

Chapter 5

THE HOUSE AS RITUAL SPACE



Every morning, just after ten, I could hear *Achi* (the grandmother) whispering chants. When the sun started to warm up the air, and people were already busy with the chores of the day, she lit the bowl of incense (*sang*) and slowly said her *Om mani padme hum* prayers. With repeated whispers and the juniper smell of burning *sang*, she walked through the spaces of the house. Starting in the room of the hearth, she encircled the water reservoir and spread the incense into all four corners. She left the first room and carefully blew the *sang* towards the stone hearth (*tsala*), where the barley beer (*chang*) would later be boiling. Approaching our room, *Achi* greeted me smilingly while she continued to murmur her prayers and let the *sang* spread itself out into the corners, focusing on the sitting and sleeping place and around the door. She continued into the neighbouring ‘prosperity room’ (*yangkhang*) and dispersed the pleasant smell around the grain and the shrine of the house protector (*namo*). Following this, she entered the shrine room (*chökhang*), making sure the *sang* still burned and the smoke spread out into the air. After this round, *Achi* carefully climbed the ladder to the roof and let the smoke transport itself with the wind. Coming down again, she smiled and said: ‘Now, the house is clean (*khangpa tsangma sö tsar*).’

The house building (*khang*) is the site for both everyday and extraordinary events of life; it is where the closest relations are produced and reproduced, among married partners, siblings, parents and children, and others living their lives together. Houses are also homes providing (for most) a sense of belonging, not only for humans but also for the many nonhumans who share

these spaces, and much work – such as *Achi's* daily offerings and cleansing – goes into making and maintaining houses as a space that mediates coexistence and allows for prosperity, amicable relations and a sense of safety. As shown in the many examples in the anthology *About the House*, ‘the house and the body are intimately linked’, the house being an extension of the body, and extra layer of the skin, that both ‘reveals and displays’ and ‘hides and protects’ what is inside (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 2005: 2). Bodily practices are also central to the making and maintaining of the boundaries of the house, such as *Achi's* daily careful movements. *Achi's* house is a potentially bounded space that, with proper action, can provide her and her co-residents with not only cover from the harsh environment but a sense of belonging and also a representation of ontological order and ritual protection.

The following observations of physical houses stem from the beginning of the 2000s, before the government launched the programme called Comfortable House Project (CHP). From 2006 and onwards, the CHP provided loans and subsidies to encourage (or coerce, and something in between) farmers and nomads to renovate or (re)build their houses. Whole villages were also resettled (Robin 2009; Yeh 2013). People who visited Panam after 2012 told me that ‘almost all houses’ in Sharlung had been renovated or rebuilt, albeit to different degrees. One of the semi-pasoralist villages higher up in the township had been relocated closer to a road, to an area with better access to grass and water. The households in Sharlung received between 2000 and 10,000 RMB in subsidies, depending on their economic status, and secured the rest of the funding themselves, mostly through loans.¹ As one person said: ‘They just accepted it.’ Although there were policy guidelines of CHP that encouraged things like moving animals out from the ground floor, in Sharlung people rebuilt ‘the same houses, with the animals and grass inside’.² This is only anecdotal information, and for sure, the renovation and rebuilding processes have produced changes to both the exterior and interior of the houses in Sharlung (as Yeh 2013 details). However, according to the information that I have the main architectural structures seem to have been maintained.

Farmers’ houses in Tsang are by no means randomly organised; they are deeply meaningful and orderly places. In studies of vernacular architecture, houses have often been compared to books ‘in which the order of [the] world is recorded’ (Schulte Nordholt cited in Waterson 1997: xvii). Moreover, houses can be, in Bourdieu’s terms, an embodiment of cultural messages – messages that are internalised by its residents. Children read the house ‘book’ with their bodies, he wrote in his work on Berber houses, ‘in and through the movements and displacements which make the space within which they are enacted as much as they are made by it’ (Bourdieu 1997: 90). Through daily, embodied practices, *Achi* and her co-residents (re)produce the Takrab

house as an ordered space, reflecting the world (*jikten*) itself and their place within it. The house is a microcosm, placing the humans and nonhumans in an ontological order and facilitating proper and friendly relations between them. Ordering the house, and acting accordingly, enables ritual efficacy. This efficacy is existential in a state of ontological continuity, where humans, animals, sprits, demons and deities, and corporeal, semi- and non-corporeal beings and forces share the world. The concept of *jikten* encompasses a wider mode of understanding human and nonhuman engagement with the world, as they are entangled and enmeshed in what can be called extended sociality – that is, a sociality that extends ‘beyond immediate relations between human consociates’ (Sillander and Remme 2018: 3). Much ritual activity in Tibetan communities is conducted to tame the local deities and to maintain proper relations between humans and nonhumans, and the house is a crucial space in which an extended sociality unfolds, is explained, and is controlled.

The house as a tamed, controlled ritual space was an important element in Sharlung, reflected in the villagers’ emphasis on strengthening their domestic unit, the *khyimsang*, and this points to the very constitutional nature of the domestic, not only as an economic entity but also as an ontological, symbolic and ritual space. The social dynamics of polyandry are centripetal – they move towards the centre – seen in the efforts involved to maintain people, material and immaterial wealth within the already established social institution of the house. The inward-focused, centripetal effects of polyandry concur with ontological values that are spatially represented in vernacular architecture. The following investigates the efforts involved in creating and reproducing the house as a ritually efficacious space in which the extended sociality between humans and nonhumans can enfold, and where protection can be secured, increasing fertility and growth on the one hand, and reducing harm, misfortune and pollution on the other.

A Fortress-Like Exterior

In the preface to the newly reprinted *Man and his House in the Himalaya*, Toffin writes that ‘Beyond their physical contours, the dwellings and settlements of the Himalayan range embody a number of social and religious implicit meanings’ (2016 [1991]: i).³ Across the Tibetan ethnographic region there is a set of core principles that are utilised to varying degrees, forming comparative structures of lay architecture.⁴ Traditionally, in the rural areas, there were two main types of dwellings for lay people: mud-brick and stone houses for farmers and black tents for nomads (although nomads often also had access to houses). While these dwellings clearly are very different, in symbolic terms their interiors are organised in similar ways.

Tsang farmers' houses are very well adapted to the arid, mineral natural environment of the Tibetan plateau, where wood is scarce and material alternatives are meagre. Yet, vernacular architecture is not simply 'some ill-defined adaptation to the environment'; as Humphrey has pointed out, the structures and forms also 'have purpose and intention' (1988: 17). The houses in Sharlung were for the most part two-storey rectangular buildings made of stones, dried mud bricks and wood. They were surrounded by a courtyard enclosed by a mud-brick wall, conveying a sense of enclosure and containment. The houses varied in magnitude and architectural elaboration, with the number and size of windows, the use of white paint and general amount of decorative and protective work increasing with the contemporary economic situation and social historical position. However, across class and other hierarchies, there was a shared architectural ideal readily apparent in Sharlung, similar to Central Tibet and other places in the high Himalayas. Houses provide individuals with, as Maréchaux noted from the Indian Himalayas, a 'profound sense of security' (1991: 224): physically they protect against fierce winds and cold climate, and ritually, they protect against misfortune, harm and pollution.

Approaching a house in Sharlung, we would meet mud-brick walls framing the gates (*chigo*, outside door) and marking the boundaries to the inside; only those living there or those with established relations should enter the *chigo* without invitation. During fieldwork we spent much time outside such gates shouting a polite '*lo*' to make our presence known. The courtyards varied in size and function, but they sheltered the draft animals such as cows, *dzo* and horses when they were not grazing in the mountains or in the cleared fields, and the young calves, lambs and kids in the periods when they needed extra care. Also, the much-feared watchdogs spent their lives chained in the courtyard. Depending on size, people used the courtyards for additional needs, such as drying dung, or they cultivated potatoes and turnips on small plots of land. Tractors and mechanical equipment was also stored there.

The economic situation of a household clearly affects the material structures of a house. The Sobnub house can serve as an illustration of a typical architecture for those with limited means, although they were not the poorest in the village. The house had been built some twenty years earlier and had two storeys; the ground floor hosted two cows and the family lived on the first floor. The house itself was small (some 70 square meters of which only two rooms had a complete roof), and the courtyard on the southern side was barely large enough for the tractor parked there. Both the stone fence and the walls of the house were without paint, as they could not afford the white lime used by many others in the village. The Dagpo house can serve as an opposite example. When we arrived in Sharlung and told people that

we were interested in learning about local culture and history, we were often advised to visit Dagpo. The Dagpo estate covered an area of some 200 square meters, and the courtyard was exceptionally large. A former *genpo* house, Dagpo illustrates the building style of those with financial means and the fine traditional architecture of Tsang farmhouses. The Dagpo house had been rebuilt four years before our visit, after a flood had damaged the previous structure. The ruins of the former, smaller house were still visible. The new house was a two-storey rectangular building laid out on a north-south axis; the entrance faced the east. Slightly widening towards the ground, the massive walls gave the house a bottom-heavy look, with only small window openings. The house was painted white, and the large windows on the first floor, placed on the southern and eastern side and framed by black paint to attract the warmth of the sun, dominated the house. The outer wall encircled the courtyard; the house was imposing and gave the impression of restricted access. The economic situation at that time was not, however, the only defining factor for the architectural structures in Sharlung. There were several large, old houses inhabited by poor households that were nevertheless architectural ideals. These were often ritually powerful houses, with immaterial wealth – that is, ritual and protective objects and forces, and long biographies. Common to all houses was the form of enclosure, particularly visible in the affluent and old houses yet also part of the smaller, often incomplete, houses. Stein's note back in the 1970s, that 'even the dwelling-houses are fortress-like' (1972: 120), indicates a strong continuity of vernacular architecture.

The Interior House as Cosmological Space

House construction and maintenance in Central Tibet is clearly linked to cosmology; it is the place within which cosmology unfolds. Much in the same way that has been shown from across the Tibetan ethnographic region (Toffin 2016 [1991]),⁵ the material and immaterial structures of Sharlung houses reflect the vertical tripartite ordering (*sa sum*) of the phenomenal world (*jikten*). The vertical axis that organises the house interior is a reflection of a verticality found in the ontological order exterior to the boundaries of the house. As pointed out by Dollfus, the notion of height and elevation are highly esteemed in the Tibetan world in general, and he links this notion to the creation of a hierarchy of space and man, where the high is pure and the low is impure and to be despised (1996). In addition to interior design, the value of verticality is also found in perceptions of the body, of nature and popular celebrations of geography, and in time (Humphrey 1995; Ramble 1996, 1999).

Pervasive in Tibetan thinking about the world, the tripartite ontology consists of an upper domain (*tok*), mountains and passes inhabited by powerful tantric deities residing in sacred mountains (*néri*), as well as local deities such as *yul lha* and *gyelpo*; a middle domain (*bar*) inhabited by humans, animals, minor deities (such as *sadak* and *tsen*) and demons (*döndré* and *dü*) as well as jealous (dead or alive) women (*söndréma*); and lastly, the domain below (*ok*), inhabited by serpentine deities (*lu*). This same three-tiered arrangement of space and its inherent cosmological reflection is the most visible order in a house's interior, seen particularly in the localisation of different shrines. It manifests hierarchical cosmological values in a way that is often described as a 'microcosm'.⁶ Writing from Ladakh, Martin Mills describes how, in an ideal Tibetan Buddhist house, such three-tiered hierarchical organisation orders cosmology, beings and activities. He writes: 'the dominant activities of the household – production/reproduction; hospitality; offering – were spatially embodied . . . producing marked divisions in the quotidian use of the house as a lived space, organising the social, economic and ritual practices of the household members and their guests' (2003: 156). The three domains are connected through a pillar (or set of (often four) pillars (*ka*) that links the three floors and domains (ibid.: 157).

This spatio-symbolic organisation was apparent also in Panam. As a general pattern, Tibetan farmers' houses are built facing east, indicating the value of cardinal directionality, but more importantly they point to a vertical rationale. Typically, the northern part of the house is designated to the most powerful ritual activities, while social activities take place in the southern part because, as Tashi-la explained regarding the placement of the kitchen (*taptsang*) in Takrab: 'It is bright and the furthest away from the north.' Verticality is also the basic principle of nomad tents, with the rear symbolising the highest part of the tent. In an article on the distribution of 'the black tents' (*dranak*) from Persia to Tibet, Manderscheid (2001) describes the symbolism of the tent's interior. A *dranak*, she explains, is divided into a female (left) side for women, children and female chores and tools, and a male (right) side for men and guests and the implements operated by men. In addition, the rear of the tent 'is the sitting place of honor and the family shrine' (ibid.: 159, as well as the storage room for religious objects and excess butter. Manderscheid does not specify the directional pegging of the Tibetan tents, which has some implications for the understanding of spatial and symbolic organisation. However, as Manderscheid also suggests, these could be placed on a north–south axis like Mongolian tents (Mong. *ger*), where the rear of the tent faces the north and the opening of the tent faces south (Fjeld and Lindskog 2017). According to Jest's descriptions (1991), Dolpo tents are placed somewhat differently, as the entrance faces towards the east. Despite the difference in terms of directionality, both the Mongolian and

Tibetan pastoralist tents share a fundamental organisation based on the value of upper versus lower – that is, a vertical axis. Inherent in this axis is what Huber calls a ‘strong vertical gradient from gross at the bottom and more refined or pure above’ (1999: 45). Indeed, the rear of the tent is perceived to be the sacred space – it is the highest on the symbolic axis of pure–impure. The rear is the location of the Buddhist shrines. Opposite, the entrance is perceived as ‘down’, hence the impure place. The up–down rationale is also found in sleeping positions in a tent, where people should keep their head positioned upwards towards the shrine (Jest 1991; Lindskog 2000; Manderscheid 2001). The human body is inherently impure, yet pollution is also distributed from top to bottom.⁷ Hence, the perceptions of the body also reflect the value of verticality and the conceptual concurrence of high and pure. The value of verticality is hence represented in a horizontally laid out Tibetan tent, which also reflects the tripartite ordering of the world. The rear of the tent is the upper domain; the right, masculine side is the middle domain, while the lower domain is the left, feminine side. This is reflected, for example, in Dolpo tents, where the rear of the tent is the place of what they call the *phuk lha* (god of ancestors); a dedication to the *tse* deities is placed on the male side, and an offering to the *lu* is located on the female side (Jest 1991).

Cardinal directions were of guiding importance in Sharlung, too, but there was not a rigid formalism to the layout of the houses. As found in the *dranak*, the spatial organisation of a house is based on a vertical axis of pure: impure :: high: low :: upper: lower. While in Mongolia these pairs of oppositions also correspond to the direction of north: south, this is not the case in the Sharlung houses. As Tashi-la noted above, the main place for socialisation (the *taptsang*) is located to the south – that is, down – due to its maximum distance from the north, indicating that human activities should be separated from the most sacred space. The entrance of the houses, as in the Dolpo tents, most often faced the east and was regarded as ‘down’. The furthest point away from the entrance (‘down’) was in the north (‘up’). There were exceptions to this, but I cannot recall having seen an entrance facing the north or west. In the houses I have systematically registered in Sharlung, the main Buddhist shrine room (*chökhang*) and room hosting the house protector were located towards the north. Hence, the axis of upper–lower seems to be more fundamental to the spatio-symbolic organisation of the house than the cardinal directions as such. In the following, I describe the three domains of the Dönkhong in all cases in Sharlung, and this will also show the similarities to previously described Ladakhi houses (Mills 2003).

The Ground Floor

The inner door (*nang-go*) of the house lead to the ground floor, where animals were kept at night. This was the domain of female chores, including as caring for animals and the spirit living there. It was also the dirtiest (*tsokpa*) place in the house. Hay and agricultural tools were stored in the northwest corner, and the middle of the room was the designated space for milking cows, lit by an opening in the roof through which the sun's rays penetrated. The room in the south-east corner provided protection for lambs and goats, though animals were also tethered on both the north and south sides of the space. Internal walls had been built in all corners to provide extra storage spaces.

Ritually and symbolically, the shrine of the *lu* – the *lukhang* – is the most important object on the ground floor. The *lukhang* was placed high up on the northern wall under the ceiling. The *lu* (also called *lumo*, female *lu*) is a well-known serpentine spirit in the Tibetan world. They often live beneath the surface of streams and rivers as well as in trees. Relations with the *lu* influence growth in women and animals, and in Sharlung, as many other places, the *lumo* were closely associated with milk and fertility. The women of the house (usually the *nama*) were responsible for quotidian offerings to the *lumo*. Tashi-la pointed out that it should be the *nama* that makes the offerings to the *lumo* because, he said: 'She [*nama*] needs milk.' When I asked Lobsang Drolma about how and when she makes the offerings in the Takrab house, she explained:

I have to go on auspicious days. We look in the [astrological] calendar and find the Palden days. On some of the Palden days I make offerings three times. Sometimes I have to wait for a long period. I have to put different things into the container (*pumba*); I put three sorts of agricultural produce (*shing*), a few *lungta*, and grain blessed in the monastery, and some flowers from the fields. *Lumo* likes flowers, and we try to find *tsanga metok*, as she prefers those. These things should always be there. Then I take *pangbö* [a small plant that grows high in the mountains], dry it and crumble it into small pieces and put it into the container. In one side I put the *pangbö*, and in the other side I put *tsampa* and sugar and make fire. Then I make the offering.

There were two types of *lu* residing in Sharlung: one had a kind personality and positively contributed to milk production, and another was easily angered and lived mostly underground, outside, and if upset would cause illness to people and animals. A *lu* can obstruct the flow of blood in the veins (*tsa*), causing great pain, and *lu* attacks are often recognised by swollen limbs and skin rashes that make the arms and legs resemble snakeskin. They can also make the eyes of sheep and goats grow out of proportion and, in severe cases, fall out. An attack is usually a result of someone having



Figure 5.1. A *lukhang*, the main shrine on the ground floor. © Heidi Fjeld

disturbed an unknown *lu* in their dwelling place, and *lu* disease (*luné*) is cured primarily by making offerings and, in serious cases, by building a new shrine; with the help of a spirit medium (*lhapa*) the *lu* is invited to accept it as its new home.⁸

Newer houses in Sharlung did not usually host a *lu*, while some of the houses with long biographies could have up to four *lumos* on the ground floor. Humans will inevitably come into contact with one or several *lu*; they are connected through shared land. By building *lukhang* and inviting them into the house, the *lu* are enmeshed into a network of relations with the people of the household, particularly the women, who feed and care for them. The ground floor clearly corresponds to the lower ontological domain in hosting the spirits of this lowest (*ok*) domain and being the residence for animals. The production activities of the ground floor are closely interconnected with – yet separate from – the reproduction and hospitality of the middle domain on the first floor.⁹

The First Floor

The wooden ladder located close to the inner door (*nang-go*), lead to the living quarters of the first floor – the place of both the middle (*bar*) and upper ontological domains. In Dönkhang, the first floor was an open,

uncovered space surrounded by rooms on all sides. The first floor is the domain of humans, but it was also shared with a few small animals (chickens and occasionally sick young animals) as well as minor deities. The activities of this domain are concerned with reproduction, both in biological and social terms, enacted as socialisation and hospitality. As most of the farmers' houses did not have a second floor (apart from the roof), the first floor also included the upper (*tok*), and third, domain. The first floor was therefore symbolically arranged into upper and lower parts; hence vertical principles are applied horizontally in ways that resemble the black tents.

In the case of the Dönkhang house, the first floor included the kitchen-cum-living room (*tapsang*), sleeping quarters and a room for produce (*norkhang/yangkhang*). The *tapsang* is the place of the hearth and the social heart of the house. It is where the women prepare food and where meals are shared and guests entertained. The kitchen also contained the water reservoir (with the water deity, *chu lha*), and it was where important documents were kept, such as records of mutual aid received and given, as well as the leather pouch (*yangkhuk*) used to store the auspicious objects of the house.¹⁰ The *tapsang* was also the bedroom for the eldest generation, for unmarried members of the house, and the children that are no longer nursing – that is, for those who are no longer or not yet in the reproductive phase of life. In most of the relatively affluent houses, the *tapsang* was a large room with white, auspicious patterns painted on the wall, and it offered seating arrangements for some fifteen people. This room was at the heart of social life in the house and the prime site for socially (re)producing a sense of belonging and practicing hospitality. Just outside the *tapsang* in Dönkhang, in a corner of a small in-between space protected from the wind by a roof and tarpaulin, was the traditional stone stove (called *tsala*) used to boil water and make *chang*, and where the important *taplha* (god of the stove) resides. The *tsala* is crucial in the process of relocating a house, as we shall see later.

In addition to the *tapsang*, there were five other rooms on the first floor in Dönkhang. On the southern side was a small bedroom usually used by the *nama* and her eldest husband when he was home, and babies still nursing. There was also an empty, uncompleted room the same side that still needed a roof. Two bedrooms were located on the eastern side, and these were used interchangeably by the two younger husbands. The toilets were on the western side. The first floor was a place for offerings; indeed, it was the abode of several deities of different categories. The minor deities, such as the *taplha* (hearth) and *chu lha* (water), resided close to the kitchen on the southern side and were cared for by women. The north-eastern end (*norkhang*) stored all that was important – the material (*nor*) wealth of the house as well as the immaterial wealth (*yang*). The room consisted of two parts; the first was the



Figure 5.2. A *namo* on the first floor. © Heidi Fjeld

main storage room where the year's production of grain was kept in large, handmade woollen bags; the second part also stored grain but hosted the *namo* (also referred to as *norlha*), who resided in a shrine high up on the wall in the north-eastern corner, overlooking the produce. The shrine was made up of twigs (*wu shing*), and the offerings to the *namo* mainly consisted of *chang*, *tsampa*, wheat, salt, hay, as well as dried meat called *yang sha*, meant to enhance the *yang* (prosperity) and *nor*. The female head of the house was usually responsible for providing these offerings, although occasionally a younger *nama* could do it. Offerings to the *namo* should be done on Saturdays or on a day advised by the spirit medium; in this case, it would occur at a different time to the other regular offerings inside the house. Access to this room was restricted, and non-members refrained from entering. The inner part of the room could be used as a bedroom but for house members only. The bedrooms, kitchen and the *norkhang* were shared by humans and nonhumans engaged in social and moral economies of production and reproduction and constituted the middle ontological domain (*bar*) in a microcosmic reflection. However, on the first floor there was another very important room that complicated this microcosmos model.

The northern end was also the location of the *chökhang* – the shrine room – hosting Buddhist devotional items and protective forces (texts, blessed objects, photos and paintings) as well as being the place for ritual activities conducted by ordained monks. The room contained a large shrine on the back wall of the room – that is, furthest away from the entrance and had a place for people to sit and read. The activities that took place in the *chökhang* were restricted; it was where monks or ordained household members slept when needed. In exceptional cases, other people held to be morally virtuous stayed there.¹¹ The restrictions on the use of the *chökhang* maintained the room physically but just as important kept it ritually clean and at a distance from lay people's bodies. As *Achi* in Takrab said: 'People are dirty. And their behaviour brings *drip tsok* (pollution).' Sexual activities were strongly prohibited in the *chökhang*, as well as washing, cooking, spilling dirty water and spitting, again reflecting degrees of pollution. This room was distinct from the rest on the first floor as it symbolically represented the third, upper (*tok*) ontological domain – that is, the domain of the highest deities. Being located in the north – symbolically the highest point – and furthest away from the human social activities represented by the *taptsang* in the southern corner, it reflected the vertical axis of pure/impure, sharing design concerns and features with black nomadic tents.

The Roof

The roof in Dönkhang was accessible via a permanent wooden ladder on the first floor and was open to all house members. The corners of the roof were typically marked by small offering. In the north-east corner, there was an elaborate collection of twigs (*wu shing*) and white flags and prayer flags, surrounded by white round stones, a yak horn and empty bottles,¹² marking it as a particularly auspicious place. Two *wu shing* with flags were also placed above the entrance to the house, halfway between the southern and eastern point of the roof. In the south-east corner was additional *wu shing*, and large white stones with hay underneath. There was often a cumulative increase of hay and stones around the roof towards the northern side. In the west, close to the north-west corner, there were three stones; one bigger stone marked the actual north-west corner, while eight stones were spread along the northern side of the roof. The ritual importance of the north, and particularly the north-east was clearly expressed.

More important than the hay, stones and other material markings was the *lha khang* (the 'house for deities'), located in the middle of the northern part of the roof. This was a small square temple built with mud bricks and dirt and decorated with various offerings. It resembled the residence of the *yul lha* or other local *lha*. The *lha khang* shared features with human houses; it had its front towards the east, and a small square opening framed with black paint, resembling a window. Inside this opening was the incense (*sang*) burning. Pierced through the middle of the small house construction was a wooden stick (resembling the house pillar, *ka*) surrounded by three *wu shing* with white flags and/or five-coloured prayer flags. The roof of the *lha khang* was decorated in similar way to a human house; with stones and hay in the four corners, a yak horn and a *khatak* (white ceremonial scarf) on the northern side. The *lha khang* was painted white with a red line. The white colour indicated that it is the house of a *tsen*, explained to be a deceased lay relative. Other houses had a red-painted roof, indicating the presence of *gyelpo*; a deceased ordained relative. According to Takrab *Achi*, in their case they built their *lha khang* at the same time as the house itself because the *tsen* had insisted (through a spirit medium) that he would follow them into the new building. 'He has lived with us for a long time now. We wanted him to have a house so that he would not be angry.' The *gyelpo* and the *tsen* are deities of the middle domain (*bar*); however, they were often talked about with respect.¹³ These nonhuman beings are powerful and needed regular offerings to be kept happy. They were also meant to reside away from humans (hence, away from the first floor).

In Sharlung, as most houses had only two floors and their financial means were limited, mapping a cosmological representation in the interior space



Figure 5.3. Offering to the *tsen* on the roof. © Heidi Fjeld

was done in a pragmatic way. While the ground floor (what Mills (2003) calls the basement) corresponds to the lower ontological domain, the first floor (Mills' central floor) corresponds to the middle and upper domains, laid out practically (horizontally). In an ideal house, the ontological tripartite is clearly reflected in the interior space, placing humans and nonhumans and their associated activities in proper relation to each other. The upper domain is inhabited by the most powerful Buddhist and local deities, who receive offerings and protect the house as a whole. The middle domain is the place for humans and (smaller) animals and is shared with the household protector (the *namo*) and other minor deities, who support biological and social reproduction and protect the wealth of the house. The lower domain is the home of serpentine spirits, who reside in the *lukhang* and influence fertility and, with that, production. None of the houses I mapped in Panam corresponded exactly to this ideal. However, when I asked about the interior arrangements of a house, the residents were quick to offer explanations for major or minor deviations from this ideal, conveying the principle of downward verticality. How are relationships enacted and maintained within these houses, and what is at stake in the efforts to keep the three domains of the house distinct and apart?

Enabling Relations through Separation

Moving through the Panam valley, as elsewhere on the Tibetan plateau, the land is marked by Buddhist elements. Devotional architecture, such as monasteries and temples, stupas and cairns, as well as colourful flags spreading prayers with the wind, remind villagers and visitors of the tamed nature of the land and its potential dangers. A well-known conversion myth, first described in the twelfth-century Mani Kambum text, and still popular, tells the story of how pre-Buddhist Tibet was inhabited by a plethora of malevolent spirits and chthonic beings before being brought under Buddhist control through the subjugation of a demoness. In this myth, the vast Tibetan land was seen in the form of a supine body of a demoness (*sinmo*), lying on her back, wild and ferocious. In order to place this land under Buddhist jurisdiction, the *sinmo* was tamed through the placing of Buddhist temples on thirteen crucial points; her hands and feet, elbows and knees, hips and shoulders, and lastly, her heart; pinning her down, taming her, and hence taming Tibet (Gyatso 1989). The Jokhang temple in Lhasa, standing firmly on her heart, and the most important pilgrimage site in Tibet, is a reminder of this taming. This sense of residing in, and thus sharing, a land of powerful, vengeful and dangerous forces that need to be handled, controlled and tamed is central to being-in-the-world across the Tibetan ethnographic region.

While monasteries and *trulku* lineages provide an advanced and, according to themselves, the only truly efficacious protection against the forces and deities of the world in everyday life, Tibetan farmers are enmeshed in extended socialities with nonhuman beings in ways that demand action and organisation in their daily life.

The central notion of interdependence or interconnectedness (*temdrel*) in Tibetan Buddhist ontology refers to the idea that ‘everything is constituted by the coming together of multiple causes and conditions; everything is dependent for its existence upon something else’ (Gyatso 1998: 179). Interconnection is reflected in many Tibetan conceptions of the natural world; *nö chü*, for instance, meaning ‘container-content’ points to the interconnection between the world and its many inhabitants (Samuel 1993: 159). Moreover, in the Tibetan cosmological notion of the ‘phenomenal world’ (*jikten*), entities and beings – bodies and materiality – are fundamentally made up of the same five elements, thus humans, animals, spirits and deities share the same qualities, capacities and abilities, which is similar to what we know from Mongolia, where humans, spirits, streams, lakes and mountains share a vital life force (*la*), a notion of lifespan (*tsé*) and also genders, personality and sociality (Fjeld and Lindskog 2017). For instance, while the *lu* are hot tempered and easily upset, the *dü* are plainly malevolent, and the mountain deities are kindred through marriage or ancestry. These types of beings are ‘embedded within the wider landscape in which a person is born’ (Mills 2003: xviii), and hence are part of social events, with the small and large offerings made to them, visits and circumambulation, and the maintenance of a continuous relation to them within villages and individual homes. Given there are potentially vengeful spirits and deities, much ritual activity among Tibetan farmers is focused on protection from these forces and other sources of potential harm. The house, with its specific architecture and its interior spatio-symbolic organisation, enables these relations to be productive and, in some ways, controlled, as it separates the domains of different being.

In her classic monograph *Society and Cosmos*, about Chewong of Peninsular Malaysia, who have become known for their elaborate cosmology and close relations with nonhuman beings, Howell (1984) developed the notion of connection through separation. One of her conclusions is that for many Chewong ideas and practices there is an underlying principle of keeping prescribed things apart, to avoid incorrect mixing. She calls this ‘the principle of separation’ and finds that this implies a paradox of Chewong rationality, namely that ‘the essential unity suggested to exist between nature and supernature; between humans and superhumans, which moulds all actors into one extended society, can only be maintained through a continued process of adhering to the principle of separation’ (Howell 1984: 4). In a comparative analysis of Mongolian and Tibetan ontologies and human–nonhuman relations, Lindskog and I



Figure 5.4. Numerous *lu* reside in Sharlung, and the land and water are marked by the offerings made to them. © Heidi Fjeld

took inspiration from this principle of ‘keeping prescribed things apart’ to explore the interdependence of the ontological principles of ‘connectedness’ and ‘separation’ underlying the organisation of domestic space in Tibet and the land itself in Mongolia (Fjeld and Lindskog 2017). Both Tibetans and Mongolians make a clear distinction between human and nonhuman realms, yet in a shared territory ‘a “cosmological collapse” is inevitable’ (Da Col 2012b: 75). Such collapse has harmful consequences that should be limited. In order to do that, Tibetan farmers engaged in continuous (re)production of bounded units and enclosed space to enable proper actions that ensured growth, fertility and reproduction (i.e. of animals, children and produce, and hence of the household). The house is the most important bounded space in the daily life of lay Tibetans. The three domains of the house, as units kept apart, enable proper behaviour, and through the separation of one domain from the other, unavoidable transgressions can be controlled with less risk involved. Constituting a whole, these domains form the entity within which the villagers work to ‘keep’, or contain, all that is valuable. One way to conceptualise the forces that enable growth and fertility of all that is valuable is ‘*yang*’ (corresponding to the Mongolian *hishig*). An ‘energy’ that, Da Col (2012b: 76) writes, is ‘prone to leak, liable to flee, to be stolen, or to be parasitized upon’, and thus needs to be guarded. Just as the leather pouch (*yangkhuk*) hung from the pillar in the house contains *yang* from valuable sources, the house itself is made into a bounded entity that enable *yang*, and other valuables, to be kept inside, and kept apart from unfortunate connections.

Da Col has introduced the term ‘cosmo-economics’ to account for these specific ‘economies of fortune’: ‘the conception . . . that efficacious actions, economic activities and political success are underpinned and supplemented by the storage and maintenance of a vital yet volatile field of energies’ (2012a: 175). Constituting the potential for growth, in a broad sense, in Central Tibet these ‘energies’ (*yang*) are gathered, pinned down and stored through ritual and daily practices in the house. The cultural meaning of the Sharlung houses could also be seen within this framework.

Bounded Efficacious Space

As a bounded space, the house is also a tamed place and a place of ritual efficacy. Asserting ‘human mastery over the natural environment’ through ritual work (Gardner 2006: 283) is central to Tibetan communities more broadly and to tantric rituals in particular. Through ‘site rituals’ (*sa chok*), deities of the soil are called forth, tamed and placed in Buddhist service, enabling humans – that is, Buddhists – to be ‘masters’ (*dak*) inside that particular closed ritual space. There are numerous annual rituals of subjugation through

which religious experts reassert that local spirits and forces remain loyal to Buddhist powers and hence re-establish a tamed, sacred place (Ortner 1978; Mills 2003). Similarly, the house must also be repeatedly and continuously reproduced as an enclosed protecting space – as a microcosmic whole. Daily cleansings, lifecycle rituals and annual rituals expelling bad forces and impurities reproduce the boundaries of the house. This, and the continuous remaking of the interior tripartite spatial arrangement through proper conduct and caretaking, (re)establishes humans, animals and other beings in their interrelated and correct place. Keeping prescribed things apart forms relations that affect fertility/growth (*sa chü*), wealth (*nor*) and fortune (*yang*) on the one hand, and harm (*nöpa*), pollution (*drip*) and misfortune (*kyen ngen*) on the other – that is, it enables the house to be a place of ritual efficacy and keeps what is valuable inside and what is unfortunate at bay.

When boundaries are crucial, openings are potentially dangerous, and just as the openings of the body are associated with ambivalence and are carefully protected, so are openings of the house. In most Tibetan houses, we can find strategies for protecting the physical openings of both the outer (*chigo*) and the inner door (*nang-go*). Talismans empowered by a local religious expert often protect the inner doors, while sigils, in the form of scorpions or auspicious signs such as the eternal dot (drawn by the villagers themselves), are often placed on the outer door. The inner door talisman in Sharlung is called *nöpa kak* ('harm stopper') and is empowered by a *lha* through the *lhaba* (the medium) and is often a collection of various auspicious objects. These are blessed and donated by the local medium as a response to a particular problem in a house. Hence, not all houses had a talisman, although most did. In Takrab, the *nöpa kak* contained pieces of Tibetan calendars, a *khatak*, animal feet and small animal bodies, eggs and yak hair. I asked *Achi* about the history of the *nöpa kak*. She explained:

We've had it for many years. It was also in the old house. After we built this new house, we had some problems with the animals. Many got sick. Also, our daughter got sick. So, we asked the Chunup *lhapa* (spirit medium) what to do. We thought that it was an angry *lumo*. But the *lhapa* said that we had to bring the *nöpa kak* from the old house to stop *dön* (external harmful forces, often translated as evil spirits) and 'jealous women' (*sindré*). They were causing the harm to come (*nöpa yong*).

The material objects comprising the inner door talisman had been collected over many years. Initially, it was for protection against one particular ghost, to which the *lhapa* responded by attaching a blessed *khatak* above the door. In the years that followed, the *lhapa* recommended continued protection of the entrance and provided additional blessed objects. The *nöpa kak* as other material protections, physically hinder the entrance to a house, hence rather

than removing bad spirits, these blessed objects subdue or tame these beings so that they no longer wish to harm the house and its residents.

Moving Protectors, Re-establishing the House

Houses are not static entities; they have doors that open for human and non-human beings and agents on a daily basis, and thus their ability to protect needs to be maintained. A physical house is not protective in itself; it must be established as a bounded, tamed space and filled with protective forces. This becomes clear in the building, and relocation, of houses, where important ritual objects, and nonhuman beings, must carefully be transferred into the new space. The house protector (*namo*) is connected to the house both as a physical space and as a social unit. The *namo* has often lived in the same house for years, and people said she is often unwilling to move. In addition, these protectors often had strong personalities and were easily angered, hence her transfer was a delicate event. In the following, I describe in some detail the process of moving into a new house.

After a new house has been built – that is, after the roof has been successfully put into place and properly celebrated (with what is called *tokchang*) – the transfer can begin. Moving involves people and animals, practical and ritual objects and also spirits and deities. In the process, the new house is transformed from a physical structure (*khang*) to a socio-symbolic house (*khyimtsang*) and is re-established as a ritually efficacious place. The first step is to fill the new house with objects that symbolically represent household activities. Tashi-la explained:

The first thing we have to do is bring the *dojung* (a mortar). *Dojung* has a similar sound to the *pecha* – the ‘*dojur*’ (the *tengyur*) – so when we bring the *dojung* into the house it brings prosperity (*yang*). So, it is most important to move the *dojung* first. After that, we move the *tsala* (the stone stove).

Transferring the *dojung* and the *tsala* practically and symbolically initiates the process of relocating the hearth, which unites the household. The second step is for the people to move, a process that often took three days. The third step involves the transfer of nonhuman beings of the house and, most importantly, the house protector (*namo*), which completes the relocation of the house.

The *namo* of the Takrab house was perceived to be very powerful. She protected not only the individual members but also the house as a whole and was associated with its material fortune (*nor*) and prosperity (*yang*). The *namo* had several names that, for the most part, referred to motherhood, such as *Ama namo-la*, ‘honourable mother protector’. Lobsang Drolma explained: ‘She is the mother of the house (*kyimtsang kyi ama*). *Namo* is very powerful,

and she is easily upset. We have to treat her carefully and give her the offerings she needs; otherwise she might be angry and bring harm (*nöpa*).’ The spirit medium (*lhapa*) had helped to convey to them the personality and preferences of the *namo*. During the yearly trip to the *lhapa* in the neighbouring township, Tashi-la had asked the *namo* how they could best maintain her contentment and make sure she would continue to protect them. The *namo* communicates through the *lhapa*, and as Tashi-la explained: ‘She easily gets angry. When we come to the *lhapa*, she is angry and says that “I don’t get anything from you, just a little *tsampa* and just a little *sang*.” So, she says that we should make more offerings.’

The transfer of the *namo* was highly ritualised and structured by prescribed rules. Although monks should preferably lead the process, no Buddhist texts were recited or in any ways consulted in the event. Tashi-la pointed to the importance of creating the best possible setting for the transfer of the *namo*, again pointing to the hot temper of these beings and explaining that the timing was crucial. I asked if they consulted an astrological calculation, but he waved his hand in refutation of that.

A transfer should only happen when it is dark, maybe after ten in the evening. Quietness is very important. It should not be windy, and there should not be any sounds. This is very difficult, especially because of the many dogs that bark continuously. So, we need much help to calm the dogs during the time of transfer.

I asked who participates in the transfer.

Only two people should participate because it should be quiet. One of them should be a woman that lives there. The second could be anyone, really; it is not important. But it is most important that the two persons are clean. They must wash their bodies and hair and wear clean or, preferably, new clothes.

The symbolic connection between the house and the body is again notable, as the state of the body should reflect the state of the house; clean and preferable new. The issue of dirt or pollution was also important in terms of providing a good environment for the transfer. Others in the village told me that the second person to participate in a move should not be randomly chosen but should preferably be a monk from Sachung gompa, as ‘they are not dirty (*tsokpa*)’. Common to several of the local deities in Sharlung is the fact that they are easily upset by uncleanness, and this was also true for the *namo*. Tashi-la continued:

The two participants are needed in order to carry the two items: one basket with food and offerings that the *namo* likes, and one large bowl of incense.



Figure 5.5. After the harvest, the house is cleansed by monks performing *Sharnyig dütok*, an exorcising ritual common throughout Tibet. In the ritual, the negative forces – leading to illness and general misfortune – are driven out of the house, in the form of effigies called *nédak* (the owner of illness) and his protector *ngarmi* (strong person) that are carried out and left in the fields, one towards the west and one towards the east.
© Heidi Fjeld

The basket should contain *chang*, tea, cookies, dried fruit and *ja mar thuk* (tea, butter and soup) and then be covered by a new apron. Then, twigs with colourful ribbons attached (*dadar*), representing the five elements, are put into the basket. *Namo-la* likes these things. Therefore we show these to her so she can follow the smells she likes. It is always difficult to know whether *namo-la* wants to leave or not.

I asked Tashi-La if he goes to the *lhapa* beforehand to consult the *namo* about moving.

No. No. If we ask her, she will say no. So we bring the baskets to lure the *namo* out of the old house. The two people whisper, ‘please come, please come’ (*pe ro nang, pe ro nang*) and start to walk slowly towards the new house. They find the shortest way and do not stop along the way. When they approach the new house, they continue to whisper and hope that the *namo* has arrived.

After the *namo* was transferred, the house was regarded as safe – that is, a ritually effective bounded space.¹⁴ With this, the rest of the nonhuman beings of



Figure 5.6. A harm stopper (*nöpa kak*), placed on the inner door of a house.
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the house could also be moved. Except for the *lumo* residing on the ground floor, the other numina of the house did not need ritualised transfer.¹⁵ As Tashi-la said: ‘The *tsen*, *gyelpo*, *chu lha*, *taplha* and the others will come.’

The Protective House

Moving a house can be ritually planned to make sure protective forces are in place. With their protected openings, proper domains and orderly relations inside, houses are effective protective spaces that enable safety and enhance prosperity. Maintaining a household in a house is inherently risky: it involves incorporating new members and seeing others leave; bringing material and immaterial substances in and out; and inviting guests to come and go – that is, household activities open the house’s interior to the exterior, with all the precariousness implied.

Engaging with this precarity is an embodied, ongoing activity in which all household members risk letting bad influences in and good forces out. While staying in Sharlung, we often visited blacksmiths, butchers and other households that were considered low-ranked and associated with pollution (*drip*). After some time, I noticed that upon our return to the Takrab house after these visits, the smell of incense was stronger than usual, especially around the inner door opening and sometimes also close to my body. The houses of blacksmiths and other skilled workers are considered to be places where the risk of being affected by *drip* was high, and I realised that our visits there had raised some concerns. My body – moving in and out of these houses – could bring *drip* into Takrab. Stopping household members’ movements outside the house was of course neither desirable nor possible; rather, safety measures were taken upon return, such as the simple and subtle act of burning *sang* after visits to blacksmith houses.

Ontologically, humans and nonhumans are guests, conceptualised as tenants, and they are embedded in fragile relations of exchange with the lord of the earth (*sadak*). In this extended sociality, with (potentially polluted) humans, (benevolent or malicious) spirits and powerful (and potentially wrathful) gods, the house serves as a protective place. By establishing the house as a bounded ritual space, inside–outside relations can be controlled and exchanges can be managed by protecting the openings, by daily and periodic offerings and by the maintenance of a yearly ritual cycle. At the same time, production and reproduction is made possible and potentially prosperous. By engaging in proper social and ritual relations and activities with humans and nonhumans, the house is reinforced as a place that not only protects the individual and the group but is a microcosm of the cosmological order and thereby defines humans’ proper ontological place in it.

These cosmological and ontological aspects of houses are important, not only because they constitute the immediate world for the people living there but also because they are symbolically interconnected to the architectural ideals of inaccessible and protective fortresses and to the value of the house as a physical, social and ritual space.

Returning to the house as a social institution, in the final chapter we move out of the house and into the village and to the complex networks of which individuals and houses are part. Friendships and forms of relatedness connect different people in ways that inform and express established and evolving social hierarchies. This finally brings me to the skilled workers – that is, artisans and others identified as being of lower rank – and the dynamics of economic and social mobility in these farming communities in Central Tibet.

Notes

1. See Yeh (2013) for an interesting analysis of how the CHP contributed to significant shifts in citizen-state relations in TAR, transforming farmers to consuming subjects.
2. The poor one-storey houses were rebuilt into two storeys, allowing the animals inside. They were built in line with traditional architecture.
3. This book received new interest after the massive earthquake that hit Nepal in 2015; not only did it take many human lives but also destroyed the traditional architecture.
4. See Tucci (1961); Khosla (1975); Paul (1976); Chayet (1988) for descriptions of sacred architecture. For lay architecture, see the already mentioned Toffin 2016 [1991], Corlin (1980), *The Lhasa Atlas* by Larsen and Sinding-Larsen (2001) and the impressive *The Lhasa House* by the late André Alexander (2019), as well as Pommaret-Imaeda's brief description of Ladakhi construction techniques (1980), Diemberger and Schicklgruber's preliminary notes on Khumbo architecture (1988) and Harrison and Ramble's work on houses in southern Mustang (1998).
5. See also Phylactou (1989); Samuel (1993); Mills (2003).
6. Phylactou (1989); Jest (1991); Ramble (1996).
7. In Tibet, numerous proverbs and rules for proper behaviour illustrate the dirt of the foot sole and the lower part of the body. One saying I was told concerns the need to prevent children from crawling under somebody's knees or feet: 'When being stepped over, the body will not grow.'
8. In severe cases where this method is found ineffective, villagers consult the *ngakpa* in Gangkar, who is known for his effective healing by blowing on the affected areas.
9. Only in exceptional cases do people live on the ground floor. Some nuns who refused to live as householders after the closing of the nunnery in 1960, for instance, chose to stay on the ground floor. By doing this, they marked their disinterest in the activities of the first floor, associated with production and reproduction, and established a semi-monastic environment on the ground floor.
10. The most important records are known as *kyiduk* lists, which include a record of help received and provided for happy events (*karto*) and unhappy events (*nakto*). I will return to these in the next chapter.

11. As mentioned in the Preface, Samdrup was offered the *chökhhang* to sleep in during our stay in the Takrab house.
12. Yak horns, symbolising *yang*, are commonly used as offerings. They can be presented either with or without the skull. In the latter case, the inside is filled with *né*, *tsampa* and rice. According to the *pala* in Dönkhong, yak horns placed on the roof are offerings to the *lha*, while the horns on the ground floor are to the *lu*. Regarding the bottles, they were placed there simply because they liked them. I do not know what they might represent beyond that, but due to limited access to bottles (of beer, for the most part), they might have been a general offering of something seen to be valuable.
13. Samuel, citing Cornu (1990), writes that *tseu* are 'red spirits who live in the rocks. They are all male and are the spirits of past monks who have rejected their vows'. About *gyelbo*, he writes: 'The *gyelpo* or "king-spirits" are said to be the spirits of evil kings or of high lamas who have failed their vows.' (1993: 162).
14. A new shrine for the *namo* was not necessarily built immediately; it could be better to wait until the spring because, as she was very fond of spring flowers the presence of these would be an incentive for her enjoy and settle in the new house.
15. An angry *lumo* might cause hindrances to the people and animals that have moved. Hence, a *lhapa* is often consulted concerning the possible transfer of a resident *lumo* and, according to Tashi-la, most *lumo* shrines are brought to a newly built house. Further, in some cases, malevolent *lumo* take up residence in a newly built house. Then, the *lhapa* can lure them to a different place, most often a beautiful place; for instance, a flowery meadow. However, this often turns out to be a complicated process of much repetition. A benevolent *lumo* will normally follow easily to a new house. On some occasions, of which the background is still unclear to me, she will also have to be lured with items of preference. Then, the process resembles that of transferring the *namo*, with the significant difference that the *lumo* is presented with milk rather than *chang*, and that the cow that produces most milk carries the basket with food and *dadar*.