

Keeping Cultural Identity: Challenges and Threats to the Buddhist Cultural Landscape of Upper Mustang in Nepal

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Abstract

North of the mountain giants Annapurna and Dhaulagiri, on a high-lying plateau near Tibet, on Nepalese Territory, lies the former small kingdom of Mustang. Up until May 1992 this 'forbidden kingdom', with its famous earthen-walled capital Lo Manthang, was completely inaccessible. With few exceptions, foreigners were not allowed to enter it. Up to the present time, only a restricted annual number of tourists can visit this area. Mustang is dotted with early Buddhist cave temples as well as century old fortresses. Some of the best preserved ancient monasteries in the Himalayas are found there, which formed an extraordinary Buddhist cultural landscape over the centuries.

Mustang's cultural heritage is to a great degree not remnant of the past but a living culture, where age-old traditions are vibrant and still continue to have clear significance in everyday life of the local inhabitants, called 'Lopa.' Cultural heritage is considered the foundation upon which the identity of the Lopa people is built. They are related ethnically and culturally to the Tibetan sphere of influence. This finds expression in their way of life, their script and their festivals and in particular in their religious belief which is oriented to the Vajrayana Buddhism. The fortress-like former capital Lo Manthang is boasting of a medieval palace, build in the 15th century, and significant Buddhist monasteries dating from the 15th and the 18th century.

In order to safeguard this extraordinary landscape, the capital Lo Manthang was inscribed on the Tentative List of Nepal for future World Heritage nomination in 2008. Currently, discussions with the local Lopa people and the Government of Nepal are continuing to also list a certain area around Lo Manthang, that needs to be designated, as a Cultural Landscape in future. And moreover, this Buddhist landscape could form part of the Heritage List's potential Silk Roads' Corridor area later on.

Mustang, with the Kali Gandaki river valley is bearing all evidences of a highly frequented route through the Himalayas linking with the Silk Road, also due to its easy access, without high mountain passes, facilitating greater interactions between parts of India and Tibet through networks of communication,

pilgrimage and trade. Petroglyphs found along the river bed, more than 3000 years old, confirm the early human habitation of this area.

With the inscription of Lo Manthang on the Tentative List, the uniqueness and the vibrant cultural traditions of the old capital have been accorded official recognition. Mustang has thus become one of the last areas in the world where a specific Buddhist culture is preserved up to the present day.

These values are coming under increasing threat from various factors, most particularly, through the construction of a road through Mustang that was completed recently. This new infrastructure will make a considerable impact on the efforts to protect this ancient landscape and will precipitate significant cultural change and social transformation, which will be assessed in the presentation. Moreover, the increasing labour migration of the Lopa people to foreign countries might lead to a transformation of their cultural identity, and the impact of climate change is another great challenge, since water resources are becoming increasingly scarce, forcing local people to migrate or to resettle in other areas of Mustang. However, as this paper will highlight, both the tangible and the intangible assets of the landscape and heritage sites can be powerful drivers for the development of the whole Mustang region.

Keywords: *Buddhist Cultural Landscape, New Green Road, Cultural Change, Unesco Tentative List, Migration*

Safeguarding Lo Manthang and the Cultural Landscape of Upper Mustang

Legends and myths swirl about the area of Upper Mustang which was also called the kingdom of Lo. Up until May 1992, this 'forbidden' kingdom with its capital, Lo Manthang, was completely inaccessible. Lo is famous for its 6-metre high-rammed earth wall, surrounding the densely inhabited place. The fortress-like capital is boasting of a magnificent medieval palace, build in the 15th century and three significant Buddhist monasteries dating from the 15th and the 18th century.



Fig. 1: The walled capital Lo Manthang

These Gompas, as people here call their monasteries, are housing amazing statues and wall paintings, as well great collections of ancient texts. With few exceptions, foreigners were not allowed to enter the capital. Up to the present time, only a restricted annual number of tourists can visit this area.

Hemmed in by a chain of mountains around 6000 m in height, this former small kingdom juts northwards into the Tibetan plateau. The landscape reveals spires of ochre earth and dramatic rock formations, as well as sandy flats and grassy plains surrounded by rolling hills and mountains. Mustang's cliffs are dotted with caves that were once prehistoric dwellings, some of which are still used for meditation retreats while a few still serve as habitations. Of specific interest are the Buddhist rock cave temple sites that partly only recently have been discovered. Ruins of old fortresses are found throughout Mustang, reminding observers that this entire region was once an important part of a series of independent kingdoms connected to Tibet by language and culture, religion and geography (see Dhungel 2002). Some of the best preserved ancient monasteries in the Himalayas originate from here and formed an extraordinary Buddhist cultural landscape over the centuries.

Until today, Mustang's cultural heritage is to a great degree not remnant of the past but a living culture, where age-old traditions are vibrant and still continue to have clear significance in everyday life of the local inhabitants, called 'Lopa.' Cultural heritage is considered the foundation upon which the identity of the Lopa people is built. They are related ethnically and culturally to the Tibetan sphere of influence.

This historical context still finds expression in the way of life of the inhabitants in Mustang, their written script and their festivals. In particular, this strong connection is evident in their Vajrayana Buddhist oriented religious beliefs and practices.

In order to safeguard this extraordinary landscape, the capital Lo Manthang was inscribed on the Tentative List of Nepal for future Unesco World Heritage nomination in 2008. The inscription on the tentative UNESCO list followed a more than a decade long restoration period of Buddhism in the former kingdom of Mustang, which was initiated after Upper Mustang, the former kingdom of Lo, was opened for tourism in 1992 by the Nepalese Government. Whereas the southern part of Mustang was opened already in the middle of the seventies for tourism, the former kingdom had been a restricted area for decades, because of its closeness to the Tibetan-Chinese border. When Upper Mustang was opened for foreigners many of the ancient Buddhist heritage sites were dilapidating, partly due to lack of support from the Nepalese Government that was oriented towards Hinduism at that time and therefore not very interested to develop the Buddhist heritage of the country. After the opening of the restricted zone for foreigners in 1992 an increasing interest for the former kingdom of Mustang developed, since many tourists knew well about the Tibetan

culture and wanted to support the survival of this ancient heritage. In this way tourism and foreign interest brought financial support into Upper Mustang, which helped the Buddhist culture to be re-established.

Currently, the Nepalese government intends, to include Lo Manthang as a single nomination on the World Heritage List, with the understanding that it could form furthermore part of the Heritage List's potential Silk Roads' Corridor area later on. Besides, also discussions with the local Lopa people and the Government of Nepal are continuing, to probably list a certain area around Lo Manthang, that needs to be designated, as a Cultural Landscape in future.

With the inscription of Lo Manthang on the UNESCO Tentative List, the uniqueness and the vibrant cultural traditions of the old capital have been accorded official recognition. Mustang has thus become one of the last areas in the world where a specific Buddhist culture is preserved up to the present day, with outstanding cultural, spiritual and natural values in a rapidly changing world.

Buddhist Cultural Landscape of Mustang

In this remote part of the world, in a completely isolated state that has lasted for several centuries, the people living here have experienced ideal conditions for safeguarding their religious heritage and their intangible cultural traditions, with specific festivals and ceremonies that link them profoundly with the surrounding landscape and that serve to support their strong sense of identity.

In this regard, the classification of Lo Manthang together with a certain defined area around the capital, as a Cultural Landscape site on the World Heritage List, seems to be an interesting alternative to a single nomination. This potential inclusion as a Cultural Landscape onto the Unesco List would, moreover, take into account the recently identified oldest wall paintings of Nepal in one rock-cave-temple, presumedly from the Pala-Period, as well as the discoveries of several other amazing ancient Buddhist cave temple sites around Lo Manthang. These are sites which show stylistic and iconographic similarities with Buddhist temples in Ladakh, the Spiti valley, Western Tibet and on the Silk Roads of Central Asia.

Regarding specifically the development of artistic influences that radiated from the Silk Roads, through the area of the Guge-Purang kingdom in Western Tibet to Mustang, there is historical research of additional importance carried out by the late Dzongsar Ngari Thingo Rinpoche and the author (see Dzongsar Ngari Thingo, v.d.Heide, 2011; v.d.Heide 2013). This research has proven that the old trade and pilgrimage path through Upper Mustang was one of the ancient Northern Passages linking the Gangetic plains with the Buddhist

holy places, the great Buddhist Universities of India and the area around modern day Lumbini, with Western Tibet and the Silk Roads. Mustang and the Kali Gandaki river valley are bearing all the evidence of a highly frequented route through the Himalayas that served as a link with the Silk Road. Due to its easy access - without the barriers of higher mountain passes, this route evidently facilitated greater interactions between parts of India and Tibet through networks of trade, communication and pilgrimage. Petroglyphs found along the river bed of the Kali Gandaki, more than 3000 years old, confirm the early human habitation of this area (see Pohle, 2000).

As recent research revealed (see Dzongsar Ngari Thingo, v.d. Heide 1998; v.d. Heide, 2006, 2010, 2011, 2012), especially since the 11th century a very important Buddhist cultural landscape evolved in this area, with influences partly from Central Asia, Kashmir, West Tibet and from Eastern India. Over time, a close interaction between man and nature has shaped this cultural landscape, replete with centuries-old monasteries, temples and stupas, as well as recently rediscovered historically significant inhabited caves and cave-temple sites, dating from the 11th century onwards, with marvellously rendered wall paintings and numerous scriptures that have been found. These discoveries underline the importance of Mustang as a spiritual center, with a continuous religious and cultural development from the 11th onwards, culminating in the formation of an independent kingdom in the 15th century, demonstrating the close ties with West-Tibet, Ladakh and, as it seems, with places along the Silk Road.

Especially between the 11th and 13th centuries, famous Buddhist scholars and saints from the Nyingma and Kadampa Traditions as well as from the Sakya and Kagyü Schools, including Atisha (982-1054), Marpa (1012-1097) and Milarepa (1040-1123) passed through Mustang, which was the southernmost border district of the area of Western Tibetan rule. Mustang, in becoming their passage to the Western Tibetan kingdom of Purang-Guge, helped to create a renaissance of Buddhism in Tibet in the late 10th and 11th century, as the late Dzongsar Ngari Thingo Rinpoche was able to prove (Dzongsar Ngari Thingo, v.d.Heide, 2011). On their journeys to and from Western Tibet, these scholars and saints often remained in Mustang for long periods of time. Famed scholars had also travelled through other regions in the same way, such as Ladakh, Kinnaur and Spiti on their way to Purang-Guge, the controlling power over almost all these areas during the 10th and the 12th centuries. In Mustang, under the influence of these Buddhist masters, new temple sites arose and monastic complexes were built, containing impressively painted cult rooms and valuable ornamentation. During this prosperous time many new impulses, mainly from Central Asia via Western Tibet, as well as from Eastern India via the Kathmandu Valley, were transferred to Mustang and became potent influences in the spiritual and artistic development of the time, creating an extraordinary Buddhist cultural landscape over the centuries.



Fig. 2: Cave Temple Mentsün Lhakhang



Fig. 3: Scenes from the life of the Buddha – bow and arrow Shooting

The studies and restoration work carried out by late Dzongsar Ngari Thingo Rinpoche and the author at the cliff cave site Mentsün Lhakhang in Mustang with its extraordinary wall paintings partly from the Pala period, and the discovery of the cave temple sites of Dagrangjung, Konchogling, Chodzong and Rinchenling have cast new light on aspects of the continuous development of early Buddhist art in Mustang from the 11th century on, at a time when it was under the influence of the Purang-Guge rule in Western Tibet. At that particular period religious and artistic influences from places along the Silk Road in Central Asia, as well as through connecting routes via Kashmir and Ladakh found their way into

the Western Tibetan kingdom and have been transferred to Mustang via the Trans-Himalayan paths.

Challenges and Threats

In the mean time, unfortunately the area of the former kingdom of Mustang and the values it is representing are coming under increasing threat from various factors, most particularly, through the construction of a road through Southern and Upper Mustang that recently has been completed. This new infrastructure will make a considerable impact on the efforts to protect this ancient landscape and will precipitate significant cultural change and social transformation. On the one hand, it is much easier now to visit different sites and more remote locations, and furthermore, better educational as well as medical care can be provided now, since schools and hospitals are easier to reach; but this change will also bring many influences from the outside, with unforeseeable results.

Furthermore, the modern advent of tourism since 1992, even though it is a limited one, has brought some western values into this Trans-Himalayan region. Today's well known trekking routes through Mustang were developed along the old trade paths with their fascinating cultural heritage sites. Along with these new influences, an increasing labour migration of the Lopa people to foreign countries can be observed and might lead to a transformation of their cultural identity, which is another threat to the cultural heritage of the people living there. With regards to this, it may be noted that the continuous diffusion of Western values and life-styles plus the general process of globalization that goes along with this, has proven to encourage mobility, and so too migration.

Another threat regarding the cultural identity of the Lopa is the loss of their language. The likelihood that their traditional dialect will be able to carry on into the future has become endangered by the lack of access to education, information and even the lack of wholesome entertainment for their youth in their language. When their children watch and listen to broadcasts on TV and radio in Nepal that are produced exclusively in languages that are not the language of their elders, and when going to school means immersion in an educational system where their language, which is the primary cultural framework of their people, is completely absent, the priceless key to their own rich heritage remains hopelessly out of their reach. Already in some Lopa families who have send their children to boarding schools in Kathmandu, the language loss is so rapid that different languages are in use among the youth and their elders, so that a generation gap appears that can widen beyond repair.

Besides, the impact of climate change is furthermore a great challenge, since water resources are becoming increasingly scarce, forcing local people to migrate to the south or

to resettle in other areas of Mustang, as in the case of the villages of Dhee and Samdzong, since their water sources have been drying up year by year. Samdzong, f. e., suffers since around 15 years from water shortage, and meanwhile, only one water source is left.



Fig. 4: Abandoned fields of Samdzong

Besides, the permafrost is beginning to thaw, with the effect that water drains away or evaporates. As a consequence, the community of Samdzong is relocating their whole village, with the support of foreign aid, to another area in Upper Mustang, which was given to them by the former king of Mustang. A similar relocation program is planned for Dhee. The areas in Upper Mustang that can still be irrigated have been declining dramatically in the last years.

Impact of the Earthquake of 2015

Moreover, the violent earthquake that hit Nepal on April 25th 2015 and its aftershocks have also badly damaged some of the villages in Upper Mustang with their unique vernacular architecture as well as several of the extraordinary heritage places of the former kingdom, including the main icon and largest structure of Lo Manthang, the 5-storied medieval 15th century old Tashi Gephel Phodrang or Gyalkhang (Palace) and the Mahakala Goenkhang of the Choede Monastery, erected in the 18th century in Lo. In the immediate aftermath of the earthquakes the author together with the Representative of Mustang in the Parliament had

carried out an assessment of the affected buildings, monuments and rock cave temples in the former kingdom that also showed that those buildings that had recently been restored were intact, including the two 15th century monasteries of Lo Manthang, where no damages occurred at the architectural structures. Out of 153 households in Lo, 10 of them have sustained serious damages, many others are suffering from cracks in the rammed earthen or dried brick walls and are instable.



Fig. 5: Tashi Gephel Gyalkhang during Tiji Festival

Very sadly, the Palace, the first building to be constructed in the city, which also never had been renovated, is now in a very bad condition. The Gyalpos (kings) of Mustang who used to reside in the Gyalkhang since its construction in the 15th century, are not able to stay inside any more. Its traditional rammed earth walls are full of structural damages, with huge horizontal and vertical cracks. Inside of the building wooden beams are jutting out of the ceiling, and the whole roof is in need of renovation.

Beside the Palace and the Choede Monastery several other ancient monuments and valuable traditional buildings in Upper Mustang are now in need to be restored or renovated, only if they are not demolished and rebuilt, or as in the case of Tetang village, if they are being resettled and reconstructed in an adjacent area.

HimalAsia assisted the local communities to salvage fragments of damaged temples, stabilize vulnerable structures and secure artifacts at temporary storage areas. Especially in the community of the Medieval Earthed Walled City of Lo Manthang, as being a

property on the Nepal Tentative List for future World Heritage Site nomination, it was discussed, moreover, how important it is to apply traditional materials for the renovation and reconstruction of buildings and to sustain the local workmanship in regard of the site authenticity (see v.d. Heide 2008). If, for technical reasons, modern materials need to be used, they should be durable and preferably equivalent to traditional materials. Furthermore, it has to be taken into account that the overall integrity of the heritage site should not be disturbed.

A Challenge after the Earthquake - Building Techniques

Unfortunately, there are a few examples in Lo Manthang already, including the newly built Shedra, a monastic college for monks at the Choede Monastery, where modern materials like cement are employed. After the earthquakes, in all of Nepal the demand for using cement for constructions is rising now, due to the fact that people unfortunately think it is safer than other materials. Also in this context, it is interesting to note that those heritage sites, restored or renovated recently or some decades ago in Mustang in the traditional way are all unharmed.

Whereas destroyed houses in the Kathmandu Valley and surrounding areas can be partly repaired by using various techniques of retrofitting, this is not so easy in the case of vernacular architecture of the traditional buildings in Mustang, using timber, stones, sun-dried bricks and rammed earth techniques. In this regard HimalAsia introduced a structural engineer from Bhaktapur and a rammed-earth-technique specialist from Kathmandu to the Lopa in Upper Mustang, in order to explain and help them to rebuild their houses and temple sites in their traditional techniques - but earthquake proven.

Since their ancient settlement cannot be renovated and repaired any more, the community of villagers of Tetang requested HimalAsia to support them to at least resettle their entire village and introduce alternative building techniques to them. There are sustainable housing models, introduced in Nepal after the earthquakes by UN Habitat and other organizations, using local materials that are adapted to the setting and climate. These housing models are taking into account the need for modernization due to changes in lifestyle; in this context, an applicable technique might be the use of compressed interlocked bricks for rebuilding the destroyed houses of Tetang. HimalAsia is currently carrying out a workshop in Tetang village, introducing the preparation of compressed interlocked bricks that are mixed with local material and around 10 % of cement, building a model two room house together with the community



Fig. 6: Introducing compressed interlocked bricks at a workshop in Tetang

Besides, HimalAsia has begun to carry out practical training workshops in Bhaktapur for carpenters from different areas in Mustang, in order to help them to achieve and improve construction and building techniques. These training sessions are continued during wintertime when many of the Lopa people are descending down from Mustang to stay during the cold season in places like Bouddha or Swayambhu in the Kathmandu Valley.

Moreover, HimalAsia is conducting practical training workshops to introduce documentation concepts, the handling of objects and different preservation techniques to safeguard objects and heritage fragments, since this has been requested from monks and involved families from Mustang. Another aim of these workshops is to increase capacity-building and help developing a strong sense for the cultural significance of the area of Mustang.

Conclusion

Based on the above informations, there is a clear need for protecting the heritage and livelihood of the people living in Upper Mustang. Mustang is not only a very important historical and cultural heritage area, but also one of the most sacred landscapes in the Himalayas. The 2015 devastating earthquakes have ruined and damaged several of the famous heritage sites of Mustang, which is also a significant tourist destination. Besides,

the out-migration of the Lopa people to the South and to other countries will increase, if this area is not supported (see Tulachan 2001). Substantial financial backing and skill based training is therefore imperative for future restoration and reconstruction projects for this region.

It is hoped therefore that the recognition as a World Heritage Site and especially the recognition as a Cultural Landscape on the World Heritage List will make it easier in future not only to preserve the ancient heritage but also to get worldwide more support and create new job opportunities in Upper Mustang to help to counteract this movement. In this way a new quality tourism, with interest in culture and nature, together with trekking tourism in selected areas, which is flourishing in Mustang up to now, could be brought to Upper Mustang. Another challenge is the recently finished green road, which is linking now the remote areas of Mustang with the south of Nepal. In this way it will be much easier in future to visit different sites and places on one hand, but in due course this will also bring many new unforeseen influences from outside. It is hoped that the envisaged inscription of Lo Manthang as a World Heritage Site and an extension as a Cultural Landscape on the UNESCO List will help the local communities of Upper Mustang in keeping a 'healthy' balance between all these challenges and managing their precious heritage for the future, in the best possible way.

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