

STONE CULTURE



Rams' horns and juniper decorate a cairn at Naerung village.

The people of Ladakh believe that their Himalayan paths and mountain passes are peopled by ancient gods – the spirits of animals, such as the ram and ibex, or of water, trees, rocks and air – which were worshipped in prehistoric religions. Although the religion of Ladakh is now Buddhism, the local people tend to worship the same gods in the same places.

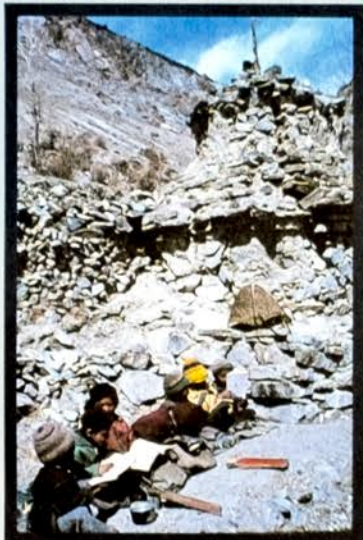
In many of the wild places believed to be inhabited by spirits, there are stone cairns similar to those found on Dartmoor and in Scotland. Often these are just heaps of stones to which travellers add a rock as they pass, hoping to pacify whatever lives there.

Now part of India, Ladakh was formerly an independent Buddhist kingdom. Sandwiched between Kashmir and Tibet, most of its people are of Tibetan origin and their way of life has changed little in the past thousand years. During the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1959, many Tibetans fled across the mountains into exile. Their religion and culture were suppressed in Tibet during the Chinese 'cultural revolution' and their monasteries were sacked, so Ladakh has become one of the few remaining repositories of traditional Tibetan culture.

Stone carving has been a crucial part of Ladakhi religion and art for at least 2500 years. The earliest examples are crude carvings of ibex on rocks, similar to those found in Neolithic caves in France, and circles of standing stones, like Stonehenge.

The most basic stone monument – the cairn – becomes increasingly sophisticated depending on the importance of its location. Often a heap of stones is marked by a pile of ram or ibex horns, reminders again

A school group beside old chorten in Sumda Chenmo village.



Tim Malyon looks at stone carving traditions in the Himalayan country of Ladakh.



Top: the mane wall of Lamayuru Gompa monastery which runs along an ancient silk route. The monastery still runs a Tibetan-style painting school.

Above: an 11th century chorten at Lamayuru Gompa with a more modern version behind.

of the old religion, and a sprig of juniper (a sacred tree in many cultures, used as ornament and incense in Tibetan Buddhism). Sometimes the heap is shaped like a *chorten*, a sacred Buddhist effigy comparable to the symbol of the cross in Christianity.

Often *mani* stones are added to the cairn. These are carved with the mantra *om mani padme hum* ('hail to the jewel in the lotus') in either Buddhist or Sanskrit lettering and are devoted to the foremost Ladakhi Buddhist god Avalokitesvara. Tibetan Buddhists believe that repeating this mantra creates a path towards a higher reincarnation in a future life. Carving the mantra on a stone, therefore, or making an effigy of Avalokitesvara, is a step along that path.

Some of the oldest carvings are over two metres high, on rock faces or standing stones. Such monumental work seems to have died out around 1000 AD, and *mani* stones now are usually between 30 centimetres and a metre long.

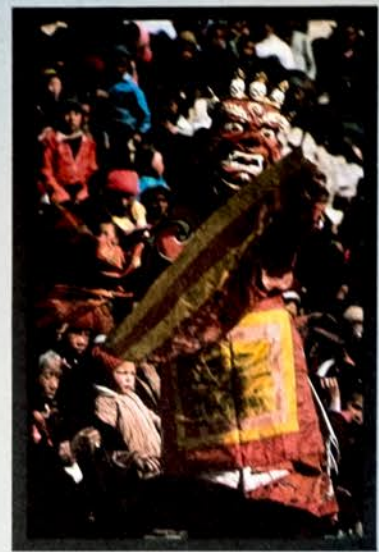
A traveller walking through the mountains comes across literally thousands of *mani* stones. Sometimes whole walls are built along the centre of the path,

particularly near villages and monasteries, covered in carved stones. Believers must always leave such walls on their right-hand side, as a mark of respect, rather like the Christian concept of 'sitting at the right hand of God'.

Stones are carved with a hammer and chisel, or simply a stone and a nail. Many are carved by priests. Buddhist monasteries in Ladakh and Tibet sometimes had painting and carving schools, which taught priests to make elaborate effigies. Now every Tibetan Buddhist priest is taught to write the basic *om mani padme hum* mantra and Tibetan Buddhist education is being revived in monasteries and schools outside Tibet, including some in Ladakh.

Lay people also carve *mani* stones. Some professional craftsmen make their living carving stones and selling them to people to place on a monument as an act of merit, just as in our culture we commission stonemasons to carve tombstones. Ordinary people also carve stones, in simple or elaborate form according to their skill, and in recent years stones have been painted.

The carving of *mani* stones in Ladakh might seem far removed from contemporary British crafts.



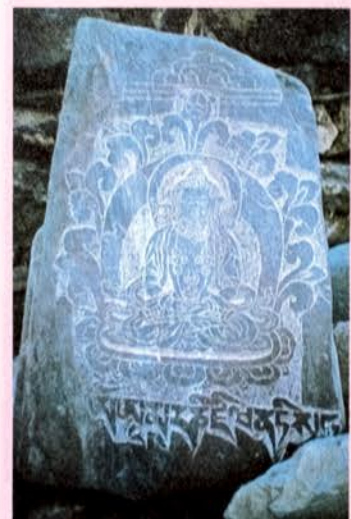
Masked dancer portraying a pre-Buddhist demon.

Yet stone carver Tom Perkins says that he uses the same basic tools as Ladakhi carvers, and he also started his career carving poems and biblical quotations on stones which he then sold.

Although Tom does not see himself as a religious person, 'at least not in the conventional sense', he feels there is more to carving stone than pure function. 'Working in stone makes me feel centred' – the same concept as the chanting or carving of the mantra. 'In Eastern cultures calligraphy, and The Word, are seen as more than just serving a purpose. They remind you of a higher level, a more open-ended interpretation of life, rather than our usual mundane, closed existence.' Much of Tom's time is spent carving to commission, to earn a living, but he likes the idea of simply carving stones and placing them out in the landscape: 'If you came across a stone carving in the wild, that would engender a sense of surprise, of mystery, which appeals to me. The most important thing is doing work for its own sake.'

In Ladakh the monasteries, supported by taxation from the people, finance priest carvers to produce *mani* stones and other works of religious art. In secular Britain, people's taxes are channelled through such state bodies as the Arts Council and the Crafts Council to support artists and craftspeople in non-commercial work. Having marvelled at *mani* stones in the arid wastes of Ladakh, perhaps one day travellers will stumble upon contemporary stone carvings in the wilds of Britain – and be inspired to contemplate their mystery. And in another thousand years, the same comparisons may be made between twentieth-century 'prehistoric' Britain and some future culture.

Mane stone engraving of a meditative Buddha.



TIM MALYON