The Ladakhi House
Patrick Kaplanian

To cite this version:
Patrick Kaplanian. The Ladakhi House. Reports in Ladakh 1977-1979, 1976. hal-01246859

HAL Id: hal-01246859
https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01246859
Submitted on 20 Dec 2015
THE LADAKHI HOUSE

I - Definition

The word khangpa (spelling: khang-pa) as distinct from khangu or khangbu-(spelling: khang-chung), refers both to a place of residence and to a social unit, in particular an electoral unit (for example for the election of a goba (sp. 'go-ba or mgo-ba; the village head) and his assistants. The word trongpa (sp. grong-pa) denotes the residence complex as a whole including a winter floor, a summer floor, ground floor stables, a chotkhang (sp. mchod-khang) on the upper storey, etc. However, it also denotes a social unit (reference to the undivided family as opposed to the khangpa/khangchung fission) with a well defined position in the social hierarchy (opposition tronchen/troncung, sp. grong-chen/grong-chung). Thus there is no term, at least not one commonly used, to designate the house as a building. The terms used always refer to social or familial groupings, to the segmentations in village society, each with a defined function and place in the social hierarchy.

The word yarsa or yartsa (sp. dbyar-sa) denotes a summer residence. In fact it has two meanings:
1) either it refers to the summer floor, the second storey and in particular the kitchen (the words can-sa (byan-sa) and thap-sa (sp. thab-sa) are normally used for the winter kitchen). In such case yarkhang (dbyar-khang) is also used.
2) or a small dwelling near the fields where it is possible to stay for some time during the summer when the pressure of work requires of one to be on the spot continuously for the harvest or ploughing. We have seen that urban expansion is manifested by the construction of the main house near the fields, displacing the yarsa or yarkhang (sp. dbyar-sa, dbyar-khang) altogether. So the main house becomes a yarsa or yarkhang in its entirety. So, theoretically at least, there is a summer house and a winter house but the latter is commonly abandoned or sublet to migrant workers and the summer house is therefore reorganized into summer and winter floors.

The words pulu (pu-lu) and brok (‘brog)¹ denote stone shelters up in the high pastures, where those who look after the herds during transhumance reside (mostly women).

II - Construction

The first problem is a choice of site; this should not be a lhu-sa (klu-sa), that is a place sacred to a lhu (klu) or sadag (sa-bdag), from which stems the necessity to consult the onpo (dbon-po) in the first place. If the chosen spot is a lhusa it should either be given up, or a lama called in to do pujas. Whoever fails to take these precautions exposes himself to worse troubles. He will witness the loss of his wealth and illness befall his family. If a lhu is hurt by the builders’ pick axes the result will be particularly serious.

Most often a plan is not made. The owner discussed the number of rooms he needs, their approximate size and orientation, with the (r)tsikspon (architect). The (r)tsikspon (rtsig-dpon) is left to trace the plan on the ground according to these demands. The onpo (dbon-po) fixes the date for the work to begin.

Once the plan is made on the ground, the foundations are sunk. The entire space to be occupied by the house is not dug up, only ditches corresponding to the course of walls. Thus the floor of the ground floor, is the ground itself. There is no cellar.

¹ phu: upper part of the valley, pasture. Rebecca Norman writes to me : “The small structures are pu-lu, unaspirated, and not the same word as phu, high valley. I spell it pu-lu... ‘brog is pronounced brok in western Sham, dok in eastern Sham, and in Sham it doesn’t mean the structure, but only an area. In Sham it is not always or even usually at higher altitude than the main house, in fact I think it might be the Sham word for Leh yarsa, just whatever fields or workplace are far away from the main house. I think in Zangskar the dok is as you describe. Some people in Leh say dok for the grazing area with pulu structures, but most people in Leh don’t have the word dok at all.
The depth of the foundation ditches depends on the nature of the terrain: two feet when the ground is hard, up to five feet if it is boggy. The width is usually three feet.

The bottom of the ditches is covered with large stones packed together and leveled. Then 1/2 foot is left on either side and a small wall is built to ground level. The space between the sides of the ditch and the wall is then filled. Then the main outside wall is raised on this small wall. This operation is sometimes performed twice. For example, in a 3 foot wide, 2 foot deep ditch, a small wall 1 foot high is erected - leaving 1/2 foot on either side. Then a second wall, also 1 foot high is built, reaching ground level, again leaving foot on either side. The main wall is built on the second wall, again allowing 1/2 foot on either side, which makes it 1 foot thick. These measurements are by no means a rule, only a possible example.

The door is raised before the wall (but after the threshold) as the rough and irregular stones must be arranged exactly for the two steps and the lintel. Once the wall is begun, they have to start anew for the windows, also inserted prior to the walls around them for the same reason. Whilst the wall is being built, the door and window frames are blocked up with loose stones so as not to warp under the pressure of the walls under construction. (Fig. 2) A beam, or to be more precise, several beams, connect the lintels of the doors and windows, and are eventually covered with cement. (Fig. 3) The window has only recently been introduced. Before the introduction of glass there were only some small skylights, stopped up with rags or paper. These openings are always present on the ground floor. (Numerous houses in the Zanskar valley still retain this feature.) At any rate windows were always confined to the houses of the king and the nobility. They were closed with decorated wooden latticework.

A particular feature called rapsal (rab-gsal) should be mentioned here. This is a kind of balcony made of wooden latticework reminiscent of the mouharabihs of Ottoman architecture. Amongst
other things the *rapsal* is an observation post for the household members; in numerous tales the
hero sees the enemy or his loved one from the *rapsal*. The introduction of glass will make the
*rapsal* increasingly obsolete.
The main door, which theoretically faces east, is called *gyazgo* (*rgya-sgo*). Though thought of as the
main door because of its orientation, it is not necessarily the largest or most used one. Many houses
are built on a slope, as a result a second door on the mountain side leads directly to the first floor.
(Fig 4)

![Diagram](image)

(2) Building the base of a wall. The two vertical jambs (c), and the horizontal traverse lintel (d), are constructed first, so that the stones of the wall (a), can be as level with the jambs as possible. As the wall is being built, the space between the jambs is filled with stones (b), so that the former do not lean inwards under the pressure of the wall. These stones are removed later.

![Diagram](image)

(3) The wall is built up to the level of the lintel. The stones have been removed. A chain moulding runs along the length of the wall joining the beams of the doors and windows. The joists rest on this chain moulding. The whole ensemble is then rough cast, and the chain moulding will no longer be visible except above the doors and windows. At the same time the spaces between the stones and the wood are filled in with mortar which is made of fine sieved earth to which some sand has been added. This same mixture is used as plaster, pisé (for enclosure walls), for the floor and the parapet, for balconies and roofs. The door frame is not masked. In the sketch given here, the surround is very simple indeed. There could be a second horizontal beam at the bottom of the door. This may be complicated further by another larger beam as a threshold under the door frame (Tib. *ma-them*) and a lintel above the frame (*ya-them*).
A house built against a slope. One can either go downstairs directly or by some stairs from the first floor (called the second floor by Ladakhis). Likewise one can go onto the roof directly (the Ladakhis call the roof third floor, when a house has one of our floors).

Clay, the hardness of which leaves much to be desired, is used as cement. However, houses are frequently rebuilt; 30 - 40 years is an average lifespan for a house.

The top floor (the second floor if the house is two-storey) is constructed with mud bricks (paku; sp. pag-gu or pa’u\(^2\)), much less expensive than stone, but also much less solid. However, the walls have no more floors to support. When the stone walls of the ground and first floor are finished, the ka (ka), central pillar of the kitchen, is erected. In general there is only one ka in the kitchen and none in the other rooms. However, some kitchens have two, and some larger houses may have a ka in other rooms. Often there may be one or two ka in the chotkhang, but here their sole function is decorative. If the kitchen ka is a tradition which rarely suffers exception, its presence can also be explained in functional terms. The kitchen is the largest room and the central beam (mardung-ma, sp. ma-gdung) is supported by the ka. Sometimes the ka enables two beams to be joined in a capital. When the external walls and ka axe finished, a feast with chang (chang) may be held.

Less important transverse beams called burdung (bu-gdung\(^3\)) join the walls, or the walls and the mardung. The spaces between the mardung are filled with small sticks (trala, sp. gral-bu) and the ceiling is covered with a species of dried grass called yagdzes (sp. yag-rdzas or g.yag-rdzas\(^4\)), which is then covered with earth. This also constitutes the floor of the next storey (fig 5).

\(^2\) pag-gu or pa’u according to S. C. Das, A Tibetan English dictionary, New Delhi 1985 [Calcutta 1902], p. 777. S. C. Das mentions that it is a Ladakhi word. Rebecca Norman suggests pag-bu and adds “Tibetan is only pha-gu”. She writes “Leh, Sham, Nubra pronounce it pagbu or pakbu”.

\(^3\) mardung (sp.ma-gdung) for the main beam that holds up smaller beams, which are then called burdung (bu-gdung). All beams are generically dungma (gdung-ma).

\(^4\) Rebecca Norman: “I spell it yag-rdzas though g.yag-rdzas would be just as good; in Upper Ladakh where the pronunciation of yag and g.yag would have different tones, they don’t use this word, they say bi-lap instead, so I can’t use their pronunciation as the clue to its spelling. Its Latin name is Stachys tibetica and it’s not a grass at all, but Ladakhis speaking English tend to say “grass” for any plant smaller than a tree. In Leh, the word bilap means this role in roofing, which nowadays can be done with discarded cardboard boxes, whereas yagdze(s) means the specific plant, Stachys tibetica. In Changthang and Nubra, bilap is the name of the plant itself”.

---

2 pag-gu or pa’u according to S. C. Das, A Tibetan English dictionary, New Delhi 1985 [Calcutta 1902], p. 777. S. C. Das mentions that it is a Ladakhi word. Rebecca Norman suggests pag-bu and adds “Tibetan is only pha-gu”. She writes “Leh, Sham, Nubra pronounce it pagbu or pakbu”.

3 mardung (sp.ma-gdung) for the main beam that holds up smaller beams, which are then called burdung (bu-gdung). All beams are generically dungma (gdung-ma).

4 Rebecca Norman: “I spell it yag-rdzas though g.yag-rdzas would be just as good; in Upper Ladakh where the pronunciation of yag and g.yag would have different tones, they don’t use this word, they say bi-lap instead, so I can’t use their pronunciation as the clue to its spelling. Its Latin name is Stachys tibetica and it’s not a grass at all, but Ladakhis speaking English tend to say “grass” for any plant smaller than a tree. In Leh, the word bilap means this role in roofing, which nowadays can be done with discarded cardboard boxes, whereas yagdze(s) means the specific plant, Stachys tibetica. In Changthang and Nubra, bilap is the name of the plant itself”.
(5) The arrangement of beams in a kitchen:
(a) the central pillar (ka).
(b) capital (kazhu, sp. ka-gzhu).
(c) main beam (mardung, sp. ma-gdung).
(d) cross beams (rdungma, sp. gdung-ma)
(e) wooden beading (tralu, lath work, sp. gral-bu) in the spaces between the cross beams. The sticks are covered with a plant called yagdzes (sp. yag-rdzas or g.yag-rdzas) and earth, which forms the floor of the next storey.
The cross beams rest on the chain moulding (fig 3) and more rarely on the stones or the bricks of the wall. The main beam rests on the stones of the wall.
The terminology used for beams seems to be a fairly imprecise.

The plan of the second storey is the same as that of the first. The ceilings/floors are not strong enough to support walls above them; thus walls are built on walls. In the case of a three-storey house, one rarely finds that the second floor is built up entirely. Only certain rooms of the first floor can be found again on the third, leaving an empty space in the middle, either facing the open or
(6) A simplified plan of a modern house at Chanspa. Above the rooms to the right of the corridor, an extension of the walls of the two rooms is built, thus forming another two rooms on the second storey.

The summer kitchen is right above the winter kitchen, but being smaller, one of its walls is erected above the main beam (A), of the winter kitchen. The one hearth is above the other, which means that the ventholes are also aligned in this way. On the other hand the opening (thokskar) above the secondary hearth (mera; me-ra) (B), gives out onto the unbuilt terrace.
sometimes closed off into a patio. Nevertheless there is one exception; it is possible to build a wall above the central rdung-ma in the kitchen. Anyway it is almost a rule that the main vent hole (thokskar; sp. thog-skar or thog-dkar, cf thog, roof and dkar-khung or skar-khung, pronounced (s)karkhung, window) of the kitchen, above the mera (me-ra, see below) leads to an open space on the second floor. For example it is possible to do this by reducing the summer kitchen by half in relation to the winter kitchen, and it is thanks to this device that the thokskar of the mera opens up into the sky. Often it is also protected by a wind break closed off on three sides and on top. On the other hand the two hearths are one above the other and the outlets for the smoke (where there are no chimneys), also called thokskar, are also aligned in this way (Fig 6). This is only one possibility. The summer kitchen may not be above the winter kitchen at all, but above another room.

We can see how important wood is in the Ladakhi house. It is the most taxing element of the budget. The wood (willow or poplar) is rare and precious in Ladakh, or else it must be brought by truck from Srinagar. Until the first truck reached Tungr in September 1977 wood had to be transported on horseback in the Zanskar valley.

Perhaps this explains the rarity of wooden staircases. More frequently they are made of stone, filled in underneath and reinforced with beams. The stairs leading to the first floor are sometimes outside. A ladder is frequently placed against the wall and leads directly to the roof.

This may also explain the rarity of skorlam (skor-lam) which is a wooden balcony encircling the chotkhang used for ritual circumambulations (skor).

This leaves the parapet (charlen; char-len) which surrounds the roof, or, if the second floor is not built up completely, then a parapet is built around all the open sections. It is supported by small beams (tralu; gral-bu) and protrudes about 10 cm from the outside wall. It is surmounted by a stone which is slightly projecting. This stone is painted red or black (Fig 7). Burnt ochre earth is used for the red, the bottoms of kitchen pots are scoured, or the interior of batteries used to obtain the substance used for black (similarly for blackening the hearth or window surrounds). The black band is called nakchu (nakpo: black, chu; water; sp. nag-chu, nag-po, chu), in other words black ink, and the red is called spenma (spen-bad or span-bad). In principle the rules are the following:

a) nakchu for houses of the laity
b) nakchu or spenma for monks' houses (trashak, gra-shag)
c) spenma for monasteries, labrang (bla-brang, a kind of hostel belonging to the monastery), and the chotkhang of kings, the kalhon (bka'-blon) and lhonpo (blon-po).
d) Black is associated with the laity. The laity may be called mi-nak-pa (mi-nag-pa; black people) but these rules have almost completely fallen into disuse. Certain informants told me that at one period black was reserved for the royal families and the nobility.
e) The spenma/nakchu is frequently situated just below the parapet. Sometimes rather than a painted line, it may be composed of fine twigs packed together and embedded in the wall, then painted over.
f) This black/red opposition seems to possess a certain importance in Ladakhi civilization. In the archery festivals the target is called bennak (ben, target, here we come across nakpo, nag-po, black, again) and the central part tsaga (sp. tsha-kha) of ochre, the yellow earth which turns red when burnt and is used to colour the tsandos (btsan-mdos)).

---

5 Willow and poplar are local, but other wood is available from lumberyards that bring wood from Kashmir.

6 According to Hubert Feiglstorfer, “Revealing Traditions in Earthen Architecture: Analysis of Earthen Building Material and traditional constructions in the western Himalaya”, in Art and Architecture of Ladakh, edited by J. Bray and E. Lo Bue, Brill, Leiden, 2014, page 383. Rebecca Norman: “What I was told is that spedma/spesma is if you make it out of sticks with the chopped ends; nakchu is black paint anywhere it belongs on a building, along the parapet or around windows; and charlen is the parapet. spen-ma is in Tib dictionaries as tamarisk, including compounds that refer to the red parapet on monasteries, so may be the same word. But Ladakhis make the spedma out of any available sticks, such as leftover tralu, and not just tamarisk.”
The end part of a wall at Hemis monastery. The part between the beams is packed with sticks, and the beading is painted red in a monastery, and black in the houses of the wealthy and the nobility.

All that now remains is to apply a coat of fine clay smoothly around the windows, and to paint it black. The remaining walls are whitewashed with lime using a rag attached to the end of a stick. The description of the house as a whole will be complete when I have recalled the elements which are added according to taste and circumstance: tarchen (dar-chen), tarcoh (dar-lcog), trashitaling (bkra-shis-khra-ling), sago-namgo (sa-mgo gnam-mgo), sangspor (bsangs-phor), sangskung (sangskhung), described in my article 'The constituent elements of architecture and urbanism in Ladakh'.

There are also tsandos (bisan-mdos) and the red decorations on the wall; triangles, lines of dots and sometimes swastikas. The head of an ibex (skin, skyin), a goat or any other animal favored by the owner, is used as a decoration above the door.

When the house is finished, religious ceremonies follow. There are three kinds:

a) ceremony to displace the pha(z)lha (pha-lha) from the old to the new lhatho (lha-tho)

b) Rabnes (rab-gnas), a ceremony. It is concerned with obtaining lha and installing them in the house.

c) Zingsek (sbyin-sreg), this ceremony can take place at the inauguration of the house. The purification procedure is the same for a house as for a monastery, when these are overrun by malignant spirits. It is dedicated to a Darmapala (choskyong, chos-skyong). In the case of the Gelukpas the darmapala is Vajrabhairava.

---

7 Out of print but, it will be soon on HAL.
III - Organisation

An example will enable us to appreciate more fully the arrangement of rooms inside the house. Fig. 8 is the plan of the ground floor of a bourgeois house in Leh. By this I mean a non-peasant house where the ground floor is inhabited and not used as a stable.

Leading from the main entrance (gyazgo) is a long corridor (Fig 8), from which a staircase takes us to the floor above. The room (nang) no. 7 is extended into a verandah (no. 9). Nos. 9 and 9a could very well form a separate verandah.

In many Ladakhi houses there is a shelkhang (shel-khang), most frequently on the upper storey. The shelkhang (shel, sp. shel: glass) is a room in a corner of the house with panes of glass on both sides looking out onto the open. It is a gathering place used mostly during the winter months. If the door faces east, conforming to the theoretical rule, then it will be placed in the corner to the left of the main entrance, that is S.E. which ensures maximum sunlight.

The actual form of the shelkhang only dates back to the introduction of glass. Previously it was constructed with wooden latticework like the windows and rapsal and was called congsa⁸. Our contemporary Western architects have rediscovered the shelkhang which they call 'window in the style of Frank Lloyd Wright' after its inventor, (information Paul Miremont). In our plan we can also have:

— in 9 a verandah
— in 9 a shelkhang
— in 9 a verandah and the room above it a shelkhang
— in 9 a verandah, there is nothing above 9 and the room above 7 is a shelkhang
— a final hypothesis which is not excluded is that a room is built above 9 and that above 7 is a 'semi- shelkhang', that is with one side of glass instead of two.

1 and 4 are simple rooms (nang, sp. nang) and 7 is readily used as a living room (dronkhang, the room khang where one receives the guests dron-po (sp. mgron; this room is also called zabkhang, maybe from gzab⁹). Note that the shelkhang is itself a living room and therefore a particular form of dronkhang or zabkhang. It is one of the rare rooms where there are a few pieces of furniture; low tables (coktse, leog-rtse), with large square cushions behind them called boldan (‘bol-gdan; ‘bol-mo means soft), measuring about 1 x 1 m. Frequently they are covered with rugs. But in the poorer houses there will be no boldan, merely some mats. Boldan and choktse are practically the only furniture, for there are no beds (one sleeps on mats or boldan) or cupboards, only niches with crude shelves called staksha¹⁰ (the cupboard is replaced by the dzot (mdzod) which we shall return to later).

Whether the zabkhang/dronkhang is a shelkhang or an ordinary room, it should always be kept impeccably clean as guests could come in at any time. It is a more formal meeting place than the kitchen, where close friends, relatives and neighbors are received without much ceremony. Sitting in the zabkhang implies a certain effort in dressing up.

Access to the washroom (thruskhang, khrus-khang) no 3 is by way of a small alcove, no 2. This is not a general rule. The thruskhang is a small, plain, square room into which pitchers and buckets are brought. Many houses do not have one in which case one washes in the kitchen, or, in the summer, outside.

In our example the latrines (chakra, honorific, decot - n° 10)¹¹ are not really a part of the house. There is a small room added to the exterior of the building which therefore lacks foundations.

The list of rooms given in this example is far from exhaustive, in the more important residences one may find the following: Outside the food dzot (mdzod), another dzot, where balls of wool, tools,

---

⁸ Spelling unknown. The word is not used any longer today. People prefer to say rapsal or shelkhang.

⁹ in Tibetan, according to Das: ‘well behaved, attentive and polite to guests, careful, cautious and also well dressed’.

¹⁰ Spelling unknown, maybe stag-sha. The word is not used any longer today. This article was written in 1979.

¹¹ According to Das, phyag-ra toilet, but the more recent Podgya Tshigdzot Chenmo doesn’t list phyag-ra or chag-ra. Honorific, decot, maybe bde-spyot, but it’s not Tibetan.
pieces of cloth garments and coats are stored. The main agricultural tools such as the plough, are kept on the ground floor. The second dzot is frequently on the second floor.

(8) Plan of a modern house in Leh. This is the kind of house built by young couples nowadays:
1 - room (nang). 2 - antichamber. 3 - washing room (thrus-khang). 4 - room (nang). 5 - kitchen (thap-sa/ cansa). 6 - dzot, storeroom with access to the kitchen. 7 - room (nang) which would readily be used as a living room, or for receiving guests (zabkhang). 8 - main entrance (gyaz-go) and corridor. The shel-khang is above 9, if a larger one is required then it is above
10 The rapsal

a) Changkhang (chang-khang): a room for storing chang in earthenware jars, often adjacent to the food dzot. On the occasion of important festivals (marriage, etc) a person called the changma (chang-ma) stands near the changkhang and distributes chang, similarly the dzotma (mdzod-ma) next to the dzot, and the thapma (thab-ma) next to the hearth. They are mainly chosen from within the phaspun.

b) Shakhang (sha-khang) a room in which dried meat is stored (sha, sp. sha: meat), or where yak or goat meat is dried.

c) Pangnga (bang-nga): a silo where barley is stored. From here a trap door opens out into the room above called pang-khang (bang-khang). The latter is likely to be the dzot or kitchen.

d) Markhan (mar-khang): room for storing butter (mar, sp. mar). In view of the large quantities consumed in salt tea (gurgur ca sp. gur-gur ja), butter is extremely important. Besides Ladakh is not self-sufficient in this respect. Butter is valuable. The wealth of a house may be expressed in quantities of butter.

e) Tangra: stable or sheep pen, etc. This is on the ground floor. Sometimes this is outside the house and may or may not be adjoined to the ground floor. The word stara (rta-ra) may also be used for horses (sta, sp. rta: horse). The dog's kennel is called khipul (khyi: dog, pul: pul< pu-lu small simple structure). Dogs are more or less obligatory guardians of Ladakhi houses.

f) Phograks: room where straw (phoma or phugma; phug-ma) is stored. This room is also called pukrak/pugrak (phug-rags). The fodder chunpo (chun-po) is simply left on the roof and parapet (khatok) referred to as the third level even if this is not built (sumthok, gsum-thog).

---

12 Rebecca Norman: ‘I spell it dang-ra because some people in lower Sham pronounce it dangra or dagra, though Leh and Zangskar pronounce it tangra. There is wide variation between regions in the meaning and words for various animal-related structures, but certainly tangra is a common word.’

13 According to Das phug-ma means chaff in Tibetan. According to Rebecca Norman phomal/phugma means straw in Ladakhi, not chaff, and phokrak/phug-rags is where you keep the straw, not proper fodder, which is chunpo and is kept on the roof. Chun-po is a Tib word: bundle.
Therefore apart from the latrines (cakra.), the washroom (thruskhang), and the shelkhang which is used as a living room (zabkhang), most of the rooms with a specific usage are these small rooms for the storing of wood (shingkhang; shing-khang), meat (shakhang; sha-khang), food (dzot), textiles and clothes (dzot), grain (pangnga), etc. However the kitchen deserves special mention.

IV - The kitchen

First let us recall briefly what has already been said about the kitchen (cansa or thapsa\textsuperscript{14}, sp. thabsa, for the main kitchen which we are mainly concerned with here, yarsa for the summer kitchen). The latter term denotes more generally the summer floor, or summer house, there is no specific word for summer kitchen.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics{kitchen_plan.png}
\caption{Plan of a kitchen. The black circle stands for the central pillar (ka). (1) is the end of the row of seated guests (traljuk), (8) is the end of the row of tables (coktse), and (2) is the beginning of this row (tralgo). The guest of honour or the father sits here. (3) is the furthest point of the row; it is the ‘end of the house’ (khyim-juk). The daughter-in-law of the father also seated at the tralgo (2), sits in front of him on the other side of the hearth. Her place is called thap-ma. (A) is the position of the big pot of drinking water (dik, sp. dig). (5) is the secondary hearth (mera). (6) is another container, frequently a metal can, for the fluid and semi-fluid leftovers (trhuchu; khru-chu). (7) is the daber (da-ber), a wooden partition next to the hearth. This word is also used for the wooden screens masking the lower parts of the windows. The arrows A - B - C, indicate the direction of sweeping. Sweeping itself also follows a hierarchical order. The thapltak (thab-ltag) is found between (2) and (9). It is a container for ashes and glowing embers, and is surrounded by a small wall. The person sitting at (2) tralgo, has the privilege of removing the embers through an opening in the hearth on his side, with a metal spade called lcaks-yok. On the other side, the left hand side of the seated woman (thap-ma), a small stone wall (bustak, sbud-ltag) is used for keeping the bellows (butpa, spud-pa). One end of the bellows is fixed into the hearth.

\textsuperscript{14} Rebecca Norman : ‘I’ve never heard thapsa for kitchen. Monks sometimes use the Tib word thap-tshang, which in Zangskari might be pronounced thaptsa, but in Leh area it’s not a common or known word’}
The kitchen is the usual gathering place for the household members, neighbors and visiting relatives. The focal point of the room is the hearth (*thap*, sp. *thab*) which I shall describe in detail below. The *thap* is built against one of the four walls which is lined with shelves (*langs*; *slangs*-*(kai)*), more or less carved. It is surrounded by a line of *choktse* (low tables), beginning with the *tralgo* (go, sp. *mgo*; beginning, of the line; *tral*, sp. *gral*) where the *nangdak* (nang-*bdag*) is seated (the household head i.e. the oldest man in the male line) and ending at the door (*traljuk*, sp. *gral-mjug*; end of the line).

![Diagram of kitchen](image)

*Langs*, shelves covering the back wall of the kitchen. The hearth is represented here by a simple rectangle, with the *thap-*ltak in profile on the right, and the bellows (*buipa*) and *bustak* on the other side.

In the lower part is an empty wooden section (I), where the seated woman helps herself to wood and dung. Enough fuel for everyday needs is kept here (1). This part is called *pangong* (in some of the large traditional kitchens, there is a small structure specially for keeping fuel, c.f. Mme Pommaret-Imaeda’s thesis where it is described in detail). Behind the *thap-*ltak is a section with three little doors (6), called *cakar*, where objects of common use are kept, especially those used in spinning. Above, the two shelves are divided into two sections. The one on the left is used for beverages (or tea in particular), and the one on the right for food. So on the shelves above the *shakar*15 we find a thermos flask (16), cups (*kore*) (15), and saucers. The drawings above are the two kinds of teapot; earthenware (*tibril*) (17), and brass (*thagu*) (18). A *capskyan* (*chab-rkyan, chang* pot 17) could also have been added.

On the shelves to the right are two kinds of container for food; (*dik*, *dig*) (9), and (*zambu, zangs-*bu*) (10). Above are plates (*thali*, Hindi/Urdu word) (12), large metal dishes (*tabak or thabak; tha-*pag*, also *lagin*, probably a Urdu word itself borrowed from Persian) (11), and soup bowls for *kholak* (*gormo, sgor-mo*) (15).

---

15 Not a Tib word, so spelling is unknown.
Different utensils are hanging from a board on the right; a copper ladle for tea and water (thumbu or thazu), an aluminum ladle for the soup (camca, 3, Hindi/Urdu words like thali), a wooden spoon for the yoghurt (zho) or whey, called zuru (za-ru) (4). Sometimes this is kept in the yoghurt churn (zobker) often found near the ka_. There is also a board for the bapa, a dough made out of boiled tsampa (taro) (8), a stick for mixing the bapa (skya) (14) and a kind of small, stiff brush for mixing the soup (silkya) (5). Below this is a large dik (dig) for drinking water (7).

The woman seated in front of the nangdak is very often his daughter-in-law or wife, or failing these, his eldest daughter or sister. The place where the woman sits, in relation to the tralgo and next to the thap is called thapma (thab-ma). In most cases she has her back turned towards the door, form which she is separated by a partition called daber (da-ber). The daber, which is a simple wooden screen, is sometimes replaced by a unit of shelves. (Fig 9)

The fact that the woman has her back turned to the door, and that the daber separates the two, can be explained in two ways:

a) We know that the section near the door is the end of the tral called traljuk. As it is rude to have one's back turned, the woman's back is turned as far as possible to the lower strata, next to the door (note that in Fig. 9 she does not do this openly; the door is not directly behind her).

b) This impoliteness is mediated by the presence of the daber, which on the other hand protects her from impurity.

I will not describe the arrangement of coktse of decreasing height in the tralgo or traljuk, here16. Another item of furniture next to the coktse should be noted — kacok (ka-lcog) is the name for a group of shelves around the central pillar (ka: pillar, coktse: table). The kacok is rare and only found in the kitchens of large and wealthy households. More common perhaps is the shelf above the door (goltak, sgo-ltag, this is a general term: the riks-sum-gonpo (rigs-gsum-mgon-po) above the gyazgo, rests on the outside of the goltak as well).

But the langs is the item of kitchen furniture invested with the greatest importance. Rows of shelves cover the entire wall against which the thap is built, (Fig 10) the langs house all the kitchen utensils. Three levels can be distinguished:

a) the lower level is that of the thap. As the thap itself touches, or almost touches the wall, a section of the langs space on the lower level is unusable. At the level of the thapma (to the right on our example) there is a store of wood and dung which is in easy reach of the seated woman, called pangong or pangongs (spelling unknown). The shakar is found at the level of the tralgo, this shuts with small doors. Objects used in weaving the female spindle (phang, sp. phang), the male spindle (skuru : sku-ru- a short stick or yokshing, yog-shing), the base of the phang called the phangkor which looks like an incense burner, and various other objects are stored here17.

b) On the second level above the shakar is the place of the teacups (kore; ko-re), saucers and glasses as well as bottles and thermos flasks. Above the thap are the various casseroles (zambu; zangs-bu), such as the dik and kubukma (kha-bug-ma), large plates (tabak, tha-pag), and ladin which are very large dishes in which the dough is kneaded.

c) Above the tralgo on the third level, are the chang pots (chabskyan; chab-rkyan) and teapots thragu (khra-gu) if made of metel, often copper (no real spelling found but should be khra-gu), tibril if made of clay (maybe tib-ril), and above the thap are bowls for eating kolak (tsampa, Ladakhi phe (phye), mixed with tea or whey: tara (dar-ba), until a dough is formed) called gormo (sgor-mo) and plates (thali, Urdu word).

To the extreme right ladies (thazu, sp. kra-tsu, Tib. thum-bu) are hung. The copper ladies with cylindrical scoops are used for tea and water (camca, Urdu word), the aluminum ones with semi-spherical scoops are used for food, especially soup (thukpa, thug-pa). The skya (skya) is also hung here. This is a stick used for making paba (pa-ba), a mixture made by boiling tsampa in water. A

---

16 My article 'The constituent elements of architecture and urbanism in Ladakh'.
small brush for stirring the thukpa called silkya (sil-skya) and a wooden board (tharo could just spell tha-ro) on which paba is placed, are also found here. The brazier on which the teapot is placed, mezlang (me-slang), is often next to the tralgo. A very large dik in one corner of the kitchen is used for storing drinking water, and the churn is placed next to the ka.

(12) The hearth seen from above and from the side. There are two kinds of brazier; zhong is the main one, (b), and tamik (thab-mig) the secondary ones (a), which serve to keep containers warm.

Apart from the thap, a secondary hearth, mera (me-ra), is in the centre of the room. It is not a built oven but simply a square hollowed out in the ground. A fire is lit here in winter (during the winter all the family sleeps in the kitchen). Above the mera a large opening, thokskar opens onto the roof. I noticed that in many kitchens rays of sunlight passing through the thokskar fall first on the thap in the morning, and then shift in a straight line, until, in the evening, they fall on the bottom of the wall opposite the thap. I was unable to ascertain whether this was a rule, I was simply told that this ray of light was used as a sundial. Above the thap there is a small thokskar for smoke to escape.

However, since their introduction by missionaries in the 19th century, more ventilation has been installed.
The thap is still mostly made of earth. It takes on the appearance of cast iron when it is blackened and polished. The missionaries introduced the metal stove which has the advantage of taking up less space. They are most likely to be found in the summer kitchen. A small mud wall on the outside edge in relation to the seated woman, is called bustak (sbud-ltag). The bellows (butpa; sbud-pa) are kept here. Thus the woman has the bellows on one hand, and the store of wood and dung on the other side. She stokes the fire by putting the wood in a large hole in front of her. On top of the thap the main opening above the flame is called zhon. Apart from this main source of heat there are two secondary ones called tamik (thab-mig, eye of the thab), used for keeping cooking pots warm. By the tralgo another small wall, less high than the first, delimits a space in which the ashes and cinders are disposed of. This is the work of the nangdak who removes them with a shovel (mekem, me-khyem) and tongs (melen; me-len). This section is called thapltak (thab-ltag). (Fig. 11)

The thap is decorated on the side facing the room. There is a line of swastikas (yundrung; g.yung-drung) above, and a jewel in the middle (norbu; sp. nor-bu) which is a symbol of wealth. Both sides of the norbu are frequently adorned with a palpi (dpal-be'u), one of the eight auspicious Buddhist symbols. A frieze of inversed lotus petals creates a border on the lower level of the thap. Should one recall that the hearth is the seat of a lha, the thap-lha?

The metal stoves are made by the gara (mgar-ba). The earthen ones are not constructed by any particular specialists. Amongst others the (r)tsiks-spon know how to make them. First the (r)tsiks-spon draws the outline on the ground. The workers help and hand him clods of earth mixed with 3 parts sand and 2 parts 'stove earth', thap-sa, clay that is. So he builds a parallelepipedal mass. This takes three days. The (r)tsiks-spon then outlines the holes for the fire, the opening for the wood (on the side of the thapma (sp. thab-ma) and the outlet for the cinders (on the side of the thapltak). Then he hollows these out using a metal pipe. The hollowing out can be avoided with another method. This involves inserting pieces of wood whilst the thap is being built. They are then removed leaving empty spaces.

The bellows must be carefully plugged in. A special stone is used for polishing. Polishing is considered an important operation as the earth may crack without this. Then the thap is tried out. The air should not be sucked back. It should be directed into the flames. One can always put this right.

The surroundings of the thap should always be kept clean. We have already seen how important the than is with respect to the prohibitions relating to the back and the feet. At the New Year offerings of butter, and salutations are made to the thap or rather the thap-lha.

The description of the house is now complete. A few words should be said about the garden wall. It is either made of loose stones on top of each other (nyagra, not a Tibetan word so could be spelled nyag-ra), like those surrounding orchards (bag, Urdu word borrowed from Persian), or of cemented stones or bricks (kyang spelled gyang)\(^1\). Like the main entrance of the house, the entrance into the garden is called gyazgo\(^2\).

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

Patrick Kaplanian

---

\(^1\) Rebecca Norman: “kyang is freestanding wall outside, eg surrounding the courtyard. Nyagra is very simple drystone walling, eg between fields. risikpa if it’s the wall of a building”

\(^2\) I am grateful to Rebecca Norman who helped me a lot in finding the proper spelling of the Ladakhi words. I am using the Wylie system.