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“Old People Eat (*S*)nganphe”
Eating Rice or Barley, a Question of Modernity ?

We were talking with some of my informants in Zanskar, and at the same time, cooking for some festival. Then one of the young Zanskarpa told me “Old People Eat (*S*)nganphe”. As Charles Ramble once observed, “‘Tsampa [(*S*)nganphe] -eaters’ is an evocative designation for ethnic Tibetans” (1993: 21). When the younger generation declares that their elders are “barley eaters” they are pointing at once to a generation gap and the new identity-building process of which this statement is a part. Barley has long been highly valued in Tibet, where it is used raw (*nas*) or grilled ((*s*)nganphe), as whole grain or flour. In these forms it is used for various purposes—in religious rituals, domestic rituals, in medicine, as currency, for domestic uses such as starching a hat, and for cooking. But as Tibet is changing, this vital foodstuff and cultural anchor is taking on some new meanings and losing others.

At an altitude of between 3,600 and 4,000 meters, the Zanskar Valley is nestled in the great Himalayan range. Zanskar has a population of 13,673; they are officially classified as a scheduled tribe ‘Boto/Bozo’ (i.e., Bhot/Tibetan), who are either followers of Mahayana Buddhism (92.73 percent) or Sunni Islam (7.27 percent).

The arrival of Indian state administration in the 1970s, and especially the permanent establishment of facilities such as the Government Store for Food and Supplies, has transformed the way Zanskarpas eat. This deep transformation accompanied the development of tourism and the intensification of commercial exchange at the beginning of the twenty-first century: Vegetables, pastas, chicken, eggs and so forth began to appear in shops in the main bazaar in Padum. An additional impact on the traditional diet is that more and more Zanskarpas travel beyond their valley; they may stay in neighbouring valleys or go farther down the Himalayan range to India to study. When you ask younger people about their standard foods, they answer, “A good meal should be rice and meat.” Older generations still maintain that “eating barley is the only way to stay in good health.” This paper, based on extensive field research, will discuss the ways local people think about modernity versus tradition, and how food is a significant component in this transformation of Zanskar Valley.

I. An Introduction to Zaskar Valley

A. Geography and administration



PICTURE 1: OVERVIEW OF ZANSKAR VALLEY TAKEN FROM KARSHA MONASTERY OPPOSITE PADUM VILLAGE, 2017

Zaskar sits between the Himalayan chain and the Indus valley, situated between the borders of China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Geographically, it constitutes one of the five regions in Ladakh. Administratively, it is a *tehsil* of the district of Kargil, which itself is part of the LAHDC (Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council) whose second constituent is the district of Leh.

Zaskar's climate is harsh. Abundant snowfalls isolate the valley from November to the end of April each year. Since 1980 there has been a 232 km highway leading from Padum to Kargil via the Penzi La pass (at an altitude of 4,400 meters). The bus

ride to Kargil takes 12 hours and leaving Zanskar via the different passes, some as high as 5,300 meters, by foot, to reach the same destination, it takes several days. As mentioned by Jonathan Demenge, since the new political decision in August 2019 when the Government of India revoked the special status, or limited autonomy, granted under Article 370 of the Indian Constitution to Jammu and Kashmir, “National priorities also explain why border regions, especially mountainous and desert areas, were largely excluded from the process and their road system weakly developed relative to the rest of the country. The development of the roadscape appears as a physical expression of socially perceived needs and political decisions and processes” (Demenge, 2015:11). Therefore, since summer 2020, the Indian army road is able to reach Padum from Manali, South Zanskar, by the tunnel under the Shingu La Pass (5000m), and from Leh, North-Est Zanskar, by the road along the river side, and dig in the rock. These rides would take, from south, 10 up 15 hours, depends on the weather like before and after tunnel, and from North-Est 10 hours. These major transformation are due to the fact that “strategically, Ladakh gained in importance after 1947 on two fronts: with Pakistan and China” (Demenge, 2015:12) especially regarding the last events in the area on the spring 2019 and then 2020 on the Chinese border.

Therefore, in terms of development, this army road has a major impact on transportation system and the capacity of people to reach one or another market, like Leh, where there is an airport, or Manali in Himachal Pradesh where basmati rice is produced.

B. Social organization in Zanskar Valley

The stratification of Zanskarpa society (Riaboff, 1997: 83), much like that of Ladakh overall, allows us to appreciate the importance of the switch to rice from barley.

In Ladakh, the term *rigs* (levels) is used and understood as “strata.” It is an indigenous Tibetan term “which covers at once the notions of family, species, birth and blood” (Dollfus, 2005: 34), whereas in literature on origins and hierarchy within the Tibetan population, additional terms are used to distinguish between different levels of society: *rus* (literally, bone, but more generically, line) or even *brgryud* (lineage) (Ramsay, 1890: 18-19 ; Macdonald, 1959: 419-450).

In Zanskar the population still complies with a quadripartite division of society: in Padum, for example, the blacksmith (*lag shes*) lives in a house on the outskirts of the village whereas the king (*rgyal po*), who is always a Buddhist, resides in the middle, in

a house that dominates all dwellings except the monastery, which overlooks the village. Zanskarpas from the Lord-strata (*blon po*) are always Buddhists and do not enter blacksmiths' or musician's (*mgar ba*) houses and prefer to greet them in the streets of the village. Muslims are counted as belonging to the stratum of lay people (*phal pa*), which includes Buddhists designated as farmers or merchants.

Since 1535, Buddhists and Muslims in Zanskar have, generation after generation, reaffirmed their understanding and recognition of one another in the unity of the village (Deboos, 2010: 189-210).¹ The Muslim family called Achar in Padum marries in a Buddhist woman from Zanskar from the stratum of ordinary people every generation, that is, every 25 years or so. This marriage is described by both Buddhists and Muslims as a "marriage of love," and by these matrimonial alliances Muslims are incorporated into the lay people category.

These social differences play out according to rather complicated rules of interaction. I often had the opportunity to have tea with the king of Padum, but I never saw him eat at the house of a Buddhist lay person or at a Muslim's house; and, if he ever took tea outside his home, it was always in his own bowl. What's more, only Buddhist lay people or nuns and monks will accept food and drink using crockery from a Muslim's house. No blacksmith or musician is ever invited to participate in a community meal or enter a local household, and no Muslim or Buddhist from the lay stratum will enter a house of blacksmith or musician; even if it is only to talk; they prefer to stay outside, where the workshop is. With all these distinctions and rules of appropriate social interaction, Zanskarpas respect, as far as possible, family ties and social strata even when doing everyday tasks like buying food in Padum's shops. They do not buy everything in the same shop but patronize the right shop for the right good.

¹ In 1535, the Great Moghul, Abdur Rashid Khan, sent one of his favorites, Haji-Lo, who offered to serve the Great Moghul not as a soldier but by keeping his status as a merchant. He was a guest of the king of Padum, then married a woman in Padum given to him by the king, and so by tacit agreement with the king founded the first Muslim family in Padum. This fact is mentioned in the memoirs of Mahmud Mirzà who was also in the service of the Great Moghul: "From Kashmir there came a certain man named Haji, who attached himself to my service; [...] Haji-Lo ... reached Padum (dPal.gTum) when the snow was an arm's length in depth. [...] Leaving Balti, we set out towards a province in Tibet called Zanskar." (MIRZA MUHAMMAD HAIDAR, Dughlat, In *Tarikh-I-Rashidi*, pp. 460)

II. Barley in Zanskar: From production to uses and consumption

A. The cultivation and processing of barley

In Zanskar, flour made from grilled barley and butter have circulated since “time immemorial,” as the historian Janet Rivzi put it in her work on the trade routes across the Ladakh (1999:130). These vegetable and animal “currencies” have specific production methods, whether the perspective be technical, calendric, or human agency related. They are highly valued because of their importance in rituals as well as everyday consumption. Here we will focus on just the latter, since that is central to the social transformation at the heart of this study.

Given the geographical location of the Zanskar valley, barley is the foundation of the local diet. This quick-growing spring grain is critical because weather conditions and altitude allow the Zanskarpas to work the land only from May to September; the rest of the year the ground is frozen or snow covered. Barley is consumed in different forms such as flour made from cooked or uncooked grain, grilled grain. Barley is prepared in many different ways: in soups, compact flour balls, porridge, and bread, depending on the situation, from every-day to feast-day meals. The management of grain stocks is solely carried out by women.

Each family has its own fields, often close to the home, and each family sows, grows, and harvests its own grain. Each home empties its dry toilets² in April, mixing human waste with soil for its fields. The transfer of this soil-enriching agent is carried out by all members of the household (men, women, and children), but the work of actual mixing is carried out only by the women, who combine the human manure and soil with their bare feet. This enriched earth is then spread over the fields, carried on the women’s backs in wicker baskets reserved for this annual use. Depending on the configuration of the household, the women may be helped by the men. The fertilizer is spread on the fields once they have been prepared. For this operation, one or two cattle are attached to a plough, and the women and/or men plough to create furrows in which they sow the barley seed. The men do the sowing using seed the women have saved from the last year’s harvest. These tasks done by women and men together are followed by work

² Zanskari houses are special in that they have a room upstairs with a relatively narrow rectangular opening overlooking an empty room on the ground floor. This opening is used for relieving oneself. The faeces fall into the room below and each person covers them using a bit of earth or ashes when they have finished. Water and paper are never used.

carried out predominantly by women: planting other crops, clearing new fields, weeding, manuring and watching as the grain ripens. Finally, towards the end of August, the barley is harvested. The women, mostly, line up across the field and advance crouched with a sickle in hand to cut the barley at the base of its stem. The cut barley is then left where it is in the sun to dry and is turned regularly to remove moisture and prevent moulding.

Once dry, the rows of cut barley are rolled up and transported in 50-kg bales on the women's backs. They lug them up to the flat roofs of their houses where the grain is threshed by trampling to remove the chaff, and aired by tossing with either a clog-shaped sieve or a two-pronged fork. It is then winnowed. The remains (bran and stalks) are kept to feed the animals over the winter and are stored directly on the roof, thus also helping to insulate the house.



PICTURE 2: WORKING THE FIELDS, 2011



PICTURE 3: WOMAN CARRYING BARLEY, 2011

Once this is done, the family sends for a woman whose know-how is recognized to come and roast the barley grains without causing them to burst open³. This operation is long and tiring. It requires the use of large flat fry pans in which the roaster puts a layer of sand that is heated over a fire outside the house. She stirs using a handled whisk and stirs the sand regularly to see if the grain is cooked, because the grain is mixed in with the heated sand to prevent it from popping. Once the grain is roasted, it is poured into 70 litre bags, which are then transported to the local water mill. These mills are collectively owned; their number is independent of the number of inhabitants in the village and directly dependent on the number of its streams. Each household takes a

³ Popped barley, called *yos*, is consumed only during the summer, when the grain has just been roasted. *Yos* does not keep.

turn according to its station in society (nobility, lay people, then blacksmiths and musicians). The mills require no manual operation, since they consist of a funnel-shaped basket that is hung from the ceiling with its narrow opening positioned just a few centimetres from the millstone, which allows a slow and regular flow of grain. The ground barley is gathered at the edge of the stone or falls to the ground where it is collected by each owner.



PICTURE 3: BARLEY MIXED IN HEATED SAND TO ROAST, 2009



PICTURE 4: WOMAN MONITORING ROASTING BARLEY, 2009



PICTURE 5: WATER MILL, 2009

The bags of barley flour are then placed in the larder of each house. They become the responsibility of the oldest woman in the household, who puts aside before any of the grain is processed a portion of the grain for seed the following year. The rest is used for food or sometimes as money.

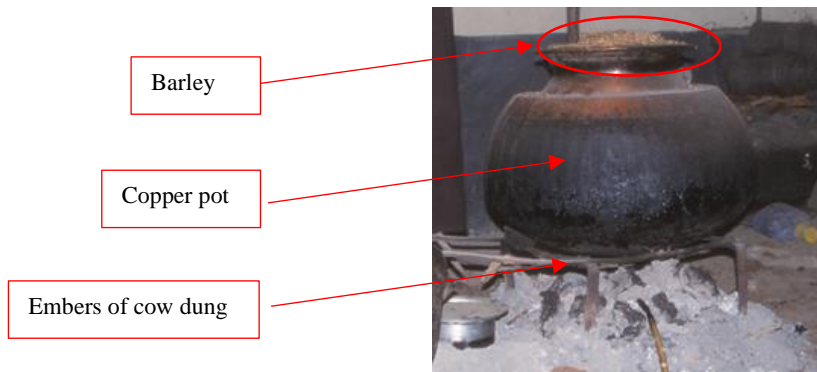
B. Consumption in terms of social and territorial reconfiguration

Grilled barley flour has been used domestically for centuries in the daily life of the Zanskarpas (Muslims and Buddhists), and this domestic use is at the center of the creation of social bonds. Here we will focus on these social aspects of its use and not go into detail about its ritual uses in monasteries and during funeral rites, which have remained unchanged over this same period.

When the family fields are well enriched and extensive in terms of their surface area, barley may be grown in sufficient quantities for the family to divide its harvest between making beer, producing flour for domestic consumption and overwintering, and finally, for supplying the monastery for protection rituals.

Barley is most frequently used for food. The grilled barley flour, (*S*)*nganphe*, which is easy to carry when Tibetans are out and about, can be consumed alone, as one might eat a spoonful of sugar, or in the form of *kholag*, mixed with tea to form a dough, or in the form of *phemar*, a sweet dough made of (*S*)*nganphe*, tea, sugar, butter and sometimes cheese, or in the form of *paba*, a local bread. As mentioned above, the popped grain (*yos*) is also consumed during the summer.

Barley grain (*nas*) is also used to make beer, which is given as a gift during either religious festivals or marriage festivities (Dolfuss, 1989; Deboos, 2010) among Buddhists and Muslims families. The whole grain is put aside so it starts to germinate before being used to produce the local beer called *chang*, which is only drink by Buddhists.



PICTURE 6: COOKING BARLEY TO MAKE BEER

These uses of barley persist today, but other grains, newly available, are gaining in popularity. Wheat flour has slowly become widespread as well as the use of rice. Wheat can also be grown in Zanskar, in lesser quantities, whereas rice must be imported. These introduced foodstuffs have brought with them a transformation in how things are cooked. Families are moving, little by little, away from the traditional cow-dung-burners to gas stoves, thanks to the importation of bottled gas. Pressure cookers allow people to cook rice at an altitude of 3,500m.



PICTURE 7: MAIN ROOM FOR THE EASTER- AND SUMMER SEASON, 2015



PICTURE 8: MAIN KITCHEN USED IN BOTH WINTER AND SUMMER, 2017

During the winter, the traditional cow-dung burner is still used, as much for heating as for cooking. Winter is when wheat and barley flours are used together to make soups (*thukpa*) to which is added rehydrated vegetable, usually spinach. These wheat and barley flours are also used in the preparation of leavened breads, *tagi* and *khambir*, or unleavened ones, *tagi shamo*, *tagi thal-Sag* or *thal-thag*. They are also used for a variety of biscuits, *donkyir*, *khura*, *markhur*, (*r*)*tsabkhur*.



PICTURE 9: ZANSKARPA EATING ‘TAGI SHAMO’, 2015



PICTURE 10: COOKING ‘TAGI’ OUTSIDE DURING SUMMER, 2017



PICTURE 11: WOMAN MAKING KAMBIR, 2017

During feasts Zanskarpas (Buddhists and Muslims) still use barley flour today, but its use has become limited in more everyday meals, as we can see from a typical menu for a formal lunch held during the winter. Invitations are sent out a few days before to between twenty and forty women. As they arrive the women sit down together to knit, and card and spin wool; salted tea is served to them immediately. The lunch service

starts at around 11 am with a round of salted tea with soaked dried apricots, *tagi shamo* (also called *chapati*), and melted butter served in a metal bowl. About an hour later, dishes of rice, meat, vegetables and *djo* (fermented yoghurt) are served. The women take out a bag or box they have brought with them and place the cooked apricots as well as the *tagi shamo/chapati* in it. They let the butter harden before also putting it in their containers. They will take this food home and share it with their families. They do the same with most of the meat they are served. This is why, when the lady of the house is preparing the meal, she plans on extra servings. For one or two hours after the meal, the women dance and imitate their men; they use coarse language to talk about the menfolk. In these bawdy exchanges, the only taboo subject is contraception. They drink sweet tea and eat biscuits before going home.

Rice is coming more and more into everyday use all through the year and especially in summer, proof of a deep transformation in eating habits in Zanskar. Even so it remains a rare item at winter feasts and festivals.

III. Rice in Zanskar: From the shop to the pot

Since the installation of the India-sponsored regional administration in Zanskar, a number of government operations have opened there, among them the state-run shop for food and supplies. As members of the Boto/Bozo tribe, Zanskaras enjoy certain benefits, including the provision of ration tickets. Consequently, the state shop has an important place in daily life.

A. Indian state administration in Zanskar

- The Food and Supplies Department of the Indian administration



PICTURE 12: WEIGHING RICE AND WHEAT FLOUR IN THE STATE SHOP, 2004

The state shop provides each family with basmati rice, wheat flour, sugar, and peanut oil. Products are provided proportionately, according to the number of people living in each household, which is ascertained during the census. The children, even if they are studying outside Zanskar, are counted as permanent residents of the household. It is the same for young people who have gone elsewhere in India or abroad to study, their families have them counted as permanent residents. Although the reserved employment policy enables a large number of Zanskaras to come back and live in the valley, civil servants assigned to Zanskar are not all from the valley, and this also creates local demand for products from the plains of India and Deccan.

Since 2007 climate change has shortened the winter period and lengthened the stay of civil servants from other Indian states or from other parts of Jammu-Kashmir Federal State. The development of road and building infrastructures has also brought in labor from outside. These workers often arrive with their families, and this also effects changes in the foods available and the ways in which those foods are prepared. For example, there is the recent development of *daba*, little restaurants where *pakora* (pieces of vegetable or meat, coated in seasoned batter and deep-fried) or *samosa* or *kachori* can be consumed. Just as the Zanskaras have learned to eat these spicy foods,

little by little they have begun to appreciate other imported goods, such as pickles sold in glass jars.

This broader cuisine requires that a variety of vegetables, cattle, and poultry be imported in sufficient quantities to feed the whole population during the summer. Poultry came mainly from Kashmir until summer 2019, but this summer 2020, they were carrying from Himachal Pradesh thanks to the new high road.



PICTURE 13 : ON THE PASS ON THE NEW ROAD FROM PADUM (ZANSKAR) TO MANALI (HIMACHAL PRADASH). 2020.

The main obstacle to importing poultry has been the high altitude; poultry often bleed out and die from the high pressure over the passes. The man in charge of poultry raising told me he has turned to importing eggs, so the chickens are hatched in Zanskar.



PICTURE 14: REARING CHICKENS IN PADUM, 2017

Rice also comes from Kashmir and from other Indian states that produce it in large quantities, such as Himachal Pradesh and Assam. Rice growing usually requires flooded fields, but the Kashmiri rice is dryland rice that nonetheless needs enough regular irrigation to keep the earth moist.



PICTURE 15: WOMEN WORKING IN THE RICE FIELDS IN ASSAM, 2008



PICTURE 16: WORKING IN THE RICE FIELDS IN KASHMIR, 2005

B. Tourism and the normalisation of imported goods

Zanskar was opened to tourism in the 1990s. With the conflict in Kargil in 1999, the Republic of India has been promoting local tourism in Zanskar, and expeditions were developed to traverse the mountain ranges in the region. Over the last ten years or so, many Indians from Kolkata, Mumbai, and Delhi have also come to Zanskar on pilgrimage and to visit the monasteries. An increasing number of Westerners now trek

across the region in search of its spectacular landscapes. According to figures kept by the tourist office, visitors to the region have exceeded thirty thousand per annum over the last few years and this additional population requires new infrastructure that can welcome and feed it.

As a result, Zanskar has seen a flourishing of commerce in virtually all sectors. Padum alone boasts around thirty restaurants and *dabas*, all of which are closed from the end of September to the beginning of June. They are run by migrant workers from Nepal or from the Tibetan refugee colonies in Leh or Dharamsala.



PICTURE 17: ZANSKARPA IN FRONT OF HIS SHOP IN THE OLD PADUM AREA, 2017

A considerable number of shops selling jewellery, fabrics, and wool products have opened next to shops selling a mishmash of mobile phones, coolers, thermos flasks, crockery, and Western fashion items.



PICTURE 18: SOUVENIR AND CLOTHING SHOP, PADUM, 2017



PICTURE 19: SOUVENIR AND BUDDHIST RITUAL SHOP, PADUM, 2017

As mentioned above, chickens are now raised in Padum, but only from June to September. This keeps the butcher shops well stocked during the tourist season. Many fruit and vegetable shops have also opened as well as shops selling foodstuffs and basic products for the home.



PICTURE 20: CLOTHING AND HOME FURNISHINGS SHOP, PADUM, 2017



PICTURE 21: VEGETABLE SHOP IN THE MAIN BAZAAR, PADUM, 2017

Rice and lentils are available throughout the summer in these shops and this enables Zanskarpa families save the rations provided by the state for the winter months.

These shops are mostly frequented by the younger generation. Older residents continue to prefer to consume (*S*)nganphe, and drink salted tea rather than the imported

bottles of Coca Cola, Pepsi, or Mazda (mango nectar) sold in the restaurants and shops in the main bazaar.

IV. Conclusion

Based on these observations in the field, the Zanskarpa year, for Buddhists and Muslims, is divided into two parts, the first being the winter when the use of barley (*(S)nganphe*) is important on an everyday basis, due to climatic conditions and supply issues. For ceremonial exchanges like weddings and funerals among Buddhists and Muslims, and the rituals practiced in Buddhist monasteries, grilled and raw barley are preferred to all other cereals. However, even in winter, on festivals like *Lhossar*, the Tibetan New Year, or Muslim religious festivals such as *l'Aïd el-Kebir* and *Aïd el-Fitr*, rice is the preferred grain for celebratory meals.

During the summer, rice becomes the staple for every meal, where it is accompanied by meat or vegetables. It is the same for festive meals. Once the rituals have been performed, the meals consist of rice and meat (goat or mutton are preferred). Chicken is consumed very little by the Zanskarpas (Buddhists and Muslims); they tend to eat the eggs and leave the meat to foreign migrant workers. Summer brings a high demand for gasoline, which obliges supply trucks to travel more frequently around the valley. The shops stock goods in small quantities delivered by pickup. This way they are not obliged to keep too much in reserve and can avoid being left with unsold stock.

These changes in food supply have only accelerated since first, the start of work on improving the valley's infrastructure and, second, the development of initially Western and now largely national tourism. The older inhabitants who say they cannot digest Indian dishes, continue to consume large quantities of barley (*(S)nganphe*), whereas younger people who have left to study in Srinagar, Jammu, or even Manali, Dehra-Dun or Delhi for a large part of the year, have taken on other eating habits, which they associate with modernity and want to share with their parents when they come home for the holidays. These young people, Buddhists and Muslims, often declared to me that "old people eat *(S)nganphe* but we are more Indian, so we prefer rice." This saying shows how the new generation is building an identity that has slightly shifted from the local territory to the state. This is confirmed and reconfirmed when they get an Indian identity card that refers to them by their state classification, scheduled tribe Boto/Bod.

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