel through which the Gods' energy can flow into them."

When the dhamis returned to shore, they sat, nearly convulsant, on woolen blankets laid out on the sand, and speaking in an archaic dialect comprehensible only to their dangri interpreters, they began to incant aphorisms: "To the ones whose eyes are not truly opened, this land may appear as a wasteland. To those who know, however, it is a land full of untold riches." Taking handfuls of rice, the dhamis let the

grains slip through their fingers onto copper plates, reading prophecies of the future from the configuration of grains. There were dark times ahead. The nagas were unhappy and, by extension, so would be their human beneficiaries. Unless we become better stewards of our earthly realm, the dhamis inferred, the world will fall apart.

That evening, sitting around a yak-dung fire on the shores of the lake, Tsering explained, "Here the Gods come in person, and we have to prove it by performing feats that no human being could endure." Tsering described how on their return to the village the Gods would enter them again and they'd be compelled to drink boiling oil, turn barley grains into crystal and run their tongues along their iron tridents brought burning hot from fire. Faith, it seemed, at least in the tradition of the dhamis, required uncompromising proof.

As we sat by the edge of the lake, the summit of Kailas glowed above the waters like a pale fire. For the shamans of Tibet's earliest spiritual traditions, this dome of luminous ice marks the center of the world--where other dimensions can be more easily reached. Esoterically, Agu explained, the mountain embodies a sacred center not only in the outer world but one that lies ultimately within. "As the outer reflection of our subtle body," Agu argued, "when we go around Kailas, we go deeper into our own true nature."

Center of the world: The traditional kora, or circumambulation route, around Kailas was revealed to a Buddhist lama five hundred years ago by a wild yak, a crow and a pack of silver wolves--all mystical emanations of local shamanistic spirits

dwelling on the upper slopes of this sacred mountain. After circling the peak three times by the standard route, the pilgrim who follows the prescribed itinerary can take a higher and more difficult trail called the khandrosanglam, the secret path of the dakinis. Finally, after completing thirteen rounds of the outer kora, the most ambitious pilgrims can travel the nangkor , the inner circuit, that for the spiritually prepared reveals the hidden "door" to Kailas' innermost mysteries.

We began the outer kora before dawn. The broad meadows beneath Kailas' western face were dotted with grazing yaks. Higher up, several families of nomads had set up tents. We stopped in to barter for dried yak cheese and fresh yogurt. The women who sold us the cheese told us how on the night before they'd gone out to check the herds. In the moonlight, descending the pilgrim's trail, they'd seen three figures gliding down from boulder to boulder, their robes billowing around their outstretched arms like the wings of giant bats. They were yogis, the women claimed, who had perfected lunggom, the yoga of the inner winds, in which the adept learns to overcome the force of gravity within his subtle body. Once accomplished, the successful yogi can cover long distances in a single bound, much as astronauts can stride freely on the moon.

Yet we ourselves felt excessively burdened by the very force these yogis had reputedly overcome. Above the nomad encampment, the trail ascends steeply towards the Dolma La pass, which at 18,720 feet is the highest point on the outer kora. To mark this critical passage, pilgrims traditionally leave an article of clothing at a sacred site just below the pass, signifying the leaving behind of all past impediments and attachments. Crossing the Dolma La, one begins a new life.

"Going around Kailas even once," Agu assured us, "purifies the obstructions of a lifetime. Every other time you go around its for other beings. You no longer have to worry about yourself." At every rest stop, while the rest of us lay prostrate on the rocks, Agu exemplified this spirit of selflessness by constructing offering cairns to the local spirits.

The morning after completing the three-day circuit around the mountain, the dhamis got a ride in a truck headed for Purang. As they drove off across the plains towards the Nepalese border, the sound of their singing rose clearly above the noise of the truck's engine. The Gods had been with them. And still were.

Agu Lama stayed behind with us at Darchen. At seventy-seven, it was likely to be his last visit to Kailas, too, and he wanted to complete the pilgrimage by performing the nangkor in Kailas' inner sanctum. Tom and I accompanied him up the ridges behind the small town of Darchen, past the nomads' barking mastiffs and into a broad silent valley leading to the mountain's vertical southern face. As we approached Kailas' symmetrical dome of ice and rock stretching up into the sky, it suddenly dawned upon us that we were approaching the center of the world. Not that there weren't other centers, too, but for millions of people in the Buddhist and Hindu worlds we were standing at the very threshold of the universe, the meeting place of heaven and earth. Agu, with his long staff, and grey hair blowing in the wind, ascended the scree slopes below Kailas' towering southern face as if he was moving through an inner landscape. When we reached a row of small shrines marking the entrance to the inner kora, Tom and I, having gone around the mountain only once, turned back in

respect of local tradition. Agu, who had already completed more than thirteen rounds, continued on over the ridge towards Kailas' secret door.