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DEMONS & DEITIES

Masks of the Himalayas



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Photography by Don Tuttle

The powerful imagery of the Himalayan mask tradition is drawn from the diverse traditions of shamanism, village myths and the classical traditions of Buddhism and Hinduism. In this essay the author probes the 'greater context' of Himalayan masks, finding in them stylistic and thematic affinities with cultures as widespread as those of Eurasia and the Americas, and covering a period extending from the upper Paleolithic era to the present.

Surviving in isolated valleys, and hemmed in by the world's tallest mountains, the peoples of the Himalayas maintain a subsistence economy of pastoralism and horticulture. They identify with the syncretic belief systems known to us as animism, Hinduism and Buddhism, and share a common love of the *masquerade*.¹ The broad dispersal throughout the Himalayan region and beyond of a masking tradition suggests that it has ancient roots.

For the purposes of this article, Himalayan masks will be divided into three main categories. Masks which depict deities, heroes, and comic characters from the 'high culture' of Buddhism and Hinduism have been described as 'classical',² and include monastery and temple masks which are worn by Buddhists and Hindus in dance ceremonies. Many Newari masks (4) from the Kathmandu Valley in Nepal portray Hindu gods and goddesses or subjects from epic dramas such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.³ Classical Buddhist masks often depict figures from the great Buddhist pantheon, including ferocious defenders of the faith such as Mahakala (3). Some of the Buddhist masks introduced here were used in the mysterious dance known in Tibet as *Cham*, in which protector deities are invoked and negative forces are dispersed.

'Village' masks often incorporate elements from the classical Hindu and Buddhist traditions, but their primary defining characteristics derive from local village myths. Lakhe masks (5), popular among the Hindus of the Kathmandu Valley, may be considered to belong

1. Previous pages left: Dharmapala (defender of the Buddhist faith), Tibet, 14th-17th century. Wood and pigment, height 38cm (15"). Widely regarded as the greatest classical Himalayan mask to come to light. Private collection.

2. Previous pages right: Masked ritual in Nepal with masks depicting Hindu deities, 1973. The children are wearing skull masks. Courtesy James Singer, London.



3. Left: Mahakala, the great Kala (the god associated with time), Tibet, ca.18th century. Wood with traces of pigment, height 28cm (11"). Mort Golub Collection.

4. Right: Indra, Nepal, Newari tribe, 17th century. Wood with traces of pigment, height 28cm (11"). This type of classical representation of the thunder god in wood is extremely rare. Mort Golub Collection.





6. Above: Gorgon figure taken from an early Corinthian vase, ca. 5th century BC. Note the characteristic encircled eyes, large teeth and long fangs all to be found in the Lakhe masks of Nepal. Drawing after Napier, *Masks, Transformation and Paradox*, 1986, pl.46.

5. Left: Lakhe mask, Kathmandu Valley, Nepal, ca. 1900. Wood, mirror, nails, pigment, attached ears and teeth, height 24cm (9½"). A strong and rare treatment of Lakhe, a demon who threatens the community during the Indra Jatra festival, and is slain by Shiva, the village protector. This mask bears great resemblance to fanged masks of Borneo, whose stylistic antecedents reach back 2,000 years to the Dong Son bronze age. Mort Golub Collection.

7. Below: Gorgon-like face on a more typical Lakhe mask than (5), Nepal, ca. 1900. Wood, foil and pigment, height 31cm (12"). Private collection.



to this category. Lakhe is a local demon most commonly depicted with characteristically Gorgon-like features (7) reminiscent of the Gorgon face familiar in Mediterranean sculpture and painting traditions (6). Lakhe's appearance, however, is undeniably linked with Indra Jatra, the annual festival associated with the classical Hindu god, Indra. Readers will note that Indra (4) and Lakhe bear similar markings on their foreheads. Village Buddhist masks, largely created by the rural ethnic Monpa and Sherdukpen peoples of Arunachal Pradesh in northeast India and eastern Bhutan, were often used in morality dramas, such as the *Ache Lhamo*, which will be described in greater detail below.

Primarily from the tribal areas of Nepal, another style of mask, the 'Primitive-shamanic', may have been used by sorcerers for purposes of healing, oracle augury and life crisis initiations (8). Our ignorance is great with respect to these tribal masks. One reason for this lack of knowledge is the very remoteness of their geographic origin. While this has favoured their survival, it has also inhibited our knowledge of the people who created them and the cultural traditions requiring their use. I would suggest that these masks are the expression of an ancient pan-Asian mask culture which was still in evidence at the beginning of the 20th century not only in the Himalayas, but also among Indonesian islanders such as the Batak of Sumatra (9) and the Atoni of Timor, as well as among the tribal people of India, the shamans of Siberia (14) and others.

The making and use of masks, born of shamanism, extended into Himalayan village folk traditions and eventually became absorbed into the higher classical traditions, invigorating them and giving them new meaning. In Asia, masks were probably first used in a shamanic context, and for this reason, my discussion of Himalayan masks begins with the primitive-shamanic.

PRIMITIVE-SHAMANIC MASKS

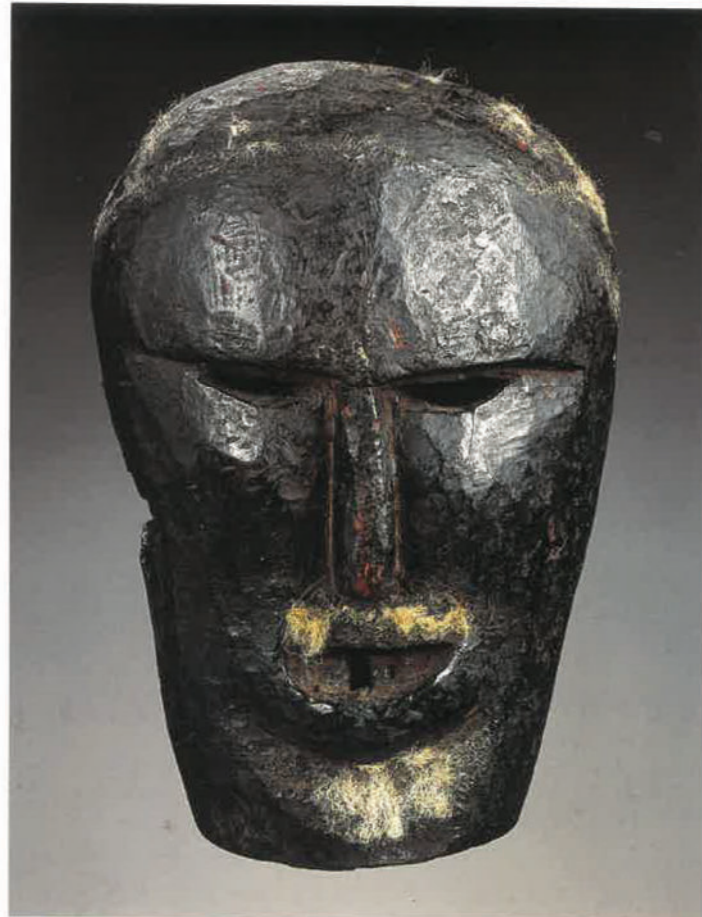
At best, specific ethnic attributions of primitive-shamanic masks are speculative. The reasons for this uncertainty include similarity of function and iconography and the aforementioned isolation of these peoples from Western observers. However, it is clear that most Himalayan shamanic style masks were created in Nepal. The Magar and Gurung tribes, living at an altitude of 7,000 feet in the middle hills of the Himalayas, have produced hardwood masks which tend toward a glossy, high patina arising from exposure to smoke and butter fat (10). Less well known ethnic groups of the middle hills include the Sherpa, Bhotya, Tamang and Rai, some of whose masks will be mentioned below.

Masks of the lowland Tharu people, living near the Indian border, are often of a softer wood, pigmented with polychrome or white kaolin clay. Hardwood examples also exist.

10. Facing page: Gurung or Magar mask, Middle Hills, Nepal, 17th/18th century (?). Wood, grass, nails, height 26cm (10 1/2"). This character is sometimes thought to be a joker, however we cannot be certain that these masks did not have different identities and ritual functions at the time of their creation, changing with the popular culture over time. Mort Golub Collection.

8. Below left: Primitive-shamanic mask, Middle Hills, Nepal, 17th/18th century (?). Wood, lichen, height 24cm (9 1/2"). Note the high cheek bones and strongly North Asiatic eye slits. Mort Golub Collection.

9. Below: Karo Batak mask, Sumatra, 19th century. Wood, feathers, pigment, height 32cm (12 1/2"). Used by the Batak in funerary rites, then typically destroyed, few survive today. These rare masks display great affinities to the tribal masks of Nepal. Private collection.





11. Monkey mask, Rajbansi, Tharu region, lowland Nepal, 19th century. Wood and pigment, height 28cm (11"). A particularly demonic Hanuman in Hindu village style. In the epic poem the *Mahabharata*, Hanuman is the helper of the great god Rama, but it is likely that the fierce monkey demon represents an even more ancient tradition. Mort Golub Collection.

Some masks from the Tharu tribe are among the most primitive examples to have come to light, while those of the Rajbansi (village dwellers in the Tharu) display iconography more directly derived from Hindu models (11). The latter are examples of what I have termed village masks, to be discussed in greater detail below. An interesting illustration of the distinctions between primitive and village Tharu masks can be seen in plates 11 and 22.

On first examination, these masks appear to defy categorisation. Each mask seems to be unique. But after viewing many, we begin to see that they fall into iconographic groups. Masks with fur attachments, creating a bearded, mustachioed character (or characters), whose identity remains undocumented (9, 10) are often encountered. Other masks, probably from the Middle Hills, do not now possess bearded attachments, but perhaps once did, and may therefore also belong to this group.

Another character, with a lumpy head and brutish facial features, also appears often; we have dubbed this type 'Potato Head' (12). Markings on the forehead sometimes offer a means of classifying masks. One example (13) bears a prominent trident mark – an attribute of the Hindu god Shiva – and many masks with this mark have survived. However, in this context the trident does not necessarily imply a knowledge of Shaivite religious dogma, but may simply be an instance of a symbol borrowed in isolation from its original meaning.

Other masks display a solar disc above a crescent moon, but again the meaning of such a motif remains as yet unclear. The mask illustrated in plate 16 has a ring in his nose which is a common feature of the Tamang tribe, though we cannot be certain that this particular type arises from the Tamang ethnic group.

The Rai are known to fashion house-protecting masks from tree fungus (17), while another multi-ethnic character mask is created from felt and goat skin.⁴ The red pigment around the mouth of plate 18 may well symbolise blood sacrifice, either animal or perhaps (in former times) human.

We may infer great age for these masks. Their black, shiny patina and their surfaces of multi-layered pigment all suggest an unspecified but undeniable antiquity. That they have survived for so long suggests they were greatly valued by the Himalayan societies that created and used them. Passed on as heirlooms from generation to generation, each use added sacred power. It is also clear that old masks were repaired rather than discarded (16).

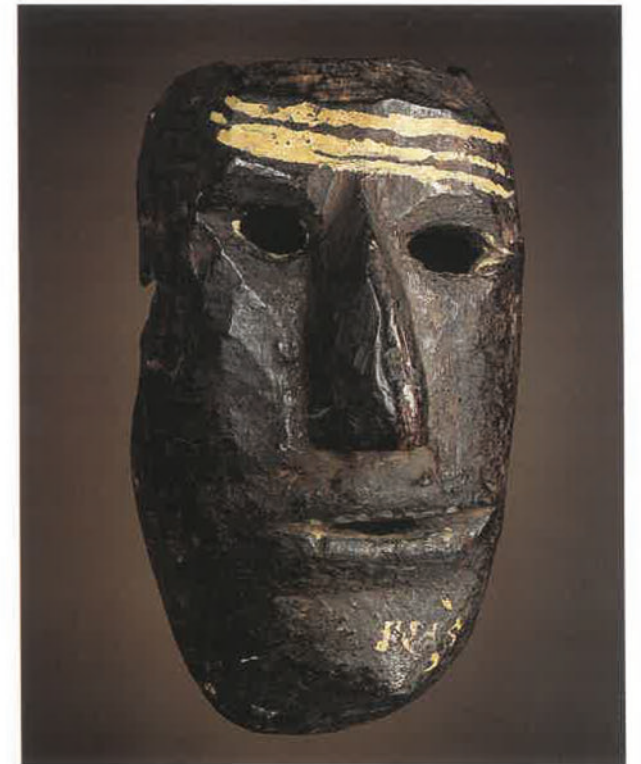
There can be little doubt that many of these masks are hundreds of years old. Precisely how they were used we cannot say, but we may infer much by examining, albeit briefly, the principles of shamanism.

THE ROOTS OF PRIMITIVE-SHAMANIC MASKS

Shamanism is the term commonly used to describe the indigenous belief systems of the ancient cave painters of Europe, the autochthonous Asian minorities, and the North and South American Indians. More of an animist world view than a religion, it is thought to have been brought to the New World from Siberia by reindeer hunters following their prey at the time of the last Ice Age, circa 15,000 BC.

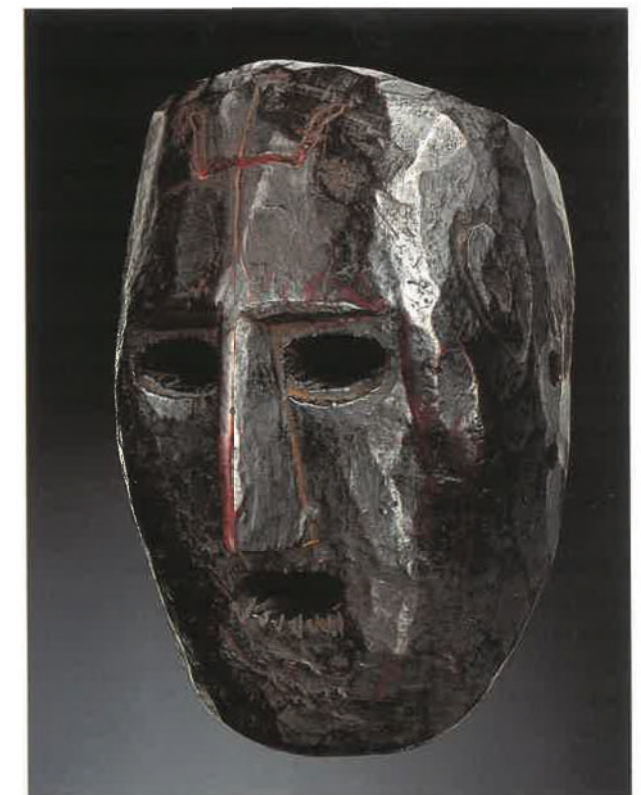
The etymology of the word shaman is interesting. Long believed to be derived from the Siberian Tungus word *saman* (itself thought to be native Altaic), it has recently been suggested that its etymology goes deeper still. It seems that the Siberians borrowed the term from the Chinese *shamen*, meaning 'wandering Buddhist monk', to give title to their own ancient religious practices. This linguistic relationship reflects the respect felt by the Siberians for the awe-inspiring Buddhist practices which they observed. As discussed in greater detail below, Buddhism also assimilated elements of shamanic practices.

Certain themes present themselves wherever shamanism is found. For example, the shaman is not the greatest warrior of the tribe, an office more likely to be held by its chief. Rather, the shaman often begins his or her life as a sickly individual – either physically or mentally impaired. There comes a time when he or she must depart



12. 'Potato Head' mask, Middle Hills, Nepal, 17th/18th century (?). Hardwood, pigment, nails, height 28cm (11"). The three stripes on the forehead may relate to Vainavite practices. Mort Golub Collection.

13. Mask with trident marking on the forehead, Middle Hills, Nepal, 17th/18th century (?). Wood, height 21cm (8 1/2"). Possibly associated with the classical Hindu god, Shiva. Mort Golub Collection.





14. Left: Maskoid talisman depicting Old Man Borto, from a shaman's costume, Buriat tribe, Siberia, 19th/early 20th century. Wood, metal, skin, trade cloth. Ethnographic Museum, Leningrad.



15. Right: Ordos/Western Han amulet, ca. 3rd century BC, with steppe tiger motif. Bronze, length 10cm (4"). Vicki Shiba Collection, Mill Valley.

18. Facing page: Mask, Middle Hills, Nepal, 17th/18th century (?). Wood, pigment, height 26cm (10 1/2"). Mort Golub Collection.

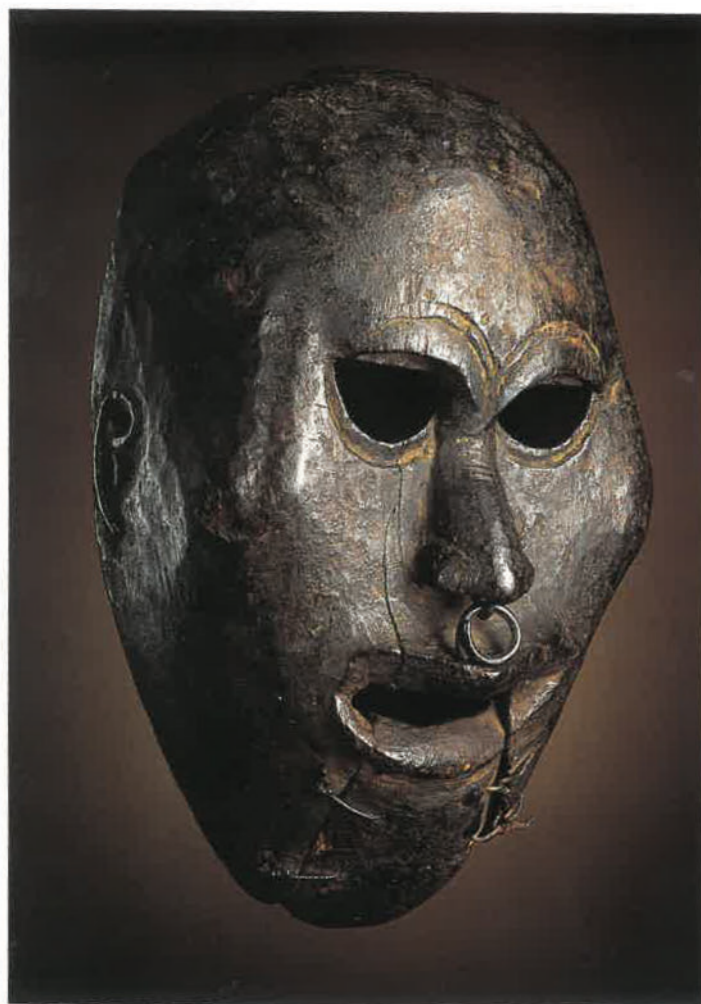
the community and live alone,⁵ and it is during this isolation that the shaman calls upon nature spirits, such as animal totems, to be vehicles of self-healing. If unsuccessful, he or she is not heard from again. However, assuming a positive outcome, the individual returns to the community empowered by these spirits in strange and mysterious ways. As a result of this 'conversion experience', such an individual may live within the village, but is always perceived as socially distinct from others in the community.

And what role does a shaman play in his or her community? Ancestor spirits hover nearby, monitoring adherence to local traditions and taboos. They require careful propitiation. Moreover, all of man's ills ultimately derive from the spirit world. Malevolent spirits must be subdued. All of nature is alive with the supernatural. The shaman, through his or her magical interventions, operates on this other plane. Existentially, the individual who is 'the other' within the earthly community more truly inhabits the world of the spirits.

Fertility and 'life crisis' transitions are the basis of many animist concerns and rituals. These include birth, puberty, marriage, attaining a social rank (status) and death. At these moments of transition, an individual is in grave danger as he 'dies' in terms of his former self and has not yet been reborn into his new identity. At these moments of vulnerability,

16. Below left: Mask, Middle Hills, Nepal, 17th/18th century (?). Wood, metal ring, wire, height 23cm (9"). Note the repairs to the jaw, indicating that masks were conserved rather than discarded. The nose ring suggests a possible Tamang origin. Mort Golub Collection.

17. Below: Mask, Rai tribe, Middle Hills, Nepal, 19th century or earlier. Tree fungus, height 33cm (13"). Associated with protection of the home. Mort Golub Collection.





19. Padmasambhava mask, Tibet or Bhutan, 18th/19th century. Paper mulberry, paste, pigment, height 33cm (13"). Padmasambhava was the Indian Tantric Buddhist master who helped to subdue the malevolent animist spirits of Tibet. Mort Golub Collection.

it is the shaman who ushers the initiate's soul across the uncertain gulf. Therefore, the shaman serves as a bridge between this world and the next, acting as a 'soul guide' to ease these life passages.

In order to operate on this higher plane, the shaman must fully identify with the powers which he hopes to wield. Masks are one of the empowering mediums by which the shaman 'becomes' the spirit which he invites to possess him. Such possession is described as an ecstatic experience. Other tools which help bring about this transformation include ritual costume (20), weapons, drums, and perhaps psychotropic substances, including fly-agaric mushroom (*amanita muscaria*) and hemp (*cannabis*).⁶

The shaman functioned not only as priest of this other world, but as a practising physician whose knowledge of drugs extended to practical cures for physical ills. These organic medicaments might be administered during rituals involving mask use for demonic exorcisms.⁷ Folk medicine entailed a great understanding of ethno-botanical pharmacology. This knowledge was preserved from generation to generation, and thus the office of shaman encompassed that of ecological conservator.

SHAMANISM IN THE HIMALAYAS

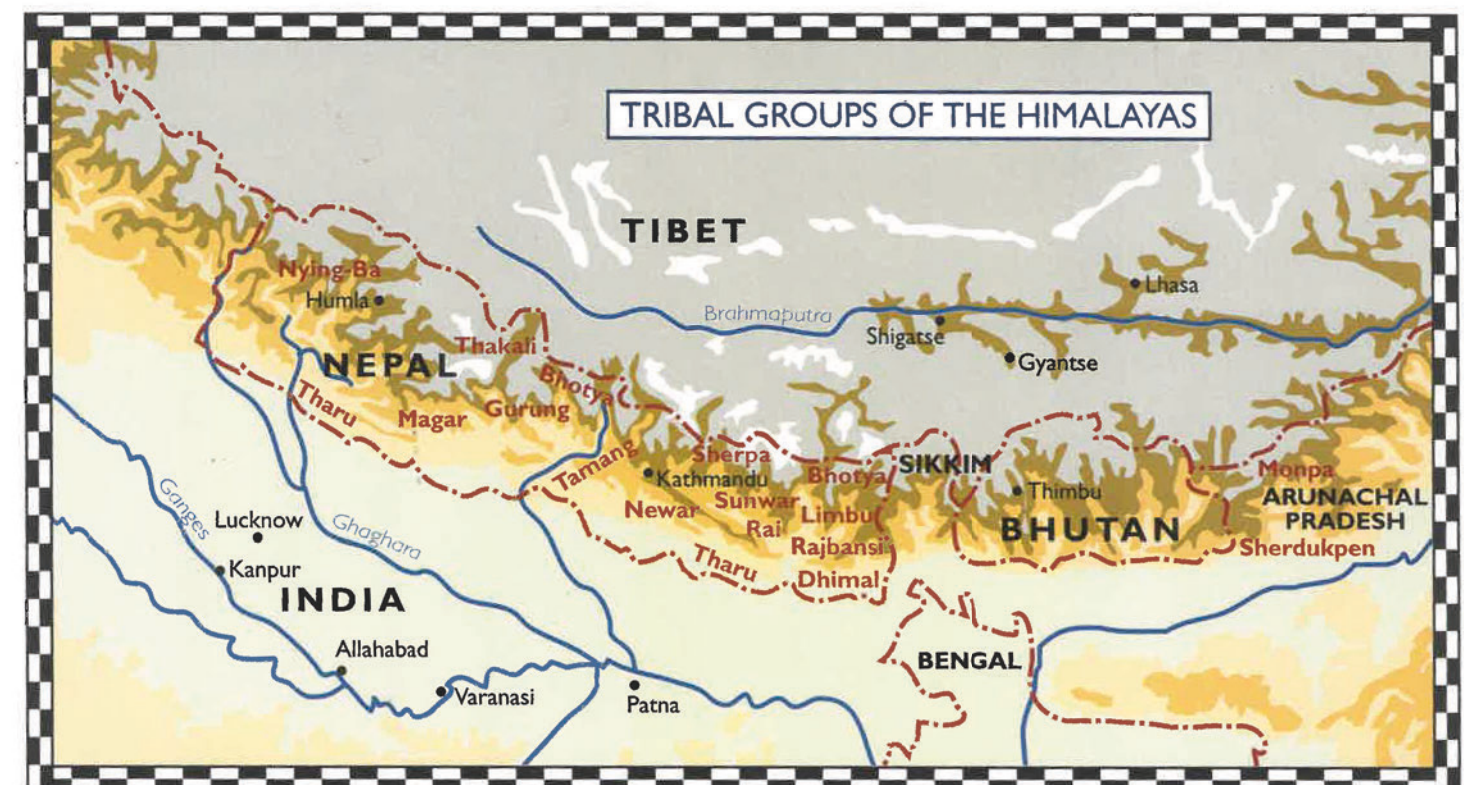
Central Asian shamanism was diffused on horseback. Early archaeological evidence suggests that shamanism permeated a bronze-using culture stretching from Tibet through Ordos, west China, and southern Siberia. Across this territory, two primary cultures existed, often in opposition – settled farmers and aggressive, nomadic herdsmen. Both held animistic beliefs, each using shamans to intercede in the spirit world for their own particular ends.

Icons of the aggressive herdsmen include animal deities expressed in an art that has come to be known as the 'animal style'. Subjects depicted include the steppe tiger (15) leaping on the back of a deer, reflecting the theme of victor and victim. A lineage of shamanic barbarians must include the Scythians (6th to 4th century BC), the Huns (300-100 BC) and later, the Mongols (Genghis Khan, circa 1162-1227, and his descendants). The settled peoples, frequently targeted by the aggressive horsemen, sought refuge in remote valleys where their descendants may still be found today.

Himalayan scholars generally believe that the origins of the Tibetan people lie in the nomadic, non-Chinese Ch'iang tribes who lived off animal husbandry many centuries before the Christian era in eastern Central Asia and in the far northwest border region of China.⁸ It is highly likely that they participated in the Central Asian culture of shamanism and the migrations broadly described above. The physical evidence of this prehistoric (pre-7th century AD) shamanic culture can still be found in Tibet today. The Tibetan cultural historian, R.A. Stein draws attention to "the sets of minhirs and tombs arranged in stone circles in the lake region on the southern fringes of the Changthang [the northern portion of the Tibetan plateau]; and the 'animal style' in the decoration of metal objects (knives, stirrups, buckles, etc.) practised at Derge and in Amdo [in eastern Tibet], which is similar



20. Siberian shaman's costume with copper mask, multiple hanging maskoid talismans, skin, bronze mirrors. Ethnographic Museum, St Petersburg.



to that of the Ordos bronzes and the 'Scythian' art of the steppes"(15).⁹

Some of the cultural minorities of Nepal preserve an archaic Tibetan tongue. They are thought to have migrated from the central Tibetan plateau long ago. Certain scholars suggest that insight may be gained into the culture of pre-Buddhist Tibet by examining today's Magar and Gurung tribes of Nepal.¹⁰ It is my contention that the primitive-shamanic style masks of Nepal (14, 21), so similar to those of Siberia, are a continuation of a common type possibly used in Neolithic Tibet.

Shamanic traditions existed in India as well. These traditions are preserved among the tribal minorities of Central India, for example in Rajasthan. The stylistic conventions of their masks are most akin to those found on the Tarai (22), not unreasonably given their relatively close geographic proximity.

THE ROOTS OF CLASSICAL & VILLAGE MASKS

The tribal minorities of India were pushed aside by the advances of the Aryans during the second millennium BC. Little is known about these Aryan tribes except that they entered India through Afghanistan and the Hindu Kush, speaking a proto-Indo-European language. They preserved an oral tradition of the *Vedas* (which were to become the fundamental Hindu scriptures), extolling philosophical principles of *karma* (the laws of cause and effect), caste, and the authority of the priestly class. By its very nature, Hinduism is syncretic, absorbing many indigenous belief systems, including the worship of nature spirits. One finds many elements of animism, and by extension the principles of shamanism, deeply imbedded in this 'high culture' religion.

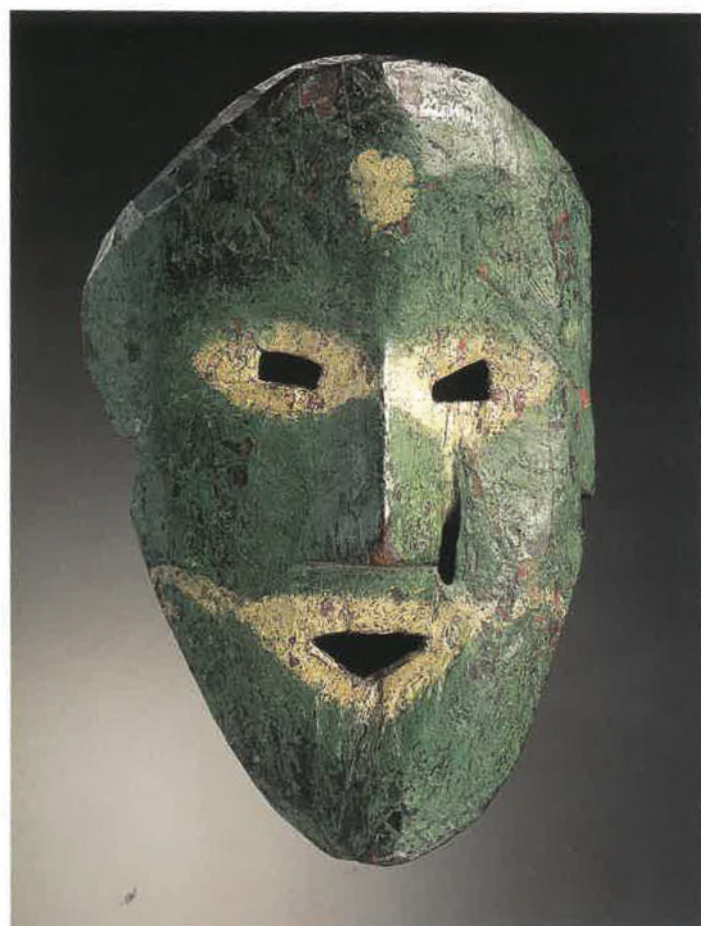
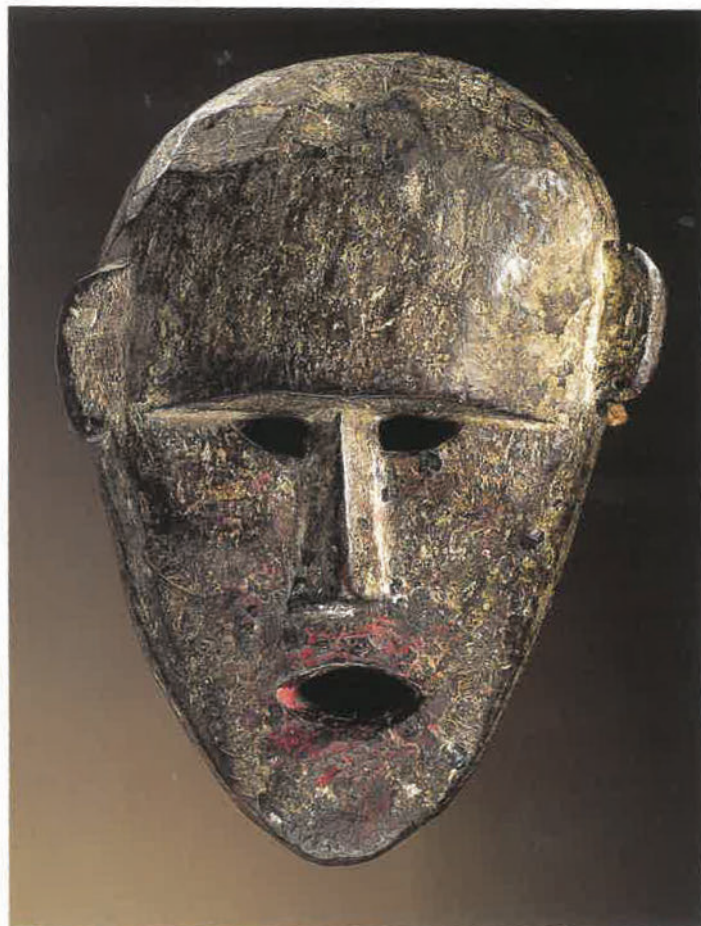
The other great Indian religious tradition to influence Himalayan masks is Buddhism. Biographical details of the Buddha ('The Awakened One'), historical founder of the faith, are fairly well established. Born a prince of the Shakya clan in Kapilavastu, near the present border of Nepal and India, he was appropriately named Siddhartha (He whose aim is achieved) Gautama, and lived from approximately 560-480 BC. Isolated within the walls of his father's opulent palace, he was spared the knowledge of human suffering. In a series of excursions outside the palace during his twenties, he encountered the existential suffering which all must face: poverty, sickness, old age, and death. These encounters so moved him that he renounced his birthright and became an ascetic, joining yogis in the forest. After seven years of meditation and ascetic deprivation, he achieved Enlightenment under the Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya.

After some initial hesitation, he decided to share his hard-earned insights and spent his remaining forty-five years teaching. The Buddha's teachings are rooted in a compelling

23. Facing page: Dharmapala mask, in a style reminiscent of the Tang dynasty, 18th century (?). Wood and pigment, height 56cm (20"). Mort Golub Collection.

21. Below left: Mask, Middle Hills, Nepal, 17th/18th century (?). Wood with pigment. Height 24cm (9 1/2"). The brow-ridge treatment is similar to the Buriat example in pl.14. Mort Golub Collection.

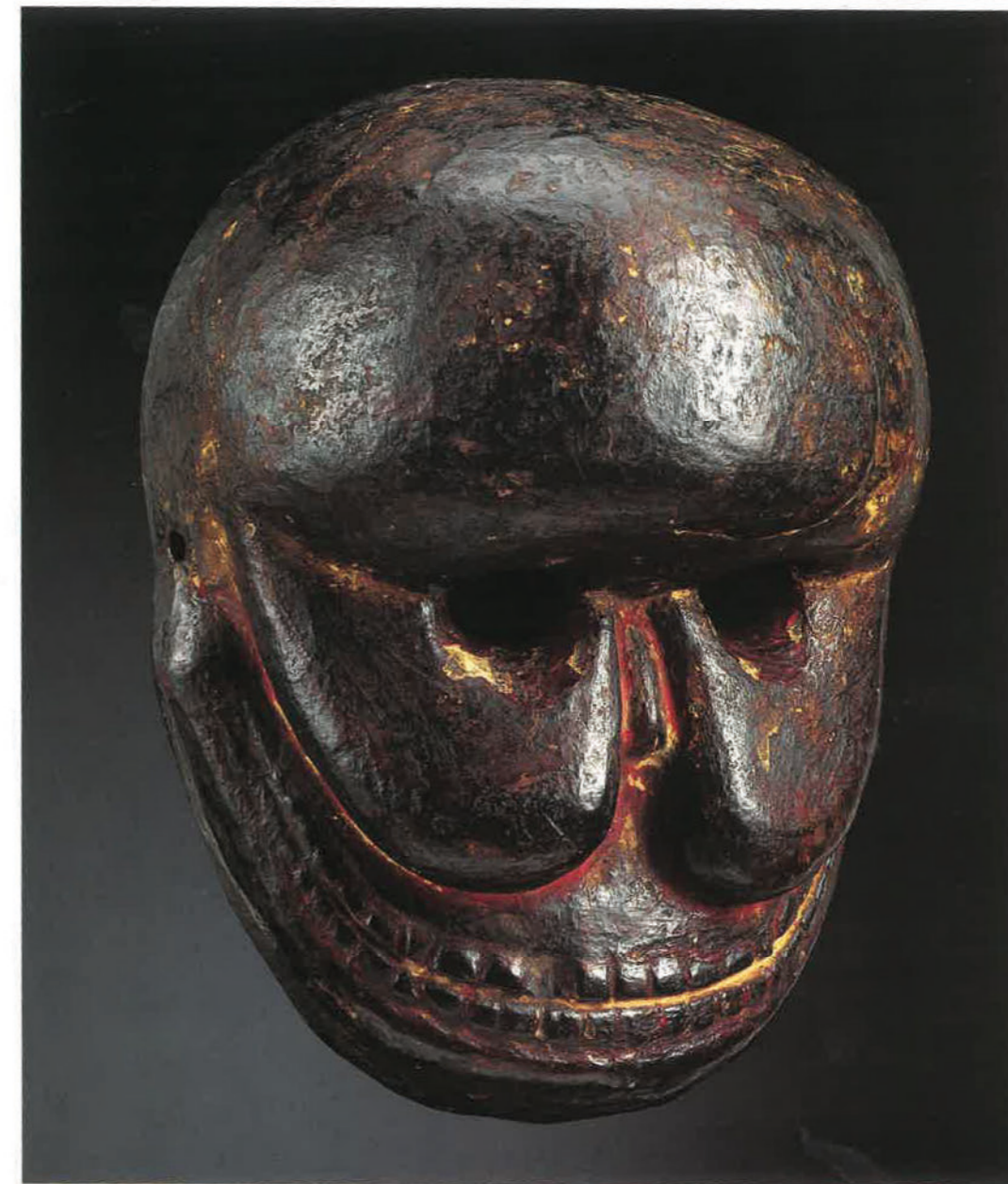
22. Below: Mask, Tharu tribe, Nepal, 19th century. Wood, pigment, height 30cm (11 1/2"). Strongly reminiscent of eskimo masks, the iconography may relate to masks from tribes of middle India. Private collection.





24. Animal spirit mask, Tibet or Bhutan, 18th/19th century. Paper mulberry, paste, pigment, height 28cm (11"). Perhaps the animal incarnation of Padmasambhava (19). Mort Golub Collection.

25. Chitipati (Lord of the Funeral Pyre), Nepal or Tibet, 18th century. Wood, pigment, height 20cm (8"). Mort Golub Collection.



26. Garuda devouring nagas, tokcha ('fall from sky') talisman, 10th-12th century. The iconography of this figure closely relates to that of (27). Dated Japanese Garuda masks contemporary with this talisman are known. Height 8cm (3"). Mort Golub Collection.





observation: despite all the efforts of human beings to find happiness and avoid pain, their lives continue to be filled with suffering and dissatisfaction. However, the Buddha did not stop there. He recognised that the causes of suffering lie within our very own minds: they are delusion, attachment, aversion, pride, and envy. The Buddha also realised that it is possible to free oneself permanently from suffering through a rigorous and well-structured training in ethics, meditation, and discriminating insight, which leads to a profound understanding of the way things really are, that is, enlightenment – a state of profound freedom and complete fulfilment.

The original Buddhist teachings were atheistic. However, it may be observed that it is human nature to yearn for a personalised saviour. As the tradition was passed from generation to generation, many buddhas and bodhisattvas (compassionate beings who assist sentient beings in their efforts for spiritual salvation) came to form a vast Buddhist pantheon.

THE SPREAD OF BUDDHISM

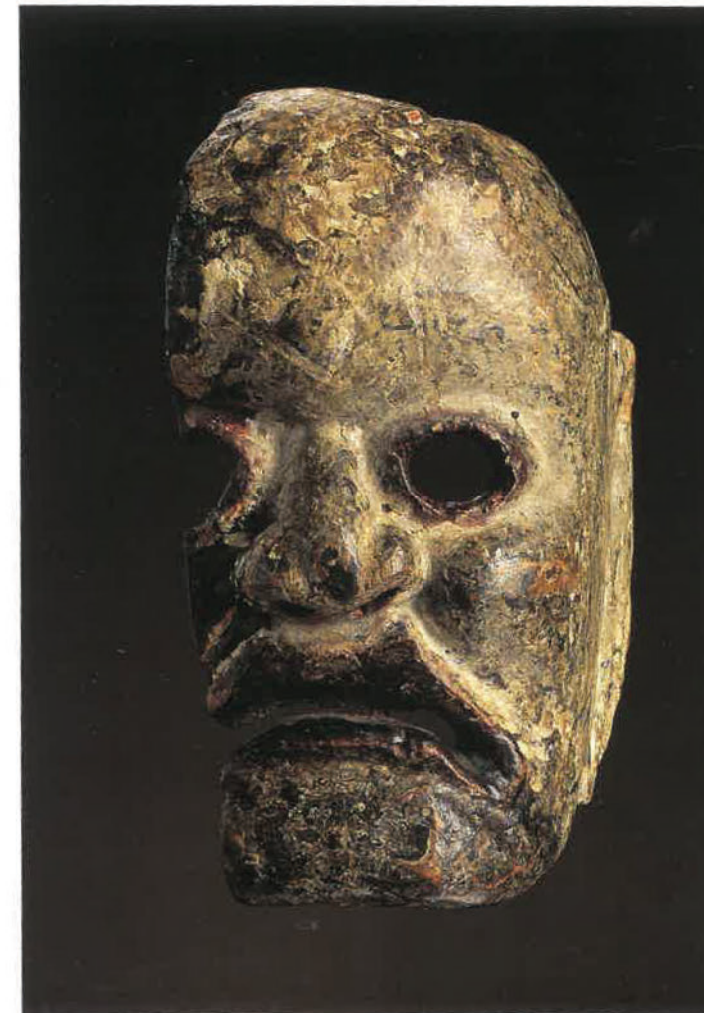
From its humble beginnings under the Bodhi tree at Bodh Gaya, the teachings of the Buddha spread overland and by sea to nearly all parts of Asia. Buddhism's path to salvation depended largely on the individual's own efforts, and Buddhism's doctrine of self-reliance and non-violence appealed to the merchant class in India and thus it spread along trade routes – north through Central Asia, into China and then into the Far East, Korea and Japan. It also spread south to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia – Burma, Thailand, Indo-China, and Indonesia. Nepal and Tibet embraced Buddhism at the zenith of its development in India, and it was this tradition which eventually came to permeate Mongolia, Manchuria, Kalmykia and Tuva (the latter two in present day Russia). It is interesting to note that in this final group of countries a form of Tibetan Buddhism returned to the region frequently associated with the origin of Central Asian shamanism.

Buddhism entered Tibet in the 7th century AD. The transformation of Tibet from an essentially animistic culture to a radiantly Buddhist one is a fascinating story. One of the major players in this tale is Padmasambhava. A great Indian Tantric Buddhist adept from the Swat Valley (modern day Pakistan), he was instrumental in founding the first Tibetan Buddhist monastery at Samye (777-779 AD), south central Tibet. It is said that he overpowered the ancient mountain gods of the old religion (Bon) and converted the wrathful deities, convincing them to become defenders of the new faith.

27. Facing page: Garuda mask, Bhutan, 18th/19th century (?). Wood, mountain goat horns, pigment, height 36cm (14"). This subject appears in many masked dramas. Mort Golub Collection.

28. Below left: Mask fragment, Monpa-Sherdukpen tribes, Bhutan, 12th-15th century (?). Wood and pigment, height 21cm (8 1/2"). A spirit figure is represented closely resembling ancient Japanese Nō theatre masks. Mort Golub Collection.

29. Below: Houshang mask, Monpa-Sherdukpen tribe, East Bhutan or adjacent regions of northeast India, 18th/19th century (?). Wood, wool, bamboo, height 21cm (8 1/2"). Houshang, the Chinese monk who attempted to convert Tibet to a Chinese form of Buddhism in the 8th century, is perceived here as a comic foreigner. Mort Golub Collection.





32. Facing page: Steppe tiger mask, Monpa-Sherdukpen, Bhutan, 19th century. Wood, cord, height 23cm (9"). Formerly referred to as Sherdukpen style. Mort Golub Collection.

30. Left: Monpa-Sherdukpen mask, 19th century. Wood, pigment, trade cloth, height 20cm (8"). This mask belongs to the same stylistic family as (33) and (34). Mort Golub Collection.

31. Below: Steppe tiger mask with Tang stylistic references, Monpa-Sherdukpen, Bhutan, 19th century or earlier. Wood, cord, height 23cm (9"). Formerly referred to as Monpa style. Georgia Sales Collection.





Padmasambhava is also said to have introduced the Vajra Dance (*rdo-rje gar*) at Samye Temple. This practice continues today under the name *Cham* in celebration of Padmasambhava's conquest of the Bon religion. Taking place in a monastery, masked monks in deep meditation perform dramas first imported from India and prescribed by Sanskrit-based Tantric texts. The ritual lasts for three days.¹¹

In masks, Padmasambhava appears in his natural and animal manifestations (19, 24). Wrathful protectors of the faith or *dharmapalas* (23), including Mahakala (1, 3), exhibit their fierce *visages* as spectators enter into the transformation process of the masquerade. In this way, Buddhist doctrine is transmitted to literate and non-literate alike through meditation in action. This dance tradition takes a form known as *Mani Rimdu* in Nepal.

Tantric Buddhism often invokes imagery associated with death. Such imagery points both to the demise of ego which is associated with spiritual transformation, and to the all-too-brief duration of our physical existence. Chitipati, the skeletal Lord of the Funeral Pyre, is a particularly powerful example of this iconographic theme, and is easily identified as a grinning skull mask (25). Remarkably, but also typical of the wise Buddhists of Tibet, Chitipati is also seen in a humorous light, his joker-like antics offering relief from the profundity of the other lessons observed during the Cham drama.

Remarkable masks are also associated with the Tibetan Folk Opera known as *Ache Lhamo*.¹² A morality play involving participation from laymen and women, this popular drama uses dance and song to illustrate the power of Buddhism to overcome all negative forces. Another folk dance tradition, practised by the Monpo and Sherdukpen people of Bhutan, is the Deer Dance. The story tells that a young man goes into the forest and shoots a deer, having already gathered sufficient food for his family. The deer transforms himself into a god who teaches the hunter that he should not take more than he needs from nature. In this way, the morality play underscores responsible wildlife ecology. A variety of masks (27-34) can be associated with these colourful dramas, and are often used interchangeably as their characters appear in more than one drama.

The distinctions made by previous authors between Monpa and Sherdukpen masks were based on the mid-century observations of Verrier Elwin. However, recent investigations into this restricted area by Thomas J. Pritzker could not support this distinction, hence the use in this article of both names when referring to masks that were formerly attributed to one or other of these ethnic groups. This is not to say that one cannot recognise stylistic differences, but that they may be attributed to regional as opposed to ethnic variations (31, 32). The extraordinary similarity between Monpa-Sherdukpen (28, 29) and Japanese (36) masks is no accident. It is clearly a reflection of a shared experience of Buddhist culture.

The subject of Himalayan masks is difficult to narrow. In considering the masking phenomenon of the region, we are drawn into a discussion of an ever-widening geographic and historic scale. Through the microcosm of this topic, we may access a macrocosm as broad-ranging as Eurasia and the Americas, and a time-span stretching from upper Paleolithic to the present. The intention here has been to place the discussion in the wider context, for it is in understanding the depth of their contacts that we recognise the great integrity of Himalayan masks. We perceive objects of relevance and become aware of a new art form.

Himalayan masks represent a truly international style, with stylistic affinities as far flung as Japan (36), Alaska (35), and Khotan. Underlying this international style is a cultural arrow through time, beginning with the shamanism of the steppes, and moving through subsequent Hindu and Buddhist

33. Facing page: Monpa-Sherdukpen mask, eastern Bhutan or Arunachal Pradesh, 19th century. Wood, pigment, height 20cm (8"). Mort Golub Collection.

34. Below: Monpa-Sherdukpen mask, eastern Bhutan or Arunachal Pradesh, 19th century. Wood, pigment, trade cloth, height 20cm (8"). Mort Golub Collection.





35. Eskimo mask, Tunghak tribe, Ugashik, southwest Alaska, collected 1887. Wood, hair. Note the rictus, a universal trait in the vocabulary of shamanic masks. Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University.

masquerade traditions. In addition, a continuous dynamic of cross-pollination occurred between tribal and monastery masking traditions, reinvigorating both. Ultimately, following the insights of C.J. Jung – it can be argued that the psychic ‘deep structure’ motivations for masking did not change and the old gods were reincarnated with new names.

A comparative analysis of large groups of tribal Asian masks reveals, I believe, a general unity of style and meaning. This unity constitutes strong evidence that the masking phenomenon had a common origin. Thus, in cases where the original meaning of masks and their accompanying rituals is lost, we may attempt to infer insights by using data surviving in other, better preserved, masking cultures.

Thus, although the Scythian ‘animal style’ may be site and period specific, the idea that animals have power, both awe-inspiring and worthy of harnessing, is something also recognised by the Nepalese shaman, the monk in a Tibetan monastery and the American Indian totem carvers of the Pacific Northwest. So too, the human yearning for wisdom and compassion, embodied by the bodhisattvas, affects us all.

In his book *Himalayan Art*, Madanjeet Singh has this to say of masks: “...these ageless images are undoubtedly the most fantastic and formidable art-link in the entire Himalaya. With these masks, we are presented with a radical departure from cultures and aesthetics more familiar to us. They provoke us emotionally and intellectually. And their examination offers both an occasion to develop intuitions about peoples, far distant and long ago, as well as insights about one’s self, here and now.”¹³

Notes see Appendix



36. Emimen, Bugaku school, Japan, dated 1173. Japanese cypress, kaolin base, *sabi urushi* priming, pigment, hair, height 27cm (11”). This is the oldest surviving example of its type. The ‘foolish old man’ type can also be seen in (28) and (29). Itsukushima Shrine, Hiroshima Prefecture.



37. Shaman (?) mask with mouth twisted in an ecstatic trance, Nepal, Kathmandu Valley, 19th century. Wood, pigment, metal foil, height 25cm (9 1/4”). Note the red mouth as in (18). Mort Golub Collection.