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## Modern education and culture preservation: Tapriza Culture School in Dolpo (Nepal)

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## MODERN EDUCATION AND CULTURE PRESERVATION: TAPRIZA CULTURE SCHOOL IN DOLPO (NEPAL)

The article is to discuss a case of community-based school in Dolpo, a remote and isolated region of north-western Nepal and a culturally Tibetan enclave inhabited by Tibetan-speaking adherents of native Bön religion. Tapriza Culture School is a project that aims to combine modern and traditional education: it integrates standard Nepalese curriculum with teaching of local history, tradition, culture and religion. In the article, I focus on the impact of a particular geographical, socio-economic and cultural setting of Dolpo on practical and ideological aspects of school curriculum and children education in Tapriza School.

Before I elaborate on these issues, I would like to present, in a nutshell, some facts on Dolpo, Dolpa District, Nepal and its educational system. It is not only to put the analysis into a wider context, but also to stress that our Western-centric assumptions and ideas on educational opportunities and school infrastructure may significantly differ from the harsh economic and geographical conditions of Dolpo. The article is partly based on data I collected during my fieldwork in Dolpo in July and August in 2008.

### 1. Dolpo: Hidden Land of the Himalayas

According to Census 2011 in Nepal lives over 26 million people. Rural population constitutes 83% of the total population<sup>1</sup>. Despite an economic growth in recent years, Nepal remains one of the world's poorest countries. The GNI per capita for 2011 was just \$540. It is estimated that one fourth of the population lives in poverty<sup>2</sup>. Nepalese society is multi-lingual and multi-ethnic. According to Census 2001 Nepal is home to 103 ethnic groups and castes<sup>3</sup> and there are 60 living languages<sup>4</sup>. The main religion is Hinduism (80% of the population), the second is Buddhism (about 11% of the population). In fact, however, many Nepali combine Hindu and Buddhist practice and many temples and shrines are shared by adherents of these two religions. Until recently Nepal was a monarchy. The civil war 1996-2006 between Maoist rebels and the government ended with communist victory. In 2008 Maoists won democratic elections, Nepal was declared a republic and king Gyanendra was forced to abdicate.

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<sup>1</sup> *Nepal Census 2011*, [www.census.gov.np](http://www.census.gov.np).

<sup>2</sup> *The World Bank*, [www.data.worldbank.org](http://www.data.worldbank.org), p. 58.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>4</sup> *Nepal Population Report*, p. 54.

Dolpo is a remote region in north-western Nepal, bordered in the north by the Tibet Autonomous Region. It encompasses four valleys – Panzang, Nangkhonh, Tsharka, Tarap – in northern part of Nepal's largest district<sup>5</sup>, Dolpa, one of the most geographically isolated, economically disadvantaged and least populated areas<sup>6</sup> in the country. The population of Dolpo is less than 5000 people<sup>7</sup>. Almost 90 percent of the region lies above 3.500 meters in elevation.<sup>8</sup> Its inhabitants in order to survive in inhospitable landscape combine agriculture, animal husbandry and trade. Dolpo is considered a culturally Tibetan enclave as the majority of its population belongs to the Tibetan- speaking minority and adherents of an indigenous Bön religion. Once the Dolpo-pa (people of Dolpo) whose economic niche was trade in salt moved freely between Nepal and Tibet, they also relied on winter pastures in Tibet. Over a span of fifty years, due to political and economic changes – Chinese restrictions on traffic across the border, availability of salt from other regions, shortage of pasture lands – they were forced to reinvent their economic and migration patterns.

At the beginning of the 2000s as a result of boom in China for *yartsa gunbu* – a medicinal caterpillar fungus endemic to the Tibetan Plateau – a new economical niche has emerged. Another important factors and events that brought about social change to the Dolpo-pa were creation in 1984 in Dolpo district Nepal's largest national park Shey Phoksundo, making movie 'Himalaya' on Dolpo location as well as increasing presence of NGOs and establishing schools by volunteers from the West.

## 2. Educational system and school infrastructure in Nepal

The first modern school in Nepal was established in 1853. However, it was school only for the ruling family and Nepalese elites. Education of people was not a priority<sup>9</sup> under Rana family regime, which lasted over century and was overthrown until in 1951. Prior to Second World War there were only few English middle and high schools in the country. After 1951 the importance of a general access to education was recognized by the state and the number of educational facilities started to grow. Yet poor economic conditions, particularly in rural areas, still are insurmountable obstacles for many children to educate. 'The government provides tuition-free education to all children between the ages of 6 and 12, yet families often lack sufficient funds to cover non-tuition costs, such as books and clothing. Besides, poor families often need their children to work. As a result, many children start school at a late age, such as nine or ten, and dropout rates are high. Education is not compulsory, and only 49.7 percent of students completed the fourth grade in 1999. (...) Another barrier to education is a common perception that there is little value in educating females'<sup>10</sup>

Over a span of the last fifty years one may observe advancement in the field of education: number of schools has grown, school attendance rates have increased and illiteracy rates have decreased<sup>11</sup>. Yet still there are many problems and challenges, which are related to

<sup>5</sup> Nepal is divided into 75 districts.

<sup>6</sup> According to Census 2011 in Dolpa District live 36 701 people, *Nepal Census 2011*, www.census.gov. np.

<sup>7</sup> Bauer K.M., *High frontiers: Dolpo and the changing world of Himalayan pastoralists*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Bauer K.M., op. cit, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> On the contrary, e.g. under Bim Shanser (1929-32) fifty people were arrested and fined for setting a public library.

<sup>10</sup> *Library of Congress – Federal Research Division, Country Profile: Nepal*, November 2005, pp. 8-9.

<sup>11</sup> From 1996 to 2004 the percentage of the population that had ever attended school increased from 34% to 46%. From 1981 to 2001 the adult literacy rate increased from 20.6% to 48.6%. Gender disparities in education have declined. From 1990 to 2004, the percentage of female students at the 'school' level (grades one to ten) increased from nearly 30% to 45.9%. Ibidem, p. 9.

social disparities based on class, gender, ethnicity and location as well as to an insufficient infrastructure and poor quality of education (e.g. in 2004 only one third of teachers had formal training<sup>12</sup>). The educational system in Nepal is modeled on that of the United States. There are three levels of basic education: primary (grades one to five), lower secondary (grades six to eight), and secondary (grades nine and ten). School Leaving Certificate (SLC) Examination is conducted nationwide at the end of grade ten. Grades eleven and twelve are considered higher secondary level. Higher education consists of bachelor, masters and PhD levels. In 2001 institutions of higher education included 8 public and 114 private technical schools, one polytechnic school and 6 universities. In recent years, the overall number of education facilities has grown. The majority of new schools, however, was established in urban areas. Primary education is a priority and the most funding is allocated to support it (in 2003 it was 55.4% of the whole budget on education). In 2003 government-funded schools accounted for more than 85 percent of enrollment. Private schools, however, are considered to offer education of higher quality<sup>13</sup>.

### 3. Taprizha Culture School

Dolpo is one of the most disadvantaged regions in Nepal, also in terms of access to education. Illiteracy rates are high and educational facilities are sparse. Primary education appears rather as a luxury than a standard. Given this fact any effort to create there any kind of school infrastructure is worthwhile. As mentioned above, Dolpo is a culturally Tibetan enclave. Taprizha School project aims to combine modern education with teaching local history, language and tradition; the particular emphasis is put on preservation of indigenous Bön religion.

#### 3.1. Social, cultural and institutional background

Taprizha Culture School was established in 1998. Taprizha (tib. Ta-pi-hri-tsa) is the name of an important Bon master living in 8<sup>th</sup> century and the patron of the school. The school is situated in Phoksumdo<sup>14</sup> village development committee (VDC)<sup>15</sup>, which includes the villages Ringmo, Pungmo, Rike and Renji. Most students come from these hamlets.

The idea of establishing the school emerged in 1990s when Marietta Kind, a Swiss social anthropologist, did her fieldwork in Dolpo on different aspects of rituals in Bon religion<sup>16</sup>. Sge recalls: 'During my fieldwork, the people of the village approached me with their desire for a school of their own. I took up their idea and supported their dreams by helping them with advice, contacts and financial support in the jungle of administration and finances'<sup>17</sup>. In 1996 Catherin Inman from the USA who worked in Phoksumdo for Peace Corps joined in. As she worked for National Park Shey Phoksundo<sup>18</sup> she could supervise in person work on Taprizha project. This collaboration proved to be successful. As Kind put it: 'With our

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<sup>12</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>14</sup> The famous movie 'Himalaya, l'enfance d'un chef' by Eric Valli was shot on Phoksumdo location.

<sup>15</sup> The village development committee (VDC) is the smallest administrative unit in rural areas in Nepal.

<sup>16</sup> The result of fieldwork was MA thesis and book (both under the same title): *Mendrub – A Bonpo Ritual for the Benefit of all Living Beings and the Empowerment of Medicine Performed in Tsho, Dolpo*.

<sup>17</sup> Vögeli Ch., *An interview with Marietta Kind*, 'Globetrotter' 1999 No. 53, [www.taprizha.org](http://www.taprizha.org).

<sup>18</sup> With regard to the name and spelling of Phoksumdo, I follow Kenneth M. Bauer. According to him the term Phoksundo is a result of early misspelling and he allows for it only in case of Shey Phoksundo National Park, which has entered common usage (cf. Bauer 2004, p. 205).

different background and deep insights into a local culture we were both able to introduce the project to interesting partners, officials, other NGOs and sources of advice and funding. From there it was a long way, with much community organizing and foreign organizing to the final opening and running of the school. Thanks to the very strong local motivation and strong bonds that developed between all of us during the last years, problems could be solved and the school finally was established in 1998<sup>19</sup>. Another person who played an important role in the process of setting the school was Semduk Lama. He grew up in Pungmo village and was one of a few in the region who have completed 10<sup>th</sup> grade. From the very beginning Semduk Lama has been working in Taprizas as school headmaster (his commitment and achievements have been recognized, in 2010 he got the National Education Award).

Currently, the school is co-managed by three NGOs: a community-based organization Taprizas Association for Social Help in Dolpo (TASHI-D), Taprizas Verein in Switzerland (with Marietta Kind as the president) and Friends of Dolpa in the USA. The project is supported by parents, local organizations, Phoksumdo village development and Bön centers in Kathmandu and India. The crucial part of financial contributions are donations from organizations from the USA and Switzerland.

The aim of Taprizas Project is to support Tibetan-speaking and religious minority in establishing a locally managed school. Since all the people of Phoksumdo development committee are followers of a native Bön religion<sup>20</sup>, an important goal is 'to maintain this ancient tradition and enable the children to also learn about it outside the monastic tradition'<sup>21</sup>. Previously, families who wanted their children to receive education in Bön tradition had to send them to the Bön monasteries – Triten Norbutse Bönpo Monastery in Kathmandu or Menri Monastery in Dolanji in India. Despite the fact that children got there free of charge accommodation almost none could afford it. Prior to the foundation of the Taprizas School the nearest school was in Dunai, the capital of the Dolpo District, at a distance of three days by foot. Hence the majority of children from Phoksumdo VDC did not attend any school. Poverty and long distances between settlements are not the only obstacles to send children to school. As Amanda Christie, secular missionary living in Dunai notes: 'Children going to school located in a nearby valley would have to stay the night in a stranger's home, and in a situation of conflict between the inhabitants of the valleys this is not possible'<sup>22</sup>. Anne Lelong, the founder of Kula Mountain Primary<sup>23</sup> School in Upper Dolpo, a region known for its inaccessibility, adds: 'The valleys of Dolpo are like small kingdoms. One valley is a kingdom, the next is another kingdom. This is how it works still'<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> Kind M., *Taprizas Lobtra. A community based cultural school and its history*, 'Proceedings of the Conference on Development Assistance to Ethnic Tibetan Communities', Taipei 2003, [www.taprizas.org](http://www.taprizas.org), Accessed 29 September 2012, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> The indigenous Tibetan Bön religion has its roots in animistic and shamanic pre-Buddhist practices. Tibetan Buddhism and Bön are distinct in many ways, however, some Buddhist ideas were integrated into Bön and some Bön elements were incorporated into Tibetan Buddhism. Bön in form of structured doctrine based on sophisticated teachings is known as Yungdrung Bön. In 1978 it has been recognized by 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama as a distinct school of practice.

<sup>21</sup> M. Kind, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> Fragment of an interview with Amanda Christie conducted by N. Maksymowicz in July 2008, form materials in the author's archives.

<sup>23</sup> Kula Mountain Primary School was established in 2001, in Tinkyu village in Tinje Village Development Committee, Panzang Valley. It is also a result of joint effort of western NGO and local community. It offers education up to fifth grade.

<sup>24</sup> Fragment of an interview with Anne Lelong conducted by N. Maksymowicz in July 2008, form materials in the author's archives.

In Taprizha, in a culturally familiar setting, students are provided with boarding facilities and are taught mainly by local teachers. In the beginning, despite of their commitment to organizing the school, parents were hesitant about sending their children to a boarding school<sup>25</sup>. To convince them Semduk Lama came up with a brilliant idea: together with children from the school he prepared an artistic performance that included both traditional and contemporary dances and songs. When parents saw how beautifully children performed, how well they danced and sang, they decided to send their children to school<sup>26</sup>.

### 3.2. Curriculum and school activities

The number of students and classes has been constantly growing. In 2006 there were 103 students, and in 2010 almost twice as many (172 children). Education starts with two years of kindergarten. In 2006, as the official permission for teaching students of 8<sup>th</sup> grade was not yet issued, in order to enable Taprizha students to continue their education a formal solution had to be found. Eventually, students officially were enrolled in Saraswati Higher Secondary School in Dunai, the capital of the district, while in fact they were taught in Taprizha. Currently, Taprizha is the only school in the Tibetan speaking part of Dolpo, which has received the official permission of the Nepalese government to teach up to class ten. It gives students an opportunity to continue their education in one education facility until School Leaving Certificate (SLC) Examination. The school staff members are: school headmaster, teachers, *geshe* (teacher who holds Ph. D. in Bön religion), cooks, *amahs* ('school mothers' who take care of the youngest children at the school), treasurer, storekeeper and a nurse working part-time. The teachers are mostly men as women are not too willing to live and work in such harsh conditions.

Apart from standard subjects from government curriculum (Nepali, English, Maths, Science and Drawings) children are taught subjects related to local culture and tradition. *Geshe* teaches children local history and Bön religion. They also learn Tibetan language, traditional dances, songs and drama as well as local handicraft (lessons of *thangka*<sup>27</sup> painting and woodcarving). They have environmental classes that include collecting plants and herbs used in traditional Tibetan medicine, They also go on field trips with specialist who share their knowledge on local plants and their use. Regular classes are held from Monday to Thursday. Every Friday is day for cleaning, sport activities, environmental classes and work in school garden. In a small shop with local handicraft, which is run together by teachers and students children have a chance to train their entrepreneurial skills. The older students who are responsible for maintenance of solar collectors, a source of energy for school buildings, have an opportunity to get skills, which in the future they may turn into profession as solar technology is becoming more and more popular in the region.

Another important aspect of Taprizha School activity is that it gives girls an opportunity to educate, in defiance of still prevailing in Nepalese society<sup>28</sup> opinion that they do not need

<sup>25</sup> An interview with Sher Badur Buddha conducted by N. Maksymowicz in August 2008, form materials in the author's archives.

<sup>26</sup> An interview with Semduk Lama conducted by N. Maksymowicz in August 2008, form materials in the author's archives.

<sup>27</sup> Traditional Buddhist scroll painting.

<sup>28</sup> According to Nepal Population Report in whole Nepalese society there is still strong preference for sons. It results in discriminatory practices against girls in the field of education, health, etc. 'Government of Nepal has taken both legal and social initiatives to address the existing discriminatory practices, however, the progress in this regard is slow mainly because of a) traditional patriarchal attitude b) poverty c) weak enforcement of legal provisions. (...) The benefit of education for girls is indisputable, but not all parents perceive this. There are tremendous gaps in literacy level, school enrollment and the length of time boys and girls stay in school' Nepal Population Report, p. 137.

it. Following statement of 17 years old Sherab Sangmo Lama from 10<sup>th</sup> grade is very telling expression of empowering effect education may have: 'I would like to become a nurse, because in our area there is no good health care and it takes many days to walk to the closest hospital. I would like to return to my remote village, develop a region and open a small hospital. (...) My parents could barely support me in my education, without the Taprizza School and the Taprizza NGO and Friends of Dolpa my schooling would not be possible. (...) My parents think that educating a girl is pointless, because she moves into a different household (of the husband) and do field and house work there. I do not agree and I am eager to continue my education'<sup>29</sup>.

One should stress that while Taprizza Culture School is on top of agenda of all three NGOs, which co-manage the school, they also engage in other activities that aim to improve quality of life in local community and to protect local culture. In 2009, for instance, they organized workshops to train people how to turn handicraft into goods attractive to foreign tourists (e.g. cell phone bags made from traditional belts or cushions made from traditional fabrics). To protect cultural and religious heritage renovation and conservation works in Bön monasteries are supported. In order to improve health conditions and with an underlying idea that Western and traditional Tibetan medicine should complete not compete with each other three hospital rooms next to the Tibetan clinic were built.

## Conclusions

To sum up, Taprizza Culture School seems to be a successful educational project in many respects. First, it gives children from economically disadvantaged and geographically isolated region an access to education. If Taprizza School had been established the majority of them would have no chance to get even basic education. Moreover, the school curriculum embraces not only standard modern education, but also teaching local history, culture and religion. Thus, children receive an education, which at the same time enables them to maintain their cultural and religious identity and to get skills, which widen the repertoire of their life and professional options in the future.

Secondly, Taprizza School exemplifies a successful long-term cooperation between western NGOs and local community. If it had not been for initiative and on-going support of volunteers from the West this educational facility probably would not have been established. It seems, however, that there is no paternalistic attitude on the 'Western' part towards local community. On the contrary, decisions are made with respect for local tradition and managing of the school is shared responsibility of local community and NGOs. As the school complex is located at the intersection of several trading routes it has become an important social institution where people from local community can meet and interact. The number of students is constantly growing and subsequent generations of graduates have been leaving the school and, what is of great importance, continue their education. A good name and fame of this educational facility attracts more and more children from the region. Recently, due to limited capacity of the school only children from Phoksumdo village development committee are admitted.

Thirdly, the fact that children have an opportunity to learn in a culturally familiar setting may have a positive impact on development of the region in the future. Previously, children who were sent to schools distant from their villages for many years lost contact with their families and community. In consequence, their ties with place of their origin have been gradually diminishing. Whether children educated in Taprizza Culture School will come back to Phoksumdo in order to work on their community behalf remains to be seen.

<sup>29</sup> *Annual Report Taprizza NGO, 2008, p. 8.*

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### **Modern education and culture preservation: Taprizia Culture School in Dolpo (Nepal)**

The aim of the article is to present a case study of an educational project that combines modern education with local culture preservation. Taprizia Culture School is community-based school in Phoksumdo Village Development Committee in Dolpo, a remote region in north-western Nepal, a culturally Tibetan enclave inhabited by Tibetan-speaking adherents of native Bön religion. Taprizia Culture School seems to be particularly interesting educational project in many respects. First, the school is located in geographically isolated and economically disadvantaged region, where access to education is not a standard, but a luxury; rates of illiteracy are high and educational facilities are sparse. Secondly, in Taprizia School local history, tradition, and religion teaching is integrated with standard national curriculum. Thus, children receive an education, which enables them to maintain their cultural and religious identity and to get skills, which widen the repertoire of their life and professional options in the future. Thirdly, it is successful joint effort of western based NGOs and local community, a project that aims not only to educate children, but also to improve a quality of life of the whole community. The article is partly based on data the author collected during her fieldwork in Dolpo in 2008.

**Keywords:** community-based school, culture preservation, local tradition, Bön religion

### **Nowoczesna edukacja i ochrona kultury: Szkoła Kultury Taprizia w Dolpo (Nepal)**

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie studium przypadku projektu edukacyjnego, który łączy nowoczesną edukację z zachowaniem lokalnej kultury. Szkoła Kultury Taprizia jest szkołą społeczności lokalnej, prowadzoną przez Komitet Rozwoju Wsi Phoksumdo w Dolpo, odległym regionie w północno-zachodnim Nepalu, kulturowo tybetańskiej enklawie zamieszkaną przez tybetańskojęzycznych mieszkańców, wyznawców lokalnej religii Bön. Szkoła Kultury Taprizia wydaje się być szczególnie interesującym projektem edukacyjnym pod wieloma względami. Po pierwsze, szkoła znajduje się w regionie izolowanym geograficznie i zaniedbanym gospodarczo, gdzie dostęp do edukacji nie jest standardem, ale luksusem; panuje powszechnie analfabetyzm, a placówki oświatowe są nieliczne. Po drugie, w szkole Taprizia nauczanie lokalnej historii, tradycji i religii jest zintegrowane ze standardowym programem krajowym. W ten sposób dzieci odbierają wykształcenie, które pozwala im na utrzymanie swojej tożsamości kulturowej i religijnej i uzyskanie umiejętności, które poszerzą ich możliwości życia i wyborów zawodowych w przyszłości. Po trzecie, jest to wspólny projekt zachodnich organizacji pozarządowych i społeczności lokalnej, mający na celu nie tylko edukację dzieci, ale również poprawę jakości życia całej społeczności. Artykuł jest częściowo oparty na danych zebranych w czasie badań terenowych prowadzonych przez autorkę w Dolpo w 2008 roku.

**Słowa kluczowe:** szkoła społeczna, ochrona kultury, lokalna tradycja, religia Bön

*Tłumaczenie Wojciech Chocianowicz*