



Peak practice

Ladakh, in northern India, is one of the few places where the Tibetan system of medicine remains central to community life. Laurent Pordié is working to re-establish traditional skills and improve healthcare in the region



Above: Laurent Pordié has worked in healthcare in Cambodia, has a doctorate in pharmaceutical sciences and has extensive training in Tibetan medicine

Buddha himself is said to have developed the Tibetan system of medicine 2,500 years ago. It is based on a holistic philosophy, where illness results from an imbalance of bodily or mental states with one of four possible sources: climate, diet, behaviour or the influence of demons. In Ladakh, northern India, the *amchis*, doctors trained in traditional Tibetan medicine, pass their knowledge from father to son — although a small number of women also qualify.

In exchange for their healing skills, which they offer free of charge, *amchis* have in the past relied on their fellow villagers to take on the bulk of their communal duties, such as ploughing, harvesting and raising livestock. That gave them time to offer consultations and treatment, and to gather medicinal plants and minerals. Their unique status earned them respect, and they were held in the same

marginalisation of holistic skills. As a result, these skills are disappearing.

"Modernisation has brought a sense of individualism and a breakdown in the traditional system of help between families in the villages," says Laurent Pordié, a 30-year-old French anthropologist and ethno-pharmacologist, who also serves as director of the non-profit organisation, Nomad, and as a research fellow and lecturer at the University of Aix-Marseille in France. "The *amchi* medical system is suffering because it is based on a strong sense of community, which is now declining," he explains.

SURVIVAL MATTERS

Pordié realised that by reinstating *amchi* skills he could improve healthcare in the region and possibly ensure the survival of a group of people who inhabit one of the world's least hospitable environments. In 1998, he set up a programme called 'Traditional Medicine for Survival', and it is for this project that he was chosen as a Laureate of the Rolex Awards for Enterprise.

Pordié's aims are threefold: to educate individuals from *amchi* families, as well as new students, in the ancient system; to set up banks of medicinal drugs accessible to all on a fee-paying basis; and to develop *amchi* medicine projects in alliance with government bodies. The practicality of his idea — balancing traditional skills with more conventional techniques to provide the best possible healthcare — and the enthusiastic reception that it has already received from local people, convinced the Rolex Award Selection Committee that Pordié's project could make a real difference to those people's lives.

Despite his youth, Pordié has extensive experience of healthcare in countries such as Cambodia, working for the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) Médecins du Monde and Pharmaciens Sans Frontières. He also has impressive academic credentials, with a doctorate in pharmaceutical sciences, training in Tibetan medicine and a doctorate in biocultural anthropology currently under way. In 1997, he received a Youth Challenge award from the French government for Nomad, and in 1999 the



Above: the instruments of a traditional doctor or *amchi*. Pordié's project provides medicine packets to help ensure patients receive the correct dose

esteem as village leaders and monks.

But in the last two decades, all that has changed. Social mobility has increased and people are less likely to remain for life in the rural communities in which they were born. Village hierarchies are more fluid and market forces have to some extent replaced indigenous barter systems. Moreover, government initiatives to introduce conventional modern medicine to these impoverished areas have led to the



Above: the Khardung la Pass (5,300 metres). Temperatures in winter can sink as low as -40°C
Left: amchi Karma Chodun teaches a diploma course to students in the project office in Leh



organisation itself received an award from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Pordié works closely with a team of researchers and social workers at Nomad to implement new ideas on alternative forms of aid for developing countries and to support existing NGOs in those countries.

TOUGH CHALLENGES

Ladakh, however, is his toughest challenge yet. "The geographical isolation and lack of healthcare facilities in the rural centres make this one of the most impoverished areas in India," he says. "Under these conditions, traditional amchi medicine is a matter of survival for many people in Ladakh."

Ladakh is a spectacularly beautiful land of rocky deserts, mountains and glacial lakes. It can also be one of the coldest places on Earth, with temperatures sinking as low as -40°C in winter. The communities are poor and, because they live high up in the Himalaya, often isolated. In addition, the new government initiatives have failed to provide an adequate substitute for the traditional system. Drugs are unaffordable, hospitals and clinics few and far between, and knowledge scarce.

With amchis no longer passing on skills from

generation to generation, Ladakhis have neither the Tibetan nor the Western medical systems to fall back on, and they are suffering the consequences. For example, the region has the highest infant mortality rate in India. "The problems of public health in Ladakh are among the most threatening to the region," notes Pordié, who as a health professional felt compelled to take action.

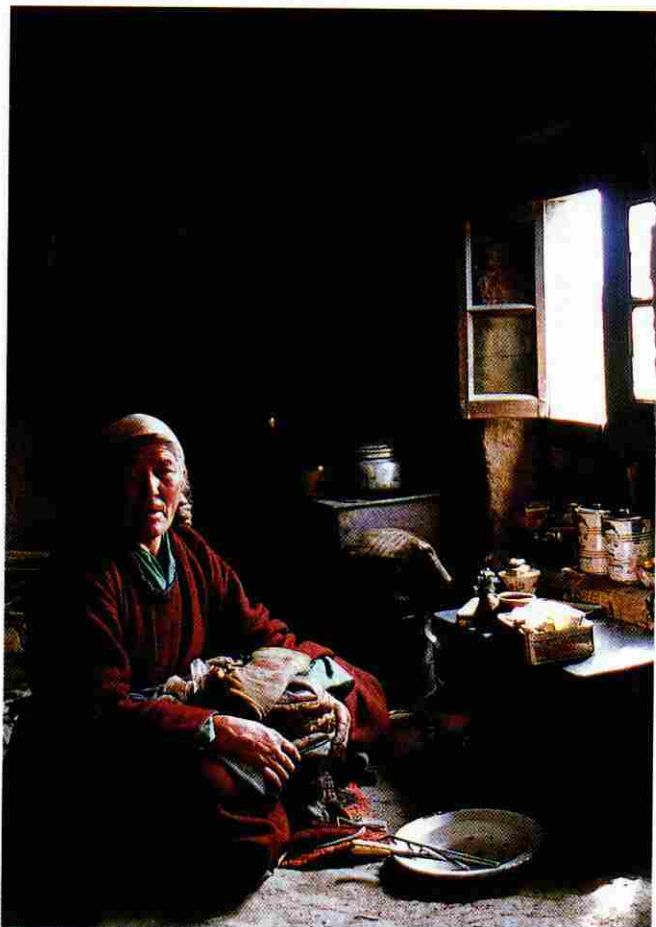
In the summer of 1999, Pordié and his colleagues at Nomad organised a ten-day workshop on amchi medicine in Leh, the capital of Ladakh, to gauge the interest of local people. The response was over-

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whelming. Forty amchis attended, and as a result of that initial success, the team officially launched an education programme in November 1999. Hopefuls came from all over the region to take the entrance



Left: women have traditionally worked as amchis, and Pordié wants to revive their training and service



Above: amchi Skalzang Norbu outside his clinic in Leh. Pordié aims to create a professional network for amchis

Above right: living in the region are around 7,000 of the Tibetan Chang-pa group who are fiercely loyal to their nomadic traditions

Above right: amchi Eshe Komzon with medicinal plants and herbs commonly used in traditional healing



exam — some walking for up to five days to get there. Thirteen amchis were eventually chosen to take part in the course, including four women, as well as six students with no prior knowledge of the traditional techniques. If all goes according to plan, they will qualify with official diplomas in April 2002.

In a climate where the authorities favour a more mainstream system of medicine, Pordié is astute enough to realise the value of such diplomas. "It is essential to allow the practitioners in Ladakh to be recognised and accredited by the central government," he asserts.

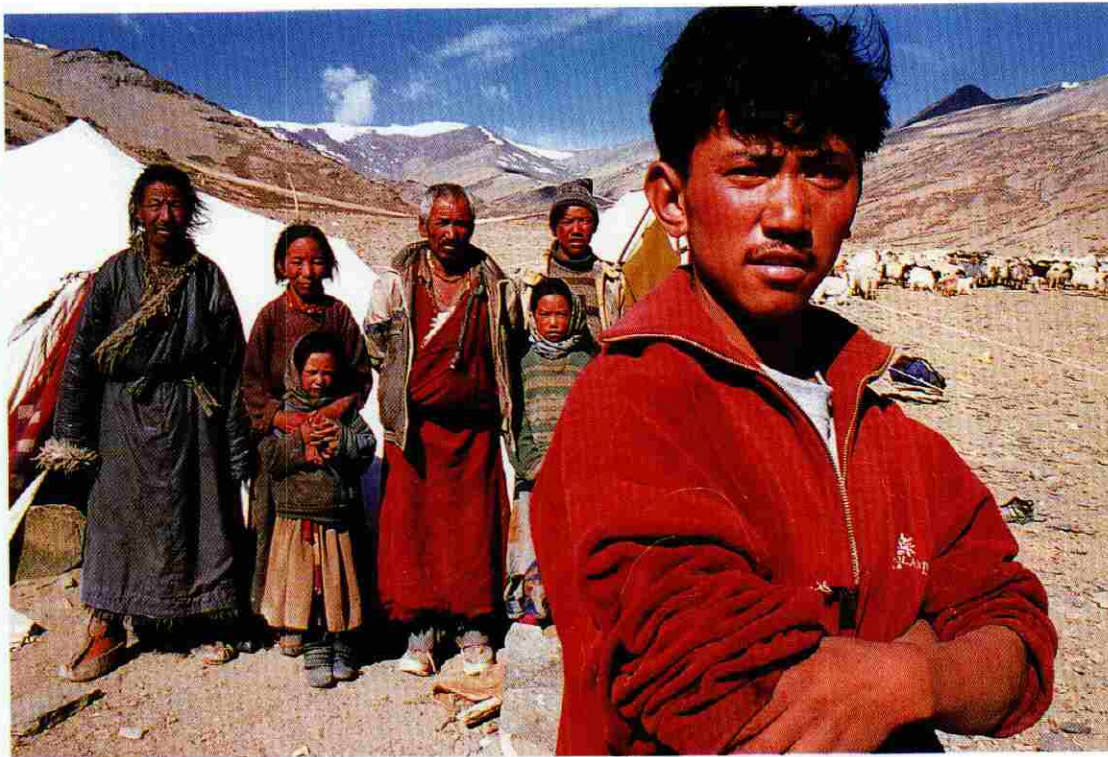
Jean Benoist, Professor of Medical Anthropology at the University of Aix-Marseille and President of AMADES (Medical Anthropology Applied to Development and Health), says of the Rolex Laureate: "Laurent Pordié's strength is to move beyond a static view of the use of traditional therapies and to incorporate modern types of therapy in the course, while at the same time providing real support for the preservation of local skills."

CLASSES FOR ALL

Starting in summer 2000, Pordié and his Nomad associates began producing a bimonthly journal that is distributed to the 400 or so practising amchis

in the region, as well as in the other Himalayan regions of India, Nepal and Tibet. The aim is to bring the amchis together in a professional network. And, in collaboration with the highly respected Tibetan Medical and Astrological Institute of Dharamsala, India, from which Pordié himself received a certificate in 1998, Nomad now runs ten to 15-day seminars to hone the skills of existing amchis. The last seminar attracted more than 90 amchis and scholars from Ladakh, Tibet and Nepal. A number of institutions throughout India offer tuition in Tibetan medicine, but the unique aspect of Pordié's project is that all of the classes are free to students and accessible to those with only the most basic level of schooling.

Meanwhile, the second part of Pordié's initiative is also under way. Since it is no longer possible for amchis to take sole responsibility for the gathering of medicinal plants and minerals, because nowadays they are forced to take care of their own farming tasks, he came up with the highly original idea of building up medicine banks to meet the needs of each village. In contrast to the former practice, villagers will now have the choice of paying for their 'withdrawals', or bartering goods and labour in the traditional way. Since they are used to free healthcare, he recognises that it will



Left: after studies in Leh, Gonbo Dorje will return to his family to serve the community

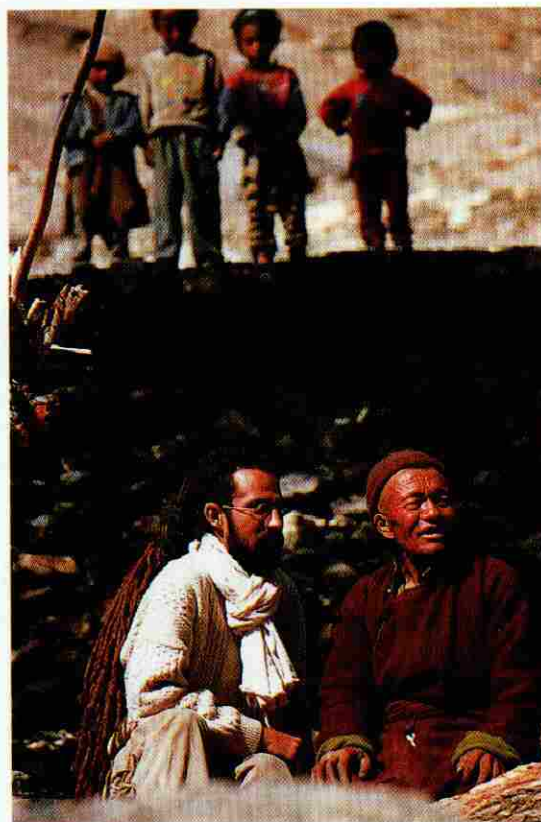
take time and some explaining for people to adjust to the new payment system.

"The act of curing a patient is supposed to be done with compassion and love, and should not involve any payment," Pordié says. But in the face of irreversible social changes, he believes that such a system is necessary. In August 1998 he set up a pilot project in the Sengi-La area of Ladakh, where six medicine banks are now up and running. Eventually he hopes to set up enough banks to supply the whole of Ladakh. Each bank will initially be stocked with a core of staple plants and minerals for treating the most common complaints, and after a year those will be supplemented with another 40 varieties.

Since many Ladakhi villages are completely cut off during the severe Himalayan winters, most of Pordié's work must be done in the summer months. He has used his Rolex Award to fund Nomad-sponsored seminars and public awareness campaigns in some of the poorest settlements, and to begin acquiring medicinal supplies in New Delhi and transporting them to local medicine banks. An amchi health centre is functioning in one area and Pordié expects that two more will be operational this summer, including one healthcare centre for nomads in the area of Chantang.

Many of those observing his work expect Pordié's project to have a considerable impact — both in terms of improving healthcare and preserving Ladakhi culture. Amchis have filled the role of general practitioner for centuries, today relying

only on Western medicine for surgery. Their presence is also essential for the cohesiveness and mental wellbeing of the communities that rely on them. If they go, says Mirjam Hemkens, International Co-ordinator for Médecins Sans Frontières, who has experience of working in Ladakh, many of those communities will quickly follow.



Left: Laurent Pordié and amchi Dorje Onpo. Traditional amchi medicine will help preserve Ladakhi culture