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The Tengboche Fire: What Went Up in Flames?

David Sassoon

On the night of January 19, 1989, atop its isolated mountain plateau in the Khumbu region of the Nepal Himalaya, the main building and courtyard of the Tengboche monastery caught fire and burned to the ground. Though the monastery is situated at an altitude of over 13,000 feet and is a week's walk from the nearest road, news of the disaster appeared in western newspapers only two days later.

The fire apparently began as the result of an electrical malfunction or accident, no one is certain which, associated with the small hydro facility built as a joint project of the King Mahendra Trust in Kathmandu and the American Himalayan Foundation in San Francisco. Reuters reported an "electrical fault" as being the apparent cause. The hydro facility which cost more than \$100,000 to install and generates twenty-two kilowatts of electricity for the monks of Tengboche was inaugurated with great fanfare less than a year ago.

Had this disaster occurred thirty years earlier, it would have remained a strictly local affair, an event of importance only to the Sherpa people of the Everest region. But ever since Hillary stopped at Tengboche on his way to the first ascent of the world's highest mountain, the monastery has been an increasingly important international landmark, and was, until last month, perhaps Nepal's best known functioning monastery.

This article is an attempt to inventory what was consumed by the fire; to consider the frictions among those who feel concern for Tengboche; and to inform the process of rebuilding, which is already getting underway.

The Monastery

The material damage was severe. The structure was a beautiful example of classic Sherpa monastic architecture, adorned with skillfully executed frescoes. Although the holy relics of the previous incarnate abbot of the monastery were rescued, the majority of Tengboche's texts and artifacts did not survive the fire. Included in this inventory were costumes and masks used in the performance of a sacred dance drama during Mani Rimdu, the most important festival of the Sherpa calendar. Some of these had come from Rongbuk monastery in Tibet before it was razed by the Chinese. In addition to the traditional canonical scriptures that every major monastery possesses, some rare texts that the present abbot had been importing from Tibet for many years are also believed to have perished.

No lives were lost to the fire. The abbot and all the monks but one were in Kathmandu on a religious mission to receive the remains of Dudjom Rimpoche who had died several years earlier in France, and whose remains were being greeted with great ceremony for enshrinement. Tourists who were at Tengboche helped rescue what they could, but with water hardly available, all were helpless in the night and the cold and could only wait for the fire to burn itself out.

Tengboche plays a very important symbolic and spiritual role in Sherpa society. It was the first celibate monastery of the Sherpas and has always been a pivotal institution enjoying the highest prestige. With the decline in the number of village lamas in recent decades, the services of Tengboche's monks have been in increasing demand.

Tengboche was founded in 1923 by Lama Gulu, a member of prominent family of Khumjung. Late in life, Lama Gulu was recognized as the incarnation of a famous local saint by the abbot of Rongbuk monastery in Tibet, which has been the mother-institution of all the major monasteries in both Solu and Khumbu. The charter of Tengboche bears the seal of the abbot of Rongbuk, and until it was



Tengboche before the fire. (Photo: David Sassoon)

... and after. (Photo: Bill Kite)



destroyed by the Chinese, young monks from Tengboche used to journey across the Nangpa-la for study and inspiration there. It was from Rongbuk, too, that the festival of Mani Rimdu was transmitted to Tengboche, as well as to Thami and Chiwong.

According to Furer-Haimendorf, the monastery building and greater religious activity that began to flourish seventy years ago in the Khumbu was made possible by surplus wealth generated by potato cultivation. Subscriptions for the construction of Tengboche were collected in all the villages of Khumbu to pay for wall paintings and items for the interior. Furer-Haimendorf gives this account of the construction of Tengboche (Sherpas of Nepal, 1964, p. 131).

"So great is the Sherpas' generosity for religious purposes that an impressive three-storeyed building with a large paved courtyard surrounded by galleries arose within two months on a site several hours' walk from any permanent village. For all the villagers of Khumjung, Kunde, Phortse, Pangboche, and Namche came to help with the work, giving their labour free of charge."

Ten years later, the main temple collapsed in the great earthquake of 1934, and Lama Gulu, then 85 years old, died shortly afterwards. Again the villagers of Khumbu donated their time and money to rebuild the monastery, and made it even larger than the first. Three years later, Lama Gulu's reincarnation was discovered in the person of a small boy from a Khamba family of Namche, who, as part of his education, was sent for study to Rongbuk, and since coming of age, has been abbot of Tengboche and remains so to this day.

Mountaineers, Trekkers, and Development

When Tengboche was built, it was on the way to nowhere, visited by only a few Sherpas on their way to highland pastures. True to monastic tradition, Tengboche was isolated. No one knew the mountain-top on which it was built would be on the route of the easiest ascent of Everest and, in later years, a stopping point for thousands of trekkers making the pilgrimage to base camp.

"In recent years," Richard Kohn, an anthropologist who made a film of Chiwong's Mani Rimdu observed, "Tengboche has been facing a challenge: how to maintain its goals as a monastic institution in the face of increased exposure to outsiders - not only to Sherpas -but people from the most glamorous and seductive culture on the planet."



Tengboche Monastery: interior. (Photo: David Sassoon)



Burnt ruins of Tengboche. (Photo: Bill Kite)

Tengboche is arguably one of the most beautiful spots in the world, surrounded on all sides by towering snow-covered peaks. Pictures of Tengboche photographed with Ama Dablam in the background provide some of the most popular tourist imagery associated with Nepal. Visitors of all kinds have developed great affection for the spot. Some return again and again, and many try to give something back in return.

The Rimpoche, or "Precious One", as the abbot is known, has been responsible for guiding Tengboche through the uncharted waters of Western popularity and influence, and he has coordinated many development efforts previous to the electricity project. The Peace Corps helped him and his monks to install a water system. The Canadian government paid for the installation of latrines. Cultural Survival raised money for the construction of a Sherpa cultural center and additional monks' quarters. Most observers agree that he has provided effective if not remarkable leadership in the most difficult of circumstances.

Nevertheless, the Rimpoche has critics who fault him for spending too much time in Kathmandu and neglecting the education and practice of the monks in his charge. That twice the Rimpoche took his monks to Japan to perform Mani Rimdu is cited as evidence of his neglect of Tengboche. Kohn, however, observed that, "It is not untraditional for religious leaders to go abroad for religious or semi-religious reasons. Tibetan monks and abbots frequently went to the Chinese court for the glamour and prestige. Going to Japan is the modern equivalent of this practice, and is to his credit locally."



Above: Tengboche courtyard at Mani Rimdu (David Sassoon). Below: After the fire (Bill Kite).



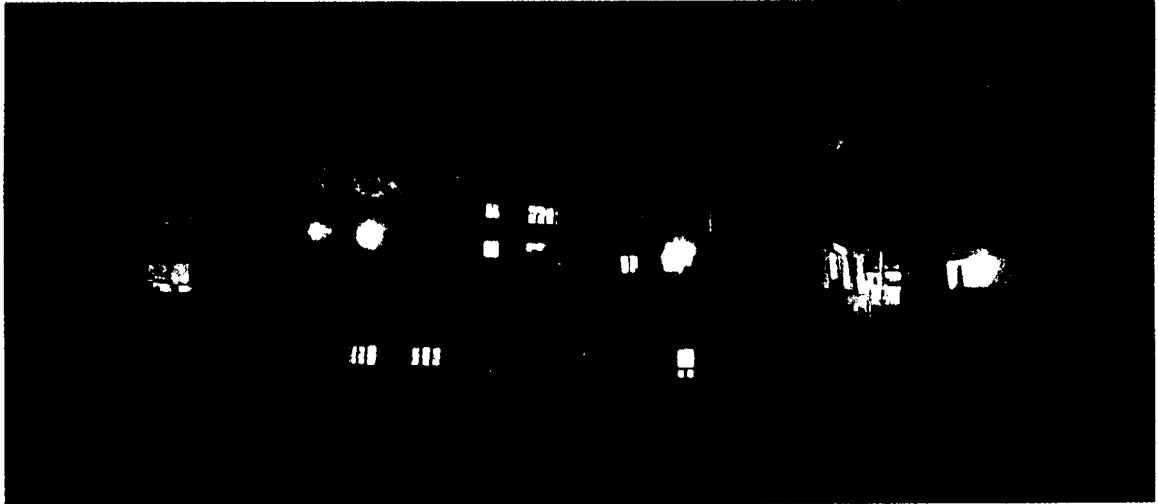
Earthquake, Flood, and Helicopters

Yet now the Rimpoche, as in his previous lifetime, is without a monastery. The last time it was an earthquake that took away his sanctuary. This time it appears that it was a flood - a flood of Western influence that ended in an electrical fire. Among Westerners with ties to Tengboche there is argument over whether the hydro station which brought electricity to the monastery need ever have been built.

According to Peggy Day, special projects coordinator of the American Himalayan foundation, it was the Rimpoche who invited electricity into his domain.

"His Eminence asked Richard Blum for it," she said. "We assume the Rimpoche is the representative of the community at Tengboche, and we only provided financial support."

Yet Richard Blum, the chairman of the foundation and an investment banker, puts the credit elsewhere - with his wife, former Mayor of San Francisco and current gubernatorial candidate for the State of California, Diane Feinstein. In an article he wrote for the San Francisco Chronicle (July 24, 1988) three months after the lights went on,



Blum said: "We had come a long way from that day in San Francisco, when only ten months before, Diane, my wife and then mayor, had conceived the idea of this power project."

Blum himself became the main force behind financing the project which was built in an impressively short period of time, uncharacteristic for projects in Nepal. In order to raise funds for the project, Blum devised a plan whereby donors of US\$5,000 or more would be given a VIP trip to Tengboche to be present when the lights went on for the first time. Two weeks before the planned inauguration day, a telex was sent from Kathmandu confirming that everything was on schedule. The day before the thirteen donors were to arrive, the system had not yet been tested. No one knew whether it would work. Two Honda generators were put in the powerhouse in case anything went wrong. The donors arrived early in the morning by helicopter. The Phillips light bulbs went on. Speeches were made. Tea and biscuits were served. Sherpas danced in the courtyard of the monastery. The donors departed in the helicopters. In less than ten months, Tengboche would be reduced to ashes.

Some speculate that the Tengboche fire originated with something left on a heater unattended. No one knows for sure. Brot Coburn, who designed the electrical distribution for the system, said it was impossible that the fire was caused by faulty wiring. On every line were sealed, tamper-proof, extremely reliable, and sensitive circuit breakers that would cut off the power if anything went wrong.

"An incredibly small short circuit would throw back-up circuit breakers within thousandths of a second," Coburn said. "I'm not worried about my conscience. I'm worried about my reputation."

Criticisms and Justifications

In the aftermath of the fire, few are criticizing Coburn's abilities as an electrician, but some are critical of the electricity project, viewing the whole effort as misguided and inappropriate. Though not one of those interviewed wanted to go on record with their criticisms, all those who were critical of the project wanted their views aired anonymously. The circle of foreigners with ties to Tengboche is intimate. The intimacy and shared concerns of foreigners who have involved themselves in the fate of Tengboche would appear to have blunted their willingness to criticize one another in open productive dialogue. Perhaps the overriding need, shared by all the members of this small group, to sway the public from apathy and unawareness to concern and involvement prevents them from exchanging potentially divisive criticism among themselves. In any case, criticisms offered by those most intimately familiar with the project in Tengboche can only be offered anonymously here.

Critics of the project thought that the project was an extravagant, useless gesture, inappropriate technologically, and culturally insensitive. Of course, the Rimpoche would acquiesce to the idea of having electricity, they said, but some who know the Rimpoche personally doubt he was as eager as to

electrify the monastery as those who would gain employment or prestige from doing so. Sources reported that significant cost overruns resulted from paying workers overtime so that they would finish work in time for the arrival of the donors. The American Himalayan Foundation has denied this and stated that any overruns were normal for a project such as this, adding that precise figures would be available only in Nepal.

The technological and ecological merits of the hydro plant are also points of debate. Critical sources point to the fire as proof that the technology was inappropriate. For people accustomed to wood-fueled fires, these critics say, electric heaters do not look like they could ignite anything. Clear explanations of electricity and its potential dangers as well as benefits must be provided by those who are familiar with both the electrical technology and the way of life of those who are to use it. If people don't understand the technology, critics argue, it is inappropriate.

One major justification for the project was the impact it would have cutting fuelwood consumption in a heavily deforested region. Yet when working at capacity, the system could only generate enough electricity to power a few stoves and heaters. Promotional literature of the American Himalayan Foundation promised that "open hearths will disappear to be replaced by electric ovens and electric lights." However, one Western tour guide reported that last November there was no power for cooking and heating units and that lights were left on throughout the night. As people stayed up later, they are said to have increased their use of firewood. Electricity for the cookers and heaters was knocked out during the monsoon season and was not restored until the second week of December. A little more than a month later, the fire started.

Some suggest that even the symbolic value of the hydro system at Tengboche went up in flames. Proponents of the project, though aware that the system would not put a serious dent in fuelwood consumption, were confident that the twinkling of electric lights there could focus attention on the problem of deforestation and the necessity for developing alternative sources of energy for heating and cooking. Development experts now are fearing the opposite result: that the fire may arouse fears of hydro-electricity in Nepal's villages where it has the potential of being an important factor in local development.

Peggy Day of the American Himalayan Foundation said that the Rimpoche has ordered the system be repaired and the wiring extended to the monk's quarters. He wants the electricity flowing again as soon as possible. "It's a model of what could be done with hydro-electricity in the Himalayas, responsibly and tastefully," she added. "I think the most exciting times are coming next." Already donations for rebuilding the monastery are flowing in. An architect from Bhutan is being considered to design the new monastery. But building cannot commence until next year because the present one is inauspicious on the Tibetan calendar.

Many foreigners with ties to Tengboche are trying to draw lessons from the fire which destroyed it. Before the timber is cut and the stones are laid, a whole year is available for all to reflect upon what went up in flames and what can be learned from the ashes of Tengboche.