

Religion and the Snow Leopard in Nepal



by Som Bahadur Ale

A stranger visiting the northwestern regions of Nepal is struck by views of alpine glacier-molded valleys with scattered settlements, and numerous Buddhist monasteries and shrines. Characteristic rows of prayer wheels and whitewashed walls covered with stone slabs inscribed with Tibetan prayers and images of Buddhist deities line the major trails. The settlements themselves are often majestically nestled against rocky crags. Above the settlements, the high alpine grasslands and scrublands, at 4,000-5,000m elevation, support livestock amid herds of the wild blue sheep, stalked by the elusive snow leopard. Such valleys include the Manang, Nar and Phu valleys within the Annapurna Conservation Area, where I worked for several years in the mid-1990's. Age-old cultural practices in these valleys of the snow leopard reflect not only the ways of unique pastoral lifestyle but also a close connection to nature. Here the musk deer is the symbol of prosperity, and snow leopard is the sacred "dog" of the holy mountain god. A British expedition team to Annapurna in the 1960's had to make a hurried exit because villagers thought they would steal their mountain god, and the group was fined for shooting a blue sheep, a locally protected species. Following

significant Chinese presence in Tibet after 1959 there was a heavy influx of Khampa guerrillas, ordinary peasants, and priests (*lamas*) along the border with Nepal. Karma Sonam Rimpuchhe was such a Lama, who fled Tibet more than three decades ago, and was requested by the inhabitants of Phu valley to fill the then vacant post as leader of the great Tashi monastery. Since then, the Lama Karma has preached against hunting, successfully banning it in the entire Phu valley, and his influence has started showing its effect not only in nearby Nar, but also in Manang valley.

"An understanding and appreciation of local culture and religion can contribute to the design of specific conservation strategies that harness conservation-aligned beliefs for the benefit of endangered species such as the snow leopard."

In these northerly societies of Nepal, many indigenous beliefs and shamanistic practices, reflecting local pre-Buddhist traditions, were incorporated and subsequently reworked into the Buddhist pantheon and ritual system. One such ritual connected to the snow leopard and its depredation forbids alpine herders to roast meat, for otherwise the mountain god will send its "dog" (i.e., snow leopard) and one will suffer livestock losses.

There are also stories of great incarnated lamas frequently making visits to Tibet in the form of snow leopards, in search of rare medicinal

herbs or for other tasks. In Manang, many religiously motivated people believe that killing a snow leopard (or domestic cat) is an especially sinful and undesirable act. This is largely because these animals are considered to have taken rebirth in their particular form especially to remove the sins of their previous lives; and killing them means having their previous sins transferred to your own life. Other folklore describes the snow leopard as a "fence" for crops, meaning that, in the absence of snow leopards, livestock would be free ranging and invade crop fields. Folk wisdom thus metaphorically suggests that the presence of snow leopard is an indicator for a good quality of livelihood.

Still today *lamas* are active in preaching the anti-hunting precepts of Buddhism in the remote valleys, but, alas, the loss of livestock due to predation is often so high that villagers' enmity towards snow leopards can not be easily eradicated.

The regional office of the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) of the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation (KMTNC) officially honored the Phu Lama in 1995 for his good works in promoting local conservation initiatives. KMTNC/ACAP work together with local people in acknowledging their beliefs and utilizing their indigenous knowledge in resource conservation.

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