

Tunga Bhadra Rai

Lo-menthang at a Glance: A One Year Journey



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Photo: Sangam Thapa Magar

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AMBASSADOR

Foreword

The Australian Embassy Nepal is pleased to have supported the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) to conduct research about the Lo-manthang peoples and publish this report. Our partnership with organisations that promote the traditions and concerns of Indigenous communities in Nepal is an important element of the Embassy's Direct Aid Program.

Nepal, like Australia, has rich diversity. Australia's Indigenous population comprises over 250 tribes speaking around 800 dialects, with 167 actively spoken Indigenous languages. Nepal's Census 2021 reported 142 ethnic groups speaking 124 languages.

It is a priority of the Australian Government to embed the unique experiences and perspectives of Indigenous peoples in both domestic and foreign policy, as well as our international development partnerships. Naturally, that includes in Nepal.

This important publication provides a foundation for knowledge and understanding of the Loba community. It will support Nepal's federal, provincial and local governments bodies, as well as academics and tourists, with valuable information.

The Loba community numbers slightly more than 1,000 members who are the custodians of a vast civilisation in the southern part of the Tibetan plateau. Such a small community deserves support in its vital efforts to maintain its social and cultural structures and strengthen its economic prosperity. My hope is that this publication will inspire many to partner with the community in this work.

I was privileged to visit Lo-manthang in October 2023 with NEFIN's principal researcher, Mr Tunga Bhadra Rai. My engagement with the Loba community, including its youth, has been a high point of my tenure in Nepal. I congratulate the community on its programs to preserve cultural practices and adapt natural resource management to address the challenges of climate change.

And I congratulate NEFIN for this valuable publication.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Felicity Volk'.

(Felicity Volk)

Ambassador

13 March 2024

Foreword

Documentation of Indigenous Peoples' practices and perspectives is equally crucial in getting Indigenous culture respected –I thank and congratulate the author for coming up with this publication. I found that this publication reflects Indigenous Peoples' unique relationships with their ancestral land and territories. It clearly shows how strongly the Indigenous lifeway is rooted in their land, intertwined with collective values and customary institutions. This article is an educating material about Indigenous ways of looking at and living in this world, and a contribution to Indigenous movement.



Gelje Lama Sherpa

Chairperson

Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN)

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Tunga Bhadra Rai

Upper Mustang of Nepal, traditionally called “Lo” or "*Lo-Tso-Dhyun*,” is the ancestral homeland of the Loba Indigenous People of Nepal. Lo-menthang, situated in the rain shadow of the Himalayas, is known as the ancient mud-walled town of Lo and the traditional capital of *Lo-Tso-Dhyun*. Lo-menthang, the homeland of Loba Indigenous People, has thrived with cultural and geographical uniqueness, for centuries. This article presents some aspects of Loba lifeways, cosmovision, and the connection of such virtues to their ancestral territory. The life rites, festivities, and day-to-day activities of Indigenous Peoples are valued as the reflections of their cosmovision, occasions to recollect, honor, learn and transfer their ancestral wisdom, stories and relationship, and the interface of Indigenous science and knowledge systems, are described in this article. This article follows through some of the major scenes of a year in Lo-menthang. The matter of fact is that a one-year calendar of Indigenous culture is usually determined and guided by customary values and institutions. Thus, the calendar does not change much in terms of core values and norms. It is rather transferred from one generation to the next ones through performances of rituals, ceremonies, and festivals.

The author’s anthropological field work, including participant observation, key informant interviews, and focused group discussions carried out in 2004, 2009,

2019, 2022 and 2023, along with exchanges with Loba knowledge holders on different occasions and the research associate's field work in 2022, provides substance to this article.

Above all, this article extends a due recognition to Loba Indigenous People's knowledge included in this article, and disclaims that misappropriation of any piece of this knowledge system as unethical.

1. Setting

Upper Mustang of Nepal, traditionally called “Lo” or “*Lo-Tso-Dhyun*” comprises nine villages of the region. The entire Lo region is the ancestral homeland of the Loba Indigenous People. The term ‘Loba’ is sometimes spelled as ‘Lowa’ or ‘Lhoba’. Lobas are one of the 59 Indigenous Nationalities recognized by Nepal government. Lo-menthang, generally spelled Lomanthang, is situated at an elevation of 3,850 meters above sea level in the southern part of the Tibetan plateau in Nepal. The Lo region, including Lo-menthang, is in a high-altitude rain shadow of the Himalayas of Nepal. It receives only occasional drizzle in the summer but heavy snowfall in the winter. The minimum temperature drops to minus ten or minus twenty degrees Celsius (-10°C or -20°C) from December to March every year. It remains fifteen degrees Celsius (15°C) to zero degrees Celsius (0°C) minimum in summer (Chhetri 2008). The landscape across this region is unique, with colourful-rocky mountains, windy passes, arid terrain, deep gorges, hidden valleys, and flat lands in between those natural wonders. Ammonite fossils along the main river Kaligandaki, wild herbs and spices from the pastureland, potatoes, naked barley, and buckwheat from Mustang are widely popular and unique too. After midday, strong wind blows at Lo-menthang, as in other parts of the Kaligandaki Valley. Snowmelt rivers named Dhokpo Lho and Dhokpo Zhyang flow through the south and north of the village. These rivers are the main source of water for household use, feeding livestock, and irrigation at Lo-menthang. The Lo region, including Lo-menthang, is also home to endangered wildlife species like snow leopards, blue sheep, wild donkeys, and musk deer (ACAP 2019). It is a corridor for migrant birds coming from the Siberian and Tibetan plateaus to many parts of Nepal in early winter and going back the same

routes in spring. Until 1992 AD, the Lo region was restricted for foreigners to enter. That is why it is also called “The Last Forbidden Kingdom of Lo.” Overall, this place is at the juncture of many natural and cultural peculiarities.



Lo-menthang, the ancient mud-walled town of Lo, is the traditional capital of *Lo-Tso-Dhyun*. Traditionally, *Lo Ghyalpo*¹, is the chief of *Lo-Tso-Dhyun*. It is a fort-like town, with its compound surrounded by a 26-foot-high mud wall. The compound wall contains four watch towers at each corner. The only main entrance to the town is called *Ghegu*. A very respectful clan deity,

1. *Ghyalpo* can be referred to as king these days. King, kingship and kingdom are more of a concept influenced by the colonization against indigenous peoples. Dr. K.B. Bhattachan also maintains: “I do not think that any indigenous peoples have a concept and practice of kingship. The use of the concept of kingship is a part of the colonization or Nepalization/Hinduization or Brahmanization. *Ghyalpo* looks to be a Loba term but if it really means a king, it is due to influence of others”. When and how the Lobas began to use the term *Ghyalpo* and also the term king could be a topic of another study.

Amajholakarmu is believed to dwell in *Ghegu*. The *Ghego* is adjoined with *Mang Gang* (Lob: a small room containing *Thukche Cheypo* (Lob: huge prayer wheel). Inside the compound wall inscribed with traditional designs, there are some 170 houses including the 1700-year-old Tashi De-Phel, a small square in front of the palace, three old monasteries (Thupchen, Jhyamba, and Choedi), *Tsortens* (Lob: Buddhist shrine/stupa), *Mhane* (Lob: prayer wall with prayer text scripted on stones, and prayer wheels sometimes) settled in traditional design. The setting of the village subsists in Mandala-like layers and circles--The white clay-washed Tashi De-Phel is at the center of the town. *Mhane* and *Tsortens* surround Tashi De-Phel and houses. Trees and farm fields are in the outer circle of the settlement.

The village is traditionally organized into four wards or clusters: Potaling, Domalang (Doma Lakhang), Jadang, and Gudang. The *Kagni* (Lob: a traditional entrance gate with Buddhist painting and mantras), the *Tsortens*, the *Darchog* (Lob: a prayer flag installed in a pole), and the *Lungta* (Lob: prayer flags of a smaller size strung in a rope to stretch across structures or hooks) are installed to protect the village from evil spirits and misfortunes. *Tsumi* (Lob: butter lamp) and *Kartsu* (Lob: herbal incense) offered to the deities in the mornings and evenings give off an aroma typical of the Loba village. The *Mhanes*, in the middle of the streets, signal people to walk, always keeping the wall on their right. Doing *Kora* (Lob: going around the *Mhane* wall), spinning the prayer wheels, and counting the *Thange* (Lob: prayer beads) all seem to be part of people's everyday lives. In their leisure time, people, usually men and the elderly, hang out at *Ghegu* (Lob: main gate), with the elderly folks narrating jokes, folklore, myths, and their personal stories and life experiences to youngsters. Men sometimes flirt with young women, who reciprocate with a smile on their golden-cap teeth (Thapa, 1992). Otherwise, people gather at *Fhota* (Lob: open space where people gather to bask in the sun doing traditional carving, wool processing, etc.) in their neighbourhood.²

Monarchy [cultural monarchy], monasteries and monks are held in the highest

2. Tunga B. Rai, "Water Management in the Trans-Himalayan Rain Shadow of Lo-menthang: The Kghyamba System Steers Irrigation Practice for Lhoba People", 2020, pg 8.

regard. Monasteries are well taken care of by the *Lamas* (Nep: monks) and the villagers together. The black, red, and white-washed clay lines on the wall of houses symbolize greed/anger, compassion and peace respectively. Skulls and horns of yaks, sheep and wild animals placed at the corners, and the firewood along the side of the flat roofs, are characteristic of Loba houses. *Darchog*, *Lungta* and *Lhazuk* (Lob: a small stupa at the top of each house) on the roof, *Lhu* (Lob: a small structure in the darkest room of the house representing the God or Goddesses of the family or the clan deity), *Choekhang* (Lob: worshiping room or space) otherwise a dedicated corner with *Ku* (Lob: statues of the God), *Poeja* (Lob: prayer books/religious text book), *Thangkas* (Lob: Buddhist painting), *Oongu* (Lob: butter lamp for offering), *Dhuza* (Lob: bowl for offering water), photograph of Dalai Lama, *Guru Rimpoche*, and of *Karmapas* (Lob: reincarnated *lamas*), kitchen with lines of kitchen appliances such as Chinese thermos, reused tins and cans, tea cups, plates and Himalayan or Tibetan style of cattle are characteristic of the ambience of traditional Loba interiors. Traditionally designed spaces such as *Ghyara* (Lob: space for livestock), *Tseprak* (Lob: space for hay storage), and *Ouza* (Lob: space for threshing, drying and processing of grains) are an integral architecture of traditional Loba settlement at Lo-menthang. *Mang Gang* (Lob: a small room containing *Thukche Cheypo* meaning huge prayer wheel) and *Tsortens* along small gullies within the settlements keeps reminding residents of their spirituality. *Dhumda* (Lob: Bhote Pipal tree plot compounded with traditional mud wall), *Hyura* (Lob: irrigation canal), *Shing* (Lob: agriculture field), *Riga* (Lob: grazing land near village) around village and *Panga* (Lob: pastureland for animal herding usually a bit far away from settlement) reflects a traditional arrangement for growing trees, agriculture and livestock together in arid land of rain shadow.

In such physical and social setting, a total of 147 households with 384 individuals' including 195 women and 189 men live in Lo-menthang village (Government of Nepal, 2021). The Loba nationality of Lo-menthang, have three distinct sub-groups called *Kuthag*, *Phalpa*, and *Gharpa*.³ Regardless of such sub-division,

3. Even if Loba people are a distinct indigenous community of Nepal, they had to use Hindu surnames as the government had not recognized the Lobas as an indigenous nationality at the time when they had to present their surnames for government documentation. Therefore, Kuthag and Phalpa had to equate themselves

Loba people share the same mother language and have common traditional attire, cultural practices, values, and worldviews. Loba's everyday life reflects distinct worldviews and ways of life. Overall, agriculture and livestock herding are the main occupations of these people. In recent years, the tourism business (running guesthouses and shops) has also emerged as a source of income for a few families in Lo-menthang. Crops grow only in the summer. In the winter months of November to March, not much activity can be undertaken at Lo due to the cold weather. No tourists visit the area in the winter. Therefore, most people, except people with disabilities, the elderly, and a few others staying at the village to take care of livestock and monasteries, walk down to warmer places in the lowlands of the country to escape the cold winter.

2. Winter Journey

Right after the harvest of summer's long-awaited agriculture production, around ninth month of Loba calendar (October), people in Lo-menthang perform a *Kurim Puja* (Nep: a religious worship or a function) to mark a successful harvest. It is an event to thank nature for a good harvest and pray for a good winter. Once the harvest is over, animals like horses, cows, and mountain goats are set free to graze in the fields. People start collecting animal dung for cooking fuel purposes. The weather starts getting colder. *Lamas* (Nep: monk) read the calendar to determine *Karma* (Lob: to forecast good dates) to migrate to a warmer place in the lowlands. Following *Lama's* suggestion of good dates for winter migration, people invite their relatives who are migrating to the lowlands for meals. Relatives offer *Khataks* (Lob: traditional scarf with eight signs of good wishes) and some money to people traveling to warmer places-

with Bista/Thakuri (hill high castes) and Gurung (an indigenous group) respectively, whereas Gharpa was considered as Biswakarma, also abbreviated as BK, a Hindu untouchable caste. Most of the rituals and values of Loba people show that the Lobas, like any other indigenous nationalities, are an egalitarian society. The literature on the topic by both foreign and Nepalese scholars have described the three sub-groups of Loba people as the hierarchical categorizations of castes in Hindu ideology. It is very much evident that these hierarchical categorizations and the adoption of such surnames as Bista, Gurung and BK are due to the influence of the rulers of the southern hills and colonization, Brahmization, Hinduization or Sanskritization. They prefer endogamy, i.e., to marry within the same sub-group. However, in Loba society, the concept of touchability and untouchability (purity and impurity) are nonexistent, unlike in Hindu caste system.

-The amount used to be NPR 50–100 in the past. People start their journey to the lowlands together, fully prepared. The horses are loaded with rations and utensils for the journey of 10–12 days of walking. In 10–12 days, the winter walk of Lo-menthang from Lo reaches the lowlands of Nepal like Pokhara, Syanja, and Kathmandu. People used to take horses, donkeys, and mules as means of transportation when there was no transportation connectivity by motor vehicles. Lo-menthang was connected by the road with its district headquarters in Jomsom and other districts after 2015.⁴



Early in the morning, people begin their journey with their horses. While leaving the village, people offer *Khataks* to *Amajholakarmu* (*Tsengresik* and *Khyesyumma*), the clan deity in *Ghego*, to wish for a safe journey and a

4. Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions.



Before 1990, when there was no motor road connectivity in Lo and in the entire Mustang District, Loba people from each family used to go to Tibet for trading as merchants and return to their respective villages. Back then, no security check was imposed by Nepal nor by Tibet, the autonomous region of China. Later on, *Dhokpa* (Lob: Tibetan people) traders came up to the Korala border with many big trucks with Chinese goods and products for sale, and Loba people used to go to the border for trade with *Dhokpa*.

Trading at an altitude of 4770 meters above sea level and bringing all the goods on horses, and even sometimes carrying goods themselves, was a very difficult for the Loba people. Considering those facts, the local government namely Village Development Committee (VDC) representative requested *Dhokpa* traders to come up to Lomanthang village. Then, *Dhokpa* traders accepted the request, but still the problem was road connectivity remained. At that time, there used to be government budget total amount of NPR 500,000 for each Village Development Committee with the slogan, “*Afno Gau Afai Banaou*” (Nep: Lets develop our village by ourselves). The local leader decided to invest this budget for road construction from the Korala border to Lo-menthang village. Based on the planning, with a NPR 1,500,000 budget from the three Village Development Committees (Tsoshar¹ VDC, Tsonub² VDC, and Lomanthang VDC), road connectivity from Korala Border to Lomathang was initiated. Within a few years, *Dhokpa* traders came up to Gyagatang (the plain place on the riverside of Lomathang leading to Nyanol and Tsoshar) with big Chinese trucks and vehicles. People from all three VDCs use to trade there.

Around 1996, the road facilities from the Korala border to Ghiling village became a major highlight and news in Mustang district and neighboring

1. Tsoshar also spelled Tsosher and in government documents it is spelled as Chhoser.

2. In government documents, Tsonub is spelled as Chhonub.

districts, and in Nepal at large. However, there was no road from Ghiling to Cheile or Jomsom. Due to the news of the motor road from Korala to Ghiling, the local leaders during their election gained insight into the importance of motor road construction, and they allocated a huge budget for the construction of the road from Ghiling to Jomsom. The road construction was continued within the local government's budget.

In 2015, India imposed a border blockade with Nepal. During the India-Nepal blockade, the Nepali government explored connectivity with China. They eventually found the route through Mustang the easiest to access among many other routes. By allocating budget for road construction through Mustang in the Red Book of the Nepal Government with the title "*Beni Korala Motar Bato*," the work was initiated in the year 2017. Thereafter, a temporary motor road was constructed along Cheile Hill from the riverside. Later, a wider and permanent road was constructed on the other side of Cheile Hill. Even on those days, road connectivity was difficult; people had to change vehicles in places because of the disconnection of roads in rivers, deep gorges, and stiff cliffs.

successful return to their village after the winter. As they cross the river nearby Lo-menthang, migrants turn towards their village, spray naked barley, and pray for their successful journey to the lowlands. As the people continue their journey, they come across several passes. At every pass, they offer one of their *Khataks* there to pray for, offer high regards to places they come across, and wish for a successful journey to their destination. They pray for further successes in the lowlands and hope to see these passes and their land again when returning to their homeland in the spring.

Most of the Loba people of Lo-menthang spend the winter in the lower lands. Some families own homes in Pokhara, Kathmandu, and other cities to stay during the winter. Many people do mobile marketing businesses, including small businesses in the lowlands. Some people go on Buddhist pilgrimages in

places like Lumbini, Bodhgaya, etc. They spend wintertime in lowlands until their homeland in Lo-menthang gets a bit warmer around late March or early April. In the meantime, the Loba New Year, ‘Losar’ begins.

3. Losar

Losar is Loba New Year, which falls around the months of February. In the Loba language, ‘Lo’ means year and ‘Sar’ means new. It is a big celebration of the Loba Indigenous People. A day named *Ghuthuk* (Lob: *Ghu* meaning nine and *Thuk* meaning *Thukpa*/noodle) falls two days before Losar. Special *Thukpa* is prepared from nine different ingredients for dinner on the day. Different symbols or character-indicating items are poured into the *Thukpa*. While eating *Thukpa*, if someone gets an item indicating kind-heartedness, then the person is known to be kind-hearted, and so on. Prior to the *Ghuthuk*, people do house cleaning, container and utensil washing, and cleaning around the neighborhood, in order to remove all evils and bad omens and to welcome God and the Goddesses. On the day after *Ghuthuk*, everyone washes their hair, praying for the washaway of all the negative thoughts, and illnesses, and begins the New Year with good hopes, positive thoughts, and sound health. Food and drinks like *Khapse* (Lob: a traditional snack prepared from a dough mixed of wheat or naked barley flour, sugar, milk, and water then deep fried into boiling oil), *Chhang* (Lob: a homemade liquor of wheat and naked barley), *Bhaluk* (Lob: a typical food item prepared from a dough of roasted wheat flour with *martsa* in an enclosed container by covering clothes for about 2 to 4 days to get set), *Dhoma* (Lob: a type of root vegetable found in the Himalaya region resembling sweet potato), varieties of meat items, and many more food items are prepared.

On the Losar Day, people wake up at early morning almost around 1AM or 2 AM and go to the nearby river to fetch water. It is believed that the first person to arrive at the river receives *Serchu* (Lob: the golden water). People greet and mark the resemblance of a golden water receiver by layering three stones, offering *Khataks* and butter at the riverside, and thanking the river for its kindness, readiness, and generosity. Thereafter, wide varieties of food items prepared a few days earlier, such as water, drinks, and sweets, are offered to the

God at family *Choekhang* (Lob: worshiping room or space). People wear new clothes, visit monasteries, offer donations, and eat delicious food.

For the following six to seven days, the merriment of singing songs, playing games, narrating stories, eating delicious food, and drinking *Chhang*, *Bhaluk*, and different types of tea at relatives' houses continues, starting from the eldest sibling's house, then moving to the second sibling, and likewise.

This way, the Losar celebration comes to an end. Life has to keep moving. People wait for the weather in Lo to get warm. Around late March to the beginning of April, migratory birds arrive in Lo from lowland; around the same time, Loba people start returning home.



Photo: Jhyamba Gyatso Gurung

4. Returning Home

When people arrive home in Lo-menthang from lowland, they offer *Khatak* to *Amajholakarmu* at the *Ghegu*. Slowly, the town starts to get lively, having people back home. People invite their friends and relative for a meal, and these invitations are reciprocated, and people exchange their experiences and presents they bring from the lowland. The noise



and joy of winter migrants returning to their homeland is special and shockingly unique feeling. This social atmosphere remains for about 2 to 3 weeks. No major works are done in the field right way after returning from the lowlands. The entire village assemble at a good sunny point locally called *Fhota* and spend the entire day together. The elderly men and women do wool processing work: combing threads, spinning thread, weaving and sewing traditional dresses. Some common Loba terms for processing wool are *Khee Tonye*, *Bha Seyye*, *Bhaye Gyapye*, *Phang Khaye*, *Tape Korye*, *Pundok Tuye*, *Dhoekpa Tuye*, *Dhuluk Soye*, *Pun Ghoye*, *Tsebu Tsemye*, *Keden Thakye*, *Pangden Thakye*, *Tsuktu Thakye*, *Mazin Thakye*, *Tyen Thakye*, *Sangoe Thakye*, *Keden Rokten Gyapye*, and lot more. Meanwhile, villagers sometimes cook and eat their day meals together at the sunny point while processing wool and exchanging their stories. Youngsters play *Oungu* (Lob: a local game, for which a small hole is made on the ground and a line is drawn at a distance of 2 to 3 meters. Everyone who participates has to pay for a pin. The whole bunch of pins are then thrown into the hole in turns. The pins which make it into the hole are owned by the thrower. Additionally, she/he can claim further pins by throwing a small flat stone upon the pins).



Table 1: Wool related works of Loba Indigenous People they do during winter

S.N.	Work	Explanation	Who does it
1	<i>Khee Ton-ye</i>	It is the process of taking out the rough and unwanted portion of wool ensuring separation of fine wool and rough wool for different purpose.	both men and women
2	<i>Bha Sey-ye</i>	It is the process of making the wool loose, softer and voluminous by tearing it out into small pieces	both men and women
3	<i>Bhaye Gyap-ye</i>	It is the process of combing the wool. The types, shapes and fineness of combing the wool depend on what types of materials to be processed. Example: rough and unfinished combing for thick blanket, mattresses, and fine, thin and finished combing for thin blankets, aprons, shawls etc.	mostly women rarely men

4	<i>Phang Kha-ye</i>	It is the process of spinning the combed wool to produce different types of threads.	women only
5	<i>Taepe Kor-ye</i>	It is also a process of spinning the combed wool or readymade thread to produce strong thread. The process of spinning and instrument used for spinning is different from the normal way of spinning.	women only
6	<i>Dhuluk Soye</i>	It is the process of making ball of thread (clew) when the spinning tools like <i>Phang</i> and <i>Taepe</i> gets full.	both men and women
7	<i>Dhokpa Tsoe-ye</i>	It is the process of dyeing white woolen thread by cooking at home.	both men and women
8	<i>Dhokpa Tuye</i>	It is the process of making ball of dyed thread (clew). It is bit different and more difficult.	both men and women
9	<i>Pundok Tuye</i>	It is the process of making ball of colorful thread bunches called <i>Pundok</i> bought from shops of lowlands.	both men and women
11	<i>Tsebu Tsemye</i>	It is the process of sewing the newly weaved woolen clothes	men only
12	<i>Chuutee Gyapye</i>	It is the process of bordering the cultural dress called <i>Keden</i> with white or blue boarder to secure the border damage and decorate.	men only
13	<i>Rokten Gyapye</i>	It is the process of putting a triangle shape structure called <i>Rokten</i> at the end of <i>Keden</i> .	men only

Source: Field Work 2022

Table 2: Wool related works of Loba Indigenous People they do during summer

S.N.	Wool works	Explanation	Who does it
1	<i>Puen Goye</i>	It is the process of spinning thread on the instrument which is used for inserting into the main weaving set.	anyone available, mostly children of the family

2	<i>Thak Denye</i>	It is the process of connecting thread in series as per need. During the process at the least two people have to be there and it takes about 2/3 hours. It needs length wise long space and is mostly done when the weather is calm with no wind.	mother and anyone available.
3	<i>Thijye Tsukye</i>	It is the process of installing the weaving instrument whole set called <i>Thijye</i> at an appropriate place.	both men and women
4	<i>Kaw Thakye</i>	Weaving cultural belt of various size and types called Kaw.	women only
5	<i>Keden Thakye</i>	Weaving cultural wear called Keden worn from back side over Bhakhu.	women only
6	<i>Pangden Thakye</i>	Weaving cultural apron of different types and sizes called Pangden.	women only
7	<i>Mazin Thakye</i>	Weaving thin and plain woolen blanket called <i>Mazin</i> .	women only
8	<i>Tsuktuk Thakye</i>	Weaving thick woolen blanket called <i>Tsuk-tuk</i>	women only
9	<i>Teyn Thakye</i>	Weaving thick woolen mat called <i>Teyn</i>	women only
10	<i>Lubi Kenang Thakye</i>	Weaving plain, men and women woolen paints called <i>Lubi Kenang</i>	women only
11	<i>Lubi Phuje Thakye</i>	Weaving plain woolen Bakhu of women called <i>Lubi Phuje</i>	women only
12	<i>Sang Goe Thakye</i>	Weaving plain woolen outer of women called <i>Sang Goe</i> . It plays the role of jackets, sweaters or shawls for women.	women only
13	<i>Chhaak Chhaakye</i>	It is the process of washing newly weaved materials near small streams. It is mostly done with <i>Mazin</i> , <i>Tsuk-tuk</i> , and <i>Teyn</i> . These materials are soaked into a container containing only water and one child must get into the container and has to feet step and jump for about 5-7 hours by changing the water quite frequently.	children and mostly daughters

14	<i>Tsebu Tsemye</i>	Sewing all the newly weaved materials forming their respective shapes and sizes.	only men
15	<i>Soemba Soeye</i>	It is the process of making woolen shoe with leather sole and long neck.	only men

Source: Field Work 2022

The culture of people gathering at *Fhota* is a very interesting feature of Loba lifeways. While basking in the sun, they do different work related with wool and thread, exchange experiences, problems, gossip, fun, songs, proverbs, stories, and what not. Children and young ones either play or otherwise observe their elders, help them with wool work, and listen to their talks. The culture of gathering at *Fhota* every day for good warmth keeps the entire community updated about different aspects of their daily lives and gives them the opportunity to plan for their tole, and village. This is such a good moment for knowledge transfer from elders to younger generations and for rejuvenating collectivism.

Time goes on; livelihood activities of the year come around the corner again; preparation and arrangements for keeping social orders must take place every year. A ritual for symbolic inauguration of agriculture activities and designating a new member of the *Ghyamba* (also spelled *Kghyamba*) system (Lob: village head and her/her team) needs to carry on—The *Ghyamba* system is a Loba customary institution comprising a team of one *Ghyamba*, two *Mhetes*, and six *Tsumes*. The ritual of starting up agriculture activities and designating the team of *Ghyamba* is called *Saka Luka*.

5. Saka Luka

Every year, on *Saka Luka*, people symbolically start agricultural activities of the year with rituals. The *Saka Luka* is observed in the *Tse* of first month or second month (February-March), according to the Loba calendar. *Karma*, the favorable date for casting seed and starting a work, is suggested by the *Ngakpa* (Lob: Buddhist priest, astrologer, and prophet). The god of the earth is called *Lhu*. On the celebration of *Saka Luka*, *Lhu* is called upon by conducting *Puja*, reciting, and chanting prayers and *mantras*.

Meanwhile, a girl and a boy with matching zodiac signs are prepared to take part in the ritual. The birth sign (zodiac sign) of the girl and boy taking part in the ritual must match the zodiac of the year for good crop yields to occur. Also, the boy and girl should have both parents, as children with both parents are usually considered a sign of good luck. A *Temding* (lob: an offering on auspicious occasions) should be offered by the person having both parents, and so is the cultivation ritual in Saka Luka.

On the day of Saka Luka, a *Puja* is conducted by the *Ngakpa* for the entire village at Zhomolangma. One of the oldest books for the *Puja* is brought in from Choedi monastery. During the *Puja*, a facing direction is determined by the *Ngakpa*. Based on that determination, people turn to the very direction to pray and spray little bits of naked barley three times.⁵

Meanwhile, the boy and the girl are brought to one of the old *Tsume*'s houses. They are dressed up in Loba attire and offer special local food items. Also, two *Zhos* (Lob: yaks) are made ready by feeding grass and coloring red by *Tsumes*. Then they go to the field. The girl digs the field, and the boy throws the soil. They plough the fields, symbolizing the start of agriculture activities, where the boy plays the role of *Ngytik* (Lob: one who leads the *Zhos*) and the girl plays the role of *Thong-gye* (Lob: one who ploughs the field by supporting the ploughing tool from the back side of the *Zhos*). Ploughing is done on a small portion of the king's field, followed by the monasteries and the *Ghyamba*'s field. After this, other people begin their part of the offering. Here, they should face in the direction of the offerings suggested by the *Ngakpa*. People bring a basket full of compost, a handful of seeds, a thermos full of *Sui Chyaa* (Lob: butter tea), *Tsampa* (Lob: roasted wheat/naked barley flour), bread, and *Yoe* (Lob: roasted wheat/naked barley), and *Yoe* is moulded with *Goram* (Lob: jaggery), forming a small ball for each family member and going to their respective fields, which yielded the most in the previous years. In the field, they fill their teacups, take a sip, eat a little of the *Tsampa* and *Yoe*, and fill the teacup again. They have the belief that such rituals should not be started with an empty stomach. Secondly, they offer their prayers, install *Katu* (Lob: stones colored usually with red clay

5. Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions.

and layered on as symbols of the deity by each household at their field on first cultivation), burn *Sang* (Lob: herbal incense), spray naked barley in the air, and prostrate three times, wishing for bountiful cultivations and a sound summer. Thirdly, they dig a part of the field and cast seed and manure. Again, they continue eating in the field and singing songs. This is to officially announce to the *Lumo* (Lob: earth deity/soil deity) that people auspiciously welcome spring, summer, and cultivation.

At around 3 PM, a completely white sheep is brought, decorated with five colors of the prayer flag, and put on the prayer flags. The sheep is set free and should not be slaughtered. On this particular day, the old *Ghyamba*, *Mhetees*, and *Tsumes* are applauded for their services. At the end of the day, the girl and boy go to the house of the newly appointed *Tsumes*, bringing a rhetorical message that their old *Tsumes* are drunk and won't be able to hold *their* roles anymore; they therefore want to hand over the responsibility to the new ones. Then, the village gets a new team of *Ghyamba* for the year.⁶



Photo provided by: Lhamo Tsering Gurung

6. Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions.



Photo provided by: Lhamo Tsering Gurung

For the celebration of Saka Luka, the following arrangements need to be made:¹

- A. Presence of the outgoing functionaries of the *Ghyamba* System (e.i. one *Ghyamba*, two *Mhetee*, and six *Tsumes*) to hand over the responsibilities to their successors.
- B. Presence of the new team of the *Ghyamba* System (one *Ghyamba*, two *Mhetees*, and six *Tsumes*) take over the responsibilities for the year.
- C. Two *Zhos* plough the field.
- D. A girl ploughs and a boy pulls the *Zho* and casts the seed.
- E. The boy digs up the compost.

1 Tunga B. Rai, “Water Management in the Trans-Himalayan Rain Shadow of Lo-menthang: The Kghyamba System Steers Irrigation Practice for Lhoba People”, 2020, pg 20.

- F. The girl puts the compost into the bamboo basket.
- G. The boy digs the canal.
- H. The girl takes the sand, soil, and gravel out from the canal.
- I. People offer a goat or sheep to the deities, but they do not to sacrifice the goat/sheep.
- J. A *Lama* recites out the religious verses.
- K. A *Ngakpa* perform *Puja*

This way, Saka Luka is not a mere celebration. It bears special significance to the *Ghyamba* system, irrigation, agriculture, as well as some of the cultural affairs and religious life of the Loba people. Like many other customary institutions of Indigenous Peoples, Loba customs and culture co-exist and interconnects with customary values. Customary institutions such as the *Ghyamba* system remain an agency for carrying on Loba values and worldviews and the core of such customs.

6. Core of Customs

Repair and maintenance of irrigation canals unused for the whole winter, followed by agricultural activities including balancing soil levels in the field and distributing manure in the fields, started ritually on Saka Luka, continue afterwards. Subsistence agriculture, being one of the primary sources of living for the people of Lo-menthang, takes a significant amount of time and resources and is embedded with festivities, rituals, customary institutions, customary law, and self-governance systems. The high-altitude arid land in the rain shadow of the Himalayas requires wise ways of doing agriculture, including water management. Such livelihood practices have been embedded in Loba culture for time immemorial, and they are still thriving well. Otherwise, the arid land in the rain shadow of the huge Himalayas would remain just desert. In those efforts, the *Ghyamba* system plays a vital role in Lo-menthang.

Collectivism remains the driving force behind the *Ghyamba* system. The sense of collectiveness is inherent through customary values and norms in Loba society. In customary institutions, there is no feeling of competition among members of the community for positions in the institution. They simply follow the customary law and hold the given roles. In the *Ghyamba* system, no leaders are elected nor are any roles designated through formal means. Rather, members of the community customarily take turns to assume roles, which get reshuffled among themselves every year. This collectivist culture is reflected in the assumption of roles by households, not individuals. For example, *Kuthag* households take it in turns to assume the role of *Ghyamba* for a year. Likewise, *Phalpa* households switch the role of *Tsume* amongst themselves on a rotating basis. *Ghyalpo* and *Ghyamba* nominate *Mhetees*. Unlike in modern institutions, these roles are given to households, not individuals.

Role assignment and decision-making are based on consensus and, in most cases, guided by the customary laws of the community. The leaders don't take decisions based on their own judgment. They just facilitate the process as set by the customary laws. In cases of conflict, wrongdoing, or any matter that calls for action, the community members and *Ghyamba* collectively take a decision based on their customary practice (the following sections explain more about how the decisions are implemented and what control mechanisms are in place).

The process of seeking and dispensing justice is accessible to community members. Complaints and suggestions on any affairs in the community are usually channelled through *Mhetees* to the *Ghyamba*. Whereas the *Mhetees* resolve minor cases, major ones are taken up with *Ghyamba*. The *Mhetees* record cases, collecting charges '*Tsepa*' (in the form of grains or cash), documenting charges, evidence, and other details.⁷

A team of six *Tsumes* representing four traditional village clusters (Potaling, Domalang/Doma Lhakhang, Jadang, and Gudang) work as associates with *Mhetees* and *Ghyamba*. *Tsumes* inspect any damage to the irrigation canals, monitor the distribution of irrigation water, and look after livestock damaging

7. Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions.

cultivation. Of the total six *Tsumes*, one is chosen as *Tsume Aama* (Lob: *Tsume* in-charge) to keep the accounting records of collected fines, while two others inspect the water sources and the canals. The rest focus on the irrigation plots to make sure that each plot gets enough and equal water. Until *Rhetsu* (Lob: the third-time irrigation in each cropping season), *Tsumes* must take care of these tasks very closely. They relay information to the villagers through an act of *Ghok* (Nep: a practice of informing villagers by shouting out the message loudly). *Tsumes* indeed help other members working for the system to ensure that the village is run in accordance with its community rules. That's how it is set to get water harvesting and agricultural work done for the year. The major agricultural work of the year begins with the repair and maintenance of irrigation canals, followed by crop cultivation.



7. Repair, Maintenance and Cultivation

Repair, maintenance, and cultivation work knock on everyone's door. Heavy snowfall in winter makes the irrigation canals fragile and may even cause

damage to certain sections of them. The gravel silts on the canals and *Ha* (Lob: conduits) and *Zhiu* (Lob: intakes/water reservoir) require maintenance before the irrigation system is brought into operation in spring. Around the first or second week of April, the villagers repair all the structures used for water harvesting. Since every household uses the Huyu irrigation system, each household must contribute labor for the maintenance of the Huyu canal. In the case of other canals like Suruk, only the households owning farmland in the command area and the ones who use that irrigation must contribute labor for maintenance work. The landlords who rent out their land in *Photok* (Lob: paying a number of grains equal to the seed cultivated), *Bhokma* (Lob: leased-out or given for a pre-conditioned number of grains), or *Phezo* (Lob: the tenant paying half of the produce) do not have to contribute labor for irrigation canal repair.⁸



Photo: Chhewang Rinjin Gurung

Individuals aged between 16 and 60 years are eligible for labor contributions. They work together, sharing their ideas and experiences and learning skills and knowledge from one another, especially from older people. Elderly people cannot make as much of a labor contribution as young people. However, elder people share their experiences and knowledge with youths and guide youths in repair and maintenance work. People are charged NPR 50–100 in case someone arrives late at work. If someone remains absent for the whole day, they are charged Rs

8. Tunga B. Rai, “Water Management in the Trans-Himalayan Rain Shadow of Lo-menthang: The Khyamba System Steers Irrigation Practice for Lhoba People”, 2020, pg 24-25.

300–500. One monastery is counted as one household, and they also must come to work for irrigation maintenance accordingly. However, the *Ghyamba*, *Mhetees*, and *Tsumes* take on the overall role of irrigation management. Thus, they might not need to contribute labor to irrigation canal maintenance. The villagers share food items such as *Tsampa*, *Sui Chyaa* and *Chhang* while working at the canal sites. Sometimes, people bring either foods to cook at the work site or cooked foods, as per *Tsume's* notice, to share. They enjoy singing, sharing a moment together, and recounting stories about their canals and so on. The irrigation canals are developed with locally available materials and traditional technology. Once the villagers complete the repair and maintenance work, irrigation canals are brought into use to distribute the water to every plot in the field.

An elder of Lo-menthang told the researcher:

“One should not use canal water until Chyakhunghyau arrives in the village and touches (purifies) the water that flows through the canal.” He commented that irrigation canal water becomes impure in wintertime. The water is safe to use only after the bird locally called Chyakhunghyau arrives in Lo-menthang and touches the water. Indeed, this very bird is a migratory bird, which arrives Lo-menthang around specific timing of the year. By that timing, snowmelt water gets warmer and the winter-long-frozen irrigation canal sweeps away the dust, contaminants and pollution deposited along the water canal.

Once the weather is warmer and the irrigation system is repaired, villagers start cultivating crops. They prepare the field according to crop varieties. Putting compost and soil labelling in plots in order for irrigation water to flow into every corner of the field, and controlling points and levels for water flow, are done with Indigenous-knowledge based practice. They make *Nagma* (Lob: plots) to control water leakages and overflow. Farmers know when and how to irrigate specific crop varieties. Some crops require water before cultivation, and some others need water after cultivation (details of this part are presented in Table

3 of the section manifestation of the role of the *Ghyamba* system). There are particular names for each specific timing and type of irrigation, which show the detailed knowledge locals hold.



After the repair and maintenance of canal and cultivation work is complete, the busy days calm down; time for holy deeds approaches around the month of Saga Dawa.

8. Saga Dawa

The fourth month of the Loba calendar (May–June) is called Saga Dawa. Saga Dawa is a holy month, as this month marks three major life events of the Buddha: birth, death, and enlightenment. It is believed that this month is the most auspicious time for good deeds; the virtue we earn in this month is multiplied by 100,000 times, and so is sin. Thus, during Saga Dawa, people make sure to do as many meritorious activities as possible and do no wrongdoing. People don't eat meat, at least for the month. They go to monasteries and donate things to poor and needy people. They recite prayers and mantras and do *Kora*. People avoid activities like backbiting, flirting, lying, stealing, and taking others' belongings without permission. They keep their surroundings clean; they clean up common places and heritage areas like *Tsortens*, monasteries, *Kagni*, and squares. Moreover,

people do not kill any living beings; they do not cut down trees and flowers with a great belief that such activities are sinful. On a full moon day, the entire village gathers at the community house to enchant *Mhanis* under the leadership of *Lamas*. People change *Darchog* and *Lungta* of the sacred places. There are a lot of norms of “Dos” and “DON’Ts” during the month of Saga Dawa. Below are some examples of common values people follow during the month.⁹

DOs	DON'Ts
Reciting prayers	Avoid killing animals
Doing Kora	Avoid eating meat
Helping poor and needy people	Avoid consuming alcohol, tobacco
Lighting butter lamp	Avoid fighting, scolding
Making pilgrimages to holy places	Avoid stealing and taking things from others without permission
Offering donations to monasteries	Avoid lying and deceiving
Planting trees and flowers	Avoid gossiping/back biting
Releasing animals from threat example fish, birds	



9. Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions.

The values of ‘Dos’ and ‘Don'ts’, helps peoples to develop their self-discipline. In this societal context people keep moving on with their day-to-day activities, their business activities, and their livelihood activities. They organize themselves for functions and festivals, which keeps their community alive. Similar age groups and cluster groups, for example, the members of Potaling, Domalang/Doma Lhakhang, Jadang, and Gudang, organize get-togethers and spiritual functions such as Nyungney.

9. Nyungney

Nyungney is observed for three days by the monasteries and villagers. The frequency of observation of this religious ceremony differs from village to village. In the case of Lo-menthang village, Nyungney takes place four times turn-wise in all four different clusters of the village, namely: Potaling, Domalang/Doma Lhakhang, Jadang, and Gudang. Amchi Gyatso Bista, who is also *Ngakpa*, does *Dhoba* (Lob: initiation of the ceremony) and gives *Kutue* (Lob: blessed water) to all participants. Since he is the only one to do the *Dhoba* and *Kutue* distribution, the Nyungney of Lomanthang village takes place in turns. As a rule, at least seven participants must be there at a time; otherwise, the ceremony does not take place. Participants from one cluster can take part in the Nyungney of another cluster. All four Nyungneys take place in the Saga Dawa month.

In the case of the neighboring village, Tsoshar, Nyungney is observed twice a year. The first Nyungney is observed in the second month of the Loba calendar (February-March), when most of the people who migrate to warm places in the winter return home by this time. The second Nyungney is observed in the Saga Dawa month, the fourth month after cultivation work is finished. In Tsoshar, the first Nyungney is sponsored by Garphuk Monastery, and the latter is sponsored by the villagers. People from Tsoshar village and other villages take part in the ceremony, and the participants remain at the monastery for all three days.

Lamas conduct *Puja*; participants enchant *Mhanis*, recite prayers, and do *Kora* around the monastery. During Nyungney, people do prayer recitation and meditation with the aim of earning virtues and praying for a prosperous summer. On the first and third days of the ritual, participants can only eat one meal, and

on the second day, they stay on *Ghukpa* (Lob: fasting the whole day and staying silent even without uttering a single word). There are norms for the ritual—some deeds are prohibited during the ritual. Participants in the function are forbidden to eat meat, drink alcohol, sit on high seats, etc. Further, they should wear simple local clothes and not wear jewellery. Singing and dancing are not allowed either. Indeed, this ceremony is observed to earn virtue.¹⁰



Social, spiritual, and day-to-day activities keep going hand in hand. By this time of the fourth month of the Loba calendar, land in Lo-menthang starts to get greener.

10. Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions.

10. Summer Scene

Now comes the time in which this arid land in the rain shadow of the Himalayas becomes greener. After Saga Dawa, the summer season approaches in Lo. In summer, local crop varieties such as barley, naked barley, buck wheat, different types of wheat, potatoes, peas, and mustard grow in the agricultural fields. People make the arid land of the Himalayan rain shadow a green and productive land by employing traditional irrigation systems and self-organized customary governance systems.



Lo-menthang people start witnessing the fields getting greener and more colorful with different flowers blossoming. All the Bhote Pipal orchards start getting greener and healthier with sparkling fresh and new leaves and branches. Pasturelands at far and near distances become greener. Indeed, nature remains too pleasing for the eyes to look around only every now and then. People start spending more time outdoors, weeding and irrigating the fields, and collecting

wide varieties of green leaves for various purposes. Fodder for domestic animals is collected daily in a limited time frame allocated by the *Ghyampa* team. People start being around the river and canal running through and by the side of fields, washing clothes, utensils, and fodder for animals, and enjoying snacks and meals outdoors in the fields. People enjoy sneaking into the pea fields of others to surreptitiously collect ripped peas for eating.

A wide variety of herbs, shrubs, and trees grow in the field area. Loba people enjoy decorating their eyebrows and eyelashes with an herb named *Meesyemaa* (Lob: a type of herb) and enjoy teasing each other using a shrub named *Quee* (Lob: a type of shrub). Moreover, different types of wildflowers with specific benefits and uses grow in the region. People enjoy sipping some of the wildflowers' juice while being in the fields during various works. Also, different types of wild fruits such as *Tsoedowa* (Lob: a type of fruit grown in the region that resembles very much pomegranate), *Amashenjama* (Lob: a type of citrus fruit), *Tora* (Lob: a sea buckthorn), *Ou-tseeri-migma* (Lob: a type of fruit found in Himalaya region), and different wild root vegetables like *Dhoma* (Lob: a vegetable very much resembling sweet potato), etc. grow everywhere. People enjoy picking them up and eating them in the field from which they grew.¹¹



11. Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions.

The summer scene remains a matter of great merriment, not only for the Loba people but also for the animals in the region. Livestock are taken in a herd to the nearby pasturelands for grazing. All the cows of the village are gathered at a point in the morning and taken to the nearby pastureland by the *Baari* (Lob: one who takes the entire cows of the village to pastureland for grazing), and calves are taken to separate pastureland by the *Beeri* (Lob: one who takes the entire calves of the village to pastureland for grazing). Similar is the case with horses, goats, sheep, and kids, as with *Taari* (Lob: horse shepherd), *Zeu* (Lob: goat and sheep shepherd), and *Ribri* (Lob: kids shepherd). After returning from the pastureland in the evening, the livestock again get fresh green fodder at their sheds.



Photo: Chhime Rinzin Gurung

Ghyalpo and the Ghyamba, including Tsume, play crucial roles in maintaining order in the above-mentioned activities. In addition to keeping all those things

in order, the roles of the Ghyamba system manifest themselves in the following activities of irrigation management.

11. Manifestation of the Role of Ghyamba System

i. Irrigation Water Distribution



The *Ghyamba* system adheres to customary law while sharing irrigation water among the cultivators. The turn for each household or plot to use water is determined by considering various factors such as the nature of the plot, the type of crops planted on it, and the location of the command area. In some cases, people resort to *Para* (Lob: toss) to decide which household or plot would use the water first, while in other instances, it is decided on a first-come, first-served basis. The villagers always reach consensus on what method to employ. They may also agree to allow a certain plot to have water based on the kinds of crops cultivated there, as different crop types require watering at different times of

their growth. A land with crops such as *Rhaema* (Lob: peas) requires irrigation before the casting of seeds. However, crops like *Dho* (Lob: wheat), *Ghyabray* (Lob: buckwheat), and *Nhey* (Lob: naked barley) need to be watered only after cultivating the seeds.¹² The distribution of water based on crop types and on their water requirement, is also a good way of sharing the scarce water. The following calendar shows water requirements and water allocations for crops:

Table 3: Water requirement for different crops types

S.N.	Crops	Water Requirement	Planting time	Frequency of water allocation until the harvest	Harvest time
1.	<i>Nhey</i> (Lob: Necked barley)	After seed cultivation	Last week of March to April	6 times	Sept.-Oct.
2	<i>Dho</i> (Lob: Wheat)	After seed cultivation	Last week of March to April	6 times	Oct.-Nov.
3	<i>Aalok</i> (Lob: Potato)	Before seed cultivation	Last week of March to April	Not defined	Sep.-Oct.
4	<i>Ghyabray</i> (Lob: Buckwheat)	After seed cultivation	April to May	4 times	Sep.-Oct.
5	<i>Rhaema/Ghung/Shaema</i> (Lob: Peas)	Before seed cultivation	April to May	4 times	Sep.-Oct.
6	<i>Tsuk</i> (Lob: Mustard)	Before seed cultivation	April to May	3 times	Sep.-Oct.

Source: Fieldwork 2004, fieldwork 2019 and field work in 2023

Water allocation at different times, as indicated in Table 1, shows that the people's in-depth knowledge of farming and irrigation is attached to customary law. Irrigation of *Rhaema* for the first, second, third, and fourth time is called *Taptsu*, *Bhutsu*, *Ngutsu*, and *Rhetsu*, respectively. Likewise, for *Dho*, the three

12. Tunga B. Rai, "Water Management in the Trans-Himalayan Rain Shadow of Lo-menthang: The Kghyamba System Steers Irrigation Practice for Lhoba People", 2020, pg 26/27.

irrigation times are called *Khantsu*, *Ngutsu*, and *Rhetsu*, respectively. This information shows that in Lo-menthang, there is a practice of farming different crops with proper allocations of scarce water in an equitable way. They also have indigenous innovations in water storage and distribution, such as *Jhiu*.

ii. Maintenance of *Jhiu*

Jhiu is an irrigation water reservoir purposely created by people for storing water for irrigation. Every village owns 2 to 3 water ponds as commonwealth for irrigation purposes.



In the past, rainfall was quite rare; despite that, every household used to depend on and do agriculture that required more water to irrigate fields. To distribute water in an equitable manner, villagers fill the *Jhiu* all night, and during the day, they irrigate their fields with the water from it. As soon as the *Jhiu* becomes empty, it is filled again and used for irrigation. Moreover, since there is only one main irrigation canal but many fields to be irrigated, people must wait in queues

to irrigate their fields. So, the *Jhiu* solves the problem to some extent. In recent years, the use of such water reservoirs has declined to a great extent. This is so because the number of farmers and the area of agriculture fields have declined; people are engaged in other occupations; and some people have migrated to other places. On the other hand, the irrigation system has been expanded with pipes and cement in some places, which reduces the water leakage from the fragile canal. However, there are possibilities that the use of water ponds may emerge in the near future if people start cultivating apples and start several apple orchards. At the same time, a depleted water source may lead to water scarcity again.

A scarcity of resources leads to competition among the users. This risk remains in water sharing in Lo-menthang. However, in case of any issues regarding disruption in water distribution or any complaints regarding water sharing, such issues are resolved locally through the *Ghyamba* and his/her team. They have a customary grievance redress mechanism.

iii. Conflict Management

Complaints and conflict are likely when sharing scarce resources. When everyone is in need of the same resource, competition naturally increases. This could give rise to conflict. As such, it helps community members to have some common norms for sharing resources among themselves. In Lo-menthang, irrigation is vital to the cultivation of crops, given its arid climate. As water is such an important resource there, Lo-menthang and its neighboring village of Tsonub sometimes get into conflict, with each village claiming to solely own and have the right to use the water from the river. The people of Lo-menthang would say, "No one may take even a single drop of water from the local Numaghung river, which belongs to the people of Lo-menthang."¹³ On the other hand, the people from Tsonub express their resentment:

This [Numaghung] river flows through our village. We should have the rights to use the water. They [Lo-menthang people] claim the water only in spring

13. Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions.

when water is needed the most. They tend to forget the calamities induced by snowmelt in summer.¹⁴

Key informants during this study recalled a case happened a couple of decades ago: Lo-menthang people went to Tsonub riding horses; they destroyed the *Nagma* (Lob: plots ready for cultivation), the irrigation canals, and the conduits in Tsonub. They ransacked yak barns of Tsonub people near Ghyaga, destroyed butter, cheese, and everything they came across and also took away eight yaks. Behind the conflict was the dissatisfaction over sharing of water from the Ghyaga river. The conflict got escalated to such an extent that even *Ghyamba* and *Ghyalpo* could do nothing about it. Finally, the case reached the district court. In the end, the *Ghyamba*, the chief district officer, and the regional development officer brokered an agreement between the two disputing sides.¹⁵ Elderly people still remember the pact: “As per the agreement, Tsonub would not go for Lo-menthang's water and Lo-menthang would not take away Tsonub's yaks.”¹⁶

The *Ghyamba* system plays a significant role in addressing grievances held by dissenting sides. The locals have their own traditional control mechanism to oversee such cases. One of the key informants, Pema, says, “Conflict over water resource sharing occasionally arises between the two villages and sometimes even within a village even to this day. But the villagers and the *Ghyambas* resolve such conflicts on their own.”¹⁷

iv. The Control Mechanism

Another informant, Kunga Funzo, referring to how someone is charged with fine as per their tradition for violating a community rule, said: “Tashi was slapped with *Tsepa* (Lob: penalty and fine) last year after his neighbor and *Tsume* reported that he took unfair precedence over his neighbors for irrigation. Queue-jumping is very common among the villagers.”¹⁸

14. Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions.

15. Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions.

16. Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions.

17. Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions.

18. Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions.

Meanwhile, Pema, seated next to Kunga, said, “People are also fined *Tsepa* in case their livestock graze in others’ agriculture fields or destroy others’ crops. They also have to pay *Tsepa* if they do not join in canal maintenance and repair work.” During an interview on *Tsepa*, another informant stated: “The villagers gathered for canal maintenance work last week, but nobody came from Kunga's house. The next day, his wife, Sonam, came to pay *Tsepa* to *Tsume Aama* for not being able to be there for labour contribution.”¹⁹ The tradition of *Tsepa* has been in practice for generations. *Tsepa* system helps peoples for controlling misconduct in community affairs.

All these traditional practices bear significance for Loba people as they thrive in this arid land for centuries. Acts of expressing gratefulness for the yield, prayer for the wellbeing of every living being and the entire village exists as custom of the place.

12. Custom and Cosmvision

Aside from *Ghyamba* system, Monk, Monastery and Monarch (cultural monarch) hold significant and specific roles in maintaining social order.

i. Monk and Monastery

Lamas (Nep: monk) play a role in regard to any sort of *Pujas*, and various ceremonies. As a fact, there aren't any ceremonies where *Lamas* are not needed. Whenever there occurs any *Puja*, *Lamas* are coordinated and invited. Most of the *Pujas* serve all-round purposes such as agriculture, world peace, and the happiness of all living beings. Unlike regular *Pujas*, *Lamas* come into play whenever villagers face natural chaos and disasters. In the case of draught, *Lamas* are requested to conduct a *Puja* to call for rainfall. In this case, *Lamas* conduct *Puja* for a day at monasteries. In the case of insect issues, that is, crops being eaten by a huge population of insects, again, *Lamas* are requested to conduct a *Puja*. The *Puja* is conducted at a community house for three days. *Sang* burned and was offered everywhere. After a three-day *Puja*, people are prohibited from going to the fields for seven days.

19. Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions.



Photo: Lomanthang Monastery

Pujas and rituals such as Saga Luka, Nekya, Gyadhongba, Dhomang, Youm, Nyungney, and Kurim, as well as different occasions and ceremonies like Losar, Yartung, and Teeji, remain incomplete without *Lamas*. *Lamas* forecast good days and timing for cultivation, weeding, and crop harvesting. Even in agriculture-related work, *Lamas* have a role to play. Villagers begin maintenance of the irrigation canal after winter is over and after villagers are back in the village from warmer places. In such activity as well, *Lamas* advise the *Tse* to start the work in the irrigation canal. On occasions of Snowfall, storms, and periods, such as winter when people stay away from irrigation work require water sources and irrigation canals to be well maintained in the spring. *Lamas* let people know about good timing for doing things.

The day and timing for the work have become commonly known facts taught by *Lamas*. *Lamas* educate people about *Karma* and *Chi*. There is a difference

between *Karma* and *Chi*. *Karma* is seen for good deeds such as seeing favorable days, dates, timing, ways, etc. for cultivation, irrigation, *Pujas*, festivals, marriage, birth, migration, business, etc. *Karma* is seen only at the *Tse* of the month. However, *Chi* is seen for death only. According to the Loba calendar, a month has 30 days with different names. The first 20 days are called *Tse*, the following 9 days are called *Nyi*, and the remaining last day is called *Namgang*. For example: *Tse Chik*, *Tse Nyee*, *Tse Sum*, and till *Tse Nyishu*, and then *Nyi Chik*, *Nyi Nyee*, *Nyi Sum*, and till *Nyi Ghu* and *Namgang*. *Chik*, *Nyee*, *Sum*, etc. are Loba counting numbers one, two, three, and so on. The Loba calendar is very similar to the Tibetan calendar. Most of the activities, such as new starts, ceremonies, and festivals, are done on *Tse* of the month. Seed sowing is traditionally done only in the *Tse* of any month, rather than the *Nyi*. Also, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday are known to be the best days for sowing seeds.



Monday is also known to be the best for the onset of first-time irrigation of fields after crops start growing.²⁰

20. Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions.

Nekya is a *Puja* performed by a *Lama* on the day of sowing seeds. The *Lama* recites prayers, burns *Sang*, and a three-layered stone painted red as an icon of *Lumo* (Loba: land deity) is erected at the first starting field. Other workers cultivating start only after the *Lama* finishes the *Puja*. The stone is erected to respect *Lhu* (Lob, the god of the earth) and protect crops from fog and morning moisture or dew, which otherwise make the germinating crops turn yellow. *Nekya* is performed by each family on their own cultivation day. Nowadays, the *Puja* is vanishing, and only a few families perform it. Dhomang and Gyadhonba are a type of *Puja* conducted by each family after the cultivation works are finished. Like other *Pujas*, these two *Pujas* have their own vast meaning and purpose. The main purpose is for the well-being of all living beings. *Youm* is another great *Puja* considered the mother of every other *Puja*. It is usually performed in the Saga Dawa, the fifth month of Loba calendar (June-July), just after seeds begin to germinate. Alternatively, it can also be performed any



time around the year. Wealthy families perform this *Puja* themselves at their respective houses; however, in general, it is also performed in common by all villagers at a community house. More than 25 *Lamas* are invited for the *Puja* and they perform it for three consecutive days based on the number of *Lamas*. The fewer the *Lamas*, the more days it takes. *Lamas* perform the *Puja* for good rainfall, fertile soil, flood prevention, and the growth of crops, as well as the well-being of the villagers, birds, insects, and all living beings in general. Every villager contributes to the *Puja* by bringing wheat, ghee, milk, tea, sugar, flour,



Photo: Chhime Rinzin Gurning

firewood, and everything else needed for the ceremony. On the last day of the *Puja*, a ceremony called *Youm Khurye* is celebrated. During this ceremony, all the villagers carry piles of religious books read on the *Puja* and make a round around the village, purposely as a round to the fields for good yields and to ward off obstacles. This specific *Puja* is organized slightly differently in different

villages. For example, in Tsoshar village, every year, four village families, on a rotational basis, take on the entire responsibility of the *Puja* chores. Those collective deeds dignify lives. They remind people to respect and honor human relationships with nature. Besides conducting several different rituals, such reminders are also taken through life rites, by imagining and creating icons and images, putting symbols, and many more functions.²¹

ii. Life Rites

a) Birth Ceremony

Four days after a baby is born, *Saa* (Lob: a *Puja*) is performed by a *Lama* to protect the baby from evil and illness and to bless the baby with good health, fortune, and prosperity. Religious and blessed water is sprayed on the baby, mother, and helpers to purify them, as it is believed that during the delivery of the baby, things may become impure due to the blood of the mother. A *Shungdi* (Lob: a religious thread) is tied around the baby's neck. A white and a black wool thread is combined and worn on both of the babies' hands and legs for good health and a long life. The baby is given a name at the end of this ceremony. In general, a baby is given two names: one given during *Saa* and the other given by a great *Lama* such as His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, Sakya Gongma Trichen. Based on the *Saa*, most often the first name is the name of the day the baby was born. Unlike in some other cultures, there are no other ceremonies, such as rice feeding for babies, in Loba culture.

b) Marriage Ceremony

Boy's parents send an odd number (3 or 5) of people representing the boy's family and relatives to the house of the girl to ask for the girl's hand. They bring tea, *Chhang*, butter, and Khataks with them and filled the cups of girls and her parents with tea, *Chhang*. If the girl and the girl's family agree upon the proposal, then tea and *Chhang* filled in the cups are drunk by the girl and her parents, and a *Yakka* (Lob: a small piece of butter) is put on the right side of the girl's forehead to mark the marriage proposal as accepted. Later, the families and relatives of

21. Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions.

the girl are invited for a meal and light ceremony by the boy's family. Then, families of brides and grooms request that *Lamas* to see *Karma*. As a fact, a couple marries only on *Tse* of the month, and marriage is always to take place at the peak of summer, when entire fields are green and crops grow bountifully. Such timing and signs in nature are believed to be an auspicious symbol for the couple and their families. The marriage ceremony for Loba people lasts for three days in general.



Day One: Representatives from the bridegroom come to the bride's house by riding horses. They sing songs and spray the welcome offerings at the gates. After completing a series of religious rites and functions accompanied by *Lama*, the bride, along with her friends, families, relatives, and entire village, ride back to the home of the bride. On the boy's side, everyone welcomes the relatives

of the bride's coming to their place. They sing local marriage songs. After the completion of the marriage songs and before the bride enters the house, *Lama* performs a *Puja* called *Ghakrok*, which means to ward off evil, bad luck, and obstacles. After a series of merriments and festivities, the bride's family, relatives, and villagers return to their places.

Day Two: The bride's parents, friends, relatives, and villagers come to the bridegroom's house again, and on that day, the newly married couple bows down in front of the bride's parents to thank them. Activities continue—a series of songs, exchanging auspiciousness, and sending congratulations go on. Thereafter, the gift presentation to the bride and groom starts first with parents, followed by friends, relatives, neighbours, and the whole village. The gifts include horses, cows, goats, sheep, land, crops, ornaments locally prepared, traditional clothes (*Keden, Pangden, Kaw, Phuje, Shamja, Somba, Mazin, Tsuktuk, Dungzi, Sang Goe*), cultural utensils (*Phora, Phonyak, Chuzak*), etc.

Day Three: *Amanuring* is celebrated to pay the price of mother's breastfeeding. On the day, a sheep is slaughtered at the bridegroom's house, and exactly the upper half part of the sheep is offered *Khatas* and brought to the bride's parents to acknowledge the importance of breastfeeding and nurturing their daughter so gracefully.²²

Overall, all relationships including of neighbours, relatives and the entire village is acknowledged by ritual during weddings.

c) **Death Rite**

After the death of a person, no one is allowed to touch the corpse; rather, a *Lama* is asked to see *Chi* of the dead person. Various things are determined by the *Chi*, such as what day and time the corpse should be taken out of the house for the funeral, who can and cannot touch it, who should not be seen on the way from the house to the crematory, etc. The *Lama* also suggests methods of funeral, such as burial, cremation, feeding to birds, or flowing into rivers. In the case of the corpse to be thrown into the river, it is carried to the end point of Lo-menthang

22. Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions.

village, and the body is cut into pieces and thrown into the river. If the corpse is to be given to birds, then it is cut into pieces and given to vultures. It is also believed that if no vultures descend on the corpse, the person is considered to be sinful. The corpse must be cut by non-relatives only.

After the *Chi*, a *Puja* named *Rojok* is conducted by *Lamas* purposely to pray for the deceased (*Monlam*) for a day. Thereafter, based on the *Chi*, the dead body is carried to the crematory. If it is the timely demise of the elderly, then the recitation of prayers by *Lamas* is accompanied by different types of religious musical instruments played on the way. However, if it is the untimely demise of a young one, then only *Damaru* (Nep: the pellet drum) is played with prayers. After the men return from the crematory, a pile of grass is laid in a row and burned, and the fire is extinguished by water. The men then have to cross that line to purify themselves and prevent evil from following them. Meanwhile, white and shining pebbles are collected, and ground into small pieces, and sprayed throughout the house so that the soul is attached nowhere and to no one.

On the 4th day after the demise, a *Puja* named *Shukzubu* is conducted by 10–12 *Lamas*. From that day on, a *Sur* offering starts and continues for 49 days. A *Sur* offering is a ritual where every four-time meal is offered to the soul of the deceased person in a prayer room for 49 days. Whatever meal we prepare for the family is also offered to the soul of the deceased person. If the deceased person used to drink *Chhang*, then it is also offered; basically, the favorite foods of the deceased person is offered in the *Sur*. After prayers and prostration, the offered meal is collected in a container, and in every seven-day interval, the meal is poured into the river.

Meanwhile, at a seven-day interval, a *Puja* named *Dhunzi* is conducted for seven weeks (49 days). The main purpose of *Dhunzi* is to pray for the deceased's soul to rest in peace and to find his way to heaven. Villagers come to the deceased person's house with tea, *Chhang*, wheat, barley, butter, oil, etc. The butter and oil are used to make offering oil lamp or butter lamp.

On the 49th day or the last week, the entire village is given a meal, and meritorious activity is done by distributing *Tsok* (Lob: a handbag full of food items) to the entire Lo-menthang village. Nowadays, people even distribute cash in the name

of *Tsok*. The donation is done in the name of the deceased person. Thereafter, a final *Puja* named *Menjyo* is conducted to mark the end of the death rites and rituals of the deceased. On *Menjyo*, prayers are chanted by *Lamas* and a piece of paper containing the name of the deceased person is burned. However, in the case of the death of children under the age of 5 years, the corpse is thrown into a river, and a *Puja* named *Bhumjung* is conducted. In order to earn virtue in the name of the child, the all the children of the village are called upon and given *Dho Thuk* (Lob: *Thukpa* prepared from slightly beaten wheat) two times at four-day intervals.²³

iii. Icons and Symbols to Adhere



a) **Du-kak-ye**

When a person is gravely ill and on the verge of death or is on the verge of dying, but there is still hope, the family will put a three-layered stone and paint red in front of their home called *Du-kak-ye*. This is to notify the villagers that the person's health condition has deteriorated and to warn them not to come there, not to call upon them, and not to shout out. The family believes that if outsiders come to their house, a witch or death soul may take a chance to enter their house with them. Moreover, if people come or shout from outside, this would cause panic in the ill person. In case some family member is sick or in maternity at a household, the white or red sign on the stone in front of the house (maybe a contribution from the villagers to the suffering ones, etc.).

23. Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions.

b) Katu and Tho

Katu and Tho are two types of indications, usually three-layered stones installed in the field areas. The Katu is installed by each family on their cultivation day at the side or middle of the field cultivated first. A *Puja* named *Nekya* is performed by a *Lama* on the cultivation day by each family. Before casting seeds in the first field, the *Lama* conducts *Puja* by reciting prayers, burning *Sang*, and installing Katu. It is done to respect the god of earth and to prevent germinating plants from turning yellow due to the fog seen early in the morning. Further, it is done to prevent the plants from being eaten by insects and also to mark the onset of cultivation. The Tho are installed by the Tsumes of the village at the main entrance of field areas, junctions, and fences. It is done to officially inform the villagers that animals are prohibited from being set free in the cultivated fields, and the Ghyamba system rules and regulations are imposed from that day on.



13. Festivals Again

The life rites are carried on around any time of the year depending on the situation when it is required. Festivals fall in certain dates of the year. Regardless of timing and date of the year, each festival has imagination of certain sacred images bringing rationale for live. Teeji is one of the biggest festivals of Lo that carries stories with imaginations of evil and demon chasing.

i. Teeji

Teeji is an auspicious religious festival of Lo-menthang celebrated for three consecutive days every year based on the Loba calendar. The word Tenchi or Teeji means “world peace prayer” and the festival is mainly celebrated for world peace to confirm the victory of good over evil and consist of prayers, chants, and dances performed by monks dressed colourfully and diversely. It is said that the festival was introduced by the Late Sakya Trizin Ngawang Kunga Sonam, a scholar brought to Lo-menthang by the King Samdup Rabten of Lo-menthang at the end of the 17th century in order to cleanse the territories of demons.



Since then, monks of Choedi monastery have been performing this festival every year in Lo-menthang. This religious festivity, among many other performances, includes the face-masked dance of the monk as one of the main performances.

This festival is one of the biggest festivals not only of Lo-menthang but of the entire upper Mustang area. Mustang's royal families and people from *Lo-Tso-Dhyun* attends the festival. On the very first day, the monks do *Puja* at Thupchen monastery of Lo-menthang. This monastery was built in 1468 by the 3rd Dharma King, Aham Tsangchen Tashi Gon of Mustang. During the following three days, monks chant prayers in the morning, and villagers clean their areas as well as the square in front of the Royal Palace of *Lo Ghyalpo*, where the monk performances occur. Huge *Thankas* are brought to display hanging on the wall of two-storey house in front of the square on the first two days of the festival. The *Thanka* is the photo or portrait of great Buddhism leader Guru Padmasambhava. There are two big *Thankas*: the old one and new one. The older *Thanka* is displayed on the first day and the new *Thanka* is displayed on the second day. These *Thankas* are believed to be the biggest *Thankas* of the world. People pay great gratitude, feel blessed offering *Khatak* and even touching those *Thankas* with caps or any head wear, believing that those *Thankas* are sacred. Monks perform invocation rituals after they display the *Thanka*. Then the religious face-masked dance starts at around 2 pm and lasts for about three hours.



demon, schemes to destroy the demon using various Buddhist tools like three colored ropes, a Loba bell, and a *Phurbha* (Lob: a knife). All the performers of the ceremony walk outside of the valley heading to an open field at the edge of the valley with tempting religious music. In the field, the *Tsowo* does his final spell by dancing with unceasing drumming and instrumental sounds. Then on he shoots an arrow, resembling the end of the demon. Again, the sling is shot twice propelling the demon further. People celebrate the death of demon and the end of festival by firing guns and having get together in their homes.²⁴



The regular everyday life goes on. People keep doing things they inherited from their older generation.

24. Key Informant Interviews, Focus Group Discussions and Event Observation.

ii. Phak-Nyi



Phak-Nyi is a type of party or picnic celebrated for a week to note the end of summer and beginning of autumn. The picnic is observed to mark the end of normal agricultural work and to get ready for harvest and then winter as well. In other words, it involves taking a break and restoring energy for the harvesting labor. Phak-Nyi is not only a picnic but also an auspicious occasion and festival to exchange good wishes for

productive harvest and cosy winter.

Girls, boys, men, women, senior population etc have their own friend circle of seven or nine members and they enjoy a party for a week. During the celebration, all friends fix a host house called *Nyae Khang* and they collect all materials like rice, wheat, flour, sugar, salt, oil, powder milk, etc that can be treasured from house. Again, they collect money to buy any remaining materials. Within seven days, they go to far distant pastureland called *Panga* for a picnic and also, they pay visit to nearby monasteries and go for far pilgrimage sites.

By the seventh month of Loba calendar (August), the crops of the year ripe almost ready to harvest. Before getting to the agricultural field to harvest the crops, Loba people celebrate yet another big festival called Yartung. Yartung is almost the last big festival of the Loba calendar.

iii. Yartung

Yartung is celebrated in all the villages of upper Mustang during the summer season. The methods of celebration are more or less the same in all villages except that they fall on different dates. In the case of Lo-menthang village, Yartung is celebrated for three days.



Lo-menthang village has four clusters namely Potaling, Domalangi, Jadang and Gudang. During this festival each group enjoys parties for few days. Meanwhile, the *Ghyamba*, *Mhetees* and *Tsumes* also parties separately forming their own group. In total, five subgroups; each group prepares its own *Chhang*, Alcohol, *Khapse*, and various other food items at their respective partying and gathering place.

The first day,

The first day is Yartung of King. On the day, all people dress well, eat delicious food and worship Gods and Goddesses. People visit the King's palace to offer *Khataks*, carrying *Khapse*, teas, *Chhang*, and alcohol in the morning. Thereafter, horses are prepared for Yartung. After having the day's meal, people go to a big pasture land named Namachuime on their horses. Before that, boys must break

Torma (Lob: sculptures made mostly of flour paste and butter on them by *Lamas*). *Torma* of different characters/items such as mirrors, butter lamps, goat feet, yak head, and bread are placed at a distance and are shot by stones from horseback. They should break one *Torma* at least to go to the party spot. The person who breaks the most items is given money by all villagers to celebrate his win. Thereafter, they go to the party spot, tents are installed for each group, and workers of each group bring their own snacks and start cooking. Two women representing each group go to sing songs for the king. On the very day, only *Garlu*



(Lob: folk songs) related to king are sang. On the king's Yartung, the king and all males ride horses. In the evening time, they return to the village from the party spot at the pastureland. Also in the evening, they again do a horse race with competition to pick up *Khataks* from the ground while riding horses.

The second day,

The second day is the queen's Yartung and on that day people go to King's palace to offer *Khataks* to the queen and her friends. The queen, her friends and the women ride horses. People sing songs related to queens. And the party begins, in ways similar to the previous day.

The third day,

The third day is *Lamas'* Yartung/Monk's Yartung. Villagers go to Monasteries to make offerings to great *Lamas*. On the day, all *Lamas* ride horses, and all villagers join *Lamas* at the party spot.

In general, during Yartung people eat delicious local food. They sing songs; dancing to local songs continues long into the night. People wear their best local clothing. There is a saying, “*Tsego La Mae-naa Yorla Soo, Yartung La Mae-naa Yorla Ghun*”. The meaning of this saying is, “If you don't have enough to eat on Losar, borrow from others. If you don't have enough to wear on Yartung, borrow from others.” The core message is, eat to please oneself on Losar and dress to please others on Yartung.²⁵



Photo: Chhime Rinzin Gurung

By the time that Yartung concludes, the harvesting time of the crops approaches around eighth month of Loba calendar (mid-September). Then, almost a year-long-awaited harvest of the crops begins. Monks determine the kick off day for the entire village to harvest their crops. Lifeways are rejuvenated through rituals, festivities, agriculture, weaving, carving, and livestock herding amid hardship of high Himalayan ecology.

14. Harvesting with Hope

Lamas of the village suggest the date and time to kick off the harvest. In recent years, sometimes the customary nine members of *Ghyamba* system of village sit

25. Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions.

together to decide the good date to kick off the harvest of the year. Collectivism and mutual help to their villagers remains the core of their decisions; they value and prioritize helping households indeed. For example, first one week of harvest is announced for the harvest of royal families; villagers help to harvest crops of the royal family. People from Potaling, Domalang, Jadang and Gudang come to help the harvest in their turn. The village allocates one day for the harvest of families of the deceased person in the year, villagers become helping hands for the family to harvest their crops. Following that, all of the villagers continue to harvest according to the date and time announced by *Lamas*. In past, it used to take a month to finish entire harvest works. Nowadays, it takes only 3-5 days to finish the harvest work because fewer and fewer people are engaged in agricultural activities. Significant areas of agricultural fields are left fallow these days. At the same time, it is quite uninteresting to witness all the traditional technologies and methods being replaced by modern technologies and methods.



Photo: Chhewang Gurung



Around the ninth month of Loba calendar (October), all harvesting activities are completed. Winter starts early in the mountains. November is already a cold time. Every year, people once again prepare to move down to the warmer place; life goes around a similar circle of years. And the Loba new year begins on the day of Losar, when some people are still in lowland.

Again, another winter journey of the year to the lowland starts, in order to escape from the cold weather of Lo.



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Upper Mustang of Nepal, traditionally called “Lo” or “*Lo-Tso-Dhyun*,” is the ancestral homeland of the Loba Indigenous People of Nepal. Lo-menthang, situated in the rain shadow of the Himalayas, is known as the ancient mud-walled town of Lo and the traditional capital of *Lo-Tso-Dhyun*. Lo-menthang, the homeland of Loba Indigenous People, has thrived with cultural and geographical uniqueness, for centuries. This article presents some aspects of Loba lifeways, cosmivision, and the connection of such virtues to their ancestral territory. The life rites, festivities, and day-to-day activities of Indigenous Peoples are valued as the reflections of their cosmivision, occasions to recollect, honor, learn and transfer their ancestral wisdom, stories and relationship, and the interface of Indigenous science and knowledge systems, are described in this article. This article follows through some of the major scenes of a year in Lo-menthang. The matter of fact is that a one-year calendar of Indigenous culture is usually determined and guided by customary values and institutions. Thus, the calendar does not change much in terms of core values and norms. It is rather transferred from one generation to the next ones through performances of rituals, ceremonies, and festivals.



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