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Hand-Spinning for Traditional Garments in Ladakh

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Ladakh is in the Indian Himalayas, in a high-altitude region that culturally overflows into Pakistan and China. Ladakh is part of the state of Jammu & Kashmir, in India. The most significant factors influencing the culture and traditions of Ladakh are climate, isolation, and inaccessibility. These factors result in a highly practical culture. Ladakh is isolated from the outside world for much of the year because of extreme cold and harsh winter weather. By necessity, Ladakhis have developed traditions and techniques to make the most of their resources, under specific and extreme climatic conditions. Thus their traditions are based in an authenticity of need.

This paper examines the production of wool for local use in traditional garments, with a focus on spinning and village context in Western Ladakh. My research from 2006 and 2007 centers on the villages of Skurbuchan and Bodh Kharbu, where wool production is typical of Western Ladakh. It is important to remember that Ladakhis are primarily spinning and weaving wool for their own use, occasionally for sale within Ladakh. The fabric described here is not made for export or tourist trade. The efficient production of handspun wool as an imperative is twofold: the extreme cold makes wool clothing a necessity, and their villages' isolation and inaccessibility require Ladakhis to provide for themselves. The continuity of this tradition is assured to the extent that Ladakhis remain in the villages, where the realities of winter will not allow them to neglect, forget, or lose the knowledge of how to process wool for cloth.

As Janet Rizvi noted in the early 1990's, "Ladakh is not a single monolithic entity.... In its relatively small area, it encompasses an enormous variety of landscapes, their differences being based primarily on the great range of altitude. There is settled human habitation from 2700 to 4500 metres, with nomadic camps higher still."¹ For this reason, the perception of resources, and the knowledge and skills surrounding them, are specific not only to Ladakh but to each individual region and village. This has an effect on the researcher, because visiting one village will only show the techniques and traditions of that place, whereas the situation may differ in another village or region. While the techniques shown here are broadly characteristic of western and central Ladakh, I can only claim to represent with certainty the places I actually visited, Skurbuchan and Bodh Kharbu.

For those familiar with Monisha Ahmed's outstanding work on the Chang Tang plateau and her excellent book *Living Fabric* (winner of the R.L. Shep award in 2002,) it is important to note that the traditions of the nomadic people she studied in Rupshu differ in a few significant ways from those of central & western Ladakh. Most notably, the women of Rupshu weave cloth for garments in addition to spinning, whereas western Ladakhi women do not weave.

¹ Janet Rizvi, *Ladakh: Crossroads of High Asia*, (Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1996), 1.

The textile arts in Ladakh are neither glorified and enshrined in museums, nor strenuously marketed to tourists as in other regions of India, but the making of textiles is deeply embedded in Ladakhi society. Textiles for everyday use have been produced for as long as people have inhabited this land, and it became evident to me as I researched that if you ask a Ladakhi of any age, you find some knowledge of textiles, which they take completely for granted and consider nothing extraordinary. The need for warmth makes spinning wool a necessary activity. Both the finished garment and the act of creating it are part of the identity of the Ladakhi villager. Women do all the spinning of sheep's wool for clothing, and being a "spinner" is not separate from being a Ladakhi woman. It is one facet of her identity, as are her other essential actions: herding, farming, preparing food, and raising children.



Figure 1. Women in Skurbuchan village have worked with wool throughout their lives. (Photo by the author).

The term that we might translate as “culture” is *shes-rig* in Ladakhi, defined for me as “the things people know.” This encompasses the daily chores, the simple facts of what must be done, as well as the knowledge of how to do them: how to make fire, cook food, milk cows, manipulate irrigation ditches, grow and harvest barley, and so forth. This whole picture is Ladakhi culture, the knowledge without which people could not survive in such a setting. The production of wool, all the steps involved in turning wool into cloth and garments, are simply part of the *shes-rig*. Everyone knows & is involved with some step in this process. The basics of textile production are passed down within families as a matter of course, and the need to know such things is not questioned. When I asked why the young people need to learn how to spin wool, I was answered with quizzical statements that seemed beyond obvious to the Ladakhis:

“If we don’t teach the children, it will be forgotten.”

“It is life education (*mi-tshe yon-tan*.) If no one learns or teaches the children, how would we get *snambu* [their woven wool cloth]?”

When I pointed out that they can buy *snambu* (pronounced “nahm-boo”) or mill-produced wool, the question came, “But if we buy it, what would we do with all the wool from our sheep?” This retort illustrates how perfectly integrated the facets of Ladakhi life are. Every chore serves a distinct purpose, and every resource they have access to is used efficiently and thoroughly. The sheep are there, producing wool, and putting that wool to use is simply a part of life.

Daily life in Ladakhi villages is a continuous round of processing various resources. Apricots, grown in lower elevations such as Skurbuchan, are a rich example. The fruits are of course collected and eaten ripe, when they are sweet and delicious. But a significant number are also dried on roofs, for winter consumption or sale. The pits are saved for their nutritious and oil-rich kernels. Again, some are consumed or sold, but most of the kernels are lightly roasted and then pounded in stone mortars into a pulp from which oil is painstakingly extracted. The oil extraction process goes on for weeks, with women spending days on their roofs cracking open the hulls first. After the pounding and oil extraction, neither the dry hulls nor the exhausted pulp are discarded: hulls burn well, and are used as kindling for winter stoves, and the pulp is molded into *phang-kor*, cups for supporting the spindles with which women spin wool. Likewise, the process leading from sheep to garment is embedded in the seasonal cycle of work, and is carried out as a matter of course.

The *gonchas* is the identifying Ladakhi garment: inside or outside of Ladakh, anyone wearing this robe is immediately recognized as Ladakhi. This garment was observed by some of the earliest foreign visitors to the region², and continues to be the most practical and reliable winter wear for Ladakhi villagers.

The male version is a *gos*, a long, straight robe buttoned at the shoulder and tied with a sash (*skyed-rags*.) The women wear *sul-ma*, a dress with dozens of pleats at the waist, also tied with a sash. Both are referred to as *gonchas*, which essentially means “what is worn.” Ladakhis don their *gonchas* when they wish to dress up, as for going to town or to religious festivals, weddings and other events. Villagers will also wear the *gonchas* every day, using older ones in the village and saving their best for special occasions.



Figure 2. A sheep shearer in Skurbuchan wears his gos for daily work. (Photo by the author)

² Monisha Ahmed, *Living Fabric: Weaving Among the Nomads of Ladakh Himalaya*, (Orchid Press, Bangkok, 2002), 22.



Figure 3. Phuntsog, a married Ladakhi woman, wears her new sul-ma to go visiting. (Photo by the author)

From my own observation, women are more persistent in wearing this garment on an everyday basis. Men are more likely to work outside the village, as drivers, in business, or in the military, and interaction with the outside world causes them to shed the *gonchas*, whereas women still find it practical and comfortable in the villages. Visiting Ladakh in 2003, His Holiness the Dalai Lama chastised Ladakhis for neglecting their traditional robes, and this resulted in a brief enforcement: during his teachings, there were monitors at the gate who wouldn't let Ladakhis in unless they wore *gonchas*. Ladakhis' attitude toward wearing the *gonchas* reflects their sense of identity in the world at large. As a token garment, it has brought them either pride or ridicule, depending on their status in a given setting. However, the sheer practicality of this handspun garment guarantees its longevity, as long as Ladakhis continue to live in Ladakh.

All hand-woven *gonchas*, in addition to the sashes (*skyed-rags*) and handmade shoes (*pa-bu*), are made from the base fabric of *snambu*. This is a twill weave, woven in long strips about 12 inches (30 cm) wide. Nearly all of the sheep's wool for *snambu* is spun by hand, using wool from local, unimproved sheep. The breeding of sheep is not controlled, and wool quality is highly variable depending on the climate. The wool I saw in Skurbuchan was of a very short staple length, and required either carding or a meticulous hand-picking & pulling process called *da-ma choches*. Hand-picking eliminates more dirt and aligns the fibers smoothly, so that a better quality yarn can be spun. This process is often used for warp yarn.



Figure 4. Abi Yangsom prepares wool for spinning by da-ma choches. (Photo by the author)

The variable quality and staple length of wool may be one reason for the use of supported spindles in Ladakh. Throughout Ladakh the spinning is done by women, using a *phang* - a whorl-less, supported spindle carved from willow wood. The *phang* is supported in the *phang-kor*, a cup made from apricot seed pulp, or a large metal spoon while spinning. I was intrigued by the supported, whorl-less spindle, because most spinning cultures worldwide use some sort of drop spindle (unsupported) for regular sheep's wool. Supported spindles are normally used only for very delicate fibers like cashmere, or for cotton. Delicate fibers can be spun more effectively with a supported spindle because there is no weight-bearing strain on the fiber as it is drafted.

Observing that Ladakhi women utilize every last scrap of wool available, regardless of quality, I concluded that the supported spindle technique must be facilitating this efficiency. Drop spindles are used in Ladakh, but only by men for spinning coarse yarn from goat or yak hair, or for the plying process [described below.]

Spinning becomes part of daily life in the winter, when families are gathered indoors much of the time. The household condenses into one warm room, the winter kitchen, where a fire of wood and dung is kept going in the stove. The women's spindles whir in their cups as the year's wool is spun. Young Ladakhis who leave home to attend school have less exposure to the daily round of work, but girls still learn to spin. Even educated girls will spin at home during the winter holidays, and will be expected to spin for *snambu* as adults.

Abi Sonam started out telling me why they spun so much wool when she was younger: they had no access to other cloth. Ready-made blouses, trousers, and T-shirts were not available in Ladakh 40 years ago; not even the mill-woven cotton or blend fabrics to make them. So spinning was absolutely crucial, and a full-time occupation for women in winter. This alone is a striking thought, to have no ready-made fabrics, in the 1960's. But as Abi Sonam gave voice to her memories, the list of things she used to live without grew. She touched her fingers with her

thumb, counting off the items: we didn't have rice, we didn't have lentils, and we didn't have wheat flour. Only food that was grown here in Ladakh. No kerosene, no propane tanks, no gas stoves - not even matches. We had to make our own fire, and keep it very carefully. We'd go to the neighbor's house with a big spoon and say, "Sister! Can you give us some fire?" And the neighbor would give us some coals so we could start a fire. At night, we'd make a pile and cover it to keep the coals going until morning.

No stainless steel or aluminum pots - only cast iron and hammered copper or bronze. This gave me a new perspective on the traditional Ladakhi kitchen, where the wealth of pots and pans, bowls and utensils is in brilliant, orderly display on open shelves along one wall. Many households have huge copper pots at the bottom of the stack, which could be very old. Abi Sonam's litany made it clear that not only textile work, but every kind of manufacture was essential knowledge for Ladakhis, until very recently. One simply could not go out and buy things. The village had to know how to supply itself with everything necessary, and this knowledge was inseparable from living in this place.

Nowadays, everyone in the family still receives wool *gonchas*, but they are not worn as often and so don't need to be replaced annually. There is still a consistent demand for new *gonchas* for weddings and other occasions, and the habit of spinning all winter remains with Ladakhi families. A woman will spin for *gonchas* for herself and her husband once she is engaged to be married. Without pressure, the spinners seem comfortable spinning enough for one or two garments each year. Women in Skurbuchan told me that if they spin all day long, they can fill five *phang*, totaling about 250 grams of wool. Four kilograms of wool are required for one *gonchas*.



Figure 5. Sonam Lhamo spins wool with the phang in her kitchen in Skurbuchan. (Photo by the author)

There is mill-spun warp yarn available now, which saves considerable time in spinning because the warp must be made very strong. More time goes into the preparation of fiber for spinning warp, and more care is taken during spinning to get a consistent, smooth and dense yarn. Weft yarn can be spun without such careful attention, so many of the women I met are spinning weft now and looking to buy warp yarn.

Handspun singles are wound from two *phang* into double-stranded balls, in preparation for plying. The plying method involves a tall frame with hooks at the top. Yarn is wound on one bottom-whorl spindle and fed up to the top and back down to a second spindle. Both spindles are spun simultaneously counter-clockwise until the twist fills the expanse of yarn, then wound on & the spinning repeated. Ladakhi women normally ply using six spindles at a time on this contraption. The plied yarn is taken to a male weaver who works on a four-harness floor loom outdoors.

Snambu fabric is fulled after weaving, by stomping on it in water, until it shrinks to the appropriate width, and then it is ready to be dyed. White wool is dyed a deep maroon shade of red, and dark wool is dyed black. Natural dyestuffs found in Ladakh were used in the past, and the knowledge of natural dyeing still exists among older Ladakhis. However, people are more likely to use purchased chemical dyes now, or take their *snambu* to professional dyers in Leh.

Although it would seem that labor-saving options such as mill-spun warp would threaten the continuation of hand-spinning in Ladakh, it is important to remember that the majority of Ladakhis are still richer in time than in cash, and anything that enables them to work less will cost money. Therefore, mere availability of time-saving wool-processing does not determine how many people will spin less. One woman actually told me that even if she spins all the wool herself, she must pay the weaver and the tailor, and this makes the *gonchas* expensive for her regardless. Ladakhi villagers are constantly balancing a complex set of economic considerations, and often the work they do with their own hands is all they can truly count on.

For this reason, the tradition of barter and communal work has always been strong in Ladakhi villages. People help one another in the fields and with building projects, and households band together to share responsibilities surrounding marriages, funerals, and religious festivals.³ I found that this mentality informs the use of wool as well. Women in Western Ladakh who own a large number of sheep (more than 10) will share the wool rather than selling it. Phuntsog of Skurbuchan told me that she allows others to take her wool for spinning if they don't have enough. Yangskit of Bodh Kharbu, who owns the most sheep in the village, is a trained *gonchas* tailor. She invites women who need wool to spin from her store, and if they spin all the wool themselves, she will sew their garments at no charge. She only charges if people bring *snambu* from their own wool for stitching, or if she has to spin for them. This shows that she considers it beneficial to have her wool used, whether by herself or others.

The main threat to continued spinning of wool for *snambu* would be if people stopped wearing traditional clothing. Usage has certainly decreased; people do not rely exclusively on the *gonchas* for warm clothing because many other options are available today. However, it is a

³ Helena Norberg-Hodge, *Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1991), 51.

valuable, culturally identifying garment, and the back-order of piled-up *snambu* at the tailor's house in Skurbuchan convinced me that interest in dressing this way is not outdated yet.

Gonchas production is considered lucrative enough that the young weaver and the female tailor I met in Skurbuchan both considered it worthwhile to go for training at the Handicrafts Cooperative in the Ladakhi capital, Leh. They were not carrying on family traditions with their handiwork; rather, they had decided to go through training to equip themselves to earn a livelihood. This indicates to me that the market for *snambu* and *gonchas* in the village is alive and well, and that people consider it part of their future, not only their past.

I believe there is a collective awareness of their proximity to poverty that causes Ladakhis to retain the important skills and knowledge that have enabled them to live in this region until now. Poverty is, of course, a relative term, and was less of a concept in Ladakh before the global market economy penetrated. But it's clear that they can see the tenuous nature of this money-based economy, compared to a lifetime of familiarity with the land and the locally available resources, and such understanding protects their traditions. Collecting sticks and dung for fuel. Making fire and bread from scratch every day. Cultivating barley grain, raising sheep and spinning wool. The preservation of Ladakhi traditions is no mere nostalgia or philosophical stance. The people clearly know that their knowledge is equal to survival. Not only culture is lost if traditional knowledge is squandered: the very ability to survive in their homeland would be lost to them. Authenticity is something they cannot avoid.

Transliteration

The Ladakhi language is considered a dialect of Tibetan, therefore Ladakhi terms have been transcribed here in accordance with the Wylie system of transcription for Tibetan language. In some cases, Ladakhi words are transcribed as I learned them from informants in colloquial use.

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