The *Axis Mundi*, the centre of the universe, the navel of the world, the world pillar, Kang Tisé or Kang Rinpoche (the ‘Precious Jewel of Snow’ in Tibetan), Meru (or Sumeru), Swastika Mountain, Mt. Astapada, Mt. Kangrinboge (the Chinese name) - all these names, real or legendary, belong to one of the holiest and most mysterious mountains in the world – Mount Kailas.

Both geography and mythology play roles in the sacred significance of Mount Kailas. This holy mountain rises to an altitude of 6714 meters. It cannot compete with peaks in the nearby Himalayan range, which includes Mount Everest, and its grandeur lies not in height but in its distinct shape – four sheer faces marking the cardinal points of the compass – and its solitary location, free of neighboring mountains that might dwarf or obscure it. Mt. Kailas is regarded as the earthly manifestation of the Hindus’ mythic Mount Meru, or Sumeru, the spiritual center of the universe, the *axis mundi* in Buddhist and Jain as well as Hindu cosmology. The area around this great mountain is the source of four life-giving rivers; the Indus, Brahmaputra, Surlej and Karnali, which is a major tributary of India’s sacred Ganges, begin here. To further enhance the symbolic mysticism of the mountain as a sacred place, two lakes are situated at the base of the mountain. The higher lake Manasarovar (one of the highest freshwater lakes in the world), is the sacred lake, and is round like the sun. The lower lake Rakhist Tal (one of the highest salt-water lakes) is the devil’s lake and has the shape of the crescent moon. The two lakes represent solar and lunar forces, good and negative energies respectively.

To Tibetan Buddhists, Kailas is the abode of the tantric meditational deity Demchog. Hindus see Kailas as the throne of the great god Shiva, one of their most significant deities. Jains revere Kailas as the site at which their first prophet received
enlightenment. Buddhist, Hindu and Jain pilgrims from the world over go to this holy mountain to circumambulate. Climbing Mount Kailas is forbidden (the only person to have ever been atop the sacred mountain is Milarepa, a 11th century Tibetan Buddhist yogi).

Long before Buddhism took root in Tibet in the 7th century Kailas was venerated by the adherents of the Bön (or Bnpos or Bönpos), the indigenous, religion of the region who maintained that the mystic region around Mt. Kailas and the Nine-Story Swastika Mountain was the seat of all power. When viewed from the south face, a swastika can indeed be seen. According to Bön accounts, while the circumambulation is made (anticlockwise, whereas followers of the other religion walk in the clockwise direction) 18 powerful and enlightened teachers will appear in this eon including Tnpa Shenrab, the most powerful of them, the founder of the Bön religion. He is said to have been born in the mythical land of Olmo Lung Ring, whose location remains something of a mystery. The land is traditionally described as dominated by Mount Yungdrung Gu-tzeg (edifice of nine swastikas), which many identify as Mount Kailas.

Legends of a mythic land were spread throughout the centuries and became of interest to philosophers, adventurers, theologists and even… political leaders! It received many names: Shambhala, Shangri-La, etc., and many locations have been suggested: the Tibet plateau, the Gobi desert, the Altai, but the Mount Kailas range is most frequently named. The poem by Frank Scassellatii below best describes the curious mixture of past and present, mysticism and reality:

There Lies a World Hidden,  
Mysterious, unknown, and forbidden.  
Where dwell entities with technologies  
behind our comprehension,  
And knowledge kept hidden from us, in this  
other dimension.  
Will the truth ever be revealed?  
Earthly forces of power and greed forever  
sealed,  
Forbidden knowledge for warfare to wield.  
When humankind understands,  
To use the knowledge acquired from these  
strange lands. For the benefit of humankind,  
Then entrance into their world we will find.

The interest has been universal. Tsar Nikolai Romanov had some connection with Tibet through the monk Badmaev, who was himself closely associated with a highly placed Tibetan, the lama Agyan Dordziyev, tutor and confidant of the 13th Dalai Lama. Dordziyev equated Russia with the coming Kingdom of Shambhala anticipated in the Kalachakra texts of Tibetan Buddhism. The lama opened the first Buddhist temple in Europe, in St. Petersburg, significantly dedicated to Kalachakra teaching. One of the Russian artists who worked on the St.Petersburg temple was Nicholas Roerich, who had been introduced by Dordziyev to the legend of Shambhala and to eastern thought. George Gurdjieff, another mystic who had some
impact on Western thought, knew Prince Ukhtomsky, Badmaev, and Dordzhiyev. Gurdjieff was accused by the British of being a Russian spy in Central Asia, a pupil of the mysterious Tibetans. Even Marx had contacts with Tibetan lamas as did Lenin who met some of them in Switzerland.

What were these people interested in and what attracted them to Tibet? The beauty of the mountains or the mysticism? The desire to find the remains of lost civilizations or the desire to learn how to acquire extreme power so as to govern the world?

Not only contacts with lamas, but even expeditions were organised in this area. What, for example, brought about the odd juxtaposition of Tibetan lamas and German SS officers on the eve of World War II? The search for lost remnants of an imagined Aryan race hidden somewhere on the Tibetan plateau? Or some other reason? It is known that Nazi leaders such as Heinrich Himmler believed that Tibet might harbour the last of the original Aryan tribes, the legendary forefathers of what was considered the German race whose Aryan leaders were supposed to possess supernatural powers that the Nazis thought they could use to conquer the world.

Ideas about an Aryan or master race began to appear in the popular media in the late nineteenth century. In the 1890s, E. B. Lytton, a Rosicrucian, wrote a best-selling novel around the idea of a cosmic energy (particularly strong in the female sex), which he called «Vril.» Later he wrote of a Vril society, consisting of a race of super-beings that would emerge from their underground hidingplaces to rule the world. The Vril Society claimed to have links to Tibetan masters, apparently drawing on the ideas of Madame Blavatsky, the theosophist, who supported the existence of super-beings in a mystic land which she described in such well-known works as the Secret Doctrine. She claimed to be in telepathic contact with spiritual masters in Tibet and confirmed that she was receiving this information from them.

Nikolai Roerich went to the region of Tibet where he spent several years. Depending on the source, the reasons for his mission vary, from purely botanic studies in the region of the Gobi desert on behalf of the US Government to political and spiritual. He may have been inspired by Kalachakra teaching and legends of Shambhala while working at the painting of St.Petersburg temple, described above. His painting “The Path to Kailas” can be seen in the New York museum dedicated to his work. He devoted many years to the search for this mystic land.

Many of these people were ready to believe in the existence of the super-natural in whatever form – higher intelligence, power, or energy. This interest remains strong to this day in many countries, to find this axis mundi, the most powerful place, the highest power, or the hidden intelligence in whatever form it exists, if indeed it does.

Nor should one ignore recent Russian studies of Tibet and the Kailas range in particular, the results of which, if true, could radically alter our thinking on the growth of civilizations. One of the ideas the Russians have put forward is that Mt. Kailas could be a vast, human-built pyramid, the centre of an entire complex of smaller pyramids, a hundred in total. This complex, moreover, might be the centre of a world-wide system connecting other monuments or sites where paranormal phenomena have been observed.
It is difficult to explain all the available information in a short article for UN Special. I have copied in the photo below the pyramidal complex as proposed by the Russians. The idea of the pyramid in this region is not new. It goes back to the timeless Sanskrit epic of the Ramayana. Since then, numerous travellers, especially in the beginning of the 20th century, have expressed the view that Mt. Kailas is too perfect to be a totally natural phenomenon, or at any rate give the appearance of human intervention. For example:

*In shape it (Mount Kailas) resembles a vast cathedral... the sides of the mountain are perpendicular and fall sheer for hundreds of feet, the strata horizontal, the layers of stone varying slightly in colour, and the dividing lines showing up clear and distinct...... which give to the entire mountain the appearance of having been built by giant hands, of huge blocks of reddish stone.* (G.C. Rawling, *The Great Plateau*, London, 1905).

However, it is only fair to add that the Russian claims to have discovered in the Mt. Kailas area the highest ever human-built pyramids were denied three years later by Chinese scientists in the official Chinese Press. Of human construction or not, Mt. Kailas is one of the most mysterious, secret and at the same time one of the most holy and sacred mountains of Asia, if not of the world) the circumambulation of which has for many centuries or possibly many millennia remained a vital pilgrimage, symbolising the life’s stages of death, purification and rebirth. Buddhists and Jains refer to the circumambulation as khora, Hindus as parikrama. A single circumambulation equals one turn of the Wheel of Life and will wipe away the sins of one’s life, twelve circumambulations will purify one’s karma for all past and future lives, enlightenment is attained after 108. Even one khora presents an extremely difficult task since the mountain is difficult of access and dangerous.

Dangers or not, some of us may dream of discovering for ourselves what there is to be seen on this mountain. Pending this adventure, I decided to speak to some of the few people who have circumambulated the mountain and recorded their personal experiences, to ask for their records and to interview them. Their replies are the subject of one of the next issues of UN Special!
January-August 2004

(With deep thanks to Mr. Wolf Scott, former Deputy Director of UNRISD, for helping me to systematise and to structure very complicated material resulted from many months of research and studies of numerous sources and private archives).