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Blood, Self-sufficiency, and the Government Dime

Elijah Ober
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Blood, Self-sufficiency, and the Government Dime

Dissolution of the Traditional Blacksmith in Spiti, India



Ober, Elijah
Academic Director: Onians, Isabelle
Senior Faculty Advisor: Decler, Huber
Project Advisor: Dickey, Sarah
Bowdoin College
Anthropology
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Abstract:

This project begins with an examination of the blacksmith trade in Spiti, Himachal Pradesh, based upon the observation and limited apprenticeship of the author.

It then examines the caste system in Spiti. This system more intense in certain regions than in others, but throughout the region the *zoks*, the metal-smith caste, are second from the bottom. This has two main effects on the caste. First, caste is keeping *zoks* who remain in the village in the lower class. Secondly, the fact that their historical profession is the symbol of their caste, combined with the fact that their Scheduled Caste Status makes it easier for them to get government jobs, the most coveted jobs in Spiti, is driving the decline of the blacksmith profession. This is despite the fact that their profession is in high demand, a carrier of traditional culture, and adds to the self-sufficiency of a highly government dependent region.

However, tradition is melting. People are beginning to believe in the equality of all people, and some upper-caste farmers are even beginning to blacksmith a little. Thus the future of blacksmithing in Spiti is questionable. It could either fall by the wayside, leaving the farmers of Spiti to improvise, importing tools or making them themselves, or the caste and economic position of the profession could change, making it a viable, desirable profession. The first factor could also help make the second a reality. Another factor that could add to the viability of blacksmithing is the increasing importance of tourism in Spiti. Tourism always creates a commodification of culture, especially the concrete, attractive aspects of it that can easily be brought home.

mGarba Nagpo, the protector deity of the blacksmiths, is also examined in this work. In addition to providing advice and strength to the greater community, he is especially revered and worshiped by the blacksmith the author studied with.

Blood, Self-sufficiency, and the Government Dime: Dissolution of the Traditional Blacksmith in Spiti, India

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Chhering Angdup and Family



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Introduction

Blacksmithing is still a crucial part of the economy in Spiti. The majority of the people of this region, roughly half of the Himachal Pradesh District Lahaul and Spiti, depend on farming the cash-crop green peas – as well as relying heavily on government subsidies they receive as a result of their Scheduled Tribal Status – for their livelihoods. Without the agricultural tools the blacksmith makes, farmers would eventually run into big trouble. Despite the increasing development of the region since the designation of its entire people as a Scheduled Tribe in 1952 and the opening of the region to tourism in 1991, there has yet to be an influx of cheap manufactured farm tools, at not the type preferred by the farmers of the area. Thus blacksmiths are still necessary for the economic prosperity of the region.

The blacksmiths in Spiti belong, almost entirely, to the *zoks* caste, the second lowest in Spiti. This caste, although not all of its members are blacksmiths, is descended from blacksmith, and the profession is the symbol of the caste's low status. Although the caste system in Spiti is not as strict as elsewhere in India, it still has significant effect upon the class and socioeconomic status of *zoks* in the villages. Many *zoks*, however, are escaping the village, or at least their traditional economic place in it. Their Scheduled Caste status gives them preference when applying for government jobs, the most stable, best paid work available to the people of Spiti. Many are taking advantage of these opportunities, leaving blacksmithing positions vacant in villages, a trend that will most likely increase in years to come.

In Demul, for example, there has been no working blacksmith for five years. The last one has retired, and his son works a government job outside of the village. Some residents claim that there have been no major problems as a result, just the minor inconvenience of going to different villages to have things repaired, like Langza. One farmer's son stated that the time of father to son job transmission is coming to an end, and that if the lack of a blacksmith in Demul becomes a problem, the people will have a meeting and appoint a new one. This may be true – a blacksmith from a different village doubted the likelihood that a new one would be selected, but thought it possible that a farmer would step into the role if it was economically pragmatic. Regardless, however, these lines of transmission are beginning to be broken, and as this process continues, farmers will have more and more difficulty fixing and repairing farm tools. Many blacksmith's sons are looking for less physically taxing, dangerous lines of work. Blacksmithing in Spiti is notoriously bad for health. For example, the father of Chhering Angdup, the blacksmith I lived and studied with in Spiti, had to retire at the age of 52 and move away from Spiti, down below treeline to the large town of Manali, due to a sickness Chhering attributes to the difficulty of his work. This pattern is leaving many towns without blacksmiths, negatively impacting the self-sufficiency of the region.

Cherring is a resident of the village of Langza. The settlement sits at 4,270 meters, on the southeast slope of a ridge, the village's terraced fields descending the adjacent drainage. Like the rest of Spiti, the village is much more culturally Tibetan than Indian – the language is similar, for instance, and is even written in the same script. Langza is surrounded on three sides by five and six thousand meter peaks. To the north there is a particularly spectacular pyramidal peak, Djo Djo Kang Nyilda, or

Princess mountain Sun and Moon, that rises up to 6707 meters and seems to control the weather of the region, creating clouds and directing the winds. A road leads east over the edge of the drainage Langza is built on, to the villages of Komic, Hikim, and Demul, a total distance of about thirty km, while another road winds down the steep valley wall to Kaza, the capital of Spiti.

Chhering is the blacksmith of Langza, Komic, and Hikim. Each village hosts a population of around 150 – Langza 147 and Komic 142, and Hikim a slightly smaller figure. His patrilineage has made farm tools and other household implements for these three villages for as long as anyone can remember. This is the way blacksmithing tends to work in Spiti, skills, knowledge, and a block of villages are passed down father to son. In the time of his grandfather, their block also included Kulling, Kong, Lara, Shegu, Nashong, and Kaza, and the family lived on a small plot of land down in the capital. But his father, born in 1955, married in Langza, and Kaza eventually grew to such size that it required its own blacksmith. The illness Chhering's father contracted around the age of thirty-five caused him to further decrease the size of the block. Chhering still completes orders for some of the members of these villages, but he never travels to them like his father and grandfather did.

This is the basic backdrop for Chhering's work, which was the center from which I explored the current state of Blacksmithing in Spiti. I will start this article with a description of the typical work of a Spitian smith, and move into examinations of the effects of government policy and caste upon the social and economic mobility of the *zoks*, as well as upon the future of the profession. Lastly I will give consideration to *mGarba Nagbo*, the most important Spiritual figure for Chhering, as well as blacksmiths all over Tibet.

Spiti Smithing

Chhering has only been a Dzo for three or four years. Blacksmiths usually learn much earlier, around the age of sixteen as opposed to twenty-eight, but Chhering's father was still able to continue his work until this time, and Chhering spent many of his early years doing odd jobs and looking for work as a teacher, or with the army. Now Tsering also works a second job, cooking for trekking expeditions run by a social entrepreneurship tourism agency operating out of Kaza.¹ This job does not pay enough for Chhering to make a living; it's less lucrative than blacksmithing. When his father's sickness progressed to the point that he could not work, Chhering decided blacksmithing was the best option for his future, so he undertook a one-year apprenticeship with his father to learn the *zoks* craft. I entered Spiti with the desire to complete an apprenticeship of my own, but as I was only with Chhering for two weeks, I only had time for a few lessons. Although I will try to include as much information I learned through practice, much of my description of the Spiti blacksmithing process is informed by observation only; most mornings I would sit and turn the *butba*, the small hand-fan that has replaced the traditional goatskin bellows for many smiths in Spiti, and watch Chhering work.



Chhering's forge: zora and butba.

He is paid in grass and barley – he says that each year he receives 60 kg of barley grass to feed his livestock and 20kg of barley to feed his family from each *kang-chen* in Langza, Knomic, and Hikim, a total of 30 houses. A few farmers I talked to said they paid more like 30-40kg grass and 5 kg barley, but one of these at least identified as *king-chung*. Chhering maintained that he is not given barley and grass contributions by *king-chung* households; it is possible that modesty of some *kang-chen* farmers is responsible for this discrepancy. He is also paid cash for large jobs. Much of his job, however, consists of minor repair work. Often as we sit a woman will walk up with a stovepipe or ladle with a hole in it, or stove hole covers that are too small. Such small undertakings Chhering will complete for free. This contribution style method of payment, despite the introduction of cash payment for larger jobs, a system initiated sometime in his father's lifetime, creates a system of dependence that separates the payment from the service in a way that makes the service seem less valuable. This payment system helps perpetuate the difference in status that is still present in Spiti society.

The precise nature of Chhering's work is defined by the season. In late fall he mostly makes and repairs stoves and stove-pipes in preparation for the coming winter. When I was with him he did not have the raw material nor any requests to make a stove, but I did witness him make a few stove-pipes. He starts by cutting apart a tin fat container with a *ti*, or iron knife, and a *kiti*, a pair of metal shears. Once he has hammered it flat, he rolls it longitudinally into a tube, fastening the two loose edges with a reverse-folded seam. This process yields roughly four feet of pipe. In

order to make a tube long enough to reach through the roof, he simply inserts one section into the next, allowing natural variations in the width of the sections to hold them together. Since the tin is very thin and soft, the process requires no heating. The finished product is perfectly functional and uses only recycled materials. Nearly all of Chhering's raw material is recycled. Minimal import/export of raw materials and waste is very important in these small Spiti villages, as there is no trash service, the people are not rich, and there is already danger of over-dependence on imported goods and services.

The majority of his raw material is scrap from broken vehicles and electricity infrastructure. Apparently in the early half of the twentieth century, his grandfather's time, it was much more difficult to find scrap iron, and it had to be carried in from Shimla and other lower hill towns. For example, he is waiting to make a plow tip, or a *tong sha*, out of a piece of the old Kalka Shimla railway, that has been saved since early in his father's career. Chhering says it is such high quality iron that it will require two whole bags of *sola*, charcoal, and two hammer men to complete, but it will last five to ten years as opposed the typical three to four. He still is forced to import certain shaped pieces of iron, mostly different gauges of rebar from downside, from larger cities like Chandigahr.

In the Fall he also does a large amount of axe and wood-splitting wedge repair. This is the time when people of Spiti buy their firewood, large logs shipped in from Kinnuar and other vegetated hill districts. Watching Chhering repair these tools taught me an important lesson – the use of heat and the *lakdo*, or hammer, is only to affect the shape of tools, lengthening them and evening out their mass, while sharpness is achieved through the use of *shukdur*, or file, and a whetstone.

He makes small household implements throughout the year, like *dikra*, double-pointed pins for fastening cloth baby carriers, and ladles. Making *dikra* is very simple, only involving bending quarter-inch wire into the correct mustache shape and pointing the ends. Ladels are much more complicated. He begins by melting down a grapefruit-sized mass of aluminum electrical wire in iron bowl in the *zora*, the forge. The forge is powered the *butba*, which heats the *sola*, or charcoal.² Once the aluminum is molten, he removes the bowl from the *zora* with his *kompa*, his tongs, and pours it into an iron mold that is roughly the shape of a ladle – a flat circle with a little hollow nub that eventually becomes the handle. Once this has cooled, he picks it up with his *karok kompa* – beaked tongs, *karok* meaning crow in Spiti language – and begins deepening the bowl with a *lakdo karil*, a hammer with a long, thin head that is useful for hammering the inside of the bowl. As it deepens, he will place the bowl over the horn of the *Kakdo*, the anvil, and, using a normal, medium sized *lakdo*, hammers from the outside, further thinning and steepening the walls of the bowl. If the bowl appears to be too big, he will trim a bit off of the circumference with a *che zong*, a chisel. Throughout this process he repeatedly heats the ladle in the *zora*, but much less frequently than he does iron implements, as aluminum is easier to shape when cool and crumbles when left in the fire for too long. Once the bowl is finished he thins and lengthen the handle, adding some undulations in width, as well as scratched patterns and sometimes Buddhist symbols, often swastikas, for ornamentation.



A rice ladle made by Chhering.

Chhering also occasionally makes *along*, iron rings about 10 cm in diameter. These rings are used for rope-work and rigging. It is an especially interesting process because he seals the gap in the ring with copper, by hammering out a small piece of a belt buckle, inserting this fragment into the gap in the ring, and placing the whole thing in the *zora* with some *sale*, or lake salt from Lehdak, which is used when heating copper, silver, and gold.

The most common and important item blacksmiths in Spiti make is the *tokze*, an all purpose digging tool used for sowing and harvesting crops, digging irrigation ditches, and digging up *tama*, a woody brush that people of Spiti use as eaves and emergency fuel. He sells *tokze* for Rs. 150 to 300, depending on the size. Chhering's *tokze*-making style is very efficient. He starts either with the suspension bands of cars, which are very good because they are perfectly shaped and made of good quality iron, or with pieces of power-line towers, which are often too wide and require time and energy-intensive cutting, and are also inferior quality iron.

After heating and hammering these pieces to the correct thickness (using a separate hammer-man and *butba*-man on the thicker steel to make his task easier) he puts a ninety-degree twist near the end of the piece, and then folds this length into a tube. This tube serves as a place for the haft to be attached with the blade of the *tokze* extending at the correct angle. This process especially required frequent reheating. After this he hammers a slight downward angle onto the blade to make it useful for digging, and beats the digging edge to a swallowtail, to make it more

effective in cutting roots. He tempers, or *gnar*, lesser quality iron in a bowl of water to add strength. Apparently the higher-quality iron is harder, so it does not need tempering, and is also more brittle, so it can be damaged in the process. He makes the majority of his *tokze* in March, just before seeding time. During this period he travels to Komic³ and Hikem and works for four days straight, stopping only to sleep and eat. He also receives visits from people from other villages during this time of year, those whose villages do not have blacksmiths and those who prefer Chhering's products to those of their own blacksmiths. In this same period, Chhering also makes the majority of his *tong sha*, the tip, or foreshare, that cuts the earth at the front of the plow. This is the largest and most physically difficult product Chhering makes, and definitely requires a hammer-man to swing the largest sledgehammers Chhering has.



*Side view of two tokzes.
The left is made from an automobile suspension system,
the right from electrical infrastructure.*

Another responsibility of the blacksmith is the making of iron religious implements. These items are made less and less as time goes on, because they are venerated and their use does not subject them to degradation. Swords, apparently originally for battle, currently used by the *buchen* in their spirit banishment ceremonies and during other religious dances, are becoming less and less common, although the Bhar blacksmith has made some in his lifetime. Other religious

implements include *dyu*, small, diamond pieces of iron that are stuck to the bottom of small prayer flag poles that llamas use during *pugas*. These come in sets of four, designed to be put on blue, green, white, and yellow flags. The *katumka*, or trident, has many uses. The one I watched Chhering fashion is used for pinning blue, green, white, and red prayer flags to peoples' doors. He fashions the *katumka* by shaping two pieces, one a stylized U shape, the other a long shaft, pointed and round at one end and flat and stylized at the other. He connects these two pieces with a *ript*, a small, factory made pin, that he fits through holes punched in the two pieces with a small *zong*, and then uses a *lakdo* to expand the pin to fill up the hole. The pin only has one head, and is not heated – it seems like the pieces should easily separate, but they are actually held quite firmly together by the expansion of the *ript*. Blacksmiths also make smaller ones that are used to pierce the cheeks of the *buchen* during their ceremonies, as well as during protector deity visitation of local oracles. All of these items are in little demand these days.



Swords made by Kunzangpa, the Bhar blacksmith.

My main project was a small pairing knife I made from a piece of Chandeghar rebar near the end of my stay, using lessons I learned watching Chhering repair axes and make *tokzes*. Although it was only a small object, it gave me an appreciation for the difficulties of the job. The metal must be struck with the correct amount of force corresponding to its heat – when I hammered too hard after the metal had cooled too much, it shattered, forcing me to remake the tip multiple times. One must also constantly evaluate the proportions one is creating as the metal changes shape – I had to cut a length off the tang with a *zong* in order to make it the proper length for the handle. After everything was the right shape, I heated the tang and put it through the hollow of the handle Chhering had lying around, and he helped me fold the end over to keep the handle firmly in place. I then spent time with the file and the whetstone, sharpening the blade to an edge. Even though it was a very small product, it was hard work – I finished with renewed respect for the process.

The Role of The Government Dime

Spiti Economic Opportunity

Langza is an agrarian and sedentary pastoralist village, typical of Spiti. Since the early 90's, farmers have grown mostly green peas, a cash crop that is sold in the village and makes its way down to Delhi. Some members of the village work second jobs down in Kaza, usually involving tourism. The arable land is divided among some 28 households, 17 *king-chung*, or little houses, and 11 *kang-chen*, big houses. The big houses are richer, and own more land and livestock. This distinction creates a two tiered class system, however it does not hold as much weight as it used to. A couple generations ago intermarriage between the different houses was very rare – *kang-chen* families would only marry their first son to the daughter of another *kang-chen*, to ensure the bride would come with a large dowry of jewelry and clothing. However, according to Tsering, the rising level of education has made intermarriage between *kang-chen* and *king-chung* common, and love marriages are more common than arranged ones.

This class system is even less important than it seems because inheritance in Spiti follows a primogenital system. A family's house and the vast majority of their fields and livestock are handed down to the oldest son. In a typical *kang-chen* family, the second son will receive some land on rent from his older son – maybe five *bigas* of a typical thirty to fifty *biga kang-chen* holding. This land is his until he dies, at which point it is returned to the older son's line. He is also taxed fifty percent of harvest by the *kang-chen*. Occasionally, land is given to a second son, and passed down along his line duty-free. When the daughter of a *kang-chen* farmer is married, her father must, along with a jewelry and cash dowry, lend a few fields to the new family until the death of his daughter.

Other siblings must find their own way. Daughters may either marry a first son and help with his agricultural holdings, look for a government job⁴, or join a nunnery. Blacksmithing is never performed by women, as, according to many men, it is too physically strenuous, despite the fact that they complete the majority of the fieldwork, and outnumber men on roadwork teams. Second or third sons may marry into a small parcel of land, attempt to find a government job, or work in tourism in contracting. A few own or work with ecotourism operations or run guesthouses or handicrafts shops. Both sons and daughters have the option (or the directive) to join one of the many monasteries and nunneries in Spiti, organizations supported partially by the community and mostly by government funds.

The Himachal Pradesh Scheduled Caste Scheduled Tribe Development Corporation, a subsidiary of the Himachal Pradesh state government, also has a number of "schemes" designed to empower members of Scheduled Castes and Tribes. These take the forms of loans, ranging from around Rs 5,000 to Rs 50,000, for education and establishment and development of small businesses. The loans have very reasonable interest rates, ranging from two to four percent, many with a number of interest free years. The majority are open to application by members of

both Castes and Tribes, some only to Caste members. One specifically aims at providing working capital assistance to artisans, which may be of special interest to blacksmiths.⁵ I heard nothing of these loans while interviewing people about financial opportunities in Spiti. It could be that the low level of internet usage has kept these loans off the radar, or it could be that many residents of Spiti are not interested in the risks of loans. It is possible that they do not believe there is a market for businesses they could establish with these loans. However, this could be a possible route to a more centralized, organized blacksmithing enterprise in Spiti, a kind of cooperative or guild that would operate like a small factory. Another option would be the opening of a permanent shop in Kaza, that could market to tourists and locals alike. Such a coop could increase and stabilize the cash income of the blacksmithing trade, decreasing their dependence on the members of the community and possibly easing Caste related disparities.

Government Work

One farmer and schoolteacher said to me, “look at Spiti farming. It is equal to nothing, no?” Spiti agriculture is certainly not a goldmine, the lack of natural resources making it extremely difficult to extract a living from the landscape. The entire population of Spiti was declared in 1952 to be a Scheduled Tribe, a status that guarantees residents of Spiti a certain share of government jobs as well as subsidized goods. Based on their income level, residents of Spiti receive different levels of discount on food items, wood and kerosene, seeds, fertilizer, and irrigation infrastructure. Most villages have a Sectry, a person appointed to obtain rations from the government and keep a store, distributing them to people at varying levels of discount, based upon which ration cards they qualify for based upon income levels. This is a necessary step in combating poverty in the region – unanimously, residents of Spiti are in support of these subsidized goods and rations, as they vastly improve quality of life. However, this system of subsidies is also a growing problem in Spiti; people are becoming dependent upon government subsidies. Sonam Angdui, a Nono and a civil service worker, worries that people are losing the ability to support themselves without the aid of the government, and if for whatever reason – war, economic crash, or even roads closed due to landslide or heavy snowfall – this government aid was cut off, the people of Spiti would be in big trouble. Blacksmiths are one aspect of contemporary Spiti culture that is still promoting self-sufficiency, and retaining the agency of the village to care for its own needs.

People of Spiti view government work as the best way to make a good living, because it is highly paid and dependable.⁶ This is another nearly undisputed subject – ask any Spitian what the best job in the district is, and he will tell you government work. Other jobs in Spiti, like farming and tourism, are dependent on the snowfall and on the influx of tourists. Contractors, the people responsible for the upkeep of Spiti’s many precipitous, rapidly eroding roads, are in a more stable economic position than other private workers, as they operate on short term contracts from the state government. Thus government employment is the only route to a fixed salary in Spiti.

Government jobs are divided into two categories – national government jobs and state government jobs. National government jobs are mostly military service –

Indian army and Indian navy work. These jobs pay well, but have the downsides of often being dangerous and difficult to integrate into people's existing lives. One man I met quit a very lucrative position of major in the Indian army because he was in a very dangerous active duty zone on the border of Pakistan, and because his family was not large enough to manage his farm without him. The state government jobs, mostly teaching positions and posts in the public works bureaucracy, are the most sought after because they are safe, steady, and well paid. Teachers, for example, start at around Rs 15,000 per month, a figure that escalates over continuous years of service to a maximum of Rs 30,000 after twenty years. Comparatively, a typical income for a large *kang-chen* farm in a good snow year is about Rs 50,000, a figure that shrinks further when adjusted for the costs of hired labor. A few years ago a dearth of snow, probably in addition to other factors,⁷ had one *kang-chen* farmer I talked to net zero on the year – he was paid Rs 15,000 for his crop of green peas, the same the cost of his seed cost and hired labor.

Tribal status also makes it much easier for the people of Spiti to get government jobs, because, due to “reservation policy” implemented by both national and state governments, 7.2% of all civil service positions must be filled by members of the Scheduled Tribes. *Zoks*, can choose to be given even more preference for these jobs, because they also have the option of claiming Scheduled Caste status. The recruitment quota for Scheduled Caste members is 15%.⁸ The blacksmith caste, called *Lohar*, throughout India and in official records, is one of the lowest throughout Asia, and in Spiti the *zoks* are no exception. “Reservation” provisions are designed to tip the scales in the favor of historically poor, repressed groups of people, and the *zoks* are certainly taking advantage; the blacksmiths I talked to unanimously spoke to the benefits of government for their children. In this way, “reservation” policy in Spiti is leading directly to the decline of blacksmithing.

In Bhar village, Pin Valley, the effect of the *zoks* Scheduled Caste status is clear. All people I talked to expressed a strong interest in their children working for the government, regardless of caste and class. However, many people did not think too highly of their children's prospects, because, according to one farmer, it is very hard to get these jobs based on talent alone – one also needs “money and politics.” One person I spoke to, a self described poor carpenter, stated that he had passed the exam to work for the Indian Navy, but he needed to pay 2 lek to get the job, the equivalent of a years income for the most prosperous farms in Spiti. The majority of young people I spoke to expressed interest in working for the government, but doubted their ability to do it without connections and bribes, even considering their Scheduled Tribal Status.

This is where Scheduled Caste status becomes relevant. Most of the children of Kunzangpa, the Bhar blacksmith either work for the government or hope to. One son is a schoolteacher, one is a member of the Indian army, one is a monk at Kungri monastery, and two are still in school, hoping for government work. At least in Bhar, there is some negative sentiment towards caste affirmative action. According to one man, the blacksmith's sons got their government jobs purely based on their Caste status, not based upon merit. Whether or not this is true, affirmative action is selectively removing the *zoks* from their historic profession.



Kungsangpa, the blacksmith of Bhar, in his shrine room.

Due to the influence of their Scheduled Caste status, many blacksmiths currently have no heirs for the tradition – it is, almost without exception, passed down from father to son, and because many of these sons are taking up other professions, there are few young blacksmiths. The Demul blacksmith, who himself tried to join the Indian army, is now five years retired and lives off the government salary of his only son. Chhering tried many careers before he decided to be a blacksmith, and one of his main goals in life is to see his son well educated and settled in a good job. The blacksmith of Mani-Yongma’s son is currently at medical school. Kunzangpa’s five sons follow this trend as well. Kunzangpa’s oldest son, Tandup, states emphatically that none of them will be blacksmiths, that his father will be the last blacksmith in Bhar. It seems that the *zoks* have reached the level of career mobility where many of them can escape professional blacksmithing if they want to. Since the job is difficult, unhealthy, and the symbol of their low caste, many choose other lines of work.

Interestingly enough, this trend may begin to reverse. There has always been an albeit declining level of disparity between Reservation quotas and actual employment, and according to Iadhav, the government of India is slimming its bureaucracy. Citing a report by the Working Group on the Empowering of Scheduled Castes, she states “over 1,13,450 job opportunities were lost by the scheduled castes in the Central Government during the period 1992-97,” and, in the “last few years, several lakhs of reservation posts have been wiped out” due to the overall declining amount of positions.⁹ Chhering made one statement to me on this subject, saying

that, even for Scheduled castes, government jobs are not easy to get. He predicted that blacksmithing will improve as a profession in the coming years, and said it may be the best opportunity for his son.

Analysis of the zoks Place in the Spiti Caste System

Caste Background

The caste system in Spiti is historically divided into three main groups – the *Tsetsang*, the landless class, is at the bottom, the *Chechang*, or the land-holding class, is in the middle, and the *Nono*, the descendants of the historical kings of Spiti, are at the top. The *Tsetsang* are the descendants of non-landholding service professions, and are thus divided between the *Beta*, the musicians, and *Zoks*, the smiths.¹⁰ *Zoks* literally means maker, and is the root of the names of many types of craftsmen. The cast *zoks*, however, only contains the descendants of metal-smiths. There are also differentiations inside of the *chechang*, although the hierarchy does not have any serious consequences. Some people think the Llamas, or *Jowa*, and the *Amche*, or village ayurvedic doctors, deserve extra respect and, due to their lineage, are the most intelligent, competent members of the *chechang*, but there is no endogamy or anything like the sanctions imposed on the lower castes.

Generally, the caste system of Spiti lacks most of the characteristics of caste systems elsewhere in India, and is instead more similar to the caste system of Tibet. There are not strict impurity sanctions – *chechang* ate meals at Chhering's house, and Chhering's family uses the same water supply as the rest of the village. However, there is still caste structure. Lower castes can only marry within their caste.¹¹ This is probably the most significant social sanction of the Spiti caste system, because it perpetuates the poverty of the lower castes. *Zo* are also expected to drink out of separate cups and sit in certain locations in other people's homes, by the door and in the far corner from the door. This is especially apparent at social functions. At one birthday ceremony, or *pingri*, I attended in Demul village, the blacksmith of Bhar was there to play the drums, a tradition role of Spiti blacksmiths. There was a large dining room set aside for feeding the fifty or so guests who had come from other villages. When I entered, the Kunsangpa was sitting alone against the wall near the door, despite a large number of cushioned empty spaces at tables. Later in the night, I noticed him pull a cup out of the front of his *chupa* to accept tea. However, the fact that people are willing to eat food and drink tea made by *zoks* out of dishes they often use shows the plasticity of these caste rules. They are universally understood, but broken in certain circumstances when politeness dictates.



Kunzangpa leading the dancers at a birthday party in Demul village.

Spiti caste relations are characterized by this dichotomy. Blacksmiths, in some cases, notably Chhering's, have many good friends in the community. While we were working, Chhering's friends would often come and sit in his smithy enclosure, working the butba, swinging a sledge hammer if he was making a large object, talking, smoking. One night, he had three of his closest friends over for dinner, men he has been close to since childhood. All are *chechang*, one a kang-chen, one an ex-army major, one a contractor, one the village ration Sectry. They all sat, eating, drinking *arrook*, smoking, telling jokes, caste division seemingly forgotten. One man, a *king-chung* said "our group, one *kang-chen*, three *king-chung*," erasing the caste divisions inside the group. However, there is also the caste system, ingrained, as one man said, in the minds of the community since childhood.

In the village of Bhar, Pin Valley, a couple hours drive from Langza, caste divisions are slightly more intense. The *zoks* are still expected to drink out of different cups and seat separately at parties and events. When I met the Kunzangpa he was returning from a marriage ceremony, again pulling a cup from his *chupa* as he walked into the house. Additionally, up until 2008, Kunzangpa was responsible for slaughtering all the animals in the village. This is a Buddhist tradition – because it is bad for one's merit to kill animals, this job is traditionally given to an economically depressed segment of the population, often the blacksmiths. According to many residents of the village, this is the reason why the *zoks* are lower – they kill animals, so they must have a different heart than most other people.

This difference, most significantly the subject of butchery, is evidence of regional variation in terms of the execution and conception of caste inside of Spiti. One interesting factor is that, in many respects, Bhar seems to be behind other parts

of Spiti in terms of agricultural practices. Although they use tractors to till the land, as well as electric threshers, the farmers of Bhar did not convert to the cash crop green peas until 2005, while the farmers of Langza converted around 1995, and some as early as 1991. Today, farmers in Pin Valley sell to three major dealers, all men from Kaza. A farmer from Langza stated that these men are not the highest bidders these days, and most of the people in Spiti sell to businessmen from Chandigarh who do not go to the Pin Valley. Thus it seems that despite their use of technology (in Spiti valley, I only saw tractors in low villages, but Bhar, well above the valley floor, has three) the Pin Valley, or at least Bhar, is a bit of a backwater in some respects, behind the trends of villages in the Spiti Valley. This is not completely true, as a few farmers, as well as the Nono, stated that the Champa, the region in the southeast of Spiti, surrounding the village of Tabo, has some of the largest caste divisions in all of Spiti. This, perhaps, is a result of the fact that this region is the closest to the neighboring district of Kinnaur, a more ethnically and culturally Indian region that has higher degree of caste consciousness than Spiti.

Despite the relative rigidity of the caste structure, the people of Bhar are very sensitive about sharing their beliefs with the *zoks* family. A few of them specifically asked that I not share their statements with the *zoks*. Some said they did not want to anger or offend the family, others said that it was important that they not offend the school teacher, since he taught their children. One farmer said that when people were at the blacksmith's house having tools made, they would go in for food and tea if they were asked. In other villages, people made similar statements, asking me not to share their statements about the caste structure in Spiti because they considered *zoks* in the village their friends, and did not want to offend them or hurt their feelings. One farmer, even though he did not believe that *zoks* are innately different in composition, still did not feel comfortable sharing the degree to which he had internalized the socially constructed lowness of the blacksmith caste. This same phenomenon is described by Heidi Fjeld in her work on caste structure in contemporary Lhasa. When she became interested in speaking with *menrig*, or the umbrella caste group in Tibet that includes the *Gara*, she describes informants as unwilling to introduce her to these families, partially out of desire to avoid social perception of connection to them, but also because of the implications of such introductions to the families themselves – it would require reminding them the rest of the community considers them *menrig*. So, although the *zoks* are not openly disrespected by the community, different villages have differing levels of underlying caste division.

This hesitancy could also be partially rooted in India's Penal Code. Just as elsewhere in India, Scheduled caste members in Spiti are protected by the law from caste-related "atrocities." As one farmer said, *zoks* can have people booked – fined or put in jail – for certain caste-related breaches of etiquette, mentioning slurs as one of the primary prohibitions. The Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955, is the mainstay of the protection of Scheduled Caste groups, generally promising punishment for anyone perpetuating inequality of access to religious places and public resources, ie public restaurants, water sources, etc, based on the ground of "untouchability." One section, forbidding insult on the ground of untouchability, is probably the basis for the man's statement about slurs. The Scheduled Castes and The Scheduled Tribes

(Protection of Atrocities) Act of 1989 is the second key documents protecting the rights of members of these groups. The Act is quite stringent, basically naming increased sentences for various hate crimes, or “atrocities” committed by non-Tribal and Caste members against these groups. Since the entire population of Lahoul and Spiti has been extended Scheduled Tribal status, this act does not, for the most part, seem relevant to Spiti – each list of atrocities in the Act begins with the qualifier that these crimes must be committed by people other than Scheduled Castes and Tribes to be punishable under the act. This, it seems, would basically null the effectiveness of the Act for the Scheduled caste members of Spiti. The 1989 Act also gives state governments the power to pass laws to help enforce this Act. In Himachal, one example of a Tribal Status-justified law is one recently passed by the state government prohibiting the purchase of land in Spiti by outsiders – one must have Spiti Tribal status to purchase land. This is the type of legislation the 1989 Act is inspiring, not civil rights protections. It seems the lower caste members of Spiti rely mostly on the 1955 Act for protection of their civil rights. This does not seem to be much of a problem – I heard nothing about hate crimes perpetrated against *zoks* in Spiti – the caste divide is not venomous enough, nor are the settlements large enough, for people to have the desire or social freedom to commit hate crimes against the lower caste, at least these days.

Historical Causes of Caste

I spent a lot of time trying to discover why the system of social prejudice marginalizes blacksmiths. Fjeld states that, in Tibet, the caste system today focuses mostly on butchers and blacksmiths is a result of historical physical uncleanness of certain professions, as well as the fact that “butchers are engaged in killing, which is the cardinal sin of Tibetan Buddhism. Blacksmiths make the knives that are used for killing. The smiths in general use materials extracted from the earth, and interference with the earth and the earth spirits is considered wrongdoing.”¹² She argues that the main reason these castes are low is the fact that their professions are “in direct occupation to the religious code of conduct.” These statements are especially applicable to Spiti, where the blacksmith historically, and, to a certain degree, even today, is also the butcher. Some parts of Fjeld’s analysis definitely apply to Spiti – especially in Bhar, many people cited butchery as the reason for why the blacksmiths are different. The extraction of metal from the earth does not apply at all today, as all blacksmithed goods are made from scrap metal, and have been for generations. It is possible that this was part of the origination of the caste structure, because in the past, where there were little metal objects in Spiti, all iron was extracted from the earth.

Interestingly enough, all three of the blacksmiths I met were highly religious – the Bhar blacksmith, for example, spent the evening I met him turning a prayer mill, and when I returned in the morning he was beating a large ritual drum, praying, in his large, highly decorated shrine room. Nearly all houses have this rooms, but his was especially full of objects. Chhering, also, seems much more religiously conscious than most people his age – it is mostly people over fifty who walk around praying, but Chhering recites mantras often, not to mention the importance of *mGara Nagpo* in his life.

Along these same lines, the *zoks* are historically thought of as occupying a lower state in samsara than the rest of people. This is evidence that Fjeld's analysis of the importance of religion in the formation of the caste structure also has a place in Spiti. However, this aspect of the socially conditioned *zoks* construct is no longer believed in Langza. In fact, Buddhism was mentioned in many of the interviews about Caste. The next district over, Kinnuar, has a significant Hindu population, and, according to Chhering, blacksmiths and construction workers there face substantial untouchability sanctions. People would mention that Buddha spoke on the equality of all people, and then either talk about how blacksmiths were different than people, how their ancestors told them blacksmiths were different than people, or how they believed in the equality of all people. Whichever way they answered, the prefacing mention of their religious code, shows its relevance in their opinions on caste. This uncovers a couple interesting moral contradictions the upper caste members must work with. Although their religious code condemns butchery, it is also directly opposite to many of their views on caste. There is also thus a degree of internal conflict between the word of the elders and their religious code.

Many in Spiti do not really know why the blacksmith is not equal. In Bhar, the oldest man I spoke to, a seventy-seven year old farmer, said that the word from his elders is that the *zoks*, as well as the *beta*, the musician class, are inherently different. Although on the outside they appear the same, their blood and bones are different than the blood and bones of other people. This sentiment was repeated by seven of eight families I spoke to. One man said he had heard from his elders that the *zoks* came from a different place when people first settled the earth. This is an interesting point in light of the Nono's speculations that the caste system in Spiti was partially constructed by difference in ethnicity, based upon his observation that the *zoks* are less "Mongoloid" have more "Mon", physiology, Mon the ancient local blanket term for people who arrived to Spiti from more southern districts.¹³

One man, a *chechang* carpenter, said that while many people in the village feel this way, he thinks the *zoks* are equal human beings. His opinion, however, is not a popular one. Even among the young people I talked to, in Bhar the repeated line was that their elders had said the *zoks* are not equal, and they must respect the teachings of their elders.¹⁴ He speculated that there would always be caste distinctions in his village. One young farmer had an interesting perspective on this – he said the village needs to have a low caste, because otherwise people will have to kill their own animals. He also argued that if the *zoks* were equal, they would not make and repair the village's metal implements. I do not fully understand his reasoning, but it is probably a combination of the fact that blacksmithing is physically hard and not very lucrative – thus a group must be socially and economically depressed in order to do it – and also a genuine feeling that they were the rightful doers of these jobs, and if they stopped, nobody else would be willing to do them. Caste, at least for some in Spiti, preserves a pragmatic status quo that allows the most disagreeable takes to be avoided.

An old story Tsering told me early on illustrates another aspect of the origination of the caste system in Spiti. At the beginning of time, when Spiti was first being settled, a *kang-chen* family had three sons. The first inherited the family's many lands, and set about to diligently cultivating them. The second son, without

any land, was supported by the first son, and in return repaired the farm tools used to cultivate the land. However, while banging away at a *tokze* on top of the house, he smashed a big hole in the roof. The elder brother, tired of his incompetency, sent him off to live in a small house, giving him some grain and barley each year in return for tool repair, since the man had not inherited enough land to otherwise support himself. The third son, a musician, played music to entertain the first son. This eventually became annoying, and he was sent off to play in the corner and beg food from the first son.

This legend apparently outlines how the cast system of Spiti was initiated, and it certainly rings true in a few ways. According to one *kang-chen* farmer I talked to, caste was not important in the social sphere. However, he says, especially in previous generations but still today, land ownership is a large part of social status hierarchy. This statement is supported by the fact that the traditional caste structure is defined by this factor. One farmer from the village of Lara, speaking on the best jobs in Spiti, suggested that *kang-chen* farming is “preferred, but economically not so good.” Even though government work is more highly paid, social status is still largely conferred based upon land ownership. The low status of blacksmiths thus has a lot to do with their historic landlessness. Especially considering their method of payment, which, even now that it has become augmented by cash payment in the last generation, seems almost like donation, it is easy to see how the social figure of the blacksmith was constructed as a figure who could not support himself, a dependent member of the village. However, nearly every farmer I asked remarked that blacksmiths were highly necessary members of society – their goods are crucial to the livings of the majority of the people of Spiti. As Chhering said, a farmer can have a fifty workers, ten yaks, ten plows, but without *tokzes* and plow-tips, he will have no green peas. Farmers also tend to agree that blacksmithing is a more difficult, less lucrative profession than farming. Far from thinking blacksmiths are lazy, people agree that blacksmithing requires much more hard work than any other job in Spiti.

Caste and Class

Poverty is still a trait shared by many of the *zoks* in the villages of Spiti. Chhering is on the most heavily subsidized ration plan available, receiving the highest possible level of subsidies. Chhering mentions poverty as the main degrading stereotype the blacksmith caste faces, although this was not echoed by many people I talked to.¹⁵ The one farmer who spoke about blacksmiths low caste status stems from their economic status spoke about this subject quickly and self-consciously, as if he was embarrassed to share it – it is possible the case that this is simply a subject people like to avoid, not wanting to seem stereotypical. Lack of land ownership is a historical trait, not a contemporary one – both Chhering and his cousin in Langza own land. The *zoks* caste, descended from a caste that was once theoretically only blacksmiths at one point, has differentiated professionally over the years – some are blacksmiths, some are farmers, some have jobs. However, at least in the case of Chhering and his brother, they have very small holdings, definitely not large enough to make a full living. The caste history of the *zoks* is thus affecting their contemporary class position. The historical lack of land ownership

combined with caste endogamy keeps *zoks* who are not able to find other work poor, and dependent on the rest of the community – Chhering’s cousin is forced to work as a laborer on other people’s farms. This effect of caste upon contemporary class, although counteracted by legislation, perpetuates historical caste divisions by keeping the *zoks* in a lower position in the community than the rest of the villagers.

This, interestingly enough, fits into the general theme of caste in modern India. Historical aspects of caste division are being replaced by economic and educational disparity, although these conditions are generally improving. According to Desai and Dubey, the most fruitful line of examination for investigating the social position of low caste groups is “focusing on ways in which a socially closed system like caste adapts and manipulates emerging class inequalities in a society undergoing economic transformation.”¹⁶ Despite affirmative action policies, general trends across India show that “access to productive resources, particularly education and skills remain closely associated with caste.”¹⁷ Spiti is extremely different from the rest of India, and does not seem to follow this trend. Chhering’s children have no problem attending schools, and generally *zoks* achieve levels of education equal to others. According to the Nono, in the rest of India the economic repression of castes is due mostly to the fact that positions of power are held by members of upper castes, and these people look after their own, being more willing to hire and accept to good jobs members of their own caste. In Spiti, he says, a similar system is present to a lesser degree, but it is mostly based on kinship ties – people will expect their family members to vote for them when they run for a local office, for example. This point is slightly moot, however, as, due to caste endogamy, kinship and caste in Spiti are nearly synonymous. Regardless, caste does not seem to be a large factor in terms of access to education in Spiti. However, caste is certainly relevant to the contemporary class structure in Spiti, even if it is due to different reasons.

The economy of Spiti is also very different from the average in India, because of the massive subsidies granted the area due to tribal status and the focus on tourism¹⁸. The affect of Caste on the *zoks* economic position seems to be generally twofold, dividing the *zoks* into two groups – those still in the village, and those who leave it, or at least its economic sphere. First of all, due to “reservation” policy, it is driving attainment of government jobs, increasing their socioeconomic status and, in some cases, taking them away from their villages. Secondly, inside of the village, caste endogamy keeps the resource levels of *zoks* low.

Butchery is a very telling case study of this second trend. Since 2008 Kunzangpa has refused to kill any animals. As a result, the rest of the village stopped his yearly contributions of barley and grass. Most of the people I surveyed used to give anywhere from two to five kg of barley to the *zoks* every year, as well as some grass for feed for his animals. One said he used to give green peas. These contributions were stopped completely when the *zoks* refused to kill animals, a statement he was able to make because of the income his family receives from his sons. This is an example of how caste is being used to reinforce class distinctions. The relatively economically stable middle class removes economic support when the lower class deviates from their traditional caste responsibilities, enforcing their low class status based upon the precepts of their historical caste.

In Langza, the blacksmith was responsible for slaughtering the village animals until Chherring's father's time. The situation has not changed that much since, however. Three or four people in the village kill their own animals, while a member of the *zoks* cast, a small-landholder and laborer, is often hired.¹⁹ I witnessed one cow slaughter in Langza. The cow was the property of a *chechang*, the owner of one of the largest farms in the village, a holding of around ninety *bigas*.²⁰ The farmer had hired the *zoks*, who often does this work, to do most of the job, paying him Rs 1500. The farmer was helping when needed, mostly light work, holding the carcass steady and fetching things. Some of his duties were definitely gruesome, but the *zoks* did the majority of the hard labor, grunting words of resigned disgust throughout. It is interesting that a member of the blacksmith caste still often does this work, even after it has stopped being the blacksmith's responsibility. It does not seem to be a caste imposed, responsibility, but a class one. When, unable to contain my feelings about the hypocrisy of the view that one could keep one's morality and religious merit by paying someone to kill an animal as opposed to killing it oneself, I asked a farmer about the practice. His response was a story about a European who had visited the village before and made the same point, but had shied away when the farmer asked his help slaughtering an animal. His implication was that this job is disgusting and disagreeable, and this is as big a reason for its delegation to a low cast as religious reasons. The *zoks* still do this work out of economic necessity – as they are still one of the poorest groups in Spiti, they are still often forced to do the most disagreeable job. It is a concrete example of the way caste and class act as a positive feedback loop inside of the Spiti village. Without much inherited land, and, due to caste endogamy, little potential to gain any more, some *zoks* are forced economically to do a job traditionally foisted upon their caste, further perpetuating the stereotype that caused his poverty in the first place.

This point also speaks to the origination of the blacksmith's low caste status in Spiti. As one man speculates, historically, the most physically and religiously degrading jobs – metalworking and butchery – were done by the poorest, most desperate people, who were never married to large, landowning families because these families wanted to increase their wealth, not dilute it. Combined with the religious immorality of butchery, this is a fairly likely interpretation about the formation of the *zoks* caste in Spiti.

Many young people from various parts of Spiti are less concerned with caste than the older generations. People in their early twenties, specifically one informant from Dankhar and another from Komic, say they believe all people are equal, and have no prejudice against the *zoks*. Both of these people have completed high levels of education, the man from Dhankar attending college in Manali, and the man from Komic making it through plus-two, meaning twelve years of primary and secondary education. Similar ideas are not totally confined to the young. Three or four years ago, Chherring taught a friend, a *Kang-chen chechang* from the village of Lossar, to blacksmith. The man, unworried about possible social consequences, now makes *tokzes* and other implements for his farm, as well as supplying these tools to other people in his village, taking labor on his farm as payment. These cases evidence the dilution of caste divisions, suggesting education and professional freedom is decreasing people's consciousness of caste boundaries.

Damchen

Many villages in Spiti have oracles that channel specific deities, or *lha*, on holey days and during times of emergency. In cases of extreme sickness, for example, deities can be called upon to come provide blessed barley medicine for the ill. One *lha* is particularly important to Chhering, a god he refers to as *Damchen*, more commonly called *mGara Nagpo*, “the dark-hued blacksmith,” an emanation or valued officer of the deity *rDorje Legspa*.²¹ *Damchen* is meaningful to Chhering because he is the protector deity of blacksmith, and Chhering’s ancestry has always made him a part of their life and work. The *rDorje Legspa* oracle, historically a resident of Chikem, died a few years ago, and no replacement has yet been found. When he was alive, Tsering made a point of seeing him to ask him questions about any problems or life decisions he is facing at the time, and still visits *Damchen*’s statue in the temple of Chikem. Apparently *Damchen* usually advises increased religious dedication, recommending reading holy books or doing pujas.



*18th Century Image of rGara Nagpo.*²²

Chhering's caste, the *zoks*, is called '*ga ra*,²³ in Tibetan. According to Chhering, the caste is descended from '*ga ra yug pa*,²⁴ the king of the blacksmith who lived in the time of the Buddha. De Nobesky notes that Tucci also proposed between this ancient blacksmith king and the namesake of the '*gar ra*, meaning that this knowledge has been passed down in Spiti for at least the past ninety years, and probably much longer.²⁵ Chhering says this figure, upon death, became the deity (who the people of Spiti refer to as a *lha*) *Damchen*,²⁶ who, like many other deities, visits the people of Spiti through oracles and gives them advice. There is no mention of and connection between '*ga ra yug pa* and *mGara Nagpo* in any source I came across; De Nobesky describes a belief among Tibetans that the deity is the ghostly reincarnation of an Indian monk who committed many grave crimes.

Damchen, according to the stories of the elders of Chikem, is an incredibly strong protector deity, a supreme power among all the deities of Tibet. This is not inflation due to local pride – *rDo rje Legs pa* is an extremely powerful and violent deity. Not only is he a member of the "*gter gyi srung ma sde bzhi*, 'the four orders of treasure guards,'" who guard the *Ningmapa Terma* treasure system, protecting the golden treasures of the South, he is a powerful dharma protector for both the *Ningmapa* and *Kagupa* lineages.²⁷ Spiti teachings on *Damchen* focus on his great strength and power.



18th Century Image of *rDorje Legpa*.²⁸

It is said that he once made a *dorje* using his thigh instead of an anvil, giving the product it to the *tulku* Serkong Dorje Chang, the reincarnation of Marpa, Naropa's most accomplished student and the teacher of Milarepa.²⁹ For this feat, the Rinpoche changed the deity's name from *Damchen mGarba nagpo* to *Damchen rDorje Lagpa*, or beautiful dorje. This story is not completely accurate – *mGarba nagpo* is viewed by historians as an officer or emanation of *mDorje legspsa*.³⁰ Although it is not certain that the two are completely different beings, many sources refer to them as such, and even if they were two names for the same being, *mDorje Legspsa* would be the original. Additionally, Serkong Dorje Chang is currently only in his third reincarnation; the first, a powerful tantric master, was not born until 1855,³¹ and there are paintings of *mGarba Nagpo* dating well before the birthday of the first Dorje Chang Rinpoche.³² This does not necessarily mean that the elders of Chichem are mistaken about their deity, as I heard this story second hand from a man who said he did not know if his transmission was necessarily accurate.

The Chichem elders also state that during the construction of the Samye Lakang, the first Buddhist temple built in Tibet, a large group of protector deities joined forces to complete the construction. It is said that *Damchen* carried two huge roof beams, one on each ear, that none of the other deities could lift with all their might. Most sources accredit the building of the Samye monastery to Padmasambhava. The monastery was being constructed in 767 CE by King Trisong Deutsen, the king of Tibet at the time, in order to spread the Dharma to Tibetans, as in his words “the people of Tibet are hard to tame.”³³ Because the building process, as well as the conditions for the future building, was endangered by “Bon-invoked obstacles,” powerful and malevolent local gods and spirits, Padmasambhava is said to have performed, according to Tibetan religious historians, the first Vajrakilaya (Vajrikila) *'cham* dance.³⁴ According to the fifth Dalai Lama, “Padmasambhava performed this dance in order to prepare the ground for the Samye monastery and to pacify the malice of the *lha* [local mountain god spirits] and *srin* [malevolent spirits] in order to create the most perfect conditions”³⁵ However, according to the *Sanglingma*, Padmasambhava's biography, written in his lifetime, a large part of his role in the construction was meditating, “commanding the eight classes of gods and demons,” who he had bound under oath “to assist in the construction... What the gods and demons built during the night exceeded what the humans built during the day.”³⁶ This story of *Damchen* is thus grounded in the classical understanding of the building of the Samye, especially considering the fact that he is said to have been pacified and pledged to protect the Dharma by *Padmasambhava* in the eighth century.³⁷

Damchen, or more accurately *mGara Nagpo*, also has a constant presence in Tsering's work. De Nebesky mentions that the blacksmiths venerate this deity, and wonders about the form this worship takes.³⁸ For Chhering, the process mostly involves praying the *mGara Nagpo* mantra. Before he begins work, Chhering places juniper needle incense in the forge as an offering to the deity. He also recites the mantra, which, he says, allows him to touch hot coals without feeling pain. One night, after praying his mantra, called *mingla*, or fire mantra, intensely on a mani, Chhering repeatedly licked a red-hot pair of fire tongs, with no adverse effects. This

practice runs in his family – both his father and grandfather, and presumably the rest of their line, used the same manta. However, Tsering thinks this is a unique trait of the Langza blacksmith, and does not know of any other blacksmiths in Spiti who recite the *mGara Nagpo* mantra, although, as De Nebesky states, his worship is common in Tibet.³⁹ This mantra, according to Chhering, was made by the protector deity when, in a fit of rage, he grabbed a piece of red-hot iron and held it in his hand until it cooled. In one block print, *mGara Nagpo* is depicted with his right hand lifting “skyward a flaming lump of iron, ... with which he crushes to powder those who oppose the teachings of Buddhism.”⁴⁰ This suggests that this mantra was originally caused by a rage against non-Buddhists, and the imperviousness to heat that it causes is more of a side effect, or an expression of the strength, of the mantra’s ability to crush non-Buddhist thought. This is especially interesting, considering the fact that Chhering’s connection with *Damchen* is one of the thickest pillars of his religious practice.

The Nono says that, generally, these deities work to preserve tradition in the villages of Spiti. Depta, the *lha* of Hansa, orders the people of the village not to stray too far from traditional dress. The *lha* of Demul village prevents certain herbs from being picked, as he says they are endangered and need time to recover, or else they will be lost to future generations. This ties them to the blacksmith, another group the Nono states preserves traditions of Spiti, and perhaps gives *Damchen* special significance in the future of the blacksmith. In addition to his role as a cultivator of pride and strength. Regardless, the *Lha* of Spiti are an extremely interesting, unstudied subject that deserves further attention.

Conclusion

Blacksmithing in Spiti is currently declining, despite its continued local importance. This is a result of a combination of factors – the Schedule Caste Status of the *zoks* is increasing the rate at which members of this caste can escape their historical profession, a common desire considering the facts that it is physically damaging, that it symbolizes their low caste standing, and that it is far less lucrative than government employment. Additionally, the *zoks* low caste standing, caused due to a combination of landlessness, religious condemnation of the profession of blacksmithing, and a possible late immigration to the area, is causing a positive feedback loop that keeps *zoks* in the economic sphere of the villages poor, a further driving factor to leave this sphere. The current trend suggests that there will be less and less blacksmiths working as time goes on.

However, it seems that this trend will reverse. If the number of “reservation” positions available continue to decrease and the national and state governments continue to be slimmed, it will be much more difficult for *zoks* to escape the village. Some blacksmiths, Chhering included, who understand that there is still a need for blacksmithed goods in Spiti, also still view the profession as having potential. Especially considering the fact that young people are beginning to care less about caste distinctions, it is highly possible that, in the future, the current decline of blacksmith will be reversed. *mGarba Nagpo*’s power and fame could also serve as an internal source of pride and power for the *zoks*, whether or not they end up

reclaiming their profession. The question is whether or not mass-produced goods will render blacksmithing irrelevant before government jobs become scarce enough, and caste prejudice sinks low enough, that smithing becomes an attractive profession. These processes could be hastened if the blacksmiths expand their market, targeting tourists and possibly starting a cooperative or guild.

Methods

My notation of Spiti and Tibetan terms is varied. In all cases it is either based on the Wilie system or a Wilie-informed phonetic interpretation. Spiti language, although it uses the Tibetan script is not often written, and it was difficult to secure time with people who could write Spiti language in Tibetan script, and in cases where I could compare their spellings to those of scholarship, the two were often significantly different.

I obtained most of my information through interview and observation. This project is the synthesis of the opinions of roughly thirty residents of Spiti, whom I interviewed verbally based loosely upon previously written questionnaires. These interviews were conducted mostly in English, sometimes in Spiti language or Hindi with the help of research assistants. Is more of a generalist than an empirical study. In a few villages, notably Bhar, I was able to obtain enough translator time to interview subjects in a systematic manner that allows me to confidently report on certain trends. Much of the time, however, my informant pool was limited to English speakers, and so I am forced to do my best to construct statements based upon small, scattered samples, especially when discussing caste issues, a subject that was often uncomfortable to breach and the local specifics of which are difficult to check and corroborate with secondary sources. Despite these fact, my data is sufficient to provide meaningful statements about the caste system in the areas of Spiti I visited. My main informant and research assistant was Chhering Andup, the blacksmith of Langza. The friendship I developed with him by living in his home and working with him each morning was extremely valuable when it came to gathering information, as well as preventing loneliness, as it gave me a deeper, more honest look at the situation than I would have received had I focused on completing an empirical analysis of villages. I try to balance this personal depth with the use of primary and secondary literary sources on the subjects I explore, adding breadth to the depth my fieldwork provides.

Notes and Appendixes:

¹ Traditionally blacksmiths also built and maintained the hydro-powered mills

² Chhering makes some of his own *sola*, by burning wood and removing the charred product from the fire before it is completely burned. However, due to the fact that there is not a single tree in Langza and the majority of the imported wood is needed for heating his home through the freezing winter, where outdoor temperatures often fall to thirty below zero on the Celsius thermometer, he often cannot produce enough *sola* to complete all his years projects, and he must buy extra in Kaza. One of the most successful blacksmiths in Spiti, the blacksmith of Mane, is able to turn out a huge volume of products because mane has a large amount of White Willow and Seabuckthorn that can be easily converted to *sola*.

³ In addition to ironsmiths, some Spiti villages, including Komic, also have gold and silver smiths. These smiths specialize in jewelry making for marriage dowries and general security. This was especially relevant even into the recent past, as banking was slow to come to Spiti. Even now, there is only one ATM in the sub-District, only installed three years ago. They are also *zoks*, and have the same class standing as blacksmiths. People wishing to have jewelry made must go “downside” to Manali or Chandighar to buy the raw metal. The silversmith of Komic has been retired for five years, as his eyes have begun to fail him, and his son, a man in his early twenties, is beginning to learn his profession.

⁴ By law, at least 1/3 of local political positions must be filled by women.

⁵ Himachal Pradesh Scheduled Tribe Development Corporation. “Our Schemes.” <http://himachal.gov.in/hpscstddc/SchemesEng.htm>. Accessed 11/30/13.

⁶ This is especially true for the second and third children who do not inherit much, or sometimes any, land or wealth in Spiti’s primogenital inheritance system, but even the oldest sons of large farms generally prefer government work.

⁷ Spiti farmers also face other problems, like variable seed quality and varying scruples of purchasers. One farmer I spoke with in Langza stated that two years ago, an agent from Chandighar promised them Rs 45 per kg of green peas, and on the day of the deal only paid them Rs 25. This past year was better, and the farmers in Langza made rs 40-43 per kg. However, in the past they have been forced to take the risk of driving their crops to Delhi, where prices are higher, or selling to local businessmen who know the ins and outs of Spiti business operations enough to get a minimum price. Some older, larger families, one man told me, will also hoard water, keeping it from the rest of the farmers.

⁸ Pravneen Jadhav. “Relative Disparity of the Implementation of Reservation Policy in India (With respect to Scheduled Castes)”. *Development of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in India*. Ed. Jagan Karade. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle (2008): 5.

⁹ Ibid 6.

¹⁰ Some say *zoks* is a professional title, while the real name for this cast is *gara*. However *zoks* is commonly used to describe the caste, and it is more accurate to say that *zoks* is Spiti language, while *Gara* is the Tibetan word for the same group. In Bhar village, people refer to the *zoks* simple as Caste, ie “the caste familie’s house.” The official Himachal Pradesh government name of the Scheduled Caste is *Lohar*, the

Hindi word for blacksmith. Similarly, the *chechang* is referred to as *Rajput* by Revenue service workers, who chose the warrior caste to represent the Spiti middle class as it is a respectable mid-level caste with neutral connotations. Professionally, a blacksmith is called a *chazoks*, a silversmith is a *muldzoks*, a goldsmith is called a *serzoks*, a carpenter is a *shinzoks*, a potter is a *zapzoks*

¹¹ Chhering is thus related to the blacksmiths of the villages of Pangmo, Vicosa, Kibur, Rangrick, Dankar, Demul, and the silversmith of Komic, and is probably distantly related to all the smiths in Spiti

¹² Heidi Fjeld. *Commoners and Nobles*. NIAS Press, Copenhagen, Denmark (2005). 51

¹³ Nono, personal interview.

¹⁴ Another interesting example of this phenomenon is the method of choosing Pradans, leaders of Panchayats, local government organizations. The elders of eleven out of thirteen of these Panchayats have eliminated voting, as it caused too much argument and infighting in the small villages, and instead pick the Pradan by drawing his or her name from a hat containing the names of all the adults in the village.

¹⁵ Cherring suggested that some *chechang* who historically started blacksmithing to make extra money were socially thrust into the *zo* caste, as people equated low economic status and the profession of blacksmithing with *zo*.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Sonalde Desai and Amaresh Dubey. "Caste in 21st Century India: Competing Narratives." *Economic and Political Weekly*: (12 March 2011) Vol XLVI no 11. 47

¹⁸ The town of Kaza is made up of guesthouses and restaurants that are visited much more often by tourists – many of them explicitly cater to tourists, offering Italian, "maxican" food, or cuisines of the whole world. Handicrafts shops dominate the streets, many of which close for the winter tourist lull. Three major tour companies operate in the valley. Outside of the tourist season, besides a few empty Nepali restaurants, the only shops open offer warm clothes, general goods, and fruits and vegetables. According to the director of a tourism company based in Kaza, about ninety percent of the shops in the town, the main commercial center of Spiti, are owned by people originally from outside of Spiti.

¹⁹ This trend is not universal. In the neighboring village of Komic, there are two or three *chechang* men who kill the majority of the animals.

²⁰ A *biga* is about eleven by fifteen meters.

²¹ Rene De Nebesky. *Oracles and Demons of Tibet: The Cult and Iconography of the Tibetan Protective Deities*. Tiwari Pilgrims Book House, Kathmandu (1993): 155.

²² Tom Suchan, *Mirrors of the Heart-Mind – Dorje Legpa Essay*. The Huntington Archive of Buddhist and Related Art.

²³ This is the spelling I was given by one old man from Bhar, but De Nobesky and Tucci both use the root *mGar*.

²⁴ Pronounced Garaukpa. Tucci gives the spelling *mGar yug pa*.

²⁵ Rene De Nebesky. *Oracles and Demons of Tibet*. 155, note 23.

²⁶ De Nebesky spells it *dam can*, meaning "oath bound," referring to his oath to Padmasambhava.

²⁷ Rene De Nebesky. *Oracles and Demons of Tibet*. 155.

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- ²⁸ Tom Suchan, *Mirrors of the Heart-Mind – Dorje Legpa Essay*. The Huntington Archive of Buddhist and Related Art.
- ²⁹ Teaching on the Life of Marpa Given by Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche at KTD, Woodstock, New York, March 25-30, 1986.
<http://www.kagyu.org/kagyulineage/lineage/kag04.php>. (2008): Accessed 12/1/13.
- ³⁰ Rene De Nebesky. *Oracles and Demons of Tibet*. 155.
- ³¹SDCROffice. "About Rinpoche." <http://www.dorjeechang.com/#!about/c20r9>. Accessed 12/1/13.
- ³² Tom Suchan, *Mirrors of the Heart-Mind – Dorje Legpa Essay*. The Huntington Archive of Buddhist and Related Art.
<http://huntingtonarchive.osu.edu/Exhibitions/sama/Essays/T97>. Updated November 2004. Accessed 12/1/13
- ³³ Yeshe Tsogyal. *The Lotus-Born: The Life Story of Padmasambhava*. Shambhala Publications, Boston (1993): 67.
- ³⁴ Mona Schrempf. "Taming the Earth, Controlling the Cosmos: Transformation of Space in Tibetan Buddhist and Bonpo Ritual Dance," *Sacred Spaces and Powerful Places in Tibetan Culture*. Ed Toni Huber. Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, Dharamsala (1999): 198.
- ³⁵ Ellen Pearlman. *Tibetan Sacred Dance: A Journey Into the Religious and Folk Traditions*. Inner Traditions, Rochester, Vermont (2002):18.
- ³⁶ Yeshe Tsogyal. *The Lotus-Born*. 72.
- ³⁷ Tom Suchan, *Mirrors of the Heart-Mind*.
- ³⁸ Rene De Nebesky. *Oracles and Demons of Tibet*. 155.
- ³⁹ It is very interesting that rDorje Legspa is the protector deity of a village of Spiti, as he is, according to De Nebesky on page 155, "undoubtedly a deity of Central Asia." This perhaps explains the scarcity of his following among blacksmiths in Spiti. His presence is further surprising, as he is predominantly a *Ningmapa* and *Kagupa* protector.
- ⁴⁰Rene De Nebesky. *Oracles and Demons of Tibet*. 155.

Glossary of Terms

Along - iron rings about 10 cm in diameter. These rings are used for rope-work and rigging.

Biga - measurement of land in Spiti, about 11 by 15 meters.

buchen - traditional performance group in Spiti, that mixes opera and prayer.

Butba - small hand-powered crank fan.

Chechang - landed commoner caste in Spiti.

Dikra - double-pointed pins for fastening cloth baby carriers.

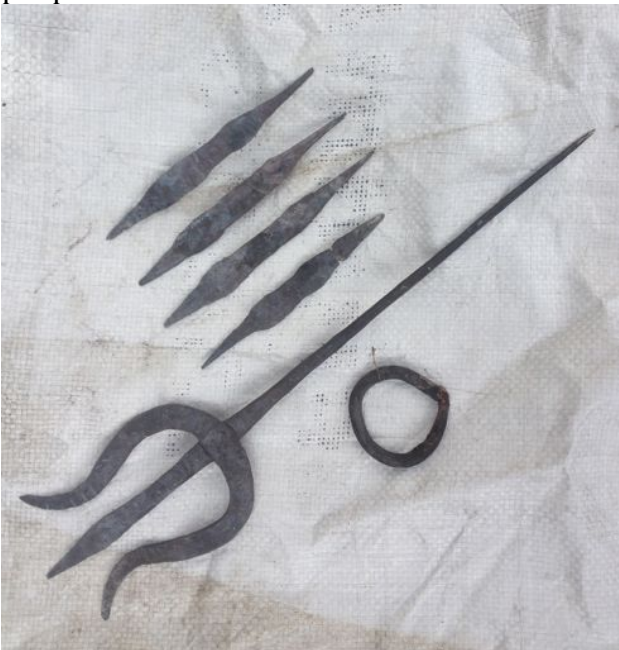
dyu, small, diamond pieces of iron that are stuck to the bottom of small prayer flag poles that llamas use during *pugas*.

Gnar -tempering.

Kakdo - the anvil.

kang-chen - large farm, roughly thirty to ninety *bigas*

Katumka - or trident, used for pinning blue, green, white, and red prayer flags to peoples' doors.



king-chung - small farm, roughly five to fifteen *bigas*.

Kiti - heavy steel shears.

Kompa - tongs,

Kompa, karok - beaked tongs, karok meaning crow in Spiti language.



lha - local mountain god spirits, in Spiti means protector Deity.

Lakdo - hammer. (see cover for range of Chhering's hammers).

lakdo karil, a hammer with a long, thin head.

menrig- the low caste in in Tibet, seemingly equivalent to *Tsetsang*

mGarba Nagbo - protector deity of the blacksmith.

Nono - the highest caste in Spiti, descended from the historical king of Spiti.

pingri, - birthday party.

rDorje Legspa - powerful, fierce protector deity, bound by oath to protect the Dharma by Padmasambhava in the 8th century.

ript - small iron pin, used to join pieces of metal.

Sale - lake salt from Lehdak, used when heating copper, silver, and gold.

Shukdur- file.

Sola - charcoal.

srin - malevolent spirits.

Tsetsang - landless caste in Spiti.

Tokze - an all purpose digging tool used for sowing and harvesting crops, digging irrigation ditches, and other digging projects.

Ti - knife.

tong sha - plow foreshare. This one made by Chhering.



Zoks - a low caste in Spiti, descended from blacksmiths. For full outline of
zora, - forge.
zong, a chisel.



The author in Spiti, India.

Suggestions for Further Research

For further study in Spiti, I recommend looking at the local government system, the Pradan Panchayat system. It's a good subject for examining the ways local people are involving themselves in the government in India, as well as looking at the culture of Spiti. The use of oracles and protector deity history, however, is the most interesting subject to be studied in Spiti right now, at least for those interested in Buddhist cosmology. A study of the way these deities inform the identities of the people of Spiti would be fascinating.

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