



Photo: Lopsang Chiring Lama



Tsum Valley

Nature-culture stewardship of the Tsumba people in the Western Himalaya, Nepal

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Tsum Valley is four days' walking distance from the nearest road, one of the most remote areas in the Western Himalaya of Nepal. Tsum Valley is the traditional homeland of the Tsumba Indigenous peoples, who speak a unique *Tsumke* or *Tsumba*, a dialect influenced by Tibetan language. The Valley was declared by its inhabitants as "Shyagya", a non-violent area, in 1920. The Shyagya, a culture of non-violence rooted in Buddhist religion, is the main guiding principle that shapes daily lives of Tsumba. Regular visits to the *Gumbas* (Buddhist monasteries), offering prayers and celebration of different religious and cultural festivals, reaffirms the spirituality. Monasteries, including Mani Bompos, Mani Walls, Kanis, and Chortens, are important cultural heritage sites that forge spiritual connections with the Tsumba territory (Rai and Thing 2020).

For the Tsumba, mountains surrounding Tsum Valley

are abodes of gods, and the Buddhist saint *Milarepa* is believed to meditate in the caves. The valley is considered a beyul (a sacred hidden valley refuge for followers), created by the 8th century *Guru Rinpoche*, who introduced Buddhism in Nepal, and is considered a sacred natural site (Rai et al. 2016; Rai and Thing 2020).

Located in Manaslu Conservation Area, the valley extends 54,417 hectares (544 km²),² is surrounded by majestic Himalayan peaks, and lies between altitudes of 1600 and 6705 metres above sea level (NTNC 2020, Rai & Lama 2020, ICIMOD 2008). It is a respected Buddhist cultural heritage site, attracting pilgrims and tourists alike. The valley provides excellent habitat for wild animals, particularly blue sheep, musk deer, Himalayan thar and snow leopard, with approximately 2,000 species of plants (50 medicinal plants), 110 species of birds, and 33 species of mammals. A diverse natural



54,417
hectares



Custodians:
1,810 Tsumba
Indigenous peoples

environment, it hosts 11 different types of forests (ICIMOD 2008, 15).

The Tsum Valley is divided into Chumchet and Chekampar villages, known as Lower Tsum and Upper Tsum, respectively, across the Budhigandaki-Shiarkhola River. The 33 settlement clusters, with 1,810 people among 529 households, sit between altitudes of 1905 and 3100 metres above sea level (GoN/NPC/CBS 2012, 56).

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The research is partially based on documentation gathered in 2015; see: Rai, J. K and Sudeep Jana Thing (2020) 'Photo Story: A Territory of Life in Tsum Valley, Gorkha District, Nepal'. ICCA Consortium.

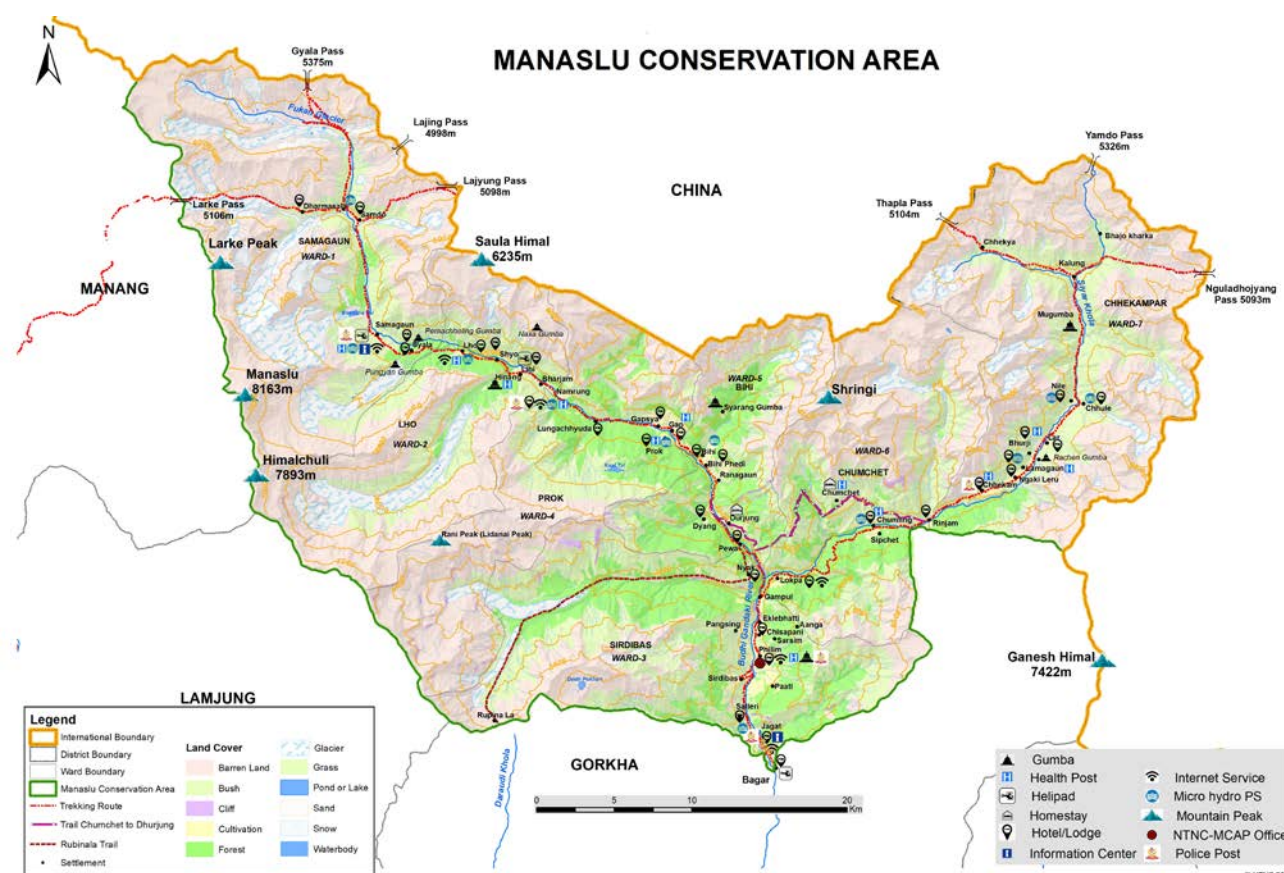
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² Topographic maps of the Government of Nepal 1996; ICIMOD 2008, 2.

“We feel proud to have been born and grown up in such a historically valuable place of the world where nature-culture conservation is sustaining through beliefs and practices based on the culture of non-violence or locally called Shyagya tradition.”

Mr. Nima Lama





Map of the Manaslu Conservation Area; Tsum Valley is the eastern 'arm' of the Area, between China, Yamdo Pass and the Ganesh Himal peak. Map: NTNC 2019

A number of traditional arts and crafts, such as Thanka paintings (special paintings in cloths and woods), stone carving (*Mani*) made mainly by males, traditional woven clothing (such as *bakhu*, *dhocha*) and carpets (known as *galachha*), are relevant to their cultural identity.

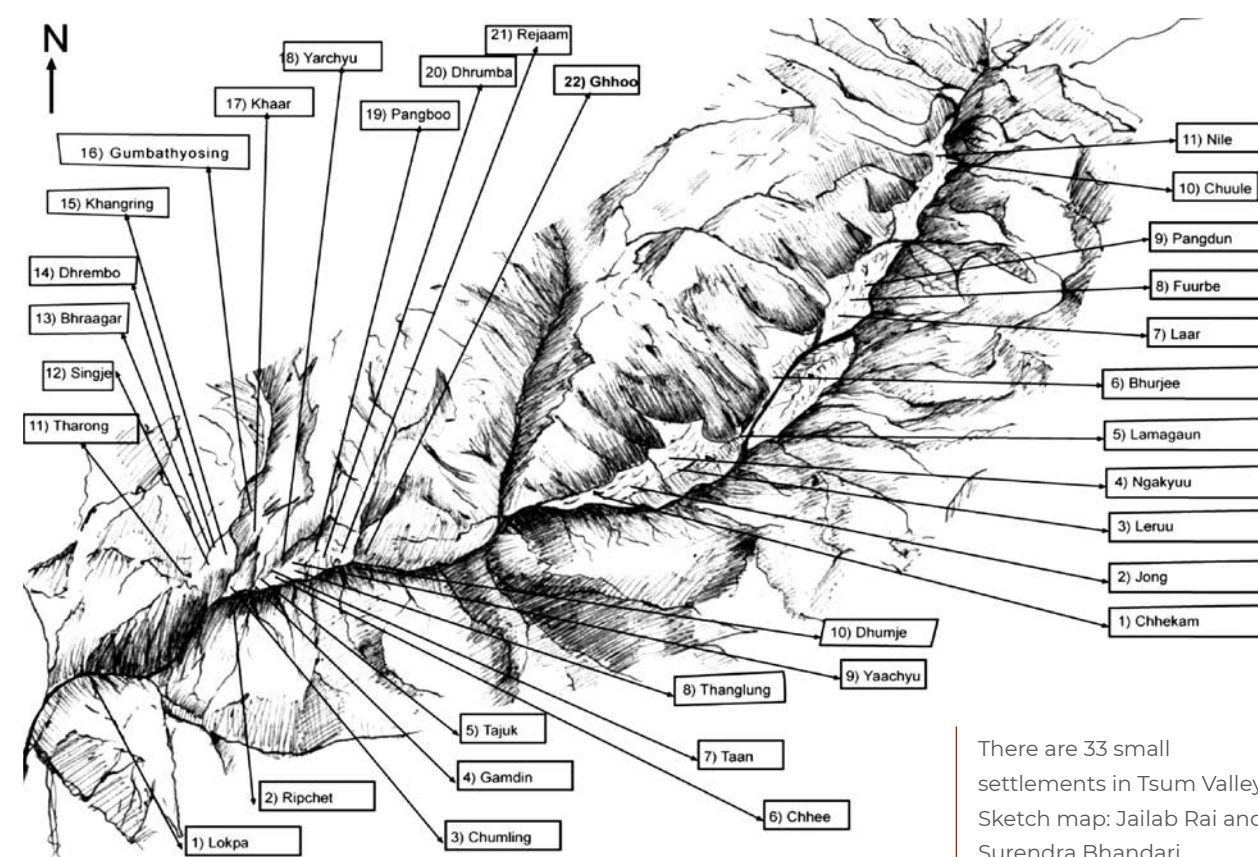
While some Tsumba are employed by government and non-government agencies, there are other forms of income for livelihoods. Major subsistence crops grown in the valley are wheat, bouquet, mustard, beans, potato and vegetables in the Upper Tsum, and wheat, maize, millet, buckwheat, beans and vegetables in the Lower-Tsum. Animal husbandry, primarily for agricultural and milk products used for self-consumption, is another source of livelihoods. The Tsumba also derive income from the collection and supply of Yarcha Gumba (*Codycepts sinensi*) from May to July, and of wild garlic during September and October (ICIMOD 2008, Rai and Thing 2020).

Tourism is another source of income. Tsum Valley is a gateway to the Tibet province of neighbouring China, with the Tibetan border about 15 km from the highest Niley village. For political reasons due to Khampa's movement for the demand of autonomous Tibet, Tsum

Valley remained restricted to foreigners from 1975 until 2008 (Mainali 2014). After continuous lobbying by community leaders between 1991 and 2008, it was opened for tourism. Since then, the number of tourists visiting Tsum Valley has gradually increased.³ Foreigners require two Nepalese permits: one is for entry to the Manaslu Conservation Area and the other is a special permit to enter Tsum Valley. Tourism infrastructure includes 40 hotels, lodges, retail shops, trekking agencies and tourist guides that host visitors to the Tsum valley. The Tsumba have a collective decision to forbid outsiders to buy the lands and operate any businesses in the valley. However, in 2020, only 27 tourists visited the valley (NTNC/NCA 2021). This dramatic decrease is due to the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Governance of the place and the people

Governance in the Tsum Valley is conducted through several institutions: government, which is comprised of elected village leaders, security forces and other government offices; semi-government institutions; other community groups and local committees known



There are 33 small settlements in Tsum Valley. Sketch map: Jailab Rai and Surendra Bhandari

as Conservation Area Management Committees formed by the Manaslu Conservation Area Project; and customary institutions of Tsumba. A village assembly nominates customary community leaders, including the *Ghenchen* (village leader), *Syara* (clan leaders) and *Ghyange* (supporter to the Ghenchen), who are responsible for enforcing community decisions and rules (Rai et al. 2016, Rai and Thing 2020). Their roles include *Bigo Laune* for the settlement of disputes about damage of food crops by domestic animals as well as disputes about the use of pasture lands, forest and agriculture. They also take and enforce decisions about the use of irrigation, arrange *Ne-Tonle* (a harvest ritual in September), and they manage and arrange *Chyokor*, which is a special ritual performed by the village *Lama* (spiritual leader) during ripening of the crops in July. At least one member of every household, generally the head of the family, participates in the assembly to discuss affairs pertaining to current and new leaders.

Traditional doctors known as *Amchi*, with knowledge and wisdom about the use of herbal medicines, also play important roles in the lives of Tsumba (Sherpa et al. 2019) given the inadequate health infrastructure and services. The village *Amchi*, who have exclusive rights over collection and distribution of herbal medicines in

the valley, are entrusted to ensure their sustainable use and ensure three types of *Amchi* persist: (1) ones with specialised knowledge about medication for domestic animals; (2) those who undertake general medication for villagers; and (3) those who offer treatment for poisons.⁴

Likewise, *Lama* (spiritual leaders) play important roles in preserving cultural practices and spirituality. They teach religious norms, values and spirituality to the Tsumba through religious rituals and cultural celebrations (Rai et al. 2016). The *Lama* are respected people in the valley. Becoming a monk or nun is a highly respected choice of religious life. *Laprang*, the local Lama, performs life cycle and village rituals. The *Lama* in Gumba Monastery, also known as *Autari-Lama* (Lama having rebirth), performs major religious celebrations and offers teaching and preaching of religious philosophies and spirituality.

³ A total of 236 foreign tourists visited Tsum Valley in 2015 increasing to 274 in 2016, 476 in 2017, and 387 in 2019 (NTNC2021).

⁴ Currently, there are 9 Amchis in total (3 for general medication, 4 for domestic animals, and 2 for the treatment of different poisons). Ten Amchis from Tsum Valley are working in different places in Kathmandu and in India.





A village assembly meeting. Photo: Christian Chatelain

Two modern community-based organisations, Tsum Welfare Committee and Tsum Shyagya Conservation Committee, were legally formed in 2006 and 2018 under the leadership of Nima Lama. They provide institutional platforms for community development, preservation of culture, religion, and identity of Tsumba, organisation of *Shyagya* festivals, promotion of the culture and practice of non-violence beyond the valley, and establishment of relationships with government, political leaders and conservation agencies.

In 1998, the entire Tsum Valley was subsumed by the Manaslu Conservation Area under the jurisdiction of the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation. The management of this Area is entrusted to the National Trust for Nature Conservation, a conservation agency constituted by a special law in Nepal. The National Trust, through the Manaslu Conservation Area Project, has established local people's committees (7 Conservation Area Management Committees in total) in



the Area, including in Tsum Valley (NTNC 2020b). As part of Conservation Area Management Committees, the Tsumba are also organised into a women's group, farmer groups and youth groups. Conservation and community development activities such as livelihood improvements in Tsum Valley are planned and carried out by two Conservation Area Management Committees (NTNC 2020a, 2020b). Similarly, local government institutions and other institutions of health, education and security carry out social and development activities. Modern and state institutions are gradually replacing Tsumba customary institutions (Rai et al. 2016).

Conservation of nature and culture

The biocultural landscape constitutes scenic Himalaya mountains, lakes, and waterfalls along with common wildlife such as musk deer and blue sheep, all co-existing with Buddhist cultural heritage and sacred sites. Conservation of nature and culture is part of the daily life and spiritual commitment of Tsumba in the sacred valley. The



Horse riding organized in first Shyagya Festival in 2009 in Upper Tsum. Photo: Lopsang Chiring Lama

Tsumba declared Upper Tsum as a non-violent area during a *wang-pooja* celebration in 1920 after endorsing the proposal by revered Lama *Serap Dorje Drukpa Rinpoche*. The declaration note of non-violence guided by Buddhist philosophies includes seven rules. These were written in the *Sambota* script, collectively signed, and have become law (Rai et al. 2016, p. 228; Rai and Thing 2020, Thing 2020):

1. Not to kill any animals;
2. not to hunt;
3. not to collect honey;
4. not to sell animals to butchers;
5. not to trap animals/birds;
6. not to trade meat; and
7. not to burn forests.

Growth of rare tree species, especially at high altitude and a cold climate, is very slow. Thus, the declaration note is vital for conservation of nature and living beings in Tsum Valley. Through cultural rituals and celebrations over time, the Tsumba have sustained collective commitments to the declaration note. In 1939, the *Lamas* from all the Gombas in the Valley and the locals gathered during *Saka-Dawa*, a special event to celebrate Buddha's birth, and expressed commitment to the declaration note. It was again reaffirmed during cultural events in 1965, 1970, 1972 and 1998. Cultural

events and festivities such as *Loshar*, *Nara*, *Dhachyang* and *Shyagya*, and different prayers (*Saka-Dawa*, *Lwahwaaf Tuechyen*, *Yaarney*, *Lahkhang*, *Mani Tyungyur*, *Dukpa Chhesi* and *Farning*) forge community solidarities and sustain nature-culture conservation (ICIMOD 2008; Rai et al. 2016, Rai and Thing 2020).

Leadership of Lamas is also critical. For instance, the leadership of *Kyabje Drukpa Rinpoche* (Ngawang Khanrap) since 1965 is very important for his teachings of *Shyagya* tradition and philosophies during cultural festivals. The Tsumba revere him as the main patron of the *Shyagya* tradition. Similarly, three Labrang Lamas from three villages in Upper Tsum (Niley, Ngak and Khangsar), a Lama in Muu Gumba, and a Lama in Rachen Gumba are other respected patrons of *Shyagya* tradition. Community leader Nima Lama, from Upper Tsum, is another *patron* for his lifetime dedication to the valley.

The Upper Tsum was demarcated with four boundaries and self-declared as non-violent in 2008 when Nima Lama was the Chair of the local government. It was a symbolic claim and a commitment for non-violence in the Tsumba territory. Since then, the Tsumba leaders have developed consensus with government officials deployed in the valley to respect and comply with non-violent culture as the local community bylaws.

The first and second *Shyagya* festivals of Tsumba in 2009 and 2012 included cultural activities such as dances, songs, music and traditional games and sports in addition to preaching from Lamas. These events also served to sensitise non-Tsumba people and government officials. During the 2012 festival, Tsumba from Lower-Tsum also self-declared Lower-Tsum as a non-violent area and committed to the declaration note of non-violence followed by voluntary handover of 58 illegal guns to the government authority (Rai et al. 2016, Rai and Thing 2020).⁵

These cultural festivals not only sustain Tsumba cultural values, beliefs and practices of nature-culture conservation, but also transmit them to new generations. Biocultural conservation and practices of non-violence thrive in the Tsumba territory of life due to the persistent collective actions of Tsumba and their leaders. As Nima Lama acknowledges, *"We are living here with all the wild animals and birds as members of the same family."*

External and internal threats in Tsum Valley

Though Tsum Valley has strong cultural and natural practices, it is facing five major threats. First, the

Photo: Christian Chatelain

expansion of modern conservation and development institutions such as Conservation Area Management Committees, although vital community-based institutions of the Manaslu Conservation Area, are gradually replacing and displacing customary institutions and practices of Tsumba. Second, ongoing road expansion towards Tsum Valley, from Arughat in the south-west and from the Tibetan border in the north-east, is another threat to the territory. There are no appropriate safeguards for cultural heritage



Working on the 'photo story' about Tsum Valley (see Rai and Thing 2020). Photo: Christian Chatelain

sites as evidenced by use of a bulldozer in 2013 during opening of a road track in the valley. This has triggered debates on nature-culture conservation "versus" development in the Tsum Valley as well as more broadly in Nepal.

The third main threat to the Tsum territory is increasing tourism requiring growth of hotels, lodges, shops and retail shops. Increased import of goods in the valley are driving over-population and triggering environmental degradation, pollution, threats to wildlife, and fuelwood consumption by lodges. This is mitigated by rules forbidding outsiders from operating hotels, lodges and retail shops in the valley as well as increased use of liquid petroleum gas.

The fourth threat is rapid out-migration to cities for education and job opportunities, especially among youth. This has resulted in gradual loss of tangible cultural heritage such as costumes, foods, handicrafts, songs, and dances, as well as intangible elements such as values and beliefs alongside the Tsumba language. Schools in Tsum Valley⁶ provide education only up to grade five, and there are concerns that youth living alone away from families are at risk of losing their culture.

Lastly, local livelihoods and natural environments are impacted by climate breakdown-induced natural disasters and extreme weather events such as heavy



"We are living here with all the wild animals and birds as members of the same family."

Mr. Nima Lama

⁵ The centennial celebration *Shyagya* had to be postponed in 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic; see: The Himalaya Times, 11. Feb. 2020, 'Sacred Tsum Valley Gears up for Centennial Celebrations'.

⁶ A total of 7 schools: 3 in Upper Tsum and 4 in Lower Tsum.



Blue Sheep (*Pseudois nayaur*) in Upper Tsum. Photo: Madhu Chettri





“We would like to see our culture, practices and faiths fully internalised and transferred to the new generation, well documented, and [the] importance of Shyagya communicated [to the] national and global community. We want to develop Tsum Valley as one of the examples of [an] open museum for nature-culture conservation and dedicate to the world.”

Mr. Nima Lama

snowfalls, avalanches, no snowfall or less snowfall, decreased length of snow-ice deposits in the farmland and terraces, and decreasing layers of snow in the mountains. Reduction of grasses in open terraces has increased crop raids by musk deer and deer in the valley during the dry season. Pests in farmlands have increased and seasonal harvesting of Yarcha Gumba, a caterpillar fungus (*Cordyceps sinensis*) and major livelihood for Tsumba, has reduced.

Opportunities and desired future of the Tsumba people

The conservation, cultural practices, and spirituality of the Tsumba people are sustained through different community and cultural events such as Shyagya Festivals that forge community solidarity and collective commitment. Biocultural diversity conservation in the Tsum territory thrives due to strong culture, traditions, and religious beliefs. Despite local collaborations with the Manaslu Conservation Area Project, there are currently no state legal or policy designations or recognition for voluntary declaration of non-violence, customary laws and institutions. Despite facing multiple threats, the Tsumba people are committed to sustain Shyagya cultural practices and tradition. They aspire to have respect and appropriate recognition of their territory of non-violence and its associated rules and cultural conservation practices as they co-exist in the co-managed Manaslu Conservation Area. Nima Lama affirms: “We would like to see our culture, practices and faiths fully internalised and transferred to the new generation, well documented, and [the] importance of Shyagya communicated [to the] national and global community. We want to develop Tsum Valley as one of the examples of [an] open museum for nature-culture conservation and dedicate to the world.”

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Yaks are used for transport and ploughing. Photo: Christian Chatelain



About this report

This chapter is part of the Territories of Life: 2021 Report, composed of local, national, regional and global analyses of territories and areas conserved by Indigenous peoples and local communities (sometimes abbreviated as “ICCAs” or “territories of life”). The report is part of an ongoing process to develop the knowledge base on territories of life in support of Indigenous peoples’ and local communities’ self-determined priorities. It is produced by the **ICCA Consortium with the support of several partners**.

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About the ICCA Consortium

The ICCA Consortium is a global non-profit association dedicated to supporting Indigenous peoples and local communities who are governing and conserving their collective lands, waters and territories. Its organisational Members and individual Honorary members in more than 80 countries are undertaking collective actions at the local, national, regional and international levels across several thematic streams, including documenting, sustaining and defending territories of life, as well as youth and intergenerational relations.

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