

HOUSES AND HOUSEHOLDS IN SOUTHERN MUSTANG

—John Harrison and Charles Ramble

The Tibetan term *khangba* (Tib. *khang-pa*), literally meaning "house", is an imprecise expression as used in Mustang. It designates any residential building as well as the individual rooms a house contains (the Central Tibetan word for room, *khangmig*, Tib. *khang-mig*, is not used); it may also be used to signify the social and economic unit, the family, that owns or inhabits the house. Houses are not only material constructions but have important social and religious aspects, both with respect to the organisation of their space as well as to the way in which they relate to the other houses that constitute a given community.

In this paper one house will be examined in some detail to illustrate the interrelation between the physical form of the building and its social and religious use. Angyal Gurung's family house¹ in the

village of Dzar (Nep. Jharkot), in the Muktinath Valley, stands beside the large gateway chorten, or *kennen* (*rkang-gnyis*) which bridges the pilgrim road to Muktinath, at the southern edge of the settlement area overlooking the fields. The house was built some forty years ago (ca. 1950) by Angyal's father when he married and started a family, and so had to move out of the old family house beside the castle in the centre of the village. The new house was located on a former threshing ground, *ulza* (Tib. *g.yul-sa*), and forms part of a gradual outward growth of the dense village core along and across the Muktinath trail. Expansion to the north and west of the village was inhibited by the precipitous drop to the river on those sides. In recent years this growth on the south side of the village has accelerated as accommodation is provided for Western trekkers as well as Hindu and Buddhist pilgrims. New development is also likely to be built

¹ John Harrison wishes to thank Angyal Gurung for providing much of the information in this section of the present article, and for his patience in answering so many questions. The authors are

grateful to Niels Gutschow for his permission to reproduce a number of his drawings.

at a lower density, with isolated buildings set in gardens occupying proportionately more of the productive agricultural land.

Angyal Gurung's house is a compact two-storey block (with additional accommodation added on the roof), with two external walls and two sides built against adjoining properties. In contrast to the wall construction most commonly employed in this area - rammed-earth in a wooden formwork² - the new house was built with mud blocks to speed its erection. The rear wall however is formed by the front wall of an earlier house behind, and this building does have rammed-earth walls on a stone foundation.

Because of the restricted site, and perhaps for reasons of cost, or conservatism, there is no central courtyard although many houses built during the last hundred years in Kag (Nep. Kagbeni) and Gelung for instance, and in Dzar itself, have adopted the courtyard plan of the rich Thakali traders of Tukche and Marpha.³ Here there are simply small openings in the floors for the steps or ladder connecting the different levels.

The front of the house faces the Muktinath road; an alleyway around the end of the building leads up to the centre of the village. From the street stone steps lead up to the only doorway, with double pivoted doors and a simple block-decorated (Tib. *bab-skyangs-bskums*) lintel above:⁴ the entrance to both the living accommodation on the

upper floor and the animal stables on the ground floor. Hanging just inside the door are some dried rabbit heads: protectors to ward off malevolent spirits. A variety of animals may be used for this - eagles, hawks, polecats are some examples, but not more benign creatures such as partridges or pigeons.

Another protective device often found over the outside of the entrance door is the *namgo* (Tib. *nam-sgo*), the "sky-door" symbol, or the *sago* (Tib. *sa-sgo*), the "earth door".⁵ The *namgo* is a sheep's skull sewn in cotton cloth and surrounded by diamond-shaped webs of threads tied to cross frames. The *sago* is similar but is based on a dog's skull. The choice of either *namgo* or *sago* will be made by the ritual specialist appointed by the householder, depending on where threats to the house are seen to lie. *Hrungma* (Tib. *srung-ma*), "protectors", small paper prints of appropriate motifs obtained from the local temple or from a lama who has the necessary printing blocks, may also be fixed over the doorway.

Continuing into the building, the wooden staircase, *gyatre* (*rgya-skras*) to the upper floor is located immediately to the left, and the remainder of the ground floor is occupied by storage and animal quarters. Firewood is stacked to the right of the door, and in a larger area against the back wall with a raised floor, *shiri* (*shing-ri*). An alcove houses agricultural implements, and the animals - goats and cattle (yak crossbreeds) - are secured beyond a door to the left in the goat-pen, *rabug* (*ra-bug*). The furthest enclosed room is a store, *tsabrag* (*rtswa-rags*), for hay and dried fodder. Cattle will return to the stable each night while

² For further information on rammed-earth construction, or *pisé de terre*, see Harrison in press a.

³ For an examination of Thakali buildings, see Blair 1983; Morrillon and Thouveny 1981; Sestini and Somigli 1980.

⁴ For further details on traditional woodwork construction and decoration, see Jackson 1979: 37.

⁵ *Nam-sgo*; for a recent discussion of this device see Dollfus 1994.

they are pastured near the village, which may be the year round. The disposition of structural walls and columns on the ground floor would appear to be determined by the layout of the rooms above - particularly the need for a large living room, *khangbache* (Tib. *khang-pa-che*, lit. "big room"), and an enclosed shrine room, *chökhang* (Tib. *mchod-khang*) - rather than by the less specific space requirements of stables and stores. The square wooden columns and capitals in front of the woodstore and facing the entrance, apparently older and of better quality than other joinery, are probably reused from an earlier building, perhaps the demolished house of an uncle of Angyal.

The staircase leads to a landing on the first floor outside the living room, and to a notched log ladder, *trewa* (Tib. *skras-pa*), up to the roof. Partially screened from the staircase (for draughts, not privacy) is a kitchen, *goga* (Tib. *go-kha*), and sitting area for summer use, with three small windows on the southwest street frontage. The windows have wooden shutters, but the roof opening for the ladder cannot be closed.

The winter kitchen/ living room, *khangbache*, occupies the centre of the upper floor, with the summer kitchen and shrine room at one side and storerooms at the other. There is one small window to the street and a central smoke-hole to the roof above. Two square wooden columns with simply-carved bracket capitals support a squared beam running the length of the room, and pole rafters above. The principal feature of the room is the formal mud-built hearth *thab* (Tib. *thab*), projecting from the farther wall, with mud sitting-platforms to each side. On shelves behind and to one side of the hearth are arranged rows of polished copper and steel pots and dishes (fig. 7).

The hearth seen here conforms to a basic

design which is found, with many minor variations, over a wide area along the upper Kali Gandaki and in neighbouring regions. The Dankardzong kitchen (fig. 6) shows a modern variant where the iron tripod has been replaced by an enclosed tin stove and stovepipe, but with the stove, like the wooden shelves, still moulded into the mud base with layers of red earth. This red wash, *tsagmar* (Tib. *btsag-dmar*) is applied quite frequently to floors and the lower parts of walls and fittings throughout the living areas, forming a dado some 70 to 100 cm high around the rooms. The whitewash on the upper parts of the walls *tsagkar* (Tib. *btsag-dkar*) is usually redone only on special occasions such as weddings, retirement ceremonies or New Year.

The hearth is the central point around which the family gathers in the long winters. Survival depends on the warmth of the fire and the food cooked on it, and the hearth consequently has a sacred character, presided over by its own god, Thab-lha dkar-po.⁶ The hearth is the very centre of the house, in much more than the physical sense. Cosmologically it is where the two axes of the Tibetan universe, horizontal and vertical, intersect. The way in which the vertical dimension of a house is represented corresponds to well-known models for the representation of the universe: beneath the house are the serpent spirits who are propitiated annually in important houses - such as the royal palace of Lo Monthang - with offerings of grain that are dug into the earth of the stables. When a house is built, an astrologer or lama first consults the stars to settle an appropriate day for the first act. This is a ritual involving burying a small quantity of barley at the site. The barley is

⁶ For a discussion of Thab-lha and other household gods, see for example Tucci (1980: 187ff).

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consecrated by a lama, and is called *lame chagne* (Tib. *bla-ma'i phyag-nas*), "barley from the lama's hand". The act of burying it is seen as a means of subduing the soil. And when the hearth is installed on the upper living floor, sheep horns and jewels are built in beneath it. On top of the house are the gods, who reside in small shrines, shaped and painted in a distinctive way that makes it possible to identify the resident divinity (see below). Variations on this triadic division occur in other ceremonial contexts. In a ritual performed in Khyenga, the village priest recites a long prayer which includes the following lines:

May the top floor of our houses
be full of people;
May the middle floor of our
houses be full of grain;
May the ground floor be full of
cattle.⁷

Within the microcosm of the house the division of space along the horizontal plane is based on gender. Seating is usually on either side of the hearth, with women occupying the left, or "female" row, *yöndral* or *modral* (Tib. *g.yon-gral, mo-gral*), and men in the right, or "male", row, *yädral* or *phodral* (Tib. *g.yas-gral, pho-gral*). Certain rooms are also situated in accordance with this binary division. Thus the storeroom, used primarily by women, is

generally to the left of the hearth, while the shrine room, a male province, is to the right.

To the left of the *khangbache* are two storerooms, *dzibug* (*mdzod-sbug*), the further one nearest to the hearth reserved for food, such as sacks of barley and dried vegetables, and the store at the front of the house containing chests of material possessions and valuables. To the right of the *khangbache* at the rear of the house, is the door, its frame carved with the common motifs of the lotus, *pema* (Tib. *padma*) and dharma stack, *chötsek* (Tib. *chos-brtsegs*),⁸ into the shrine room, *chökhang*. There is a single column in the centre of the room with a carved capital supporting a beam and the roof structure, a simple altar for small statues and offering bowls, and to one side a low table and suspended drum behind which the officiant will sit for ceremonies. Daily offerings are made by the family and special ceremonies are conducted by either a Sakyapa monk from the gompa, a Nyingmapa nun (in this case, the daughter of the lama of Muktinath) or by the Bonpo Tshampa Takla, according to the nature of the ritual that is to be performed. The size and decoration of shrine rooms varies widely, depending on the wealth and inclination of the householder. This example in Dzar is quite simply appointed, although there is a separate room set aside; the altar may also be found in the corner of the living room or in a storeroom, or at the other extreme it may be a richly furnished apartment with wall-paintings, thangkhas, decorated tables and cupboards for statues and scriptures. The Red

⁷ Most houses in Mustang are now only two storeys high but this verse suggests that three storeys might formerly have been the norm. This is substantiated by the older and mostly ruined part of Khyenga itself. In Kag, too, the three-storey houses are found in the sixteenth-century core of the village, while nineteenth- and twentieth-century house are invariably two storeys high.

⁸ For further details on traditional Tibetan woodwork construction and decoration, see Thubten Legshay Gyatsho 1979: 37.

House in Kag⁹ contains a colossal seated figure of Maitreya Buddha framed by a baroque *torana*; and the shrine room of the Bonpo lama Tshampa Takla in Dzar even has a separate ante-chamber, *gumzur*, (lit. place where shoes are removed).

The flat roof over the first floor accommodation is open at the front of the building, towards the street, with an open-fronted shelter, *yab* (Tib. *g.yab*), or *kyangyab* (Tib. *skyang-g.yab*), at the rear. This is used as a winter shelter for sitting in the sun, or for the emergency storage of crops if rain comes on when they are spread to dry on the roof. The smoke-holes or skylights which light the *khangbache* and *chökhang* below are set under the front of the *yab* roof to protect them from rain. At the western end of the roof an enclosed room was built later than the rest of the house. It is used as a guest room, or store, or for drying meat. The poor insulation of the single mud brick walls means that it is too cold to occupy in winter. Firewood is neatly stacked along the front edge of the roof to form a parapet. In some cases, as in Marpha houses, the firewood has become a permanent feature, plastered into place over the years; and in a further development, seen at the Red House, Kag, and on many gompas, a purely decorative skin of trimmed brushwood, *drolo*, is set into the outer face of a masonry parapet.

In the centre of the front parapet stands a three-sided *tsenkhang* (Tib. *btsan-khang*), the shrine dedicated to a *btsan*, in this case the household protector Dungmara ([A-bse] mdung-dmar). The *tsenkhang* is a miniature house, with a roof, eaves of brushwood (*drolo*), the main body of the house and a hole into a cavity containing figures of sheep,

yaks and goats moulded in tsampa which are ceremonially renewed each year. The *tsenkhang*, like a chorten, is built around a central pole, *hrokshing* (Tib. *srog-shing*), the "tree of life", which emerges through the roof, surrounded by twigs of sacred juniper, *shukpa* (Tib. *shug-pa*). *Tsenkhang* may be square or triangular in plan, red or white (or both) in colour and may vary in the details of the design depending on the particular divinity, and will be located and oriented on the roof to deflect malignant forces expected from a particular direction.

Another protective shrine is also set in the parapet: the *rigsum gönpo* (Tib. *rigs-gsum mgon-po*), the "protectors from the three families". This consists of three small chorten painted red, blue (or black) and white, dedicated respectively to Manjusri, Vajrapani and Avalokitesvara. Prayer flags on vertical poles, *darcoq* (Tib. *dar-lcog*), six in number, are supported by the edge of the *yab* roof.

There is a close, but not exact, correspondence, between houses and households, that is, the socially relevant units into which houses are divided or clustered. Households are of different kinds, and a brief typology may be given here. The main category of household is the *drongba* (Tib. *grong-pa*), or estate. An estate essentially consists of a house and an area of agricultural land, although there are certain exceptions. The smallest category of household is the hearth, called *meptra* (Tib. *me-khral*, meaning "hearth [lit. fire] tax"). The term "hearth" is also used to designate the landless dependency of an estate. This type of hearth usually consists of a part of the main house, inhabited by relatives of the household head. The tenant in question may be the householder's aged parents who have retired from public life, or an

⁹ For a detailed discussion of this building, see Harrison in press *b*.

unmarried sister, or a divorced female relative who has returned to her parental home. The first of these households is referred to as a *gentshang* (Tib. *rgan-tshang*), "elders' quarters". The second are known as *phorang-morang* (Tib. *pho-rang morang*), "men/ women on their own". Such households are not inherited separately but revert to the main estate on the death of the occupants.

Another category of household which should be mentioned is the *khaldura* (*kha-'thor-ba* or *kha-'thor 'thor-ba*), "scattered part" or "fragment". The meaning of this term varies considerably from one village to another in Baragaon. In Chongkhor, for example, the *khaldura* were probably created by younger brothers who had no wish to participate in a polyandrous marriage, and therefore forfeited their rights to the usufruct of their parents. The founder of a *khaldura* household marries separately from his brothers and, with sufficient industry and luck, builds or buys a house and purchases fields. The name *khaldura* implies a degree of poverty and inferior standing, but they can in theory acquire considerable wealth and prestige. Some decades ago in Chongkhor, the subsidiary households were able to form a persuasive lobby who demanded similar rights to those of the estates. A consequence of this dispute is that, at the present time, the headmen of Chongkhor are recruited *exclusively* from the subsidiary households. In Khyenga, where the meaning of *khaldura* seems to be similar to that in Chongkhor, the category was dissolved altogether at the beginning of the Panchayat era: the community gave each of its *khaldura* an area of land and the right to build a house. Thenceforth they were classified as full estates, and were required to help shoulder the burden of increased civic duties that had come in the wake of the

political changes. In Kag, the term *khaldura* is applied primarily to an estate that has no land, or very little land, attached to it, and as such pays its local land tax at the same rate as a hearth. The expression *khaldura* is also sometimes used of non-estate households, whether an "elders' quarters" (*gentshang*) or a "solitary householder", but only if the residents include a male member. In other villages such as Te (Nep. Tetang), by contrast, the term *phorang-morang* includes the *khaldura* category, and the word *khaldura* is never used.

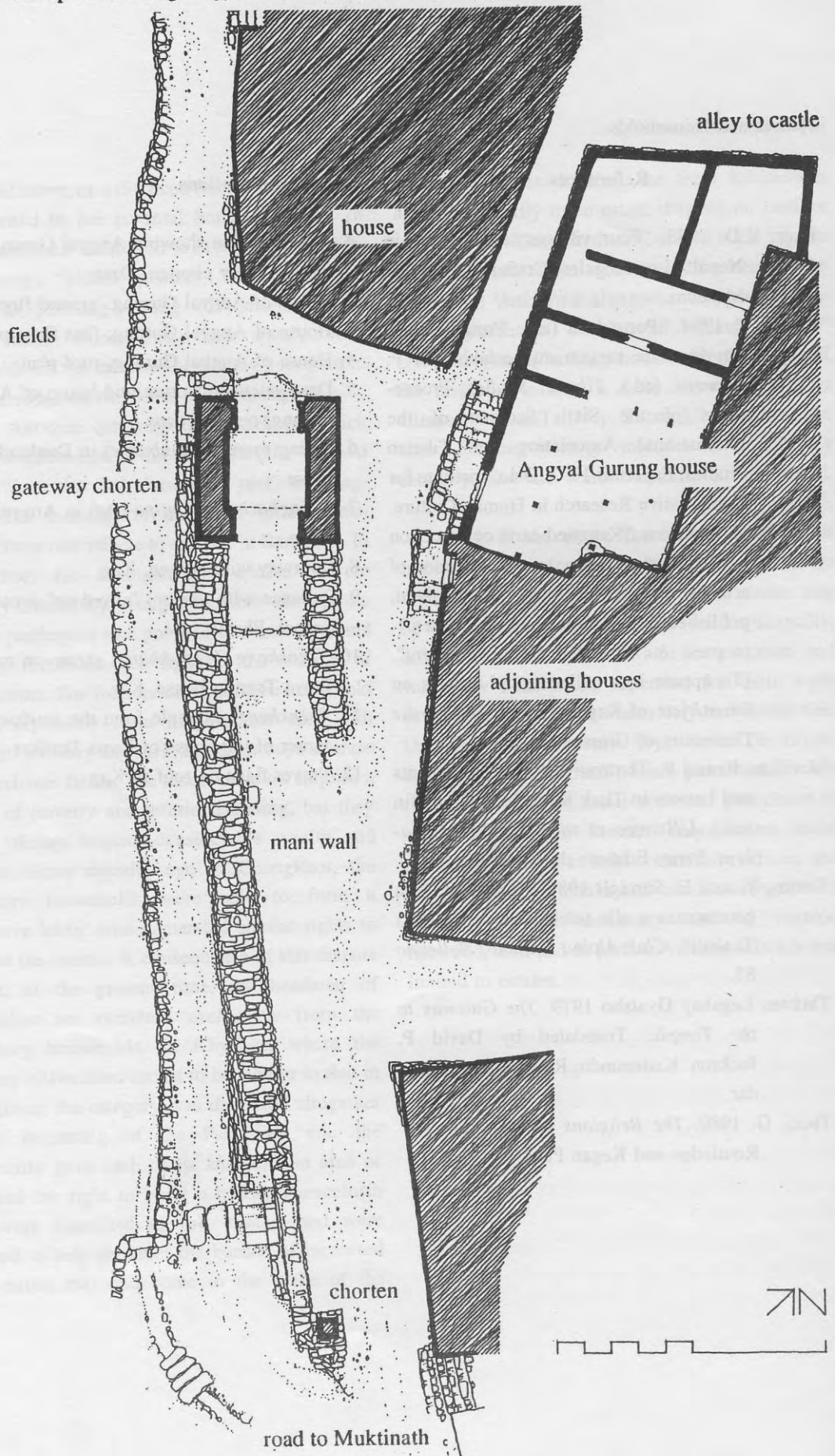
It is the estate that is the single most important unit in the constitution of village organisation. Some of the functions of estates may be listed here by way of illustration. Traditionally, only estates had rights to water for irrigation, and subsidiary households depended for their water supply on estates with whom they had family ties. Only the principal women, *khyimbamo* (Tib. *khyim-ba-mo*, "house mistress"), were permitted to wear turquoise and gold headpieces and participate in certain ceremonial dances; only estates could provide personnel to hold community offices; and the provision of monks and certain categories of offerings to the monastery, and of victuals, firewood, beer and so forth to visiting officials was limited to estates.

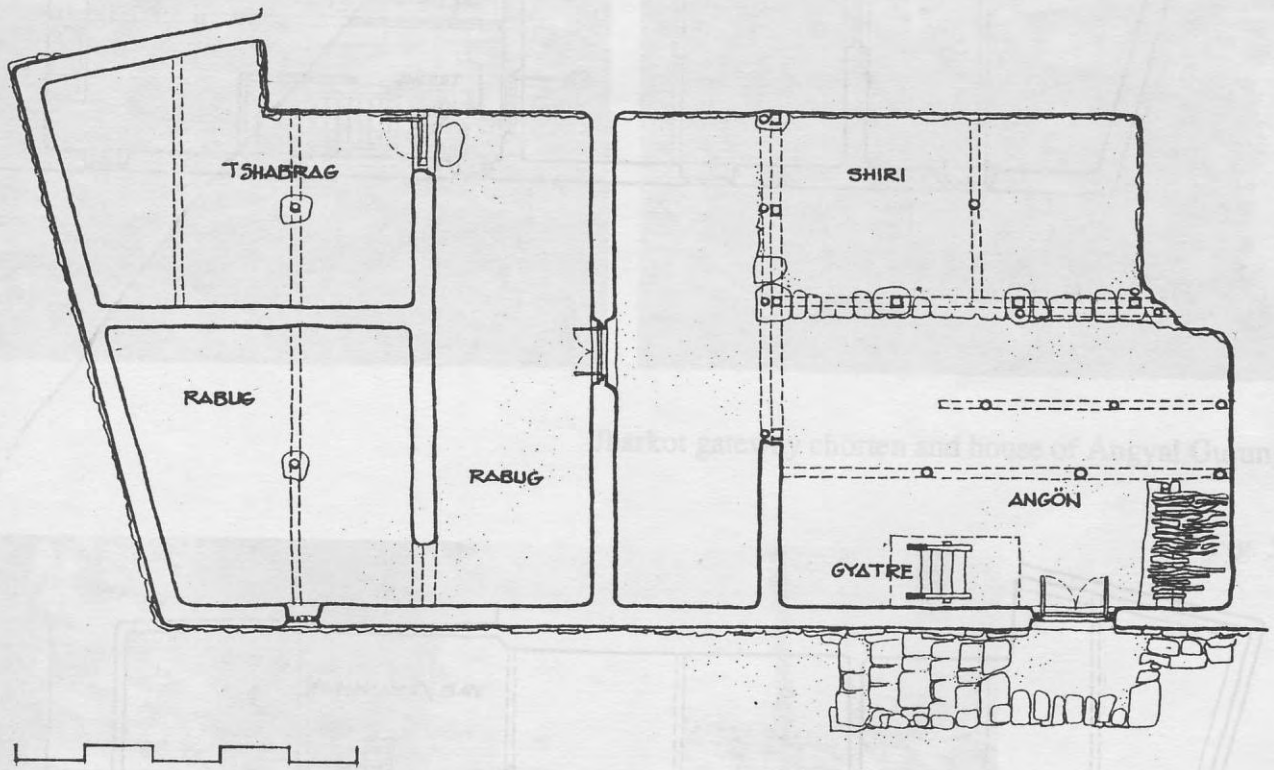
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1. Location plan showing Angyal Gurung house and gateway chorten, Dzar
 2. House of Angyal Gurung: ground floor plan
 3. House of Angyal Gurung: first floor plan
 4. House of Angyal Gurung: roof plan
 5. Dzar gateway chorten and house of Angyal Gurung; resident *dzos*
 6. Living room (*khangbache*) in Dankardzong house
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Fig. 1 Location plan showing Angyal Gurung house and gateway chorten, Dzar





Ground floor plan

Fig. 2 House of Angyal Gurung

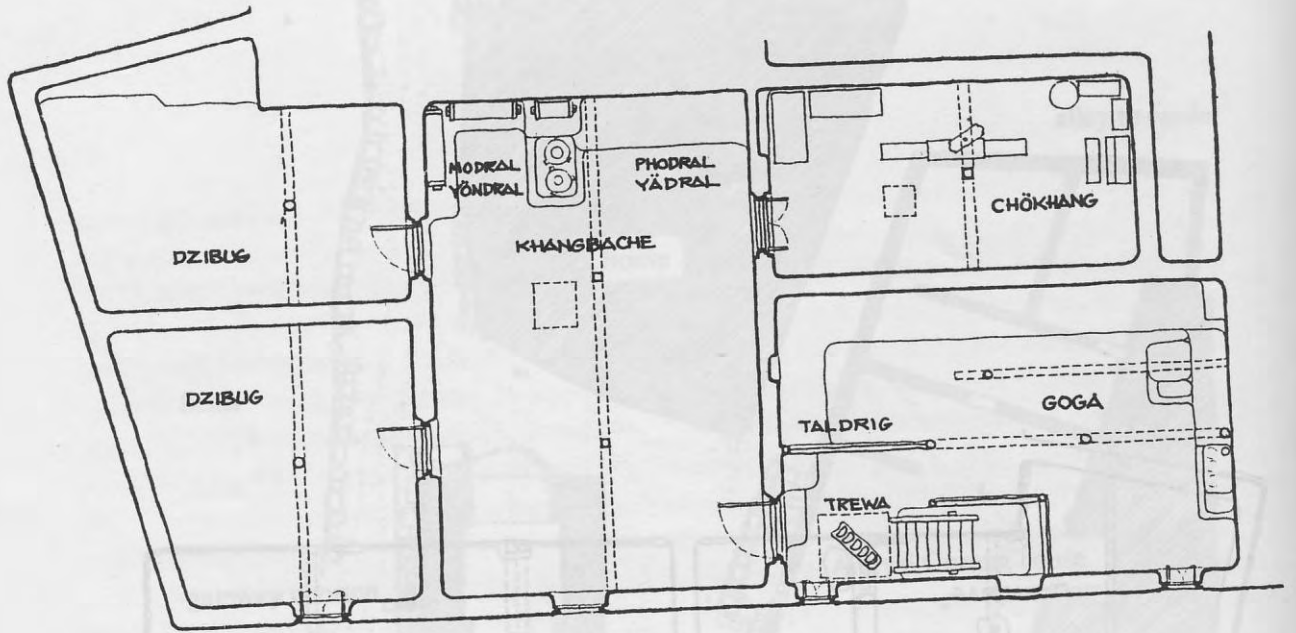
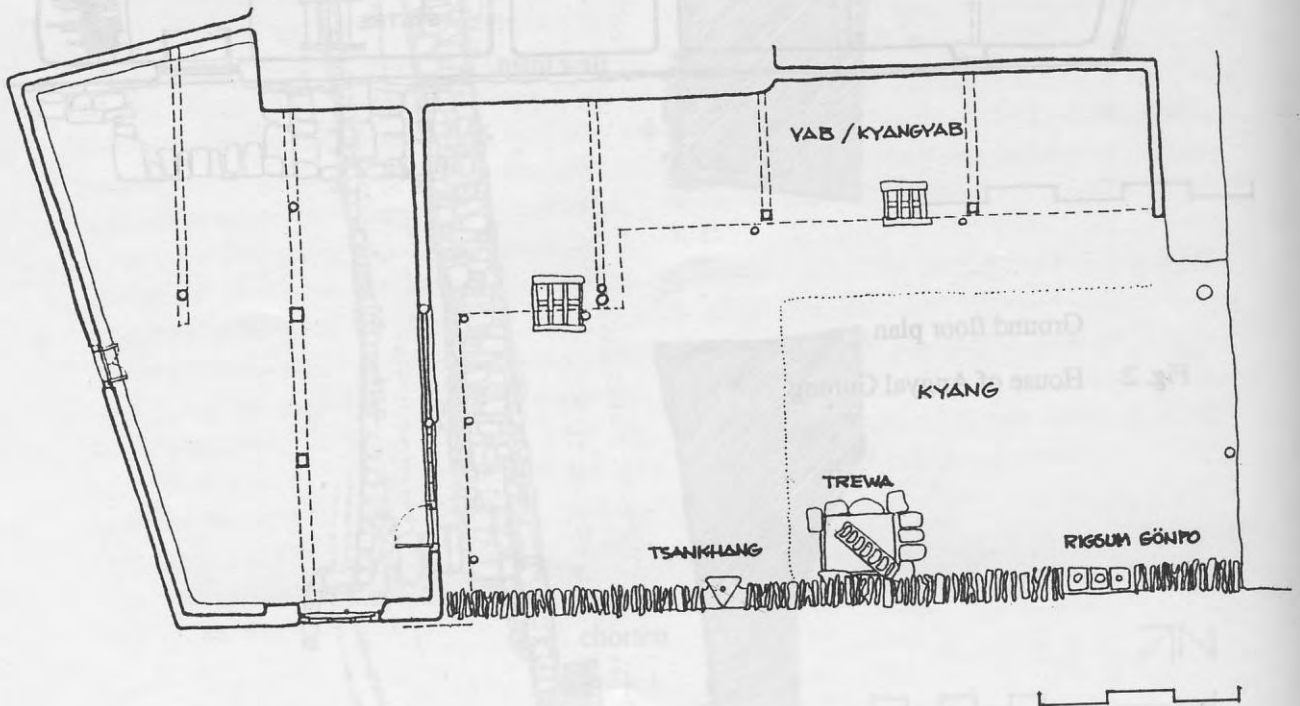


Fig. 3 First floor plan



Roof plan

Fig. 4 House of Angyal Gurung



Jharkot gateway chörten and house of Angyal Gurung

Fig. 5



Resident dzos



Fig. 6 Living room (*khangbache*) in Dankardzong house

Fig. 7 *Khangbache* (*khang-pa-che*) in Angyal Gurung house



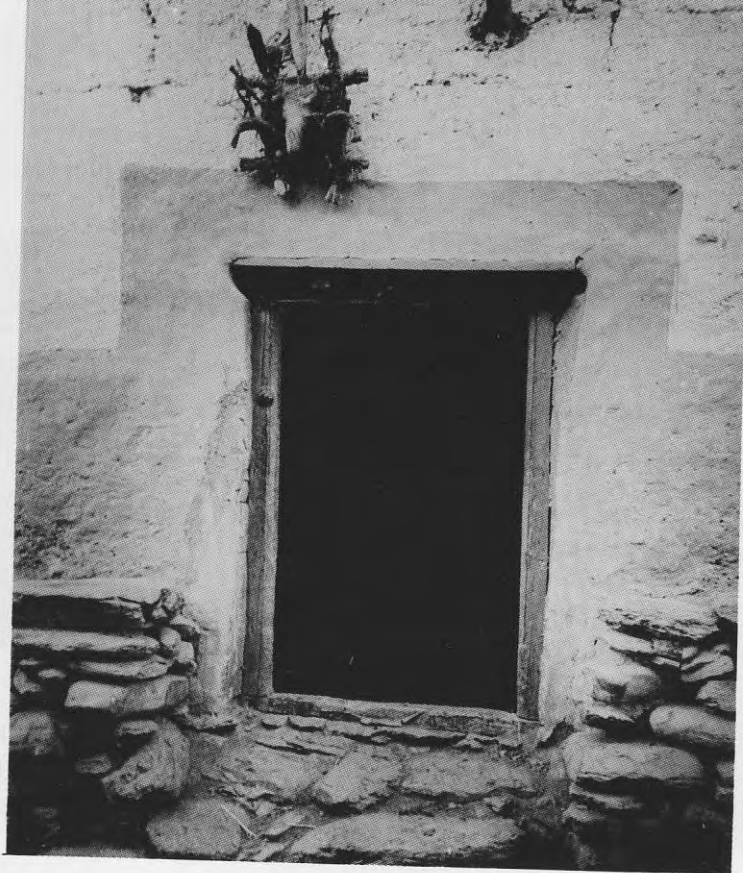


Fig. 8

Doorway with *namgo*, Kag



Fig. 9

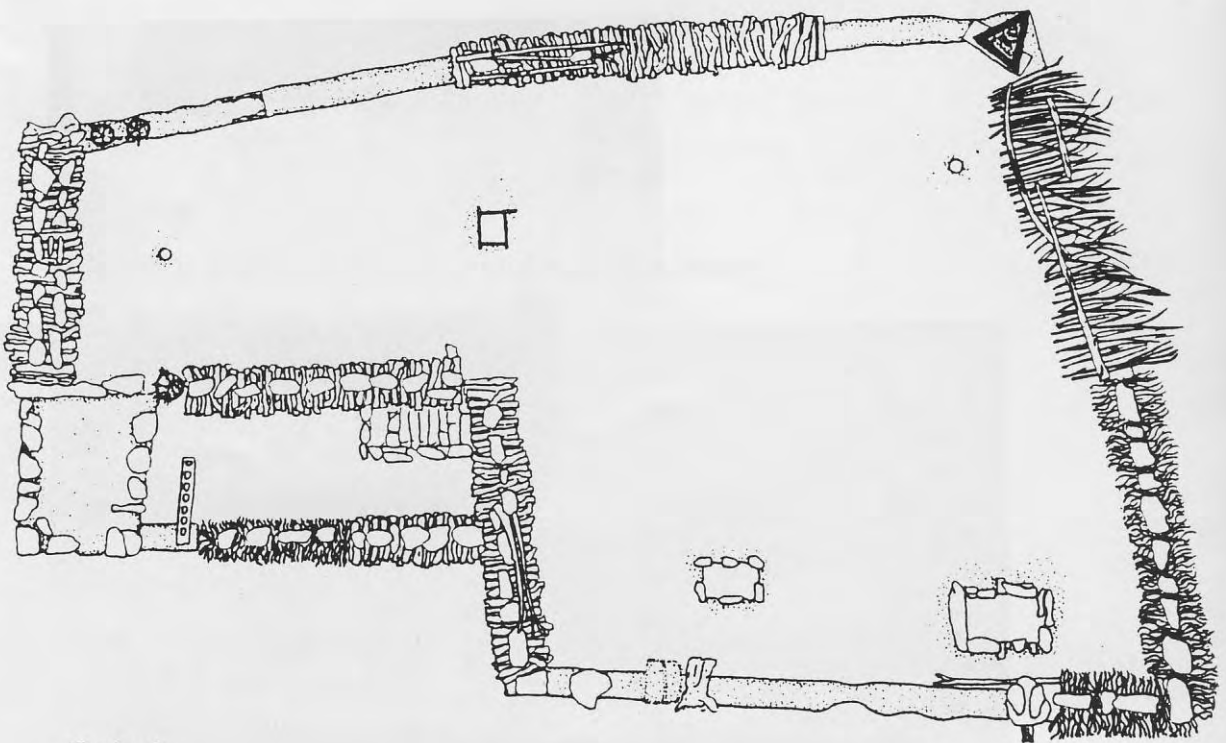
Entrance with *namgo*, "sky-door" protective symbol, Phelak



Fig. 10

Tsankhang (*btsan-khang*) shrine on roof of Waya Tsering house, Kag
 This Triangular white *tsankhang* on the corner of the roof is dedicated to a Bon-po
 divinity. On the adjoining roof (left) is a square red shrine to a different divinity.

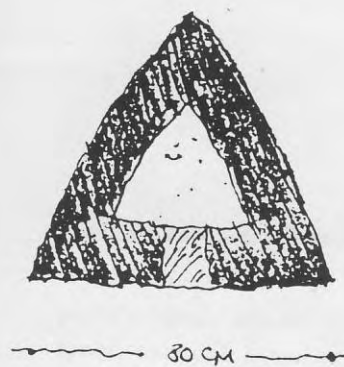
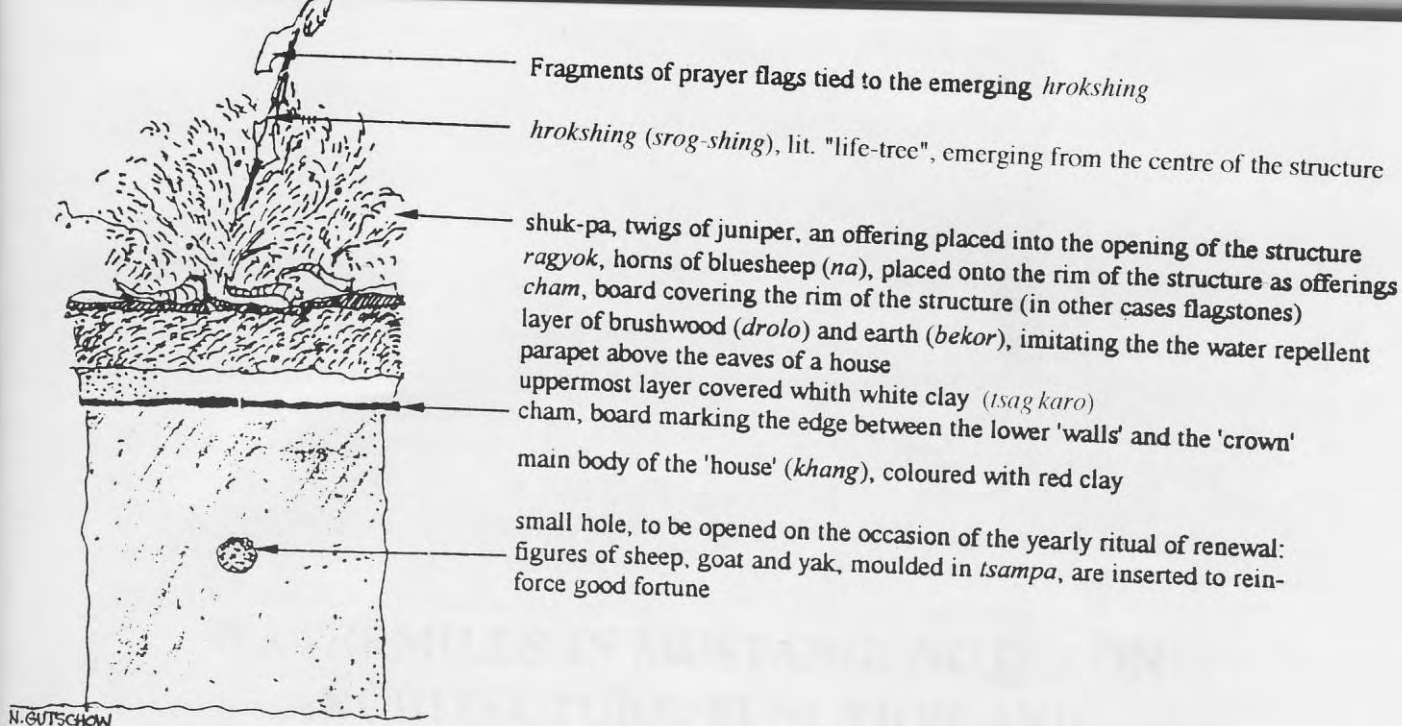
TSENKHANG
 ("house" of the demon)



Kagbeni:

Top view of the house of Waya Tsering on the southern edge of the village square,
 scale 1:100, drawing by Asha Ram Twayna, June 1993

The *Tsenkhang* is located in the northwestern corner and supported by a plank in
 order to point Northwest. Firewood and fruit line the parapet, the low wall extending
 some 20 to 30cm beyond the roof. The holes in the roof provide for ventilation, two
 small ones were added for recently introduced stove-pipes.



Tsen Khang
 example from the southwestern corner of the house of Pema Drolkar, dedicated to Abse, the Bonpo protector

Fig. 11

Fig. 12 Prayer flags on roof in Kag

