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Patrick Kaplanian

BODILY, SPACIAL AND SOCIAL HIERARCHY IN LADAKH

The Ladakh districts are peopled by somewhat more than 200,000 inhabitants. This region, which covers 97,000 sq km, is located to the northeast of Kashmir, along the Sino-Indian border. It is still called “Indian Tibet” a name which has the advantage of pointing out its dual attachment: to Tibet, in cultural and religious matters, and to the Indian Federation, in political matters. The Ladakhis are of Tibetan race and language. 55% of them practice Lama Buddhism. The Buddhists are concentrated in the valley of the Zanskar and the Indus. This study concentrates primarily upon the Indus valley.

This area is located behind the great Himalayan chain, and being thus sheltered from the effects of the monsoons presents an arid, death-like aspect. The high altitude, an average of 3,500 m for the Indus valley, and the distance from the ocean explain the striking temperature ranges which occur not only seasonally but daily. Villages are virtually oases where the fields are irrigated solely by melting snows. In general, the villages are rather scattered, as we shall see further on.

Before referring to the villages, we shall consider the houses. They consist of either 1, 2 or 3 floors, depending upon the family's wealth. Two is the most common figures a ground floor and an upper floor. The lower level would usually be occupied by the animals, whereas the people would live on the upper level. If there are two upper floors the first is used in winter, and the second in summer. 4

The most important room in the house is the kitchen, which is the habitual meeting place. Meals are taken here, and the most talkative individuals gather to converse and drink chang (fermented barley) or salted tea with butter. The room is arranged around the hearth (thap; spelling thab) which is made of metal or earth and is placed against one of the walls, which is equipped with shelving covered with cooking-ware. The other walls are generally bare. Adjacent to the kitchen, and usually only accessible through it, is the dzot (spelling mdzod), the pantry or larder. In many houses there is a lhubang (spelling klu-bang, in Tib. klukhang) in the dzot, which is consecrated to the lhu, underground divinities (spelling klu) who are providers of wealth and abundance.

Every floor is equipped with a latrine: a small, door-less room with a hole in the floor. One relieves oneself on the earth-covered floor (or directly into the hole). Excrement is then sent down the hole with a hit of earth so that it accumulates at the ground level, thus enriching the supply of natural fertilizer. Scoops are provided for this purpose.

Most of the other rooms are multi-functional. In certain houses there are specialized rooms such as shingkhang, rooms for storing wood (shing); changkhang, rooms for storing chang in large earthen jars; silo rooms (pang-a; spelling bangā). But there is no equivalent to our bedrooms, or

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1 This enquiry was carried out entirely through direct observation and interviews with Ladakhis, during 10 months in the field, broken up into the three summers of 1975, 1976 and 1977. The conclusions partially concur with those described in an article by R. A. Stein, “L'Habitat, le Monde, et le Corps Humain en Extrême Orient et Haute Asie”, Journal Asiatique, Volume CCXLVII, pp 37-74, to which I refer. This article is completed by another by the same author: “Architecture et Pensée Religieuse en Extrême Orient”, Arts Asiatiques, Vol. IV, No. 3.
2 100 000 at the time of writing this article. I will mention other changes since 1975.
3 See for instance the title of the book Antiquities of Indian Tibet by A. H. Francke (Re-publication New Delhi, 1972).
4 In Globus. Vol. 73, page 4, A. H. Francke mentions a house with the kitchen on the ground floor.
5 Lhubang: “pantry or larder for the lhu”. Tibetans prefer to write klu-khang “house for the lhu”
6 The absence of a door implies the lack of taboo surrounding the fact of seeing someone defecate. Occasionally there are two holes in the latrines.
7 Dog excrements alone are not used for any purpose.
8 Goldstein’s New Tibetan English Dictionary: “bang-ba, storage cubicle for grain in a storehouse”. It is the same bang as in lhubang, see note 5.
even the idea of given members of the family (parents, grand-parents, children) having rooms of their own.

Particular mention should be made of the chotkhang (spelling mchod-khang), the private 'chapel' of the house. Every house has one. The far wall is covered with painted wooden recesses destined to hold statues of divinities. There is a striking contrast between the rich decoration of these recesses, as well as the scrolls of religious paintings (thangka; spelling thang-ka) which are hung on the walls on either side of these niches, and the simplicity of the other rooms. The chotkhang is decorated with sacred books, and with stucco, wood, or bronze images. Monks gather there to pray for the members of the household.

At the top of the house is a flat terrace surrounded by a small parapet. This may be considered an additional room; one without a roof and one in which many activities take place. In winter, it is a favorite meeting place in the middle of the day, for soaking in such pale rays of sunlight as there may be. In the summer, many small tasks are carried out on the roof: cheese is dried, barley is roasted, wool is combed, etc. The terrace serves also as a storage place for wood, used for heating as well as for dzö (mdzo) dung, which is another fuel. Unless the astrologer (onpo; spelling dbyon-po) decrees otherwise, the main entrance to the building faces east. The Ladakhis consider the east, and in conjunction, the south, as good directions. They sleep, for example, with their heads towards the east. However, when there is a monastery nearby, a chotkhang on the floor where they are sleeping, it is towards this that they turn in order to sleep. To paraphrase Bourdieu, one might say that the chotkhang is the east of the floor of the house on which it is located.¹⁰

Religion or religious imagery, thus creates a barrier against the ill effects of evil directions. Furthermore, when one is in a closed room located on a floor where there is no chotkhang, it is less serious to violate the rule of sleeping facing the east than it would be out of doors or on the terrace. A wall will thus counteract the ill effects of an evil direction, but will not have the same radical effect as a religious object (monastery, chotkhang, image). Most important, a wall will not in any way modify a privileged direction. We can state, therefore, that cultural space can be defined by a degree of distance in relation to natural, cosmographical space, even though the two are in harmony, since the house as a whole seen from outside is perfectly oriented on this same east-west axis. Religious space, on the other hand, delineates a complete break with cosmographical space, as the chotkhang may be oriented in any direction, and for those on the same level in the house, the chotkhang becomes the new focal point. Similarly, monasteries do not necessarily face east; in fact, most face south.

In any case, religious constructions aside, we have these homologues — front : rear of the house :: east : west :: head : foot (read: the front of the house is to the rear of the house as the east to the west and as the head to the feet) — which initially define an isomorphism between cosmographical space, the dwelling, and the body.

The demonstration of this isomorphism could easily be continued. For example, the front/rear opposition couples with the east/west opposition. Morning and evening the Ladakhis must kneel, facing the direction towards which they will sleep (or have slept). This front/back opposition is expressed in a series of very strict rules of etiquette: it is forbidden to turn one's back to a person, a religious image, to the kitchen hearth; women are obliged to wear a lokpa (slog-pa) on their backs (a goatskin which is at times replaced with brocade, or even a shawl).

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¹⁰ The dzö (mdzo) is a hybrid of the yak and the cow.

¹⁰ P. Bourdieu, *Esquisse d'une Théorie de la Pratique*, Geneva 1972. Title of chapter: “La Maison et le Monde renversé”. In order that a comparison with Bourdieu's conclusions be of interest, one would have to demonstrate that the four cardinal points are redistributed indoors from the “new east”, as he does with the case of the Kabyle house.
The high/low opposition introduces a third dimension; inspired from the human body. When lying down, a man turns his head to the east. However, this opposition between head and feet is maintained when he is standing and becomes homologous not in terms of east and west, but in terms of high and low. This is also manifested in the rules of etiquette which are equally strict as those concerning the front/back opposition: it is forbidden to point one's foot towards a religious image, a person, the kitchen hearth, food, etc. A ladakhi proverb states that “even a mon would not be able to tolerate a king pointing his foot at him”. The only sitting position allowed is cross-legged. When one is moving through a room in which people are sleeping, one must avoid

Figure 1 – Very simplified plan of a Ladakhi house

\textsuperscript{11} S.C. Das A Tibetan-English dictionary [1902] 1985, p. 1316 bsangs “incense, frankincense”; in Ladakhi sangs is the action of burning, not what is burned; p. 147 khung : “hole, pit, hollow, cavity”. In Ladakh seems to mean before all the arrangement of 3 stones made to protect the fire from the wind.

\textsuperscript{12} Inferior stratum of musicians and carpenters.
walking too close to them. It would be far more serious to pass over their heads than over their feet. In getting up, one must also avoid passing over any vessel containing food placed in front of one.

The Ladakhis themselves give a simple explanation for this: the feet are dirty; one is always walking in the dirt, in particular in the toilets, because of the climate, one does not take one's shoes off when entering the house, or even the kitchen. Of course, this is not a very satisfactory explanation. Taking off one's shoes and washing one's feet would change nothing. However, this explanation does show the opposition which corresponds to dirty/clean (most often, only the face is washed) or even impure/pure. The opposition is so strong that it takes precedence even over that of east and west. For example, if a group of persons has to sleep in a tent having dimensions such that all may not lie in a row side by side and face east, but must lie in two rows (see figure 2-a), then they sleep head to head (figure 2-b) or, at worst, feet to feet (figure 2-c), which implies that not all of them will be turned to the east.

The opposition between head and feet is maintained whether the body is in a vertical position or a horizontal one. This allows for mediation between the horizontal axis (front : rear of the house :: front : back :: east : west) and the vertical axis.

There is another element which allows for this mediation: the sago-namgo. At times the onpo ordain that the head of a goat (namgo) or dog (sago) be placed in order to close the doors (go, spelling: sgo) of the sky (nam, spelling: gnam) or the earth (sa) against demons coming from these two directions. In general the namgo is located near the main door, turned towards the east, while the sago is placed on the other side of the house facing west.\(^{13}\)

The list of homologues has thus become: front : rear :: front : back :: east : west :: head : feet :: sky : earth. The general framework of these spatial homologues having been defined, we shall concentrate on the vertical axis. We have seen that it is the most important, since in the case of conflict, the head/feet opposition takes precedence over that between east and west. It is upon this that the hierarchies are based: i.e. the social hierarchy, the hierarchy between the pure and impure, between the sacred and the profane. How is this materialized?

First of all, within the framework of the house, the ground floor is always the animals' habitat. Agricultural tools, linked to the earth, and in particular, natural fertilizers of animal and human origin are stored there. This usage of the ground floor as a stable can be very well explained for practical reasons. However, the opposition between high and low becomes immediately apparent when one notes that the chotkhang is always on the upper floor; on the first floor if there is only

\(^{13}\) Those questioned also speak of a camel's head as the sago, and the head of a hare or rabbit as the namgo. I have never had the occasion to verify this.
one, and on the second if there are two above ground level. Certain houses which have but one floor still place the chotkhang on the terrace.

The chotkhang and the ground floor are two extremes: on the one hand that which is religious, pure, of the sky, the residence of the gods; on the other, that which is dirty, impure, the earth. These two poles are reflected by the social hierarchy. When the king of Ladakh is invited into a house, he does not enter by the door; a ladder is placed against the wall so that he immediately steps onto the terrace. Those questioned explain that he should not be obliged to go through the ground floor, which is dirty, full of mud, and animal excrement. In fact, the king places himself directly at the level which corresponds to his social rank, i.e. at the highest point in the house. Although it is not the royal family's habit to visit subjects, the current queen's father-in-law did so.\footnote{I remind that this paper was written in 1975-1977.}

It is interesting to note that the lhatho (lha-tho) of the pha(z)lha (pha-lha)\footnote{The word phaspun. indicates a group of families or houses. Its function is only apparent upon three occasions: birth, marriage and death. This function is at the same time practical, (for example, the members of a phaspun join forces to gather wood for a cremation); ritualistic, (other examples: the members of a phaspun accompany the bride to her husband's house; they move about the funeral pyre, carrying a special scarf, etc.); and religious (a certain number of taboos: the body of a dead person may only be touched by the members of his phaspun; at the time of birth only the members of the family's phaspun may accept food from them during 7, 15 or 30 days, as the case may be, etc.). In the Indus valley one may change phaspun.} protector of the phaspun (pha-spun) is most often located on the roof of the chotkhang. The better instructed persons questioned affirmed the superiority of orthodox Lamaism over the popular religion.\footnote{And the monks insist that if they are to tolerate the lhatho they are against its being placed inside the chotkhang. Paradoxically, their attitude leads their followers to place popular religion above Lamaism.}

Eating habits give us a second lead. First of all, one must never place one's cup on the ground. In the kitchen, in front of the cushions upon which one sits cross legged, long, low tables are provided on which to place bowls and cups. Outdoors, one would utilize any object rather than a stone. A brick, for example, would be preferable 'because it is a man-made object. The object holding the cup serves not only to put it in a spatial, hierarchic position in relation to the ground, but also, however, in the case of a baby, to lower it to a proper height (about the shoulders of the adult)-- and to protect it from gusts of wind.\footnote{From the Ladakhi believe in a myriad of local deities which are linked to various elements of the landscape (rocks, rivers, etc.). I have already mentioned the lhun, underground and/or aquatic deities linked with wealth, as well as the local benevolent deities. To this list, we must add the tsan (btsan), ambigious beings which may be both evil and benevolent. They are linked to the wilderness, but live in inhabited areas. They are characterized by two things: their red color, and their lack of a back (from behind, their heart and lungs can be seen). This absence of a back can no doubt be linked to prohibitions concerning the back, and the women's obligation to wear a lokpa (slog-pa), a goatskin or sheepskin which is attached to the shoulders and falls to the waist.}

The lhatho of the phaspun is the guardian deity. It lives in a lhatho (lha: divinity). A lhatho is a structure which is more or less cubical, and crowned with poplar or shukpa branches (shug-pa; Juniperus wallachiana: the pencil cedar). These are decorated with ceremonial scarves which are called khataks (bkha-tags. most often pronounced kata or katha in Lhasa) and placed in a vertical position on top of the cube. In the case of the pha(z)lha's lhatho the branches are changed at the beginning of each new year. Branches from the shukpa are used, and it is the male members of the phaspun who change them. There are also lhatho for the guardian deities of the village (yulha. yul: village), of the monastery (gonlha, from gonpo; spelling: mgon-po: protector or dgon-lha from dgon-pa, monastery), and the royal palace (tselha). Most often, though not always, they are placed in a high position.

Paradoxically, however, in the case of a “son-in-law” marriage (makpa, spelling mag-pa, a young man marries the daughter of a family in which all the children are girls and agrees to live with his parents-in-law, although marriage is normally patrilocal), the son in law in question is taken into the same phaspun as his new wife, or at worst, into the phaspun of another village which has the same pha(z)lha.

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It is interesting to note that the lhatho (lha-tho) of the pha(z)lha (pha-lha)\footnote{The word phaspun. indicates a group of families or houses. Its function is only apparent upon three occasions: birth, marriage and death. This function is at the same time practical, (for example, the members of a phaspun join forces to gather wood for a cremation); ritualistic, (other examples: the members of a phaspun accompany the bride to her husband's house; they move about the funeral pyre, carrying a special scarf, etc.); and religious (a certain number of taboos: the body of a dead person may only be touched by the members of his phaspun; at the time of birth only the members of the family's phaspun may accept food from them during 7, 15 or 30 days, as the case may be, etc.). In the Indus valley one may change phaspun.} protector of the phaspun (pha-spun) is most often located on the roof of the chotkhang. The better instructed persons questioned affirmed the superiority of orthodox Lamaism over the popular religion.\footnote{And the monks insist that if they are to tolerate the lhatho they are against its being placed inside the chotkhang. Paradoxically, their attitude leads their followers to place popular religion above Lamaism.}
but to separate cooked food and culture from the earth itself, from nature, by means of an object which in itself is of the realm of culture.

There are also attitudes of respect as regards food, when one is offered tea or soup, one must hold the cup or bowl below the vessel which the woman who is serving holds, or quite simply, leave the empty glass on the table without holding it. If one takes the initiative of getting up in order to be served at the hearth, one must similarly hold the cup at the foot of the hearth, but without placing it on the ground.

That which is true for food is also true for knowledge (which is always more or less connected to religion). One never places a book on the ground. One never sits on it. And it is better to place it on the table than on one's knees.

Everyone holds the same attitudes towards food and knowledge. However, the social and religious hierarchy manifests itself in another way in the case of food: in the arrangement of individuals in the room, and in the height of the tables placed before them.

The starting point is the hearth, which is placed against one of the four walls of the kitchen. On one side (either left or right) is the woman who is cooking. On the other side, the eldest male is generally seated, most often, the father-in-law (since it is a patrilocal society). It is he who removes embers from the fire as the need arises, and puts them into a receptacle placed there for this purpose. His seat is the most important in the hierarchy, as we shall see. It is also the “good place” where one can warm one's hand.

![Figure 3 - Arrangement of guests in a kitchen. H: hearth, W: woman cooking, 1,2,3 hierarchic order, 1 being the grandfather's seat, s: screen pulled out in order to separate the cook from the lower strata.](image)

If a gathering is organized, the guests will seat themselves according to hierarchic order. The first in this order places himself in the grand-father's seat (figure 3). The order is illustrated above.

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18 This is in fact, a rather obvious practice, but the rule is explicitly laid down.

19 A rinpoche is a great, reincarnated lama. Lama (sp. blama) simply means monk. The kalhon or kalon (sp. bka’-blon used to be the prime minister. This title was hereditary, and he still keeps it. This is also true for the lhonpo (governor). The kalhon or kalon is still a house name, while lhonpo is used to translate “minister” in modern
This structured order is not in itself sufficient. To reinforce it, tables of varying heights are used. For example, in front of the rinpoche, one places a very high table, considered as a throne. In front of the lamas (bla-ma), the kalhon (bka'-blon), and the lhonpo (blon-po), a high table is placed on top of an ordinary table; in front of the people of average strata, one places an ordinary table. The goba (mgo-ba) is the village chief, and is elected. The garas (sp. mgar-ba) are still a stratum of ironworkers; the mons of musicians and carpenters; the bedas of bards. It is noted that this arrangement puts priority on religion. It does not correspond, in fact, to the division of Ladakhi society into three strata, where the religious and the secular are mixed: 1 king, kalhon, lhonpo 2 “ordinary people” (peasants) and plain lamas, 3 garas, mons and bedas. According to the information from the village of Matho, reported by P. Farrington and N. Grist, the garas are placed above the mons in the hierarchy, since on the arrow, the iron tip made by the former is in front of the wooden shaft made by the latter.

Ladakhi. The goba (mgo-ba) is the village chief, and is elected. The garas (sp. mgar-ba) are still a stratum of ironworkers; the mons of musicians and carpenters; the bedas of bards.

As far as the rinpoche (very high reincarnated lama) is concerned I am just repeating here what most informants told me in the 1970s. However five years later I had the opportunity to attend a very important wedding where the rinpoche of Rizong was present. He was not on the highest pillow in front of the highest table but given a seat in a room separated from the other guests. It was confirmed to me afterwards that, actually a rinpoche is not seated at the place of honor at the head of a row but locked in a separate room.

On the other hand in monasteries the rinpoche has his own throne and often a second throne, even higher, is reserved for the highest rinpoche of the school in question (the Dalai Lama for example). His photo is put on the seat.
table; before the *mon* and *gara* a board, and before the *beda*, nothing at all, or possibly a board (Figure 4).  

The case of the *bedas* is of particular interest. In theory, they are characterized as “not having a house”; these wandering bards are the limit of humanity, of culture. They are barely tolerated inside the kitchen, and are sometimes excluded and have to eat outside. They merely have a board on which to place their cups, sometimes nothing, and have to place it on the ground. They have an ambiguous position. They remain part of the social structure when they are at the far end of the kitchen, and have a board to use. They are no longer a part of it when they are forced outdoors, and must put their bowls on the ground.

House, kitchen; there is yet one last area in which space reflects the hierarchy: urbanism. It is manifested at the level of the village by the predominant positions of the royal palace and the monastery. For the most part, the monastery is on a higher elevation than the palace. Although other criteria are often given by those questioned in order to justify this position, such as the need for defense measures in past times, the superiority of the king over his subjects, and of the sacred over the unholy is also a theme frequently heard.  

It is true that when confronted with the current urban situation, we cannot go beyond this statement. It would, however, be perfectly consistent with previously given data to visualize an urban area hierarchically organized in concentric circles: a projection of the social pyramid. In fact, according to the Ladakhis themselves, when the village was gathered at the top of the hill, and protected by walls, this was indeed the case. The houses of the *kalhon*, the *lhonpo*, and the nobility were near the palace, whereas those of the lower strata were further away. Archaeological findings will verify these comments, which in any case are a reflection of mental structures. But evolvement towards the breaking up of groups of compact dwellings is

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21 See R.A. Stein’s article (ibid.) p. 73, n.61: “Au Tibet, la hiérarchie des hauteurs s'exprime volontiers aussi par le nombre de coussins entassés qui servent de siège. Dans une hagiographie de Padmasambhava celui-ci occupe un siège formé de neuf coussins, l'abbé, un siège formé de cinq coussins et les traducteurs de tapis. Cette hiérarchie des hauteurs se double de celle horizontale, en droite et gauche.”

22 Sp. lcog-rtse or cog-rtse. This word is borrowed from Chinese and has no proper spelling. The Bod-rgya-tshig-Mdzod-chen-po gives 3 or 4 spellings included: lcog-rtse and cog-rtse

23 It is not impossible that the height of domiciles also be a criterion. See R.A. Stein (ibid) p. 73, n.61: “La hiérarchie des étages s'est maintenue au Tibet et est attestée en Chine...... Le 'temple rouge' (mchod-khang dmar-po) construit sur le palais du Potala à Lhasa est dit avoir neuf étages, et le Dalai Lama est assis sur neuf coussins. Des bâtiments réels de neuf étages sont attestés au Tibet, à Tashi Lunpo et à Leh (le château). ” Leh was the last royal capital of Ladakh.

24 It may still be verified that the houses were concentrated on top of a hill around the royal palace by visiting the ruins of Temisgam and Zangla (in the Zanskar valley).
continuously in process. Unfortunately, these are small hamlets, which do not have a royal palace. Dwellings in large villages have already been completely dispersed. However, in villages of secondary size, one notices that there are a few, isolated houses of recent construction. The inhabitants explain that certain families had their homes reconstructed “in order to be closer to the fields”. But why have they waited until now to do so? This second question generally remains unanswered.

Although inhabited space is indeed the reflection of a highly hierarchic society, this society is evolving, after having remained immobile for a long time. Although the kings, kalhon and llhonpo and other important groups have maintained their prerogatives up to this time — in spite of the abolition of the monarchy by the Dogra more than a hundred years ago — traditional urbanism now continues to exist only through remainders. The last of the royal palaces, in which the queen currently lives, is in Stok. It was constructed during the 19th century, and is located at the bottom of the valley, at a lower elevation than the village.

Thus, Ladakhi society is strictly hierarchic. The oppositions between the sacred and the unholy, between the religious and the secular, between pure and impure, between gods and men, between the different strata of society, between culture (cooked food) and nature (earth, animals) are expressed through positions in space which are graduated from high to low. They are projected on the house, the human body, the village, cosmic space, and even geographical space. Titles of nobility still hold their prerogatives in protocol. But the destructuring of the urban network has marked an evolution. If it no longer reflects the social hierarchy as it once did, it is because this is losing relevance. There is a good possibility that the social attitudes that reflect this social hierarchy will also follow the same path. Attitudes of revolt can be seen today. A number of young people who have learned English and Urdu in school and afterwards found state-supported positions in Leh, the principal urban complex, refuse for example, to sit in the places assigned to them when they come home. Nonetheless, it is remarkable, after more than 130 years under the Dogra, English, and then Kashmiri colonialism, that attitudes have remained unchanged, as if the monarchy and the entire complicated apparatus of the nobility were still the status quo. After all, didn't the Ladakhi elect their queen to a seat in Parliament in New Delhi in the summer of 1977? Today, it is still widely said that in such and such a village the archery festivals are very lovely, “because that is a village where all the inhabitants serve the palace”. In fact it can be nothing of the sort. The queen has but a few servants.

Translated from French by Maria Phylactou (London school of Economics).
Drawing by Lucy Vallauri (CNRS, Aix en Provence)

Patrick Kaplanian

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25 Since the writing of the first version of this article this movement has been accelerated. The housing environment is increasingly scattered. This dispersal is strengthened by the increase of secondary houses subsequent to the division of the estate between brothers, which is a recent phenomenon.
26 Karl Marx, 3 documents relating to the history of Ladakh, Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1891, Vol. LX, p.117, n.27: “To Ladakh people 'going in the direction of Lhasa' is 'going up', 'coming away from there' is equal to 'going down”
27 I have used the following symbols in the order of the Tibetan alphabet.

ka
ca
ta
pa
tsa
zha
ra
ha
kha
ja
da
ba
dza
'a
sha

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