Stories from a Place Called Walung

Jenny Ding

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Stories from a Place Called Walung

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Abstract

The goal of the project is to explore the relationship between people and the natural landscape through storytelling. I’m interested by elements like: terrain, topography, path, wayfinding, natural disasters, weather, natural resources, flora and fauna. How do these elements manifest in people’s oral history, daily lives, and spatial identity? How are these elements and the environment changing, and how are people adapting to these changes? My approach will be to talk to people at Walung about their interactions with elements of the natural landscape, both current and from the past. I will also document my own observations of these elements. Then, I will try to explore how these elements appear in and shape folk stories. From the stories and experiences people share with me, I will create a collection of short stories that attempt to document narratives of the people of Walung in order to paint a picture of space and place.

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Introduction

This project took me to a place called Walung, at an altitude of 3200 meters (10,000 feet), in the farthest reaches of Northeast Nepal. Also referred to as Olanchung Gola, the village currently has 62 households and a population of 260 people (on village records).\(^1\) Another villager though, stated that there are only around 90 people currently at the village.\(^2\) The local villagers share a culture very similar to that of Tibet, in terms of clothing, food, rituals, religion, etc. They speak the Walung-ge language, that some locals refer to as Tibetan or a dialect of Tibetan\(^3\). However, there are many differences between Walung-ge and Tibetan, and the local language is often difficult to write down in Tibetan script\(^4\). Thus, within the stories, whenever words or phrases in the local language appear, the English spellings I use reflect the closest possible fit to the actual pronunciation.

The project is fundamentally one of storytelling. It is my attempt to paint a picture of Walung and to introduce the readers to the villagers, their way of life, and their spatial identity and oral history in relation to the immediate landscape. I originally set out full of creative juices, feeling tired of writing academic research papers and wanting to try something new, something that will give me less of a headache. However, my inner curiosity consumed me entirely, and my experience in Walung turned into a quest for answers and “accuracy”. The process of writing creative non-fiction stories that attempt to accurately depict a place and its people ended up giving me more headaches than writing research papers. How can I, a visitor, depict the culture, traditions, and way of life of a place, after merely witnessing it for two weeks? How can I transcribe the oral traditions and folk tales of a place without knowing the local language? I found myself constantly tempted by the realm of fiction.

Eventually, I came to terms with and embraced the boundaries and beauty of non-fiction. All the dialogue that appears in the stories have been said by villagers of Walung, and all the events and interactions have actually occurred. I tried to present descriptions and observations of experiences and conversations, instead of interpretations and personal opinions. I can only say though, that this project is my best attempt to depict Walung and to retain the original voices of villagers. Most dialogue resulted from a translation by my companion, Chungdak, followed by paraphrasing by me, the writer. There is uncertainty in how much of the original villagers’ voices remain after that process, as fabrication and personal biases by both the translator and writer is inevitable.

Another aspect to note is that although I call my project a collection of short stories, the individual stories themselves are not so much stand-alone pieces. There is somewhat a continuous thread and narrative that ties them together, and the stories are best if read in chronological order.

My hope is that this project will allow readers to discover and witness the diversity and uniqueness of the region and of its people and traditions. It is a celebration of the importance of folk stories, legends, and oral traditions. The process also shines light upon the many interesting discrepancies of villagers’ oral accounts of historical events and folk stories. And lastly, I hope the readers will enjoy witnessing this place called Walung through these stories.

\(^1\) Tsetan Sherpa, 35, Male, Chairman of Walung Village, Nov. 26\(^{th}\), 2018
\(^2\) Tsering Dorjee Bara, 61, Male, Walung Village, Nov. 15\(^{th}\)-27\(^{th}\), 2018
\(^3\) Tseden Dolkar, 25, Female, Walung Village, Nov. 15\(^{th}\), 2018
\(^4\) Tenzin Chungdak Bhotia, 22, Male, Walung Village, Nov. 16\(^{th}\), 2018
1. Tapethok
2. Lelep
3. Lungthung
4. Iladanda
5. Zongnyi
6. Thwan Lasey
7. Walung
8. Ghunsa
9. Yangma

10. Shingzema Lake
11. Shingzema
12. Dilma
13. Mauma

*Note: The Tamor River runs the whole length of the valley along the route we took.*
A Place Called Walung

“A long time ago… I apologize for not knowing exactly when. You see, not many things were written down, so what I am telling you is only from what I heard.” But yes, a long time ago, hunters from Tibet followed an animal called the wa. They followed the wa to a place people called Peemo, then to Zashapo, and then, they reached here. The hunters decided to settle, and they named this place Walung, or the place of wa. You want to know what the wa looks like? Sorry, I cannot tell you much because I have never seen one before. Probably only the old people know a lot about the wa.”

“The wa? Oh, yes, yes, the wa. I have never seen one before,” an old Momola started to say. “I don’t know what the wa looks like, but I do know that this place used to be filled with people. But then… more tea? But then people started building houses and cutting trees. There are less wa now…less wa now.”

“I know what the wa looks like! I have seen one with my own eyes!” another villager said. “It is a dog-like animal with red fur and white fur on its belly. And a silver tail! Looks like a jackal, or maybe a small wolf. I heard they are the original inhabitants of this land. I believe they mainly feed on abra rodents that look like rabbits without tails. Maybe they also eat the wild bee honey. You can see them during the wintertime—if you’re lucky, that is. But too bad they are hunted for their fur. I heard people make hats out of them that goes for a pretty good price.”

“Wa looks like a dog. Or maybe a fox. The males are all white, I think, and the females are red and white. They eat the remains of other animals and I was told that they don’t kill and hunt on their own.”

“I saw one from far away. Oh, it was moving so fast! I only saw the white tail. That’s all I can tell you.”

“The wa…hmm… I have seen many wa but I have never killed one before since I am a disciple of the Buddha. I try to stop other people from killing them, too. They have red bodies, pointed ears, and the tip of their tail is white. They’re almost as big as dogs. The males have striped bodies and little white spots on their faces. There are many around the nomadic settlements. During snowfall, I often see their footprints. The wa around Walung are those that live in higher altitudes, and the ones that live in lower altitudes are the red pandas. Do you know the red panda? The wa and red pandas are relatives, you see.”

“I, too, have seen a wa before. They sometimes come near the village. Wa have a red body and a white-tipped tail facing downwards. They don’t look like red pandas. A wa is almost as big as a dog. Looks like one, too.”

“Red? No, no. I saw a photo from my friend. Looked like a brown dog to me,” another villager said.

“I have seen them before in the forest. There are still some wa around. They look like foxes with a brown-yellowish color. A bit smaller than dogs, I would say.”

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5 Kushu Bhula (Jamyang Chomphel), 71, Male, Walung Village, Nov. 24th, 2018
6 Tashi Sherpa, 38, Male, Walung Village, Nov. 18th, 2018
7 Lung means stone in the Limbu (native people to Taplejung and eastern Nepal) language. The Limbu people are believed to be the first people who moved to this land from Tibet.
8 Tibetan word for grandmother. People use Momola to also address senior women from the generation of their grandparents.
9 Rhila, 80, Female, Walung Village, Nov. 15th, 2018
10 Tsering Dorjee Bara, 61, Male, Walung Village, Nov. 15th, 2018
11 Dhongdoo, Dandu, 79, Male, Walung Village, Nov. 18th, 2018
12 Yeshi Dolma, 30, Female, Walung Village, Nov. 23rd, 2018
13 Sonam Dophyal, 75, Male, Shingzema Settlement, Nov. 19th, 2018
14 Chungdak, 45, Male, Walung Village, Nov. 25th, 2018
15 Nurbu Dhundup Sherpa, 21, Male, Shingzema Settlement, Nov. 20th, 2018
“Their body is yellow, tail is white. Tak tak reh\textsuperscript{16}, \textit{wa} is a red fox.”\textsuperscript{17}

“The \textit{wa} of Walung… it is a chicken. Yes, a chicken,” said a villager from Lelep\textsuperscript{18}.

“There is an old saying I just remembered that goes: \textit{jhyangdang la wa gyawa la duwa nga la nomok meh}, which means if the \textit{wa} cries in the forest, I, the traveler, won’t have any bad luck,”\textsuperscript{19} said Amala\textsuperscript{20} during dinner-time. “You want to know what the \textit{wa} sounds like? Ask Pala.”

“The \textit{wa} sounds like ‘koot kook, woo koot’, and they also sometimes yell like wolves,”\textsuperscript{21} said Pala\textsuperscript{22}.

“The \textit{wa} sounds like a dog barking,”\textsuperscript{23} said Popola\textsuperscript{24}.

“‘The \textit{wa} sounds like ‘waaaaaaaaaaaa’, like a small kid crying,”\textsuperscript{25} said Chochola\textsuperscript{26}.

“Hmm…I’m pretty sure the hunters from Tibet followed a deer, a stag, to Walung. They didn’t follow a \textit{wa}. We call stags \textit{shawa}. This place used to be called Shawalung, which later people started calling Walung,”\textsuperscript{27} said a monk. “Nothing is written in the books though, so no one really knows for sure.”

\textsuperscript{16} Walung-ge (and Tibetan) phrase for “right” or “exactly”  
\textsuperscript{17} Tsetan Sherpa, 35, Male, Chairman of Walung Village, Nov. 26\textsuperscript{th}, 2018  
\textsuperscript{18} Village two days hike away from Walung towards the southwest  
\textsuperscript{19} Bhomo Walung, 60, Female, Walung Village, Nov. 16\textsuperscript{th}, 2018  
\textsuperscript{20} Tibetan word for mother. People use Amala to also address women from the generation of their parents.  
\textsuperscript{21} Tseri ng Dorjee Bara, 61, Male, Walung Village, Nov. 24\textsuperscript{th}, 2018  
\textsuperscript{22} Tibetan word for father. People use Pala to also address men from the generation of their parents.  
\textsuperscript{23} Dandu Dhongdor, 79, Male, Walung Village, Nov. 18\textsuperscript{th}, 2018  
\textsuperscript{24} Tibetan word for grandfather. People use Popola to also address senior men from the generation of their grandparents.  
\textsuperscript{25} Tsetan Sherpa, 35, Male, Chairman of Walung Village, Nov. 26\textsuperscript{th}, 2018  
\textsuperscript{26} Tibetan word for older brother. People use Chochola to also address older men from their own generation.  
\textsuperscript{27} From conversation with Kushu Bhula (Jamyang Chomphel), 71, Male, Walung Village, Nov 24\textsuperscript{th}, 2018
The Road to Walung

I didn’t follow a *wa*, a stag, or a chicken to Walung, but it certainly did feel like I was always following a Chungdak and a Coleton. I was constantly lagging behind my two other companions, struggling to keep up as we ascended the hills.

“Look! It’s Thwan Lasey! The Walung entry gate!” Chungdak’s voice carried down from above the slope. I looked up from my seemingly infinite frame of vision: the pebbles, earth, hiking boots, and two walking sticks. There, between the foliage and branches of trees growing on large moss-covered boulders, I saw an opening, almost like a cave’s, with light shining in. Colorful prayer flags and white *khataks*28 tied all over the branches shaped and framed the entryway. Suddenly, my pack seemed lighter and my fatigue faded. I rushed up the slope out of curiosity and excitement for what lied beyond the gate; and as I passed through the threshold, I saw a red structure in the distance, perched on a sloping hill.

“That is the gompa29! You see that red gompa there? We’re here! We’re at Walung!” I heard Chungdak say as I was mesmerized by the scene before me. The landscape seemed to suddenly have changed. The footpath was no longer surrounded by trees but by low-growing shrubs and rocks, giving us an unobstructed view of the river, hills, and Walung.

“Hang in there, just a 30 more minute hike to Walung,” said Chungdak.

“What?! That will take me an hour!”

It was day five, the final day, of our journey to Walung. When we planned the trip back in Kathmandu, I had no idea what I was getting myself into. I didn’t anticipate the extent of the challenges and wonders that would come. It was also in Kathmandu where I met Chungdak for the first time. He was born in Walung and moved to Kathmandu in 2002, with his family, when he was just 6 years old. Now, he is a college student and aspiring businessman. Having returned to Walung earlier this year in April, he was well informed about wayfinding and well acquainted with the villagers of Walung. In fact, it seemed as if every

28 Tibetan ceremonial scarf

29 Tibetan monastery
villager we met was somehow related to him; either an aunt, uncle, cousin, etc. I grew into this habit of asking him whether someone is his relative or not whenever we were introduced to new villagers. The answer was always: “Actually…” he pauses for a moment to think, “Yes. He is the brother of the husband of my aunt from my mom’s side of the family,” or “Yes, he is my half cousin’s wife.” There were those few rare occasions when he answered, “Actually…nope,” where I was filled with amazement. “Woah…finally someone not related to you.” Anyhow, Chungdak was a very cheerful young man, who was eager to help and support us in every way possible. He was the perfect companion, and one we couldn’t have pulled off this journey without.

And then, of course, there’s Coleton, an equally talented young man obsessed with linguistics and endangered languages. I would have never bothered to notice the fascinating nuances of the Walung-ge language if he wasn’t around. Coleton sports an amazing volume of facial hair (for local standards), and his beard and mustache never fail to be the first remark a villager says upon meeting us. His almost-mangled appearance earned him the nickname “Rimi”, a word that literally means “wild man” or yeti. A villager was trying so hard to explain to us what a rimi looked like. After thinking and failing to come up with descriptions, he pointed at Coleton and said, “Looks just like him.”

The journey started when Chungdak, Coleton and I hopped on a 12 hour bus ride from Kathmandu eastward to Birtamod, where we stayed our first night. Then bright and early in the morning, we got on a nine-hour jeep ride that took us north on winding mountain roads and through dense forests to Taplejung, a pleasant, small city nestled within and surrounded by hills and mountains. We rested there for a night and enjoyed our first whisk of chilly mountain air and first taste of drinkable fountain water. In the morning, we again departed early on another jeep ride up north for five hours. The concrete paved road ended very early on in the ride, and our jeep traversed through roads paved instead with rocks, holes, and bumps. By the end of the trip, we’d been tossed around so much that we were bruised from head to toe in the places where our bodies bumped the car door.
Upon reaching Tapethok by noon, we were all relieved that we were done with jeep rides—at least, until the return trip. Tapethok is a small village sitting by the banks of Tamor River and is the starting point where travelers must begin trekking. We planned for a simple two-hour trek northeastward to Lelep on our first day by foot. The path was maintained well and was lined with flat rocks and wide footpaths, allowing us to reach Lelep by early afternoon. Lelep is a relatively large village, with many scattered houses and agriculture fields and terraces. After a night’s rest, we continued trekking north, past Lungthung village, where we briefly stayed for tea, to Iladanda village. The villages we passed through got higher and higher in elevation but smaller and smaller in size. Iladanda village consists of only two families, one of which kindly hosted us for the night.

As we were resting, preparing for the longest, hardest, and steepest hike so far on the following day, I couldn’t help but feel a bit confused and disoriented. At Iladanda, we were surrounded by lush, green forests. The weather was mild, with no signs of snowfall anytime soon. Villagers had animals like goats, pigs, and chicken, and had agricultural terraces growing crops like corn and cardamom. People even had wooden logs for bees to harvest honey. But Chungdak was telling me about Walung’s extremely cold weather, snow mountains, and yaks. I just couldn’t wrap my head around how, within just a single day of trekking, we could possibly reach a place so vastly different. I started to doubt if I’ll even get to use the thick layers of clothing I packed and carried all the way here. Curiosity and confusion only made me more excited for the last stretch of our journey to Walung.

The next morning, we set out when the sun came out, scratching our plan to leave at 5:30 am, when it was still dark. The villagers warned us of wild animals and treacherous sections of the path next to cliffs. We took their advice immediately. I mean, who doesn’t like sleeping in? We traversed up and down (mostly up though) hills along the Tamor river, occasionally crossing a few metal bridges and waterfalls. The path stayed close to the river, which was the easiest route topographically, given it lied within the natural valley formed by the river.
Along the footpath, we passed a few Walung villagers traveling to Taplejung. They were leaving Walung for the winter. It made me think about how inconvenient it must be for villagers to always have to trek such long distances in order to reach other villages. One villager from Walung told me that many do trade in Taplejung and get their food supplies there as well. Before the jeep road from Taplejung to Tapethok was built, people had to walk all the way from Walung to Taplejung! The path back then also went along a different route and was more difficult. He told me that just looking down at the cliffs made him dizzy.30

“When we moved to Kathmandu,” Chungdak started to say while we rested on a huge rock, “I remembered the path being much harder. There were also no metal bridges back then, and I heard that the wooden bridges often collapsed during rainy seasons. As you’ve probably noticed, there’s also a vast different from one village to another around here. The higher you go, the less plants you’ll see growing around. And in Walung, it is mostly rocky hills. There are some forests in some of the hills, but there aren’t that many plant types. Then, if you keep on going north towards the nomadic settlements, there are no trees there and even fewer plant types.”

As we trekked onward, slowly but surely the landscape started to transform before our eyes. The vegetation gradually changed from deciduous trees, bamboo, and ferns to evergreen trees like rhododendrons and conifers. The evergreen trees gradually became more and more dwarfed. After we passed Thwan Lasey, the entry gate, low growing shrubs like juniper, barberry, and mountain ash replaced the trees along the path. From there, the path took us along the slopes above the banks of the Tamor river. And sure enough, after an hour of inching forward and sitting down for rests, we arrived in Walung.

30 Dandu Dhongdoe, 79, Male, Walung Village, Nov. 18th, 27th, 2018
Arrival

Upon entering Walung, I saw wood and stone houses clustered closely together. The whole village ground was covered in stones of various shapes and sizes, and the houses were built directly on the stones. On the eastern side of the village is a hill of loosely-packed rhododendron trees that turn sparser and sparser, until giving way to rocks higher up in the hill. The gompa is on that very same hill, with a stairway lined with colorful flags leading to it. On the west side of the village lies a cliff where the land seems to have slid and fallen down into the valley of the river. On the other side of the river, another tall hill full of evergreen trees rises high up into the sky. And in the north, a distant mountain of bare rocks can be seen between the valley. The sun has already set, and clouds covered the sky and fog permeated the air, giving a rather gloomy and dark atmosphere to the village. The coherent color of the stone and houses added to the gray-ness. I was overwhelmed by the ambiance and scenery of the village, unlike any of the places we passed along the way. Oh and of course, I saw yaks. Later, I found out from villagers that their ancestors settled here not only because Walung is a strategic spot for trade, but also because this is the furthest south their yaks can live before it gets too warm. As soon as we dropped our packs and sat down, the cold started creeping in on us. On our first night in Walung, I realized that I indeed needed those five layers of shirts and jackets and three layers of pants I packed.

During our two weeks at Walung, we stayed with Chungdak’s aunt’s family. They were such hospitable and caring hosts, treating us like family members and providing us with a place we undoubtedly started referring to as home. Within the family, there is Amala Bhomo, who makes the best chura I’ve ever tasted. After finding out about my love for vegetables, she always cooked up delicious cabbage, spinach, radish, and carrot from the family’s beautiful, large greenhouse garden. There is also Pala Dorjee, who calls me bhomo, the Walung-ge word for daughter or girl. Pala is extremely knowledgeable about the village,
perhaps because his father was one of the village monks. Pala is also one of the main Cham mask dancers at the village festivals, and he teaches the youngsters the dances. The Cham dance occurs during Buddhist festivals at the gompa, where the dancers wear elaborate masks and costumes representing deities. And then, there is Achala Dolkar, who is an aspiring nurse. She is currently in Walung on a holiday from her studies in India. The neighbors and villagers will often frequent the house, coming to Achala for checkups on things like blood pressure.

Upon our arrival, they loaded us up with delicious food, tea, snacks, and thick blankets for the night. In the center of the house lies a firewood stove. We sat around the fire, telling our new family members about our long journey. Rain droplets started to hit the wooden roof planks above. Amala told us that it hadn’t rained in Walung for the longest time. It had just been cloudy, and they hadn’t seen the sun in ages either. Achala then told us that at least with the rain, we will be able to see some snow mountains in the morning. And indeed, on the following morning, the hills and mountains were covered in snow. But to everyone’s surprise, the sky was mostly clear, and the sun shined brightly onto the village. In fact, starting the day after we arrived in Walung, we had clear and sunny days for the entire time we stayed. Villagers always joke that when the weather is bad, it must be because some tourist or visitor brought it. In that case, we definitely brought the good weather with us.

It took a few days for me to adjust to the weather here. In the early morning, it is extremely cold until the sun rises above the eastern hill. The first ray shines on our house at 7:25 am. As the day goes on, we gradually start shedding our layers of clothing. At this altitude, one can definitely walk outdoors at noon in just one layer of clothing in the heat of the sun. The villagers are also out and about during the periods of sunlight, some of them working outdoors, some just sitting and chatting. But the second the sun goes behind the western hill at 2:32 pm, it starts to get colder and colder by the minute. And villagers start to gradually migrate indoors. By around 4:00 pm, we’re basically

33 Jhangchup, 35, Male, Shingzema Settlement, Nov. 19th - 21st, 2018

Snow and Sun
stuck sitting next to the fire from the stove for warmth, until we go to bed.

The house we stayed in is also made of wood and stone. In fact, most of the houses in Walung are built in the same traditional style, aside from the few new concrete buildings. Pala told us that traditional houses are stronger for earthquakes since they are wood-joint structures without a single nail. However, building these traditional houses is getting expensive, as they require huge wood boards and pillars that villagers have to cut with axes. There’s also not as many large trees around anymore.

“Now, people ship in concrete and metal with the mules, which is much easier than trying to find a nice big tree and cutting it up,” Pala told us. He continued to tell us that most of the houses in Walung are more than 60 years old, some maybe 100 years old. That is why every two-three years, people have to repair parts of the roofing, balcony, etc. That is also why some people are tempted to just tear the old house down and build a concrete one instead. People who have huge land might keep the traditional house and build a concrete one next to it.

“These traditional houses make more sense though. You see, in the ground floor, we store all the raw food. In the middle floor is where we live, and in the attic, we store things like the fermented grains for alcohol. So, to simplify it, the three levels are for eating, sleeping, and drinking! Well you wouldn’t really eat in the storage below or drink up in the attic, but you get my point.”
Fixing the Balcony Roof

Houses of Walung
**Pala’s Night-time Stories**

When we sat around the fire one night, Pala Dorjee started to tell us stories of Walung:

“In the beginning, there were only seven families living in Walung. They were called the “Sath Paschime”, or the seven families from the West. These seven families were very rich families with enormous wealth. They were called the Shung, Gyang, Bitsari, Naike, Bara, Kalapari, and Goar families. They were also called the Shiwa, which means upper class family. Other families, referred to as Bhojeawa, started to move in as well. These families were considered the lower class. The people living in Walung now are mostly descendants of the servants of rich people in the past. After the rich left the village, the poor started a living raising animals. Later, the poor also made some wealth and now, villagers sent their children out of the village for education and for a better future. So, we must work hard when it’s time to work and enjoy when we have free time.

“As for the origins of the Diki Chholing Gompa, there was a monk who goes by the name, Woesar Dorjee. He is believed to have come from Sikkim or Bhutan, maybe around 500 or 600 years ago. He meditated in the western hill opposite to Walung, called Bhadak, and felt a need to build a monastery. In order to find the perfect location, he meditated in the eastern hill, where the current monastery stands, and looked towards Bhadak. But he didn't discover any signs. Then, he returned to Bhadak to meditate, and one night, he noticed a fire burning on the eastern hill across. He told the villagers that this must be a very auspicious place to build a monastery. While building the monastery, various miracles happened. When they were digging the land, they found different objects made of bronze, copper and other metals. Those were the twelve tools for carving stupas and statues. They also found four Guru Rinpoche statues and other religious statues. Then, they dug up something that looked exactly like a yak’s tongue. These objects are still housed in the gompa today. But that is not all; while the villagers built one meter by the day, some deities built two meters by the night. The villagers were astonished by these miracles. After the completion of the monastery, they felt the need to introduce statues for the monastery from Tibet. They brought a statue of Guru Rinpoche with his two disciples beside him.

“Walung is also called Byung Shawalung, which means: land with a lot of holy places. There are many pilgrimage sites around Walung. There is the hill called Zadak, where the higher monks opened a door to a hill with a key. And in the hill, they found many religious instruments like conch trumpets, snare drums, etc. On every tenth day of the Tibetan month, people would perform rituals with these instruments. There’s also a holy place called Kyipuk, where there used to be a monastery even older than the one Woesar Dorjee built. Now, only the remains can be seen, and it is hard to find. But from the remains, seven copper plates emerged. Those were probably used by the ancient monks to eat food. The first man who found the plates took them home with him. But bad things started happening to him and his family. Later, he went back to Kyipuk to return the plates and asked for forgiveness. Now, if you happen to find ancient copper plates, remember not to let your greed get the better of you.

“I learned all these stories from the higher monks back in the days when I was young. We also worship Dorjee Shonu, who is the main deity at our gompa, on every auspicious day of the Tibetan calendar. The Dorjee Shonu dance occurs during the festivals. We have a statue of Dorjee Shonu and also a costume. I perform the dance during the festivals. You see… when I dance, I need to get deep into it and have full faith in the deity. I recite my prayers before I do every dance. That way, my dance will make the heavens happy and will also help people find their paths in the afterlife.

The kani gates were built way long ago to protect our village, to bring good fortune and keep bad omens away. There are many paintings of deities on the walls, and people spin the prayer wheels as they pass through. There are three kani, two on the north side and one near the center of the village. When people passed away, they would be taken under the gates for a good afterlife. The kani were built along the road so people had to pass them. In the past, people had to go through the kani to go to the gompa. Then, they wouldn’t have a tough time climbing up to it. Now the new road to the gompa as well as the big road going to Tibet both don’t go through the kani anymore.
“Oh! How can I forget about Chereshi Thungsa, the birthplace of Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of compassion! The birthplace of Chereshi is near Dangjiye, the grassland on the southeastern hill where villagers cut grass to store for winter. The tree where Chereshi was born was a tea tree and the leaves were used for tea in the past. But now, we have tea from Tibet and from Taplejung. So, the story goes that a long time ago, when a servant went to cut wood, he found a mushroom with scripts written on it. He looked carefully and saw that the scripts read "om mani padme hum." Then, he brought the mushroom to the village. In the village, the rich people offered him money for the mushroom. I find that very embarrassing. Then, the monks came to know about the mushroom and suggested safekeeping it in the monastery. Next to the same tree where the mushroom grew, a conch emerged. The woodcutter who found the conch didn't know about mushroom. So, he broke the conch with his axe. After that, the place never showed any good signs or miracles. Later, the villagers donated money and built a silver box to keep the mushroom in it. You saw it when you visited the gompa the other day, right? When it comes to worshipping, the people of Walung have a deep connection with Chereshi. Some other people might not believe in the miracle of the mushroom, but the people of Walung have a deep faith in it. Someone once built a hut and hanged prayer flags at the birth site, but that is all gone now. You’ll never find the Chereshi birth place on your own. The footpath going there is no longer visible since people rarely go there anymore. It is only an hour hike from Dangjiye, but even villagers might spend a whole day just to find it. You could go try if you’re really that determined.

“Lasso. That is all that I can remember for now. Oh, it has been a long time since I heard or told these stories.”

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34 Walung-ge word for birth place.
35 Mantra associated with Avalokiteshvara
36 Tibetan word for “okay”, “alright”, “yes”, or in this particular case, “that’s it”
37 Stories told by Tsering Dorjee Bara and translated by Tenzin Chungdak Bhotia
Pilgrimage to Shingzema Lake

Don’t call it the land of wa,
Call it the land of pilgrimage.
(Walung masung nelung sung)
Walung Proverb

“What was that? Oh, you’re asking about Shingzema Lake…
Yes, yes. I have been there when I was very young…very young,” said Popola Dandu, the oldest man currently residing in Walung. People refer to Popola as Dlongdo Dandu, meaning Dandu from “that” (north) side of the village. “Oh, there are many stories about the lake, you see. It is a very holy place. When you visit, you might see extraordinary and miraculous things. Yes, yes. When I was there, I saw a huge white building in the water. It had many prayer flags and khataks hanging on the walls. Yes, yes. That was what I saw in the water. I heard that lucky people will see a bull emerge from the water. The bull will drop golden dung. They say that there was a man who saw the bull at the lake. But he ran away. Then, a monk also saw the bull. But he didn’t run away. He recited some prayers. How did the story go after that? I don’t remember… Well, anyways, just go to the lake and see for yourself.”

A few days after arriving in Walung, we decided to journey north to Shingzema, a settlement where nomads from Walung stay with their yaks. We planned for a three-day, two-night trip. Aside from Chungdak and Coleton, Achala Dolkar and Nurbu, a young man from Walung, also joined us. Nurbu went to the same school as Chungdak in Kathmandu. Earlier this year, he spent five months living in Shingzema, and he knows the area very well. Without him, we probably would have lost our way.

The five of us headed north, along the road to Tibet. I was very surprised by the road, particularly by how much it contrasted with the road we trekked coming to Walung from Tapethok. This road was wide, wide enough for vehicles. It was covered by pebbles and rocks and was easier to walk on. The road was also right along the banks of the river. We were walking right by the waters instead of on the hills above. I later found out from villagers that this is an ongoing project by Chinese contractors to build a road for vehicles from the border of Tibet.

We ascended along this road for the whole morning, until we reached Dilma, another nomadic campsite that marks the point where the road to Shingzema diverts eastward, away from the road to Tibet. We stopped there to eat some snacks and rest. No nomads were staying there at that time, but there was a small hut with a firepit that gave us some shelter from the chilly wind. We were already at a much higher elevation.

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38 Chungdak, 45, Male, Walung Village, Shingzema Settlement, Nov. 21st, 25th, 2018
39 Tsetan Sherpa, 35, Male, Chairman of Walung Village, Nov, 26th, 2018
elevation than Walung, and it’s almost like you can feel a difference in the air. There were also more visible snow mountains around us. We rested at Dilma for the longest time, since Nurbu kept on telling us to stay a bit longer in order to delay our arrival in Shingzema.

“If we get there too early, they’ll make me go fetch the yaks,” he explained. “Just a bit longer, we should stay here. Let us reach there around four or five.”

After completely resting up in Dilma, we left the main road for good and traveled along footpaths and grass fields towards the east. We cut through hills along a river that flowed from the east and joins into the Tamor river near Dilma. Along the main road, there were still some evergreen trees, but that got replaced completely by low-growing, fragrant juniper and rhododendron shrubs, grass, and moss. There were frequent stone cairns marking the path and guiding us along the banks of the river.
I was slowly advancing forward, taking photos of the beauty surrounding us. Then suddenly, I heard Chungdak yelling out at me from the distance.

“Jenny! Stop taking pictures and get over here! There are scary dogs!”

At first, I thought he was joking. But then I looked over and saw the whole crew standing on top a huge rock. Some ditched their bags beneath the rock. I realized that they were probably chased up there by the dogs. And here we are, I guess. We arrived in Shingzema.

We were greeted by Achala Yangdon, who chased away the dogs for us. She was staying at Shingzema with her husband, father-in-law, and older brother-in-law. She was planning to leave Shingzema a few days later to make a trip to Ghunsa, where she was born. Achala Yangdon invited us into their tent and immediately started preparing tea for us. We huddled around the fire for warmth. Soon after, her father-in-law also walked into the tent.

Father-in-law told us his name is Dongbo Tse, which apparently means “Tree-top”. He persistently told us that “Tree-top” was his real name, until at one point he finally revealed his name, Sonam Dopgyal. I later found out that Pala Tree-top is Chungdak’s uncle, which then makes basically everyone else Chungdak’s cousins.

“My son said he saw you guys while he was fetching yaks near Dilma. He thought you were just some other tourists. Said he saw a Korean-looking lady taking pictures and a rimi resting on a rock, so he didn’t go down to greet you guys,” Pala Tree-top said. “But where were you three?” he asked, looking over to Chungdak, Nurbu, and Achala Dolkar.

“Oh, we were probably in the hut at that moment.”

Pala Tree-top continued to tell us that he is 120 years old and was born in America. He has been traveling around the world but didn’t have enough money for flights anymore, so he started being a nomad here, in Shingzema. He has seen Coleton and me before in the streets in America, but we didn’t notice him back then since there were too many people. Pala Tree-top has been a nomad for 30 years and lived in America for 30 years. If you see a red airplane flying around
here, it is his, from Shingzema Airlines. After Pala Tree-top found out about our plans to visit the lake, he turned a bit more serious and started telling us about Shingzema Lake.

“When you visit the lake tomorrow, put a khatak at the stupa, then do some kora around the lake. There is a place to offer things as well. If you offer money, you will become wealthy. If you offer food, you will always have abundant food supplies. You see, the blessings you receive from the lake depends on the object that you offer. Bhomo, you have a pretty nice-looking camera over there. You should offer your camera at the lake. Then, you will get a lot of good photos in the future.

“The lake was formed a very long time ago. How? Perhaps from rainfall. There are many different deities that resides in the lake. I don’t recall their names anymore. But one of the deities might look like you,” Pala Tree-top said, looking over at Coleton. “And one of the female deities might look like you, Bhomo. At the lake, there is a place where an elephant rests within the water. Now, if you pray with a pure heart, maybe the water will start to bubble, and maybe the elephant will emerge from the lake. Then, maybe it will start to poop golden dung. You can also try wrapping a coin in khatak and throw it in the lake. If it sinks deep, that means you will have a long life. However, if it floats, your life will be very short. If you are a lucky person, the lake will show you your next life, your future and how long you will live. Just look carefully into the water tomorrow. Any wishes you make will also come true. However, people should never pollute and throw trash in the lake. That will bring about extremely bad luck. If you swim in the lake, you will drown and die since the gravity force is too strong. Remember, don’t ever get into the lake! Once you enter, you won’t be able to get out as the lake will pull you down deeper and deeper to the very bottom. So, be careful and don’t slip and fall into the lake. I also heard that before, a sheep emerged out of the lake and people killed and ate it. Then those people had really terrible lives. If they didn’t kill the sheep, they could’ve had really lucky and wealthy lives. If you are alone at the lake, you might also see someone who looks like you emerge from the lake. That’s about all that I can tell you.”

After listening to Pala Tree-top’s legends of the lake while sitting around the tent’s fire, the five of us moved over to the dried grass storehouse, a little hut made of stone and wood. We cushioned the ground with grass and laid out our sleeping bags on top. It was surprisingly very comfortable and soft. But very, very cold.

The following morning, we set out on a “simple two-hour hike” to the lake, as Nurbu described it, that turned out to be an arduous four-hour hike. It was, by far, no doubt, the most difficult thing I have ever done. It started out well, as we were only walking east along the river, not covering much elevation. Near the bridge crossing the river to its southern bank, lies a stone stupa.

We stopped there to perform a ritual, and to ask for permission to visit the lake. We lit up a small fire at the base of the stupa and burned saang incense, using dried up juniper and rhododendron branches and leaves that we collected from the surroundings. The smoke flowing out gave a very fragrant smell and is considered pure. We then added some tsampa, butter, and jhasomaso on the burning saang as a means of offering. Each of us put yakah on one of the stones of the stupa, making a row of five small dots with butter from bottom to top. Then, we each wrapped some rice in one end of a khatak, made wishes and prayers, and tied the khatak to the stone stupa. The ritual continued as we put some tsampa in our right hands and lifted it into the air three times chanting: “Soosoooooo…soosoooooo…soosoooooo…”, a ritual phrase calling out to the heavens and deities. Then we threw the tsampa in the air, saying: “Kyi kyi so so lha gyallo!” “Hail the heavens!

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40 Circumambulation around religious sites, monuments or objects
41 Incense made of dried plant material
42 Roasted and ground barley flour
43 Mixture of Tibetan tea and butter
44 Patterns and designs made from butter or wheat flour for good luck and protection, usually a part of rituals and ceremonies. Villagers would put yakah on the wooden eaves in the interior of their houses during Losar New Year Bhomo Walung, 60, Female, Walung Village, Nov. 15th-27th, 2018
Victory to the gods!” We rubbed the remaining *tsampa* of good fortune from our hands onto each other’s shoulders. We asked the stupa for permission to visit the lake, saying: “*Tsomja nang rok nang.*” “Please let us visit the lake.”

“You see,” Nurbu started to explain, “Not all pilgrims and visitors make it to the lake. Some find the hike too difficult and have to turn back. Others might get lost. That is why we perform this ritual. Why we must pray. But don’t worry, I have been to the lake many times. Just follow me and you’ll make it there for sure. Just follow me.”

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45 Tenzin Chungdak Bhotia, 22, Male, Kathmandu, Walung, Shingzema Settlement, Nov. 6\textsuperscript{th}-Dec. 8\textsuperscript{th}, 2018
After the ritual, we crossed the bridge and headed towards the southern hills, where we started the long ascent. Every time we came close to surmounting a hill, Nurbu would say, “Almost there!” But then, whenever we reached the top of that hill, he would point to the next one in front of us, saying, “Just over that next hill!” The altitude did not help. The clouds were floating around beneath us. We were climbing to a lake at an altitude of 4500 meters (14,800 feet), and I had to stop every 10 steps or so just to stand for a moment and try to breathe properly. It made me start to doubt if I prayed hard enough at the stone stupa.
The Clouds Beneath Us

Taking a Breather
“We made it!” I heard someone say in front of me. Having already painted an image of the next hill in my mind, I thought that they were joking. But then, I looked up and saw rows after rows of stone cairns. Behind them, I saw a slit of blue which gradually widened as I finished ascending the hill, revealing the pristine waters of Shingzema Lake, enclosed and surrounded by rocky hills and snow peaks.
“So, did you see anything at the lake?” asked Amala Dawa Choekyi, as we sat in her little hut in Shingzema, sipping on tea. Amala is a nomad originally from Yangma. She moved to Walung 16 years ago. From Yangma, the route to Tibet was tough and they had to cross snow mountains. She told us how she is much happier in Walung and Shingzema since life is much easier. From here, she can go do trade at the border and come back in just two days. Amala also has a small kitchen garden, where in the summer they grow radish, potatoes, carrots and spinach. But she said that the animals go in and eat them. We met her on our way back from the lake and couldn’t put down her offer of some hot tea.

“Noope, didn’t see anything much”.

“I used to hear that when young people visit the lake, they can see their future and who they will get married to. Are you sure none of you saw anything?”

“Not a thing, only our reflections.”

We continued to tell Amala Dawa about our trip to the lake. We did kora once around the entire lake, stopping at another stone stupa to perform the same ritual, the only different being thanking the lake for letting us visit her. At that stupa, we each offered an object. A few offered coins, hoping for wealth in the future. A few offered pens, hoping to create great written masterpieces in the future. Then, we each built a stone cairn next to the lake, finished the full circumambulation, and headed back to Shingzema.

“There are many pilgrims that come to the lake,” Amala Dawa started to say, “People from Lunthung and other villages would eat nothing and only drink tea in the morning. Then, they would hike all the way to the lake from their homes. After they complete the pilgrimage, they would hike back here, to Shingzema, to eat food that I cook for them. That would be their first time eating that day. Then, they hike back to Walung to spend the night. This is a common one-day pilgrimage that many villagers in the region perform.”

“Well, if that is the case,” Chungdak said, “Since we stopped two times to eat snacks— once along the hike and the second time at
the lake…” he paused for a moment, “What we did today wasn’t a pilgrimage to Shingzema Lake… it was a picnic!” We all started to laugh.

The lake is very holy.
If you look from behind,
It looks like Tara’s\(^{46}\) palace.
If you look from front,
It looks like Lumo’s\(^{47}\) house.
There are many golden fish.

-Walung Song Lyrics\(^ {48}\)

\(^{46}\) Buddhist goddess
\(^{47}\) Local word for a kind-hearted enchantress
\(^{48}\) Bhomo Walung, 60, Female, Walung Village, Nov. 25\(^{th}\), 2018
Yak Nomads

With only the grasses they find in the wild, Animals who graze can live happily.  
(Sagyu tsa le mena, ridha naso deweh)  
Walung Proverb

Pala Tree-top was indeed happy to see that all of us safely returned from the lake without drowning. For the rest of our stay in Shingzema, we spent most of our time sitting by the tent fire and chatting with the nomads. From Pala Tree-top, we found out more about their way of life. They are nomads all year long. In the autumn, they go to Mauma, another nomadic settlement northwest from Shingzema. During winter, they stay here in Shingzema or move around a bit to the nearby campsites. During summer, they go closer to the Tibet border, where it is colder. Pala Tree-top returns to Walung for festivals, and family members also take turns returning to Walung. When one goes back, another comes to the nomadic site.

“You see, it doesn’t snow as heavily as it did in the past. It is much warmer now. The young ones all believe that this is a good change. Makes work easier, they say. But I believe that the heavier the snow, the easier life is. Even if you fall, you won’t hit stone. And you can slide down the slopes and won’t hit anything hard. The snow will protect you. Snow also doesn’t make you wet, unlike rain.” I wasn’t completely sure if Pala Tree-top was being sarcastic or not.

“Bhomo, you have some nice photos of my yaks. They will be world famous one day due to your photos!” Pala sipped on his tea and continued, “Some yaks are really loyal, some are really calm, some are really aggressive, and at times, you can even see some crying. Since I am a disciple of the Buddha, I never kill my animals for meat. Only when they die on their own, that is when I will eat their meat. I also never sell my animals since they should be happy and graze freely on grasslands here. I only get milk and wool from them. That is all I need, you see.”

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49 Chungdak, 45, Male, Walung Village, Shingzema Settlement, Nov. 25th, 2018
Later that day, we met our neighbor from Walung, who came up here to Shingzema to retrieve his yak calves. They have been staying here with his father-in-law, our one and only Pala Tree-top. Our neighbor’s name is also Chungdak, but to avoid confusion, let us call him Chochola Ox, since he is born in the year of the ox. Interestingly, he is mostly a dzo nomad, having 25 momdzo and 6 pomdzo. They don’t require as much attention, allowing him to be a nomad for the warmer half of a year and stay in Walung for the colder half. They mostly bring their dzo to Zongnyi, a nomadic settlement that used to be a village south of Walung. During the summer, they go to Mauma.

“Yak nomads need to find colder places but us, dzo nomads, need to find warmer places,” Chochola Ox explained.

“My father-in-law may appear to be a silly old man that always cracks jokes. But get to know him, and you’ll find that he is a very hardworking and a morally just and kind man. All of his children (2 sons and 3 daughters) are married. He gave them equal numbers of yaks. He never kills his animals since he truly loves them. He’s not raising them just to earn money. Pala also never drinks alcohol. He is stronger than all of us and rarely falls sick. Did I mention how hardworking he is? We all strive to be like him.”

We also visited Chochola Jhangchup’s tent one evening. He is the older son of Pala Tree-top. His wife and daughter left for Walung the day before. Chochola Jhangchup started being a nomad since he was 13 years old.

“You’re asking how many yaks I have? Well, for good luck, let’s say I have 100.” He has around 48 yaks, and we immediately realized that sense of humor runs deep in their bloodline. “Around 50 years ago, I sold all my yaks that I had for 13 years. How old am I, you ask? I’m 30. Ok, so 4 years ago, when the road got built, was when I sold my yaks. I wanted to pursue other things, you see. But nothing really happened… so then, I bought new yaks… And now, here I

50 Hybrid of a yak and cow
51 Female dzo
52 Male dzo
still am, fetching all my yaks and di\textsuperscript{53} and calves every afternoon to protect them from wild animals. Some of them go off as far as two hours hike away, and I have to go around everywhere searching for them by listening to their bells.”

Now, I realized why Nurbu didn’t want to go and help fetch yaks.

Chochola Jhangchup continued, “Then, I feed them jop\textsuperscript{54}, especially the young ones. In the morning, they leave by themselves to graze. For more details, why not try living here as a nomad?” he looked at me as I was bombarding him with questions. “If you stay here, I can make you fetch the yaks, so I can finally rest. Oh, and if you work well, I’ll consider giving you a few of my yaks and di.”

Chochola Jhangchup looked over at Coleton, then said to Chungdak: “Can you help me ask that man with the beard if he wants to trade his hiking boots with my worn-out shoes?” The tent was continuously filled with our laughter.

“Where was I? Oh yes, the tents are not cold at all at night and people can just sleep on grass. When the yaks approach, they will eat the grass from directly underneath you. I love Shingzema the most…because I love sleeping on grass.”

He also told us that a week ago, they went to Tibet to trade and get supplies. They felt really cold and stayed with construction workers close to the border. But they had to use sign language since the workers didn’t speak Tibetan.

“If we take our yaks, it takes two hours to walk to the border. But if I just walk by myself, it will only take one hour.”

“Aka five hours for me,” I thought in my head.

“Just follow the main road,” Chochola Jhangchup said, “Very easy. Why don’t you guys go there, to the border, and take a look?”

As we talked, yaks and dogs walked around outside, occasionally peeking in to see if their supper is ready.

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\textsuperscript{53} Female yak

\textsuperscript{54} Stew made from bajak (what remains after extracting oil from mustard plant), salt, tsampa, animal fat, and leftover vegetables and food
This reminded me of the stories Pala Dorjee told about yak attacks back at Walung. Five years ago, a tourist ignored warnings and tried to take selfies with a yak while holding its horn. The yak, of course, was not happy and attacked. The man got hurt a bit and his camera got smashed up too. Another time, even Amala Bhomo’s legs were injured once by their own yak and she couldn’t walk for 3 months. There was also that time, three years ago, when Pala tried to feed a yak and it knocked him down and tried to step on him.

“For a long time, I was scared of yaks and lost all my courage,” I remembered Pala telling me. For two months, he couldn’t move and breath well. Oh, and of course, there was the story about a female tourist that was hit by a yak 10 years ago. She was injured badly and was sent to a hospital in Kathmandu. But unfortunately, she didn’t make it. Pala said that she went close to a yak, even though the villagers warned her not to. She tried to touch its head and do some other things as well.

“What an arrogant tourist she was,” Pala said, “always saying ‘no, no, no, it’s ok’ whenever we tried to warn her.”
Soon after we ate our dinners, the animals got fed too. It gets dark here really fast, and if you walk outside with your flashlight to use to bathroom, you can see what seems like hundreds of pairs of glowing yak eyes staring at you in the dark. We laid down on the grass beds for our last night in Shingzema.

Good Night Shingzema
Wild Animals

You can hear the dogs barking outside occasionally at night. They have three Tibetan mastiffs here. They are loyal dogs, good at hunting, good at guarding, and good with cold weather as well, as Chochola Jhangchup puts it. He told us that the dogs stay up all night and bark when wild animals approach.

A few days ago, there was an animal attack near Dinga Samba, along the road here from Walung,” Achala Yangdon said as we were sipping on tea in the tent. “I heard from the nomads living there that it killed two calves and one adult yak. They saw it while it was running away. They told me the lower body was black, and from the chest upward it was white. It walked like a human, but they couldn’t get a closer look at it. Sounds just like a rimi to me.”

“Getting Sleepy

“A few days ago, there was an animal attack near Dinga Samba, along the road here from Walung,” Achala Yangdon said as we were sipping on tea in the tent. “I heard from the nomads living there that it killed two calves and one adult yak. They saw it while it was running away. They told me the lower body was black, and from the chest upward it was white. It walked like a human, but they couldn’t get a closer look at it. Sounds just like a rimi to me.”

“The ‘experts’ from KCAP call these yet-like animals ‘Himalayan brown bear’, ” Nurbu commented. “The locals also use this fancy term to refer to it, but they don’t know what these English words really mean. For all they know, it could mean the demons from one of the temples.”

“I think those ‘experts’ you’re referring to could have called them bears just to make the villagers not scared anymore. I mean, it is only based on their guess from what villagers told them,” said Chungdak.

“There’s not only the rimi that attacks though,” Achala Yangdon said. “A couple of years back, I heard that five calves were killed by a pack of wolves.”

“There’s plenty of wild animals around. But don’t worry, not all of them attack.” Nurbu added. “For example, there are blue sheep here, called naa in our language. They have a deer’s body but sheep horns and are slightly bigger than goats. I saw huge flocks of them when I was living here last month.”

“I actually saw a few just yesterday,” said Achala Yangdon.

Then Pala Tree-top also joined in on the conversation.

“There are also wolves that are fully white, snow leopards that look like cats, oh, and of course those rimi bears that looks like furry humans. They always come here and somehow make it into the huts and destroys many things. Or they mess up the walls. Last year, there were many rimi attacks. Then after that one time, when we chased one away with the dogs, they never came back.” Pala was getting worked up and excited by all the rimi talk. “Its footprints were almost 30 cm in length, and even wider than long. Its face looked like a pig’s. It was three meters tall, with a black body and white chest, and hands like humans. Even the dogs got scared. It ran to the other side of the river and stared at us. Then, it ran away and never came back.”

I looked over at Achala Yangdon, and she looked a bit scared.

55 Kanchanjunga Conservation Area Project
Pala continued to say, “they kill blue sheep and domesticated animals, but they don’t eat the meat. Only kill. Then, they dig a big hole and dump the dead animals in the hole. *Rimi* also eat rice and flour, just like us! There are also dwarf *rimi* that look like small humans. I heard that if one sees them, one is doomed to die. They have magical powers, you see.”

All this wild animal talk reminded me of that time Popola Dandu talked about *ghangba*, meaning “animal in snow”. Apparently, they look like baby goats and live high up in the snow mountains. Popola Dandu said that they sometimes come down near the villages and can destroy everything, even metal bridges. They don’t hurt humans though.

Suddenly, a rustling sound came from the corner of the tent. A pair of dark hands reached into the little opening between the layers, pulling and stretching the hole bigger.

“Ahhhh! Look! A *rimi*!” Coleton suddenly blurted out.

We all burst into laughter. It was just Chochola Jhangchup opening the vent wider to let smoke out of the tent. Coleton, our very own *rimi*, was proud of himself for pulling off a *rimi* joke with his limited Walung-ge vocabulary.
Return on the Road from Tibet

The journey back to Walung was much easier, given it was pretty much all downhill on a nice, wide road. From an hour or so away from Walung, one can already see the red gompa, perched on the hill, with a backdrop of other hills and mountains in the distance. I think we all experienced a déjà vu-esque moment when we first saw it.

Upon our return to Walung, we went back to our usual routine of interchanging between sitting by the fire for warmth and walking around the village until a villager invites us in for tea and snacks or a meal.

On one such occasion, we met Jamyang Chomphel, age 71, the oldest monk currently residing in Walung. The villagers refer to him as Kushu Bhula. It has been 40 years since he became a monk at Diki Chholing Gompa, here, in Walung. He was born in Walung, but he went to Tingye Gompa in Jhyang Phukyu, Tibet when he was just 7 or 8 years old. The gompa is roughly a one-hour jeep ride from Samdok, a Tibetan trading town not so far from the border. He was there, at Tingye Gompa, during the Chinese occupation and decided to flee with other monks across the border. After fleeing, he came back to Walung, and has never returned to Tibet since then.

“I fled through the same route you walked on when you returned from Shingzema. Though back then, it was merely a small footpath. We had to flee at night. From Samdok to the border, it was roughly three hours of walking. Let me see… it was autumn, 1959. Yes, autumn. By that time, the Chinese were already at all the border passes. That was why we had to flee at night. You see, that border pass, the Tiptala pass, wasn’t as strictly guarded as the other borders. I fled with around 10 other monks. Some went on to Kathmandu, some to India, and some stayed here in Walung with me. One monk didn’t feel happy in Nepal and went back to Tibet. The higher Lama, Gonjyang Rinpoche, that fled with us got ill.
I heard that they went on to Calacatta and then to Darjeeling, where he passed away. Now, his reincarnation is in Sikkim. I also heard that the Chinese destroyed the whole monastery after we fled. Later on, other monks reconstructed it and I heard that now, it is really nice. There are still probably 16 or 17 monks there, but right below the monastery is the Chinese army base. In the past, there were many people, roughly 300 families, that fled through this same route and passed through Walung. Most moved on to other places in Nepal or India. Some did live here for a few years. But if people try to flee now, the Nepalis will send them back to Tibet. Last year, a Tibetan woman was getting married here. Men from Walung often find wives from Tibet, you see. Then, the Chinese came on jeeps and took her right back to Tibet. That’s how much power they have. It also got harder for the traders. Villagers used to be able to take yaks all the way to Lhasa for trade. Not anymore…Then, a few years after I returned to Walung, a major flood occurred. It took half of the village away…Walung isn’t the same anymore.”

56 Kushu Bhula (Jamyang Chomphel), 71, Male, Walung Village, Nov 24th, 2018
The Flood that Caused the Land to Slide Away

Amala Bhomo, 60
“A flood happened 55 years ago. So, if we do some math, that would make it 1963. Yes, that is right because I remember it happened in Nepali year 2020. The flood happened at 9:00 pm. I was only 5 years old. I remember I was sleeping when my Momola woke me up and told me that we must move to somewhere safe. The flood itself didn’t wash away any of the houses. It was the small, frequent landslides that took the houses one by one. No one died since everyone already shifted away from the danger zone. Now, people plant many trees and we have a nursery on the hills to prevent the land from sliding.”

Achala Dolkar, 25
“I don’t know much about the flood or the landslide. I wasn’t born yet when it happened. I do know that people are not allowed to cut trees on the gompa side of the hill to prevent landslides.”

Achala Yangkyi, 36
“I heard that where our house stands used to be the corner of the village before the flood. Now we’re in the center of the village. The main section and market got washed away.”

Pala Tree-top, 75
“The flood occurred around 40 years ago… I think. A lake collapsed, and the water washed away parts of Walung. There was a village in the mountains above the lake that made it overflow by accident. I was around 17 or 18 years old and was in Thudam. The flood washed away the houses slowly, so people were able to get their valuables out and there were no casualties. More than half of the village was washed away. The village used to have two main paths. Now, there’s only one. I heard that the villagers fled to the monastery, where it was safe. The flood started in the afternoon, and by night time, half of the village was gone.”

Chochola Tsetan, 35
“The flood happened in Nepali year 2020. Half of the village got washed away. There was a lake called Ghemama Lake that was hit by an avalanche, which caused the lake to collapse into the river. When the flood hit, first there was a landslide on the southern end of the village. Then, the landslide spread north gradually, taking the houses with it. The lake is still up there in Tiptala, on the Nepal side of the border. It is the lake that the river runs from. Since the lake is still there, there are still risks of future avalanches and floods.”

Pala Dorjee, 61
“During the flood, I was around 3 or 4. My Pala carried me and my twin sister to the monastery. In the past, Walung used to be really big, and the bridge to cross the river was just seven feet in length. There were two small bridges, one at each end of the village. The river was very small, and the land was flat on both sides. Then, the flood came and caused landslides. The land on the other side of the current village lost more houses. And the land got washed away slowly.”

Achala Kyikyi, 40
“I wasn’t born yet when the Walung flood happened. I don’t know much about it. However, there was another flood that happened in Zongnyi when I was very young. I heard a few people and many animals were killed. I used to live in Zongnyi, and our family used to run a restaurant there for travelers. You see, in order to reach Walung, everyone had to pass by Zongnyi, so we made good business there. But now, Zongnyi is completely empty. After the flood occurred, families started moving to Walung. Soon enough, we were the only family left there. We felt lonely, and so we moved to Walung too.”

Amala Bhomo, 60
“All the people from Zongnyi moved to Walung, and now, there is only one house left where nomads stay during spring. The huge flood there happened 35 years ago. It came from the river that flows from Yangma and killed many people. Fortunately, it didn’t go directly through Yangma village as well, or else more people could have died. But Zongnyi was hit directly. I heard that two children and two old
people died. Many of the animals died too. Around 10 houses in Zongnyi were washed away. They used to grow a lot of potatoes there, but slowly, people moved out from Zongnyi after the flood.

Amala Choekyi, 56
“During the Zongnyi flood, I was in Yangma, where it started when Nangama Lake collapsed. I heard that it hit Zaree badly. Zaree is slightly south of Yangma where the nomads lived. Two kids died there. When the flood happened, the parents went to find their elder son, who went to get the dzo. They kept the kids in the tent, thinking that it would be safe, but the flood got bigger and the tent got washed away. I was around 17 years old. It happened in the morning. Villagers from Yangma who woke up early saw the flood. It didn’t go through Yangma village though. I think I was still sleeping when it happened. The Walung landslide? Sorry, I don’t know much about it.”

Kushu Bhula, 71
“I was meditating in my house at the time of the flood. Urgenla, another monk, was meditating near the gompa. The flood happened during the night and I fled to the gompa with other villagers. It was the flood that caused the land to slide. In the past, there were around 130 houses. The houses weren’t taken directly. It took three to four days, where the land slid bit by bit and took the houses one by one. Now there are only around 60 houses left. My house is one of the safe ones. During the landslide, my house started shaking as the ground was shaking too. I also heard people shouting outside and running around. I knew something was wrong. I went out of my house and tried running towards the north. I vaguely remember seeing the flood in the dark. When I saw it, I stopped and looked up and saw people running towards the gompa. I started running that way too. I remember hearing a few gunshots before the ground started shaking. During the flood, some thugs were trying to rob people, but it wasn’t investigated, and no one knows what really happened to the thugs. Luckily, none of the religious structures were damaged. The three kani gates were built way long ago to protect our village and to bring good fortune. During the landslide, the houses near the kani did not get damaged at all. The kani were protecting us.”
Popola Dandu, 79
“The flood washed away the market... it got washed away completely. It occurred during the night. I ran towards the gompa, following other people. I didn’t see anything, because I was so scared. I only knew I had to run towards the gompa. Nothing happened to my house though. I was very fortunate. Probably 30 to 40 houses got washed away, but no one died. People had to temporarily live in the gompa. I remember that on the same night, two thugs from Tibet came to rob a monk. One accidentally shot his companion, and the monk got shot, too, on one side of his stomach. The thug tried to run away but got caught in the flood and drowned. Now, that’s what you call bad karma. Later, foreigners came. They took out the bullet, and the monk survived. There was a rich family that used to bully the poor. During the flood, everything thing owned got washed away. There was another rich but very kind family. Nothing bad happened to them during the flood since they have kind hearts. The village used to be twice the size. Both sides of the hills got washed away. I remember many houses were left hanging, and people had to break the walls to get their valuables inside before their houses fell. The flood happened when a lake collapsed. Before, the river was so small and narrow. Barely any re-building happened afterwards. There also isn’t much land left to build on. We’re now stuck between a hill and a cliff. The market used to be very big with many people. I grew up in a house that used to be in the main market. That was before I moved to this house here. I remember it being really crowded and noisy during the summer. Traders used the other road as the main road, where there was an open exchange market. Now the market shifted here after the main road got washed away.
Anonymous Villager:
“Before the flood, the market here used to be much larger than the one in Taplejung at that time. People from Taplejung and Tibet used to come here to buy and sell rice, wheat flour, salt, and many other goods. This trade route used to be famous. Even people in Ilam used to get salt from here. But now there are many borders open. And places like Taplejung and Ilam have road access for trade while Walung still doesn’t. The big market was on the side of the village where the landslide was. When I was young, Walung was big with many people. Now, I feel like Walung is drying up since many families are moving away. It is a lot quieter now. Walung used to be so noisy and I sometimes really miss the noise. There was a much happier vibe back then. During summer trading seasons, thousands of traders and yaks pass through Walung, and the market would be packed. People used to be so much busier back then. Now, even Ghunsa is doing better as it lies on a popular trekking route for tourists. Even though the individual families are getting better now, and the poor are no longer poor, the village itself is not getting better. Rich families are all moving out. People from other smaller villages are moving in. Those who have education, good ideas, and wealth all left. So, the village market never got rebuilt. Nothing got rebuilt after the flood. I really miss those old days. If the flood never happened, Walung would be a lot more prosperous, a lot better.
Pala’s Journey to Tibet

On our back from Shingzema, we passed Pala Dorjee bringing his ten yaks to Tibet. Initially, I thought he was bringing them to do trade, but later, I found out that he went to sell his yaks. Upon his return to Walung, Pala started telling us about his travel:

“The road to Tibet is much easier now. Also, much easier than the one to Taplejung. You see, we feel much more connected to Tibet compared to the rest of Nepal. I used to go every summer with my yaks to do trade. Unlike the road going to Taplejung, there are no leeches, snakes or flies, and no rain, slippery roads or landslides. But now, I am getting old, and my kids are all pestering me to move to Kathmandu. Also, mules are slowly taking over yaks for trade to Tibet since they are faster, cheaper to hire and can move on sunny days too. I guess it was time to sell my beloved yaks.

“It took two days to get to Tibet, and we stayed a night near Mauma settlement at a place called Rolep. Then, we left early in the morning, reaching the border at around 9:00 am. After that, we walked in Tibet for another seven hours to reach the army camp. Once you cross the border, there’s a 15 minute downhill hike. Then, from there onward, it is all plain land on the plateau. I left my yaks there with a friend, showed the army people my permit and trading pass, and hopped on my friend’s jeep. Normally, if we were doing trade, there would’ve been no need for me to go farther into Tibet. I could just call the traders and they would come get the goods with their jeeps. But I had to go find people interested in buying my yaks. We reached Samdok, which is the farthest the Chinese will let traders go, and I stayed with relatives for the night.

“I was in Tibet for two full days, and eventually sold each of my yaks to different people. I sold the older yaks for higher prices and younger ones for cheaper. I was, of course, very sad to part with them. Each of my yaks had names. There’s Pangkay, the one that has a black body and white spots. Then there’s Khamdong, with a bit of white on his forehead, shoulder, and tail. There’s also the bluish-gray furred yak, Ngombo. Of course, there’s also Ghajungma, the white-faced leader of the pack, the same one that attacked me a few years back. I still remember the day when I got them nine years ago, when they were just little calves. I remember the day we gave them their red nepto earrings. Two people had to hold them down, then we massaged their ears, so they got hot and red. That way, the yaks won’t feel the pain of the piercing. But everything has its own timing, right? It was time for me to part with them.

“After I sold all the yaks, I made my return trip with other traders from Walung that I met in Tibet. On that day, I first went to clear my pass and check out. We left at around 1:30 pm in a jeep and reached the border in half an hour. From the border, we hiked back to Mauma. It was already dark by then. From there, we used flashlights and reached Dilma, where we stayed the night. This morning, we hiked back to Walung, and now, here I am.”
Calve with Nepto Earrings

Pala’s Yaks:
Ngombo (upper)
Pangkay and Pala (lower left)
Khamdong (lower right)
The Carpet Weavers

“I usually sell these to Tibet. Fetches a better price there. But for this one, a foreign lady ordered it from Taplejung,” Achala Donga told me as I sat on a little stool on the balcony of her house, watching her weave dhumsay, the Tibetan carpet. Achala Donga is the wife of Chochola Ox.

Most of the women in Walung know how to weave Tibetan carpets. Some weave as their profession, being able to finish one in two to three weeks. Some weave whenever they have free time from being a nomad or doing other things. I watched Achala Donga, as she weaved in the different colored threads, row by row, onto the white threads that are arranged vertically on a wooden frame. I didn’t want to disturb her, so I silently sipped on my cup of tea. I recalled how Achala Yangkyi was telling me the other day that they dye all the threads into different colors by themselves. The green and yellow colors come from leaves of bhamchak plants that they collect in the hills and boil. The brown comes from walnut hulls that they purchase from Lungthung. These natural dyes give a much more vibrant color. For the rest of the colors (i.e. blue, red, purple, etc.), they purchase coloring packs from Taplejung. I also remembered how she said that nowadays, villagers can directly purchase threads instead of making their own. Before, they had to prepare the wool, wash it, spin it, and thread it. Achala Yangkyi also told me that with shorter winter daytime, it takes longer for people to weave. I looked over at Achala Donga and wondered how she’s not feeling cold sitting in the same position for such a long time.

She has a sample carpet hanging right above the one she’s weaving, and she’s following the patterns on it. From the back side of the sample carpet, she can count the small blocks of colors, allowing her to replicate it completely. She told me that the foreign lady wanted to order the same pattern as the sample one. Then, I noticed something didn’t seem right.

“Achala! You forgot to weave in the stem of the flower on that side!”

She stopped and looked carefully at the carpet above her head, then back down at her own.

“Oh my, you are absolutely right. It’s a good thing you told me now. I would’ve just kept on going and have to re-do so much later. It’s still easily fixable now… just let me pull out a few of the threads here and replace in the right colors.”

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57 Walung-ge term for carpet

58 Kyikyi, 40, Female, Walung Village, Nov. 18th, 2018
The Future of Walung

Two years before the landslide, a prophecy from Sanga Lama said that only half of Walung will remain. He also said that at one point, all the people from Walung will leave. But then, they will come back, and the village will become prosperous again.

-Walung Prophecy

What holds for the future of Walung? Chochola Tsetan, current chairman of Walung, had a lot to say.

“There are many current problems that Walung faces, and it is my job as the Chairman to address them. The main problem of Walung is our lack of accessibility and infrastructure. There are currently no good paths to other villages. Traders are dependent on yaks and mules to carry goods. There’s also no mobile network, internet, and stable electricity. Currently, electricity only runs from around 4:30 pm to 11:00 pm, and often does not work.

“Another issue is one of people’s source of income. Now, many villagers depend heavily on trade with Tibet, selling goods such as woven carpets, yak meat, wool, chura, etc. and purchasing goods from Tibet to sell towards Taplejung. However, there are uncertainties about whether the Tiptala border pass will remain open in the future. There have been talks between the Nepal and Chinese government about closing this border. They think it might be too early to have so many open ones, and there is also pressure from India. If this border does close, it will make trade and business very difficult for Walung people.

“Then, there is the ongoing trend that people from Walung are moving away to places like Kathmandu, Dharjeeling and New York. Other people are moving in from villages like Yangma and Ghunsch. This is a problem since the people moving in from other villages could have slightly different culture and the original Walung culture could be lost. In addition, current villagers are all sending their children to Taplejung, Kathmandu or India for better education. Our children are less and less exposed to our own culture and language. Often, they never return to Walung. When they do, it is only to take their parents away too. I am not saying that it is a problem for parents to hope for a brighter future for their kids. The unintentional consequence is that we are facing a loss of culture and population. There is a similar problem with parents sending their children to monasteries elsewhere. We are trying to keep as many of our current monks here in Walung as possible.

“There are certain measures that are currently being taken to address these issues. We are currently one year into a three-year contract with Chinese and Nepalese contractors to build paved vehicle roads between the border and Tapethok. The Chinese contractors are building from the north while the Nepalese contractors are building from the south. Hopefully, in two years, the roads will complete and meet in Lungthung. The current stone-covered road to Tibet is just the trail for the actual road, which will be expanded to a 10 meter wide road. The Chinese contractors are already in Nepal’s side of the border and will start constructing in a month.

“There is also a project this year to improve electricity and pull in new and better lines that offer 24 hour electricity. Internet access might also come soon, and we are currently discussing details about a mobile network tower being built. Then, if the road construction goes well and the border stays open, things will only get better. With mobile and internet network, there will be more job opportunities for villagers. Tourism is likely to increase, and people can pursue businesses like opening guesthouses and restaurants. Tourists are likely to come here to visit the monastery and Shingzema Lake. We will plan to build better paths to access these sites, including a clear path to the Chershi birth place. Current yak traders can also purchase jeeps to do trade and sell their good. I guess the yaks will also be having better lives, not having to carry heavy loads.

“As the Chairman, I try to tell the people who moved away from Walung not to forget their culture and to help the village if they can. I try to stay in contact with villagers that move out. In fact, the donations and funds from Walung people from all over the world are helping us

59 Bhomo Walung, 60, Female, Walung Village, Nov. 15th-27th, 2018
tremendously in pushing projects forward. I hope that Walung people who leave will continue to support and help the village.

“I also plan to bring into our local school a class of Walung-ge language in order to preserve our language in the younger generation. This class will be for students who study elsewhere and come back to Walung for holidays. We had the budget this year but spent it instead on providing the young village monks with education on Tibetan Buddhism. We will push for this project next year.

“I truly believe that these ongoing projects and projects we have in plan will bring about a brighter future for Walung and get us back on track.”

“When will we get to rest?”
Departure

“Do you think you’ll ever come back to this place?” Chungdak asked.

“Yeah, for sure! Perhaps for a festival. That will be fun. Or just to come back and say hi to all the villagers again.”

“Try to keep a nice pace today, we have a lot of distance to cover. Oh, and you’re planning that return trip of yours for two years later, when the road is built, right? Just kidding.”

We trekked away from Walung along a familiar road, reaching Thwan Lasey, which this time around became the departure gate. We tied khataks on a branch and turned around for our last glimpse of the red gompa, perched on a sloping hill. As we passed under the gate, Chungdak drew a line on the ground with a walking stick, marking the boundary.

“Why did you do that?”

“I don’t know. Aunty Bhomo told me to do this when we crossed the gate.”

I’ve come to realize that there isn’t an absolute answer for everything here at Walung.
Meet my host family and travel companions!

From right to left: Achala Dolkar, Pala Dorjee, Achala Donga, Amala Bhomo, Chungdak, Coleton, Indu the dog, the author

The Autor with Yak
Further Research

There is a plethora of potential research ideas related to the culture and lifestyle of people in Walung. Below, I have suggested a few topics that I have encountered and found interesting. Many (if not all) of the women in Walung are carpet weavers. I haven’t delved much into how the carpets are actually weaved. There are also many herbs that are collected in the region, most being sold to Tibet to make medicine. The style of architecture in Walung is very interesting and different from the surrounding villages. Many of the houses are a few generations old, and some villagers have told me about the potential loss of knowledge for building these traditional houses. Another interesting topic is of the experiences and difficulties encountered by yak traders that routinely go to the Tibet border, in relation to the politics of the China-Nepal border. There’s also the potential of a study of the changes the new road brings to the village once the construction finishes in two years. Then, there’s the wild flora and fauna conservation projects of KCAP (Kanchanjunga Conservation Area Project), which I didn’t feature in the stories, but the villagers had quite a lot to say about it.

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