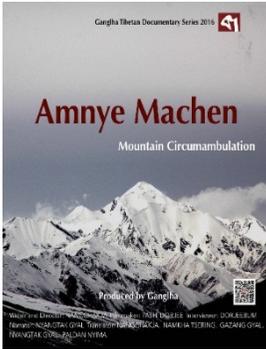


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**REVIEW: AMNYE MACHEN MOUNTAIN CIRCUMAMBULATION**

Reviewed by Bill Bleisch (China Exploration  
& Research Society)



Nangchukja and Tashi Dorje. 2014. *Amnye Machen Mountain Circumambulation*. Producer: Ganglha; Writer Director: Nangchukja; Filmmaker: Tashi Dorjee; Interviewer: Dorjeebum; Narrator: Nyangtak Gyal; Background Music: *Under the Wings of Blessing* by Nawang Khechog. 23:32 minutes. Ganglha Tibetan Cultural Communication. Available at:

- <https://goo.gl/D9o1Xp> (HD, in Tibetan with Chinese subtitles)
- <https://goo.gl/GxgUKv> (in Tibetan with Chinese subtitles)
- <https://goo.gl/ulQvSE> (in Tibetan with English subtitles)

This sublime documentary was filmed by a Tibetan team in 2014, the Year of the Horse. The film features stunning visual images of sacred Amnye Machen presented with an ethereal soundtrack of Tibetan-electronica fusion. It also includes a large amount of information about the practices of pilgrimage, illustrated with valuable footage of pilgrims at prayer, or walking and prostrating along the *kora* route; interviews with pilgrims; and extended explanations by Tibetan scholar, Gonpo Lhachen, and Tibetan environmentalist, Tsering Bum.

The stated purpose of the filmmakers is to preserve knowledge of traditional pilgrimage practices that many young Tibetans are no longer familiar with, such as circumambulation, prostration, and prayer. A second, but no less central, purpose is to raise environmental awareness among young Tibetans, pilgrims, and government officials. As such, the film, narrated in Tibetan, is clearly aimed at a Tibetan audience, although other audiences may also enjoy the film, as

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Bleisch, Bill. 2017. Review: Amnye Machen Mountain Circumambulation. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 45:221-224.

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subtitles in Chinese and English have been provided in different on-line versions.

The film begins with an introduction to the beliefs and practices that surround Amnye Machen, a sacred mountain located in the Amdo region, in what is now the south of Qinghai Province. Amnye Machen is considered one of the eight great holy mountains of Tibet and is held sacred as the holy abode of many Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, including Chakrasamvara 'Wheel of Perfect Bliss', as well as being the home of thirteen hunting deities of King Gesar. Tibetans traditionally undertake pilgrimage to Amnye Machen to pray at and trek around the mountain. Through one circuit of the circumambulation, the pilgrim is considered to gain merit equivalent to saying the mantra *Om Ma Ni Pad+me Hum* eight billion times, while circumambulation by prostration brings the merits of 100,000 prostrations.

Pilgrimage is undertaken to benefit not only the individual, but all sentient beings, and should be conducted in a spirit of deep faith, with an "ironclad focus of the mind with pure belief." As stated by Gonpo Lhachen in the film, "In order to eliminate the sufferings of beings in the six classes of transmigration, we must understand the idea of obtaining the positive path of transmigration by circumambulation."

Amnye Machen symbolizes the body, speech, and mind of Chakrasamvara. The Year of the Horse is particularly significant for the body of Chakrasamvara and, therefore, for Amnye Machen. The merit gained through a pilgrimage to Amnye Machen increases thirteen or eighteen times in the Year of the Horse.

The second half of the film considers the relationship between pilgrimage practices and environmental protection. Tsering Bum points out that, in Tibetan cultural practices surrounding mountain deities, there is no separation between humans and nature, which is in striking contrast to the consideration of nature as a source of materials, something to be conquered and exploited. Despite this, road building and earth mining near the mountain, as well as litter from an ever-increasing number of pilgrims, have brought modern problems to

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Amnye Machen. Gonpo Lhachen delivers an impassioned call to all Tibetans to work tirelessly to protect Amnye Machen from environmental damage.

While the film primarily deals with Tibetan beliefs and practices, a few minor inaccuracies can be pointed out, such as the statement that the most auspicious year for pilgrimage to sacred Mount Kawakarpo is the Year of the Horse. In fact, for that mountain in southern Kham, it is generally considered to be the Year of the Sheep. As another instance, the year by year decrease in snow and ice cover around Amnye Machen is blamed on dust from local road construction and mining activities. The loss of snow cover, however, probably has more to do with distant activities. Deposition of soot ("black carbon") on glacier ice and snow may be increasing their absorption of heat from the sun.

Anthropogenic global climate change is causing increasingly high average and peak temperatures on the high Tibetan Plateau. Most of the black carbon probably arises from distant industry and field waste burning, and global climate change is the result of carbon emissions, not local activities. There is little that pilgrims and local government can do about these long-distance effects of human activity. Nevertheless, restricting use of coal fires and diesel engines around the mountain would be a concrete action that could be taken to protect the mountain's snow and ice. Contributing a voice to the global campaign to combat denial of the responsibility of carbon profligate nations in the developed world, especially the USA, would be another concrete action to which viewers of this film could contribute.

Overall the film should do well in achieving its stated goals, and we hope that it gets a wide audience, as it is freely available on the internet, both outside of China and within. As Tsering Bum points out in the film, circumambulation is an important way of preserving cultural heritage and of cultivating healthier attitudes towards the environment.

Gonpo Lhachen gives the final call to action: "Amnye Machen is a sacred mountain deity for all Tibetans. We must protect it."

## NON-ENGLISH TERMS

Amdo, a mdo ཨ་མདོ།

Amnye Machen, a myes rma chen ཨ་མྱེས་མ་ཚེན།

Chakrasamvara, dpal 'khor lo sdom pa, དཔལ་འཁོར་ལོ་སྐྱེལ་པ།

Dorjeebum, rdo rje 'bum རྡོ་རྗེ་འབུམ།

Ganglha, gang lha གངས་ལྷ།

Gesar, ge sar གེ་སར།

Gonpo Lhachen, mgon po lha chen མགོན་པོ་ལྷ་ཚེན།

Kawakarpo, kha ba dkar po ཁ་བ་དཀར་པོ།

Kham, khams ཁམས།

kora, skor ra སྐོར་ར།

Nyangchakja, snying lcags rgyal སྙིང་ལྷགས་རྒྱལ།

Nawang Khechog, ngag dbang mkhas mchog འག་དབང་མཁས་མཚོག

Nyangtak Gyal, snying stag rgyal སྙིང་སྟག་རྒྱལ།

Om Ma Ni Pad+me Hum ཨོཾ་མ་ཎི་པད་མེ་ཏཱྃ།

Qinghai 青海, mtsho sngon མཚོ་སྐོན།

Tashi Dorje, bkra shis rdo rje བཀ་ཤིས་རྡོ་རྗེ།

Tsering Bum, tshe ring 'bum ཚེ་རིང་འབུམ།