

Abstracts, Objects, Ideas

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Tibetan Sacred Mountains: Connectivity and ontologies of nature

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Mount Kailash, located on the southwestern Tibetan Plateau near the PRC's borders with Nepal and India, and Mount Khawa Karpo, which straddles Yunnan Province and the Tibet Autonomous Region on the southeastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau, are two of the most sacred mountains (*gnas ri*) in cultural Tibet. As destinations for pilgrimage, they are simultaneously remote and deeply interconnected to distant locales. This very preliminary attempt at a paper (or paper fragments) will draw on my observations during participation in the outer circumambulation of Mt. Khawa Karpo in 2015 and Mt. Kailash in 2016 to reflect on recent debates about the "ontological turn," and to explore Tibetan concepts of nature and contemporary efforts at environmental protection.

The recent ontological turn in anthropology and geography has been described as both a deeper form of decoloniality and a return to colonialism. Persuasive arguments have been made for both sides of this debate, particularly in work on indigeneity in Latin America. Critics suggest that the fixation on ontology is deeply apolitical and obscures historical and ongoing resource extraction, violence, dispossession, and colonialism. In short, as Lucas Bessire demonstrates with his study of the Aroyo, it fetishizes isolation and remoteness. A focus on ontology appears to ignore interconnection and history. On the other hand, Marisol de la Cadena's work on Earth Beings in the Andes is highly attuned to politics while also problematizing notions of "belief" and "religion." She argues for attention to ontology as a way of moving beyond the hegemonic distinction between nature and culture, "in which the first exists objectively and the second is subjectively made by humans and therefore includes beliefs (sacred, spiritual or profane) about nature." In this view, it is not *belief* that mediates between local people's relationships with Earth Beings; rather, Earth Beings simply *are*. De la Cadena further argues that postcolonial theory has failed to fully decolonize, given its admission of only certain kinds of (historical) evidence into the terrain of the real. Instead, she argues, we need to "make room for the eventfulness of the ahistorical and the possibility that evidence is not a precondition for reality."

I try to read these arguments about ontology and history in relation to remoteness and connectivity at Mount Kailash and Mount Khawa Karpo. Attention to critical historiographies of circumambulation, processes of "Buddhicization," and contemporary pilgrims' explanations of their pilgrimage practices all suggest the importance of connectivity and the problems of certain readings of ontology that privilege isolation. At the same time, however, taking alterity seriously demands we

try to approach Kailash and Khawa Karbo in ways that do not reinforce the nature/culture binary. I ask how to do this in the context of “self-arisen” phenomena along the circumambulation routes as well as contemporary messages about environmental protection

“What I have heard is that in those days they have taken out a gold statue.”
Obscure holes, stolen treasures, and the search for the Yeti in Nepal’s Arun valley.
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During my fieldwork on the invention, suspension and uncertain resumption of the Arun-3 hydropower project in Eastern Nepal, I asked a lot of people why the World Bank had stopped construction in 1995, before it had fully started. One reoccurring explanation voiced by elder people in the villages around the proposed dam site went as follows: The dam was nothing but a smokescreen. When those foreign engineers arrived with huge machines to do geological test drillings for a planned water diversion tunnel, in reality they were digging for hidden treasures underground. After they had found what they had been looking for they “left the place in a mess.”

While younger friends told me not believe their grandmother's cock and bull story, to me it immediately made sense as a convincing framing for what happens when hydropower dams are built without consulting directly affected communities. Beyond that, this narrative enables to unearth an historic account of the production of remoteness in this long-standing frontier space. I will argue that the origin of the story was born from the encounter of ‘local’ perceptions of fertility and vitality with Western imaginations of the Arun valley as one of the most remote places in the Himalayas and the only possible area where the yeti could have survived. To this day, this entangled history serves as fundament for local understandings of non-development and backwardness.

Forces of Passion: Humanitarianism, Islam and Affect in Northern Pakistan

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Much research on humanitarianism carries forward the underlying assumption of a genealogy of originally Christian ideas about human life that have now become secularized and made part of neo-colonial endeavours. This is particularly evident in approaches that historicize contemporary notions of suffering and “bare life” as re-translated Christian ethics of compassion. Such reasoning adds to the understanding of the development of humanitarian institutions with firm roots in the Global North. At the same time, it leaves open the question of how we can make sense of individuals and institutions that have long and complex histories of navigating South-North and South-South connections. In this article I address this question based on anthropological and historical research in Pakistan in the context

of its northern borderlands with Afghanistan, China and Tajikistan. I thereby focus on individual and institutional humanitarian actors in past and present that have drawn on various sources of legitimacy, including Islam, colonial rule, economic ideologies, the materiality of infrastructure and ideas of masculine passion.

Matters of the heart vs. Female heights

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As I am in the liminal stage between PhD and Postdoc, I would like to explore two new research ideas with you.

Matters of the Heart ties in with my previous work on embodiment, love and emotions in Gilgit-Baltistan. It seeks to tease out vernacular understandings of the heart as an immaterial locus of (irrational) emotions as well as a material organ that is associated with increasing cases of cardiovascular diseases. Besides people's strong belief in pills as panacea, various 'health' specialists are consulted to treat *Matters of the Heart*. Prayers, amulets and sacrifices are popular Islamic approaches, while the folk traditions of sorcery, herbal medicine and shamanism serve to unravel social maladies and imbalances, thus reflecting the social construction of illness. From heartbreak to heart attack, I seek to relate individual feelings with medical discourses.

Female Heights takes off from Samina Baig's success to climb Mount Everest and all Seven Summits as first Pakistani woman. Having received great media attention, she has paved the way for women mountaineering in Pakistan: Climbing classes for girls have sprung up in Gilgit-Baltistan and a climbing club was founded at the local university. Nevertheless, for the majority of women a trip even to the high meadows still remains a dream, it is mostly men who are shepherds, hunters, porters or (tourist) mountaineers. At the same time, local associations with mountain tops as dominion of the fairies raises questions of femininity, im/purity, fertility and danger. *Female Heights* seeks to investigate women's changing relationship with the mountains that surround them and investigate how this interacts with conceptions of the masculine and the female.

As the state of my two proposals very much resembles workshop character, I invite the other participants to examine them with me: I will present two posters with enough free space to fill in words, ideas, rearrange concepts, connect them through arrows and move around thoughts.

Seen from Moscow: Legibility and Remoteness after 'Moscow Provisioning'

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What I plan to present at the Highlands Asia workshop is the outline of a chapter for a book manuscript-in-progress on space and power in Central Asia. The book is pitched as a short anthropological introduction to Central Asia aimed at an

undergraduate audience, using a focus on place-making as a lens for thinking about social and spatial transformation during and after socialism. The primary challenge I have in drafting the book is to keep the work short, simple and accessible (the primary readership will be first-year undergraduates with no previous exposure to the region; the complete text is limited to 50,000 words), while also aiming for ethnographic richness and specificity.

At the workshop I plan to present the first draft of a chapter that takes the logic of ‘Moscow provisioning’ as a lens for considering questions of remoteness and connectivity in the context of Soviet developmentalism in Central Asia. Such provisioning entailed the privileged distribution of resources to regions, and in certain cases, to specific towns and villages, which were considered to be at once ‘remote’ and strategically important to the Soviet economy. In practice, this meant that there was a variegated local landscape of access to goods, particularly to consumer items and food (Soviet sausage, lace underwear, children’s toys...) in which the more ‘remote’ location—the high-altitude coal-mine or the mercury plant and its associated ‘village-of-urban-type’ far from the main road—enjoyed a greater degree of economic and symbolic legibility to the Soviet centre than surrounding villages and even larger urban centres. Such instances, I suggest, are not just empirically interesting—as sites from which to register the experiential feel of growing ‘distanciation’ (Vitebsky) after the Soviet developmental state. They also pose a challenge to our very assumptions about what constitutes the ‘remote’ periphery of the contemporary Central Asian state. In this chapter I draw on case studies of Shorab (Tajikistan) and Aidarken/Khaidarkan to focus on the significance of particular *materials* and their exchange through which Moscow provisioning was mediated, and to think about the way in which a focus on *trajectories of provisioning and blockage* can extend recent debates about the ‘return of remoteness’ in contemporary anthropology (Andersson and Saxer).

Back to the Future: In the Aftermath of Soviet Modernity in Tajikistan’s Pamirs

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In this paper I explore people’s understandings of modernity in Tajikistan’s Gorno-Badakhshan province following the disintegration of the Soviet Union and in the context of development work by the Ismaili Aga Khan Development Network. During the Soviet time, people came to understand modernity as a mode of life aimed at continued improvement in order to progress towards communist utopia. The modern life was associated with particular standards of living as well as cultural sophistication facilitated by state provisioning of goods, infrastructure and welfare services. In contrast, the post-Soviet Tajik state failed to meet people’s expectations to (continue to) provide, or to maintain what existed. Consequently, crumbling infrastructure and lack of services came to contribute to a sense of “stepping back in time”, or of “a time reversed”, leading back to a state of “backwardness” which is temporarily located in a pre-Soviet time period. The presence and work of Ismaili development and religious institutions, on the other

hand, has not only partly succeeded the generous Soviet state in its capacity to provide vital services and infrastructure, but also offered an alternative modernity -- religiously underpinned yet pronounced worldly -- to both the Soviet modern life that lies irrecoverable in the past and to the current life in regress. However, with this "Ismaili modernity" the temporality of progress and a life of improvement became spatialized: that is, limited to particular places within Gorno-Badakhshan and, most of all, abroad. In the course of the paper, I approach modernity as an empirical as well as analytical concept allowing me to trace different temporalities and their qualities that people refer to in order to evaluate recent socio-material and political changes. Those interpretations, however, do not necessarily conform to the periodization of linear time.

Murghab, Documentary, 82 min

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A generation ago, Murghab was well taken care of. As the highest town of the former Soviet Union at 3600 metres above sea level and close to the sensitive borders with Afghanistan and China, the town enjoyed ample provisions from Moscow brought in via the Pamir Highway. It featured electricity around the clock, an airport with regular flights, a movie theatre, and a hospital with central heating. Since then, Murghab and its people have weathered several storms and many of the Soviet hallmarks are crumbling away. Yet, life goes on and, with wit and improvisational skills, the ruins of Socialism afford a plethora of new but precarious ways to make do.

The film provides a window into contemporary life in Murghab. It offers glimpses into people's daily routines, inviting the audience on a journey to the Pamirs. It follows a group of men harvesting shrubs on the windswept high-altitude plateau, a nurse keeping regional health statistics, a passionate teacher inspiring a sense of history and purpose in her class, and a welder building stoves from the scraps of Soviet modernity. A winter film of hardship, work and hope.

Following pathways, producing knowledge

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In his article from 2017, Martin Saxer argues that pathways in the Himalayan valleys are generative and resistant. In spite of the ongoing political, economic and social transformations, the environmental setting of the mountainous terrain has created specific options for movement which have persisted in this terrain for long periods of time. The persistent pathways highlight that communities in highland Asia, thought of as remote and isolated from the perspective of colonial and national power centres, have actually been inherently connected not only locally but also

trans-locally and even trans-continentally through networks of routes and communication nodes which have emerged along them.

While the materiality of the Himalayan valleys affords certain stability of pathways, the Taklamakan Desert in northwest China is a different type of terrain in which people and their mobility have to embed themselves. While pathways may remain visible in the stony terrain for years, the marks of motorcycles, cars, hoofs and feet disappear in the sandy fluidity of the Taklamakan in a few minutes, hours, or days, depending on the strength of the wind which moves the sand. In the past, as seasonal rivers in the desert changed their beds frequently, pathways also used to move following their meandering courses. Due to the movement of the sand dunes and meandering rivers, and also due to climate shifts, many of the pathways which emerged at one point were soon after abandoned. And yet, though the exact location of pathways changed dynamically, at a large scale, the connectivity across Taklamakan had persisted for, perhaps, as long as the last three millennia. At this large scale, the fact that some routes shifted or were abandoned appears insignificant as communication has continued in spite of them. At the local scale, the shifts did matter as whole cities like Kroraina, and their networks of trading routes have disappeared swallowed by sand. How to negotiate our position as ethnographers between these different spatial and temporal scales? How does the scale of detailed ethnography matter if, eventually, the ‘flows’ might continue along other ways? More generally, what is the value of the ethnographic perspective? For whom is it valuable? How to explain what we know in ways that are understandable to others? With regard to my own project, how does the ethnographic knowledge matter in large initiatives like the BRI besides “demonstrating what is going on on the ground”? Who wants to know about “what is going on on the ground”? When applied to the Highland Asia project, how does the knowledge produced in the Highland Asia team matter, and for whom?

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I am writing this abstract sitting in the restaurant of a little hotel at the Bernina Pass in Switzerland. It has been snowing for the past twelve hours and the train tracks which provide the only connection to and from the hotel are blocked by one meter of fresh snow. Usually, the first train arrives at Bernina at 7 am. Today things look differently. At 7.30 am the first team of maintenance workers arrives from Poschiavo on a rail-car with huge milling machines, having cut a corridor in the snow along the rail tracks. Four hours later, the team coming from the opposite direction arrives as well and everyone celebrates the meeting and the feat of establishing a 15 km-corridor through the snow between Pontresina and Poschiavo. Later in the afternoon, the regular train connections are resumed again. Witnessing this infrastructural event as the only guest at the hotel I wonder: how significant is what I’m witnessing here? What do we lose if we focus on the fact that, at the end, the traffic flows again? When we focus on longer temporalities, a break of eight hours is close to insignificant. When we focus on the break, it reveals itself to be a highly charged and intensive moment for those stuck on the way, for maintenance workers, for story-making about the Alps and for reflection on climate change. For whom does this perspective matter? And how to reconcile it, on equal rights, with the bird’s-eye perspective of many economists and political scientists?

Re-imagining the frontier: Exploration, espionage and place-making

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My paper examines the shape of “the frontier” as it emerged in the genre of the 19th century colonial expeditionary travelogue, that set out to survey and record the putatively “blank space” between South and Central Asia. Written both by colonial officers and their native translators/ scribes/companions called *munshis*, they comprise an English language archive of patterns of territoriality, jurisdiction and movement that have ceased to exist as they once did. Although highly mediated by the colonial project of exploration, espionage and imperial rivalry between Britain and Russia (that came to be known later as the ‘Great Game’), these travelogues designed for popular consumption serve as granular sources for tracing overlaps between “networks of trade” and “networks of knowledge” (Raj 2006). Looking at two accounts of the same voyage from Punjab to Bukhara in 1831-34, I study these immersions as constitutive acts of spatial ordering with a focus on the tension between colonial fantasies and the desires that animated their native interlocutors and agents.

Sunken models of distance across Xinjiang

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The new "mountains" are to be found in the urban centres. According to leading counter insurgency expert David Kilcullen, mega cities and slums rather than geographically remote wasteland are the places least likely to be reached by the state's surveillance and military apparatus. James Scott showed the escape spaces and hideouts to have been high mountains and swampy wetlands for centuries. Infrastructure and new technology have changed this and thereby altered our notions of distance. Distance is more about accessibility or about time than about count of kilometers. I want to look at the spatial imaginations of Xinjiang in maps and writings by different actors, including the government, Uyghur scholars and outside observers. I see these spatial models as expressions of ideologies and values (oftentimes severely modernist in nature) that I will attempt to lay bare. The depictions I will use include maps of Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative, Uyghur scholar's reiteration of Kashgar being a "Pearl on the Silk Road" and their respective measurements of success. I would like to show these examples and discuss them with the other workshop participants in relation to established models and theories of connectivity and networks, such as Saskia Sassen's Global Cities theory and James Scott's notions of remoteness.

Mapping Roadmaking in Highland Asia

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How do we track, trace, and make sense of development interventions across Asia today? As infrastructures rapidly expand and borders open and close under increasingly authoritarian regimes, cartographic analyses require new capabilities of flexibility and openness. OpenStreet Map, Google Earth Engine, and MapBoxStudio, amongst other new open-source cartographic technologies, present innovative new ways to collaboratively map development projects across a range of scales and spaces today. Taking as a starting point the rapid, dynamic nature of infrastructure development across Highland Asia, this project intends to accomplish two central objectives: 1. To create and maintain an open-source and crowd-sourced platform to map and illustrate road and other infrastructure development between Nepal and China in near-realtime; 2. To facilitate closer and more constant communication between citizens in Nepal – as some of the purported ‘targets of development in the trans-Himalaya – and academic and policy-oriented scholars who study and write about international development operations. Through this platform, I aim to give both metaphorical microphones and magnifying glasses to colleagues in Nepal so that words, maps, images, and other knowledges about road development in the trans-Himalayan borderlands can be disseminated to wider audiences and constituents.

At the Highland Asia Workshop, I will present a beta-version of this new mapping roadmaking platform

The mayor of Tengchong: A film

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The film follows the story of a Burmese teacher in the Chinese town of Tengchong. Teacher Zhou, as he is known by most people in the small border town, was born in Mandalay, Myanmar, in a family of prominent writers and intellectuals. As a young man, in the 1960s, teacher Zhou joined the Communist Party of Burma (CPB). After a few years in jail, in the early 1970s he fled Mandalay for what were known at the time as the "liberated areas": a wide stretch of territory that the CPB controlled in the northern part of the country, in proximity to the Chinese border. There, he lived until 1989, when the Communist Party of Burma collapsed and its leadership was forced to flee into China. Since then he has been living in Tengchong, where he teaches Burmese to young Chinese entrepreneurs.

The film is based on over a dozen interviews with members of teacher Zhou's family, his former comrades, and current students and friends in Tengchong. Through his story, the film retraces the history of the communist struggle in Burma and of fifty years of China-Myanmar cross-border relations.

The film offers a particular view of a region with is often depicted as a remote and unruly periphery, tormented by endless civil wars, illegal trades, and dis-

connections. Against such views, the film traces a story of connectivity: it follows how ideas and people travelled through such space and do so to this very day.

I am planning to show a first rough cut of the film in the course of the Highland Asia workshop. This will be an occasion, I hope, to discuss the impact and scope of the film, invite questions and reflections over its depiction of the China-Myanmar borderlands, and raise issues of representation and how to address them in the course of the editing process.