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Corneille Jest: Ethnologist and photographer

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► **To cite this version:**

Pascale Dollfus, Jean-Dominique Lajoux, Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, Gérard Toffin. Corneille Jest: Ethnologist and photographer. *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research*, 1999, A special double issue on photography dedicated to Corneille Jest, 15-16, pp.6-10. hal-00595270

HAL Id: hal-00595270

<https://hal.science/hal-00595270>

Submitted on 7 Feb 2018

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CORNEILLE JEST

ETHNOLOGIST AND PHOTOGRAPHER

Corneille Jest was born in Strasbourg, France, on February 12, 1930. After preliminary scientific studies, he decided to specialize in ethnology.

He spent many years at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. A disciple of André Leroi-Gourhan, he followed his method. Under his supervision, he studied at the Centre de la Formation à la Recherche Ethnologique (CFRE), where fieldwork, methodology, technology and material life were stressed. It should be noted that this training used to end with a week of fieldwork in France. Corneille Jest chose to work in the Aveyron on traditional handicraft techniques which were very alive at that time. This formed the subject of his thèse de troisième cycle "Le Haut Levezou. Techniques et économie d'une communauté rurale", 1960, Paris, La Sorbonne. He entered the CNRS in 1956 where he has spent all his career.

His first mission to the Himalayas took place in Sikkim (Kalimpong District) during the summer of 1953. Afterwards he published a photo article in *Sciences et*

first stay, followed by that from later fieldwork, formed the basis of his dissertation for the Doctorat d'Etat "Tarap, 'la vallée aux chevaux excellents', communauté tibétaine du nord-ouest du Népal" in 1972 at the Université René Descartes, Paris and published in 1975 by the CNRS editions with the title : *Dolpo. Communautés de langue tibétaine du Népal*. Depicting every aspect of the economic, social, and religious life in the area, this major work was the first monograph on a Tibetan community in Nepal.

In 1965 Corneille Jest, along with other colleagues, associated themselves under the directorship of Professor Jacques Millot, then director of the Musée de l'Homme, to create a "Recherche coopérative sur programme" called RCP 65, "Etude des régions népalaises". In 1970, he created a new RCP with botanists and geologists called "Ecologie et géologie de l'Himalaya central". During winter 1970-71, he travelled around the Manaslu along with Jean-François Dobremez; an account of which may be found in *Manaslu. Hommes et milieux des vallées du Népal central*. He organised and participated actively in numerous pluridisciplinary programmes with geologists, agronomists, geographers and ethnologists in Langtang, Salme village and the districts of Gulmi and Argha-Khanci.



Ethnologist and lamas, Kegar, Dolpo, 1965 (author unknown).

Nature and a paper on Lepcha religious beliefs in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* in 1960. The same year, Corneille went to Nepal and trekked with David Snellgrove up to Dolpo, north of Dhaulagiri. He spent about one year there, mostly in Tarap, the centre of the region, working with Pasang Sherpa, David Snellgrove's research assistant. The data collected during his

During the last two decades, Corneille Jest has been involved in the conservation of Himalayan cultural heritage from Ladakh up to Bhutan, working notably under the auspices of UNESCO and the Getty Foundation.

Corneille Jest has travelled a great deal throughout

Nepal and the Himalaya, and he is certainly one of the Westerners who knows this region the best. His publications attest to the extraordinary diversity of his interests : technology, architecture, rituals, oral traditions... His writings are clear and precise. Many are pioneers in their field, such as his ethnography of a Tibetan community, and works on the Thakali, the Chepang and the Kushwar. During these many years, Corneille Jest was accompanied along the paths of Nepal by Sarkiman Majhi, from Parsel village in Kabhre Palancok.

During all his fieldwork, Corneille collected a great number of objects, as well as geological and botanical samples, deposited respectively at the Musée de l'Homme, the Museum d'Histoire Naturelle (Paris) and the Laboratoire de Biologie Végétale (Université de Grenoble). He made several films in Dolpo, Kathmandu, and among the Thakali, made numerous recordings and edited the vinyl disc "Tibet-Népal".

Photography in the work of Corneille Jest

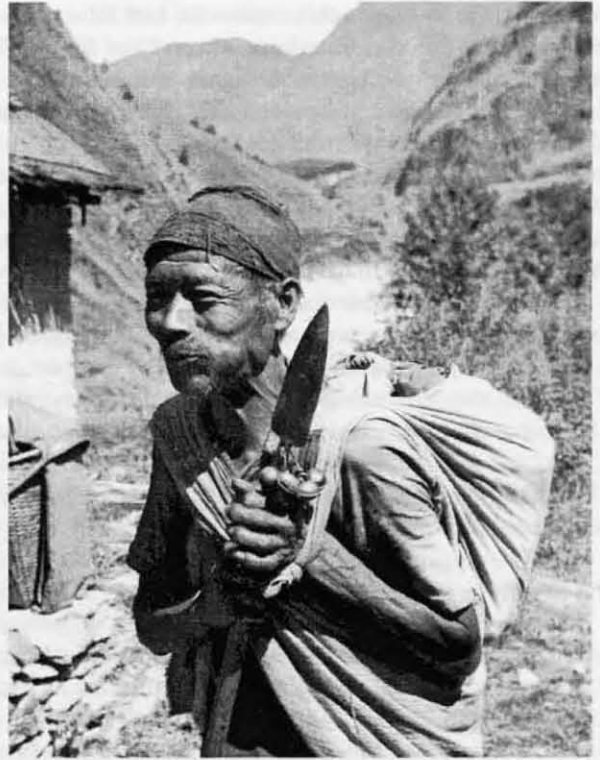
Photography plays an essential role in his objective and sensitive approach to reality. In his first articles on Dolpo, he chose this means which was unusual at that time, when theoretical anthropology was very fashionable, to introduce the reader in a direct face-to-face with a Tibetan community of Nepal. In the same way, he devoted much space to photography in his dissertation on Dolpo. Later on he developed a more direct and internal approach to this population in his picture-book on Tarap, where along with his beautiful pictures, he let his informant, Kagar Rinpoche, speak. Turning his back on the post-fieldwork embellishment of the text, interpretations done back home and theorization, Corneille aimed at minimising the filter of the anthropologist. He made himself a witness of the Himalayan peoples. However, in comparison to a professional photographer, his manner of capturing a culture on film reveals his deep knowledge of it. Without artifice, but with a profound sense of beauty, his compositions are perfect in their classicism. We have tried here to pay homage to his art with these short contributions by some of the numerous colleagues he has worked with.

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Women of Langtang, Wangel village, 1965. (C. Jest)

The postman.
He holds a spiked lance with bells, the
insignia of his function. Kali Gandaki
Valley, north of Tatopani, 1960. (C.Jest)



A Kanphata Yogi in the Modi Khola
valley, 1960. (C. Jest)





Brahmans pounding rice. Trisuli Valley. (C. Jest)



This photograph is a homage from Jean-Dominique Lajoux, CNRS, who worked for many years in collaboration with Corneille Jest, both in France (Aveyron) and in the Himalayas. It shows the villagers of Bouloc watching themselves in a film projected in the local school during winter 1960-61. The film was made by J.-D. Lajoux and C. Jest in summer 1959. It depicts village life and local techniques. This photograph from J.-D. Lajoux is the result of an experiment using an infrared flash.