

Regionalism, mobility, and “the village” as a set of social relations: Himalayan reflections on a South Asian theme

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Abstract

This article considers how ethnographic representations of “the village” have created links between otherwise disparate “regional ethnography traditions” over time. “The village” has served as a multivalent sign that at once works to integrate specific locales into broader scholarly narratives, and to index moments of disjuncture in the production of regionality. I make this argument with specific reference to the relationship between “Himalayan” and “South Asian” studies, as mediated by the village as both geographical and social sign. I draw upon ethnographic material from three different Himalayan contexts to illustrate how people think of the village as a set of social relations, within which they orient themselves subjectively regardless of their physical location. Such orientations can be either positive or negative, demonstrating that the village serves not only as a site of nostalgia for those who have left it, but rather as an organizing principle that may possess a range of emotional and pragmatic valences. Ultimately, I argue that today’s villages remain key sites for the production of social meaning, requiring deep anthropological engagement if we wish to understand how contemporary mobile lives themselves mediate between the universal and the particular.

Keywords

Village, Himalaya, South Asia, Nepal, India, mobility, migration, subjectivity, territory, place

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Introduction

This article considers how ethnographic representations of “the village” have created links between “regional ethnography traditions” (Fardon, 1990) over time. The village has served as a multivalent sign that at once works to integrate specific locales into broader scholarly narratives, and to index moments of disjuncture in the production of regionality. By this, I mean that it has served as a shared scholarly symbol that flattens difference across locales, making village spaces in varied regional contexts comparable, while also demonstrating their distinctive materiality. I make this argument with specific reference to the relationship between “Himalayan” and “South Asian” studies, as mediated by the village as both geographical and social sign.

I argue that understanding the village as a flexible set of social relations (see also, Ferguson, 2011; Gallo, this volume) in this way, rather than as a fixed point on a map, allows us to recognize that village identity can be unmoored from place, even while it is shaped significantly by the specific historical and political contexts within which its geographical referent is nested. Such a perspective enables us to make sense of both historical and contemporary forms of mobility in which people rely upon the village as a foundational concept, which provides orientation within regional, national, and transnational frameworks, even while they move away from its territorial space.

Himalayan villagers have long been anything but sedentary inhabitants of bounded spaces. Trade, labor, and religious networks have historically connected people across broad swathes of South and Central Asia, and as the material presented here will show, many contemporary Himalayan livelihoods depend upon mobility across these regions, as well as further afield. Although the village as a set of social relations may remain constant wherever they are, the particularities of the broader web of regional, national, and transnational relations in which such village relations are embedded matter in shaping villagers’ experiences of belonging and nonbelonging wherever they are. I draw upon ethnographic material from three different Himalayan contexts to illustrate how people think of the village as an orienting set of social relations at the subjective level regardless of their physical location at any given time. Such orientations can be either positive or negative, or both, demonstrating that the village serves not only as a site of nostalgia for those who have left it, but rather as an organizing principle that may possess a range of emotional and pragmatic valences. Ultimately, I argue that today’s villages remain key sites for the production of social meaning, requiring deep anthropological engagement if we wish to understand how contemporary mobile lives themselves mediate between the universal and the particular.

Part I: Himalayan and South Asian Histories of “the Village”

Revisiting the figure of the village in the anthropology of India, Mines and Yazgi (2010) provide a much-needed corrective to the idea that villages “have become passé” (Patel, 1990: vii, cited in Mines and Yazgi). They offer a robust argument

for taking villages ever more seriously as persistent “ontological existents” and “elements of consciousness” (Mines and Yazgi, 2010: 13) in what we might by now call the era of post-multi-sited ethnography. Their emphasis on the continued importance of the village as a field of meaning for several billion world citizens is compelling. Yet, they perpetuate an unfortunate slippage between “India” and “South Asia” to designate the geographical unit of analysis that the book addresses. The implications of using these two terms interchangeably – as in fact happens often in scholarly writing on this region of the world – are substantial for the project of understanding what villages have been, are, and might be in both lived experience and scholarly analysis. While Mines and Yazgi explicitly consider how scholarship around Indian experiences of the village may benefit productively from exchange with anthropologists working in other world areas, there is little consideration of how work on India might in fact benefit from conversations much closer to home – with scholars working in other parts of South Asia – and vice versa.

Here I explore how the village has been conceptualized in the Himalayan ethnographic contexts that lie largely within, yet are not fully encompassed by, the geographical label of “South Asia,” nor the scholarly one of “South Asian Studies.” As I have argued elsewhere (Shneiderman 2010), the “Himalaya” rubric itself is a complicated one, which has often served to de-emphasize distinct national political histories in favor of broad regional paradigms for asserting cultural, linguistic, and religious commonality. But like “the village,” “the Himalaya” offers prospects for productive refiguring within new, more regionally expansive yet ethnographically grounded analytical frameworks.

The “Himalayan village” has appeared in numerous scholarly book titles, beginning in the colonial era (Crook and Osmaston, 1994; Downs, 1980; Gorer, 2005 [1938]). In such works, the trope of the village in conjunction with that of “the Himalaya” works to analytically distance its spatially defined subject from the larger national context – usually Nepal or India – in which the scholar’s field site(s) is physically located. As in the classic village studies of “mainland” India, here villages are portrayed as self-contained, sedentary social zones, which are not integrated into larger national or regional formations, or understood as nodes within networks of mobility. Within the Himalayan context, taking the village as the unit of analysis has had the effect of enabling the representation of geopolitically Nepali and Indian spaces as culturally and religiously Tibetan ones (Shneiderman, 2010).

On the one hand, such representations facilitated the larger scholarly project of “discovering” cultural Tibet outside the long-closed boundaries of political Tibet that motivated much early anthropological and philological research in the Himalayan regions of both Nepal and India. On the other hand, the shared rubric of the village provided a commonly understood analytical unit from which Himalayan data could be inserted into broader South Asian debates, as well as a vantage point for critiquing received South Asian orthodoxies. For example, James Fisher wrote in 1978 that, “Although the ‘village study’ is still the classic

mode of anthropological enquiry, research in complex peasant societies such as those of South Asia inevitably, if only indirectly, confronts substantive and methodological problems in the choice of appropriate research units” (1978: 43). He proceeds to challenge the applicability of Dumont’s interpretation of caste for the entirety of South Asia with his own ethnographic work in a Himalayan village in Nepal:

However well Dumont’s analysis may work in the heart of the subcontinent, one cannot help speculating on its utility at the periphery. After all, the notion of a culturally unique South Asia logically implies not only a conceptually neat and tidily bounded entity but something somewhere beyond it – such as Central Asia – with which it can be contrasted and compared. . . . I will take that portion of the surface of the earth conventionally called South Asia and quite literally follow it to an interstitial zone where it shades into, or perhaps collides with, the social and cultural systems of Central Asia. The interface will be defined in terms of confrontation. (Fisher, 1978: 43–44)

This Fisher proceeds to do by describing practices of caste in Tichurong, a set of 13 villages in the Dolpo district of northwestern Nepal, concluding that, “. . . we cannot avoid the fact that Indic ideology . . . cannot explain the behaviour or ideology of Tichurong” (Fisher, 1978: 49).

While such critiques of Dumont are hardly seen as revolutionary today, the point is that in 1978, the analytical unit of “the Himalayan village” provided a standpoint from which to question assumptions about the South Asian region’s limits and characteristics. In this sense, the rubric of the village served as a critical link between South Asian and Himalayan regional ethnography traditions. The village was a recognizable constant, but its interpretations necessarily varied between Dumont’s India and Fisher’s Himalayan Nepal.

Fisher’s discussion of Tichurong did not address how patterns of mobility in fact situated such villages within broader transregional networks (a theme he did consider later – see Fisher, 1986). While their “behavior” might not be entirely comprehensible through either “Indic” or “Tibetan” ideologies in a singular fashion, many Himalayan villagers have in fact engaged with such ideologies over time via their own experiences of mobility, largely as participants in religious and trading networks extending across both the Indic and Tibetan worlds. A reformulated approach to the village reveals it as a useful analytic in such contexts, which can help us understand the particular, sited dimensions of subjectivity in a universally mobile world.

Perhaps due to the sense of frustration that earlier Himalayan anthropologies had not adequately accounted for cosmopolitanism and transnational connectivity in the region, much recent ethnography of Nepal in particular departs from this legacy to focus instead on urban and/or globalized contexts (Hindman, 2013; Kunreuther, 2014; Rademacher, 2011). Here the global theoretical turn away from the village was exacerbated by the fact that the Maoist–state civil conflict

of 1996–2006 was primarily based in village settings, which, with few exceptions (i.e., de Sales, 2000, Pettigrew, 2013), made field research difficult. Maoist rhetoric itself highlighted how “feudal” structures of land tenure and social organization in Nepal’s rural areas contributed to deep inequalities. However, there is relatively little empirical data that goes beyond polemics to give us a sense of how such dynamics actually worked in particular locales, and how they have or have not been transformed by the conflict as well as the “post-conflict” political shifts.

Mahesh Chandra Regmi’s works (1976, 1978) remain the primary substantive scholarship on Nepal’s economic history, complemented by several works by Marxian anthropologists from the same period (Blaikie et al., 1980; Caplan, 2000 [1970]; Macfarlane, 1976; Seddon et al., 1979). Some emerging scholarship in geography and sociology returns to these paradigms to interpret the country’s recent political economic challenges (Adhikari, 2008, Sugden, 2009), but there is scarce anthropological attention to the particulars of contemporary village-based lives (Fitzpatrick, 2011 is a notable exception). A comprehensive contemporary agrarian history of the country is sorely needed, as are anthropological approaches that take seriously the continued valences of village relations in constituting contemporary Himalayan lives, mobile and transnational as they may be.

While I cannot explore in depth here parallel patterns in scholarship elsewhere in South Asia, including in other parts of the Himalaya, I suspect that the strategy of using a shared referent such as the village to make an argument for distinction is common, especially among scholars who face the challenge of writing about South Asia’s diversity. The Himalayan region is no more distinct or coherent than any other part of South Asia, and I do not make an argument for Himalayan exceptionality. Rather, I show that the village serves as a powerful symbolic link between otherwise potentially disparate locations and modes of ethnographic inquiry, particularly when deployed to understand experiences of transnational mobility across and between regions whose overlapping fluidity challenges received scholarly representations.

Part II: Administrative fiction, affective reality

Before turning to three brief contemporary ethnographic cases that illustrate these dynamics, I would like to shift from discussing how villages have been positioned within the regional discourses of “South Asia” and “Himalaya,” to discuss their trajectories within the national discourses of “India” and “Nepal,” both of which transect the two larger regional categories considered above. In particular, I suggest that Nepal’s “non-postcolonial” (Des Chene, 2007) experience provides a valuable counterpoint to the postcolonial narrative of the village as an administrative fiction of colonialism. Historian Anand Yang nicely summarizes the latter approach:

Although scholars since the 1950s have been steadily dismantling the village that the Raj built – some argue that this edifice has by now not only been condemned but also razed – the mythologized village, like caste, has not entirely relinquished the

considerable analytical and theoretical domains it annexed and possessed for more than a century and a half . . . The village, in other words, comprised one of the many sites . . . appropriated by colonialism. It therefore speaks to us about the workings of colonial power, not only in exercising political, social and economic control and domination but also in inscribing itself into the domain of culture and consciousness. (Yang, 1998: 8–9)

How then are we to make sense of the village in what Des Chene (2007) calls “non-postcolonial” Nepal? She suggests that Nepal’s never-colonized status sets it outside the purview of mainstream paradigms for understanding postcolonial South Asia. This argument has important implications as we consider the ontological status of the village, since like critiques of caste that deconstruct that concept as a colonial fabrication (Dirks, 2001), much of the argument against the village as an analytical framework within Indian scholarly circles has focused on deconstructing the colonial origins of the village as a mode of social and administrative organization, as exemplified in the above quotation from Yang. A recent wave of scholarship on India seeks to reevaluate “the agrarian question” in the “Indian countryside” (Lerche et al., 2013), but this is not really framed in explicit relation to “the village,” presumably because that term is perceived to carry unwanted colonial baggage (Mines and Yazgi, 2010). What, then, are we to make of the fact that villages are an equally important trope in the scholarly and political discourses of nonpostcolonial Nepal as they are in postcolonial India?

The village, or *gau* in Nepali, appears as an administrative unit of the Nepali state as early as 1799 (Regmi, 1976: 157), and by the 1860s, the nexus of power between rulers at the center and what Regmi calls “village overlords” was well established. However, such relationships were forged among Nepalis themselves (albeit of different caste, class, linguistic and regional backgrounds), rather than at the behest of an external colonial power. In establishing such agrarian systems of extraction, the Shah kings took many of their cues from the successes of rulers elsewhere in South Asia. As historian John Whelpton describes Nepal’s processes of state formation in the late 1760s, “institutions and practices in many ways followed the example of Mughal India, as was now the case in South Asia generally” (2005: 49).

My point here is twofold. First, Nepal’s Shah kings were watching carefully what unfolded elsewhere in South Asia, and defined themselves in relation to those paradigms, rather than as “Himalayan” subjects at the “periphery of South Asia” (to quote Fisher). Second, the fact that a term for the “village” exists in Nepali state documents by the end of the 18th century, long before the formal establishment of the British Raj, suggests that the Shah state modeled the agrarian unit of the village as a site of social and economic control not on British colonial practice, but on earlier Mughal forms of governance. As such, the prevalence of the village in the noncolonial, and as we shall see shortly, nonpostcolonial Nepali context suggests that it is a more fundamental paradigm for organizing meaning about the social world than postcolonial critiques of the concept allow.

In Nepal today, the smallest unit of state administration is the Village Development Committee (VDC). Introduced in the early 1960s as part of Nepal's last great phase of territorial restructuring, which also created the country's current 75 districts (Baral, 2012), this is a geographically and demographically flexible designation. It can describe anything from a "typical" village with houses and community life clustered around a shared physical and/or cultural center, to a disparate smattering of houses across a hillside with little social cohesion, to multiple smaller centralized villages that are clustered together for administrative purposes. In other cases, VDC boundaries cut across areas that residents conceptualize as single villages, as constituted by kinship, ethnic, and/or economic relations. For this reason, the term *gavisa* has become an important conceptual complement to the idea of the *gau*. The former is an acronym made up of the first syllables of the three words in the Nepali rendering of VDC: *gau vikas samiti*.

Recognizing that these two terms signify distinct, but related categories helps tease out the different meanings of "the village." In contemporary Nepali discourse, the term *gavisa* signifies the administrative aspect of what we might term the Village with a capital "V" – the framework through which citizenship and land documents are issued, as well as central government funds distributed – while *gau* continues to signify "the village" with a lower-case "v," or what I call the village as a set of social relations. By this I mean the lived experience of the village for those who inhabit it, which in some places and times may be coterminous with its boundaries as an administrative unit, but at others, may diverge from them significantly. Interviews I have conducted with residents of the three different districts across Nepal over the past year confirm this point. When asked where the territorial boundaries of their *gau* are, most respondents answer in concrete terms that allude to specific geographical features such as rivers and hills, as well as particular patterns of human settlement. They provide similarly descriptive responses when asked where the boundaries of their *gavisa* are – but clearly differentiate between the two sets of boundaries, and the affective content of each zone so delineated. The Village as administrative structure may have been a colonial creation in India, and a parallel creation of the Shah state in Nepal, but the village as a phenomenological frame exists independently of any specific historical–political conjuncture. As such, it is a constituent element of the "territorial consciousness" (Tamang, 2009) possessed by many of Nepal's rural residents.

Pigg (1996) first proposed that we understand the village as a particular kind of subjective space in the Nepali context by posing, "the question of 'villagers' beliefs'." In her rendering, the village became a proxy for the idea of backwardness, enabling elites at the center to make the case for Nepal's desperate need for "development," thereby benefiting from international donor attention, without labeling themselves as backward. Instead, it was the inhabitants of "village Nepal" who required such attention, in a manner mediated by none other than Kathmandu elites who could offer "development" to their village-based brethren as a way of remaking the Nepali state as modern, developed whole. For Pigg, "the village" comes to signify not so much a specific location, but rather a set of beliefs cast in

opposition to modernization and science. This is coded by the locational concept of “the village,” framed in opposition to cosmopolitan locales like “the city” – Kathmandu and beyond. Here, I want to further develop these ideas by suggesting that, beyond its life in administrative discourse as the *gavisa*, or its life in development discourse as the bastion of the backward, the village has another life as a set of social relations.

Part III: Ethnographic sketches

In developing this concept, I draw upon Levitt’s (2001) notion of the “transnational village.” In the Himalayas, the transnational village is not a recent phenomenon, but rather a long-standing organizational principle, as explained in Part I of this article. Focusing on the way in which the village serves as a framework for sociality within highly mobile contexts helps us see how and why the village has remained such an important mode of structuring social relations over time.

In the following three examples, I demonstrate how people from different communities have used it to orient themselves simultaneously in relation to specific localities, and to a wider world, as they engage in complex livelihood strategies that involve both settled agrarian production and forms of mobility like wage labor and trade. The first two examples involve people whose transnational villages extend across the political boundaries of Nepal, India, and China’s Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), as well as across the geographical range of both the Himalaya and South Asia. The first example also includes people who have extended the parameters of their village to the US. The third example focuses on conflict-induced internal migration within Nepal, and serves as a counterpoint to the largely positive portrayals of village relations that we find in the other two vignettes by emphasizing how the social relations that constitute the village may become an oppressive vector of violence. Taken together, these ethnographic sketches demonstrate how the village is a lived experience of relationality, in which kinship, territoriality, and ethnicity are encoded in a manner that transcends the geographical or administrative boundaries of any of the villages in question.

Sketch 1

August 2010. Lubra village, Muktinath VDC, Mustang District, Nepal. I arrive in this village of 14 houses in a side valley of Nepal’s Kali Gandaki river for a return visit after several years. Located just off the well-known Annapurna trekking route, Lubra possesses a strong sense of itself as a corporate entity. This is reproduced through both oral and textual traditions of narrating the village’s myth of foundation by a 12th-century itinerant Tibetan lama. As described by Ramble (1983), Lubra demonstrates how both “great” and “little” traditions – in Robert Redfield’s terms – may be fused in Himalayan village environments. It was the village’s special status as the primary seat of the priestly lineages of the Bön religious tradition in Nepal that first brought me here to conduct research as a college student in 1995 (Shneiderman, 2006).



Figure 1. Lubra village, Muktinath VDC, Mustang, with new hotel in the foreground. Photo by Sara Shneiderman March 2015.

Upon first arriving then, I was puzzled by the fact that the only residents were elderly people, women, and children. It took me several days to work out that since it was winter, the rest of the village's inhabitants were in India, largely in the northeastern bazaar towns of Guwahati (Assam) and Dimapur (Nagaland), selling sweaters as a seasonal business, as they did every year. Almost every household had at least one member away in India at that time, some many more. As I inquired further, I learned that after the 1959 tightening of the Sino-Nepal border, this pattern of annual mobility had superseded older patterns of seasonal cross-border trade between Lubra and towns in Tibet. But for all of the residents of Lubra whom I interviewed in 1995, annual circular migration – whether in the form of cross-border trade in salt and grain with Tibet, or seasonal residence in India as garment merchants – was a normal feature of life. The income from these activities subsidized the limited yield from their very small fields, which were steadily eroding as the river abutting the village changed course.

As I settled down for a cup of tea in the front room of the house where I had always stayed in Lubra, now 15 years after my first visit, the senior lama of the village burst through the low wooden door. “Hey, here you are!” he said, having spied us making our way up the riverine trail from his rooftop lookout next door. “I’m glad you didn’t come any earlier. I just returned from New York.” For the first time, he had visited his three children, all of whom had emigrated to the US

over the past decade, and his four grandchildren, who were all US citizens by virtue of their birth there. Dressed in a dirty yellow down jacket and red pants, it was hard to tell from his weathered hands that he had until a few days earlier been enjoying a vacation in Queens, New York (see Craig, 2002, 2011; Hangen and Ranjit, 2010 on New York's Nepali community).

"Now," he continued, "where's Nhima Bhuti? I need her to look at a cut on my hand." Nhima Bhuti was both my hostess in Lubra, the woman of the house in which we were sitting – and resident of the UK, where at the time of our 2010 visit to Nepal, she had lived with me and my family to study English and help with childcare for the previous two years. She had just climbed up the steep rocky path to the village with me, and was relieved to have arrived home. But here was the lama, asking for her medical attention to a cut on his hand. "What do you need?" she asked. "Well, you were the one trained as a village health worker," he replied, "So it's good that you're here, since now that I'm back in the village I need help from you." Indeed, Nhima Bhuti had been trained as what was officially called by the Nepali state a Female Community Health Volunteer (FCHV) several years earlier, and before leaving for the UK was regularly consulted by other villagers about general health issues.

"Isn't there someone else doing that job now?" I asked. "Or a health post?" "No, it is Nhima Bhuti's job and everyone in the village knows that," said the lama. "It doesn't matter where she is, we would never give the job to anyone else. We trust her, and now that she is back in the village, she is still the same person. Even when she is not here she is still my neighbour and my niece, and it doesn't matter if I find her in New York or in Lubra, if she is there I would always ask her for help, even if there was the best hospital in the world next door." Nhima Bhuti laughed, unnerved by the flattery. "Show me your hand, and let's see what we can do," she said. The lama held up a nasty knife wound across his palm and ring finger. Nhima Bhuti proceeded to rummage in a dusty corner of the kitchen – which was somewhat worse for the wear having been managed by her chronically ill mother for the last two years – and pulled out an old roll of gauze bandage and a bottle of Dettol antibacterial solution. After checking the expiration date, she fixed up his hand.

This encounter highlighted to me the way in which the village serves as a structuring principle that enables people to make sense of social relations even, and perhaps especially in, situations where their interactions are not actually circumscribed by the closeness of "face-to-face" village life. Both of the individuals I described here were well traveled at regional and global levels (beyond their travels in the UK and US, both had spent many seasons working in India, and the lama had also traveled in Tibet), and both had only just returned to the village itself. Elsewhere, and perhaps more importantly, *with other people*, they might have played many other roles. But *with each other*, their engagement was structured by their shared understanding of the village as the framework, which established a specific form of relationality and trust between them as neighbors and kin (the lama was Nhima Bhuti's mother's second cousin, but she called him "uncle"), despite the

fact that they had not met for nearly two years, and both were engaged in a wide network of relationships that stretched far beyond the village.

Conversely, upon moving to the US with us in 2011, Nhima Bhuti became quickly engaged in a web of village relations in New York. Some of its nodes were with the lama's children and grandchildren, along with many other relatives and friends. Although all of them are part of much larger regional (Mustang) and national (Nepali and/or Tibetan) social networks in New York City, the most important unit of belonging for all of them appeared to remain the village. Holidays were celebrated in village-based groups, and they maintained a rotational credit group, a *dhikuri*, among co-villagers who live in the US. These groups were oriented around the relations established by membership in the *gau*, not the *gavisa*. Although the latter may frame villagers' relationships with the Nepali state and with each other when it comes to political-economic issues at home, it has little relevance once its inhabitants are territorially dislocated from that administrative structure; while the former maintains (and perhaps even gains) force as an organizing principle under such conditions of geographical dislocation in the US.

Craig (2002, 2011) suggests that the objective of most immigrants to the US from Mustang and nearby villages is not to settle in the US, but rather to earn enough money to reinvigorate their villages at home. In so doing, they expand and reaffirm the centrality of the village as a central tenet of self-identity, belonging, and land-based economic investment, regardless of where in the world its inhabitants are physically located. Such projects were strongly in evidence during my most recent visit to Lubra in early 2015. There are now two hotels for the increasing number of tourists trekking through the tiny village after a road-building project rerouted the popular Annapurna Circuit through it. One hotel opened recently and one was under construction, both financed by money earned in the US. Tashi, the owner of the latter, had just returned to Lubra after 15 years in the US a few months before I visited. When I asked if he wanted to leave again he said, "Why should I? I made my money, now I'm home. I was born here, I want to die here. This is my village, I need to make sure there is something here for my children." All four of his teenage children were absent, studying and working in the district headquarters of Jomsom, Nepal's capital of Kathmandu, and in India – but nonetheless Tashi's notion of insurance for their future was investing his US-earned cash in village-based infrastructure.

Sketch 2

The next anecdote comes from my long-standing work with the Thangmi community (Shneiderman, 2015). This group of approximately 40,000 is dispersed across parts of central-eastern Nepal, especially Dolakha and Sindhupalchok districts; the Indian states of West Bengal (Darjeeling District) and Sikkim, and the southern border towns of China's TAR that border Nepal. Many Thangmi practice circular migration on an annual basis, moving from the villages inside Nepal where they



Figure 2. The Thangmi village of Phaselung, Suspa-Kshemawati VDC, Dolakha. Photo by Sara Shneiderman March 2015.

hold small plots of land to the relatively urban bazaar towns of both Darjeeling and Gangtok in India, and Dram and Nyalam in the TAR.

I was repeatedly struck by the strength of the village identities that continued to shape Thangmi relationships, even in a presumably diasporic situation. That is to say, contrary to the notion that in diaspora environments, more granular units of identity – ethnic group or regional affiliation – diminish in importance relative to larger national, linguistic, and religious affinities, in India for the Thangmi, as in New York for the people of Mustang, village affiliations seemed to take on an even greater importance than they did at home. Thangmi in India, even those whose forebears had given up circular migration to settle permanently in India, identified each other by the village from which they had originally hailed. But this was not in a nostalgic sense vis-à-vis a “point of origin,” distant in time and place, in relation to which a diasporic identity was constructed (Axel, 2001). Rather, villages themselves were conceptualized as transcendent, transnational territories, which possessed specific characteristics and patron deities. These worked not to circumscribe locality, however, but to make it an expansive category of identification that moved with its people wherever they went. The full contours of this argument are beyond the scope of the present paper (for further details, see

Shneiderman, 2015, chapter 6, upon which the description below is based). Here, I offer just a brief insight into the dynamics at play.

At a cultural performance in 2004 where Thangmi migrants from Nepal were commissioned by an Indian cultural organization to perform “Thangmi culture” for political purposes, I first began to understand how the transcendent notion of the village and its territory worked for those Thangmi villagers who inhabited it – in both Nepal and India. I also saw how this expansive idea of ethnic territory could be expediently appropriated by Thangmi ethnic activists who sought to forge an indigenous identity in India. Their motivation for doing this was to find a way to demonstrate to the Indian state that the Thangmi were indigenous to India despite their strong links with cultural heritage in Nepal. On this occasion, I traveled by jeep with the Thangmi leadership to the site of the program in Jorebunglow, some kilometers outside of Darjeeling bazaar. While we then waited for the audience to gather—a multigenerational, multiethnic group from the surrounding residential area—I interviewed the performers, and learned that they typically spent six months of the year in India, although most of them had wives and children back in Nepal, all in Dolakha district’s village of Lopilang. When I asked which place they considered home, one of them said, “This is our village, but that is also our village. Really, they are the same village.” Overhearing this conversation, one of the Indian ethnic activists approached just as I was writing the label for the videocassette which I had cued up to record their performance, and said, “Well, since it’s all one village anyway, please don’t write on the cassette that they are actually from Nepal. Just write that this performance occurred in Darjeeling.” It is in this sense that Thangmi villages can be envisioned as translocal ethnic territories, which are at once grounded in specific localities, and transcend the national borders that may appear to circumscribe them on the ground. I compromised with the activist’s request by writing “Lopilang dancers in Jorebunglow” on the cassette, using local rather than national descriptors, and in the process invoking two specific locations in the larger transnational Thangmi village.

Unlike the first sketch, in which labor migrants like Tashi spend many years, often decades, in their host country before returning home, here the Thangmi of whom I speak primarily practice circular migration, spending approximately half of each year on their village homesteads in Nepal, and half as urban wage laborers in India portering goods up steep roads inaccessible to vehicles or working in construction. This accounts for some differences in how each group conceptualizes the village: in the first case, it is as a longed-for but distant site of eventual return whose sociality is replicated in the US, but whose geographical referent is elsewhere; while in the second it is an ever-present component of a transnational sense of territoriality that comprises both village and not-village simultaneously, with sociality and geography more closely fused. Nonetheless, in both circumstances, the village serves as an organizing principle for group-internal social relations, as well as a means of expressing belonging within broader social fields. For both, it also serves as a site for economic investment and imagined future security. On all of

these counts, the final example below diverges significantly, demonstrating the full range of the village's possible valences.

Sketch 3

January 2015. Kohalpur municipality, Banke district. As I walked up the concrete stairs, a stack of bamboo *doko* (handwoven baskets carried with a headstrap) nearly fell on my head. Along with some sharp sickles and axes, the *doko* had been haphazardly stuffed into a corner of the stairwell in this three story building located along one of the major thoroughfares of Kohalpur, a planned township built in the 1980s. These agricultural implements seemed oddly out of place in this new suburban residence on the outskirts of Nepalgunj, a major city along Nepal's southern border with India. I was here to visit with the family of a Nepali friend,



Figure 3. Bamboo baskets in stairwell, Kohalpur municipality, Banke district. Photo by Sara Shneiderman January 2015.

who had emigrated to Kohalpur from a district in the country's western hills at the center of the 1996–2006 civil conflict between Maoist and state forces.

We sat down on the rooftop for tea, and I asked about whether the *doko* were of use here in the city as well. “No, we just like to keep them there to remind ourselves of all of the hard work we have left behind,” replied Som Bahadur (a pseudonym) wryly, “But there are other things we prefer not to remember.” This former school-teacher in his 60s from an upper caste Hindu background was one of the few villagers with a college education, and as a local intellectual, he had been targeted early on by the Maoists as a potential supporter. When he refused to comply with their demands, threats ensued, and he felt he had no choice but to leave the village. He already had strong networks in the Nepalgunj area dating to his college years there, and began to explore relocating his family.

In the meantime, many co-villagers became Maoist supporters, some even fighters in the People's Liberation Army. As Som Bahadur explained, the web of village relations in which his family was embedded – through kinship, land tenure arrangements, and other linkages – changed shape during the conflict years, from a network of solidarity (albeit one with its own occasional internal conflicts) to a vector for politically motivated violence. As de Sales (2000) described for a neighboring district in a seminal anthropological account of the then-emergent conflict, village sociality served to exacerbate violence and intimidation rather than temper it. This was both because the intimate webs of relations left nowhere to hide, and because individual villagers found ways to harness the power of political violence for their own agendas – to take revenge for a long-standing land dispute, or punish a daughter who had eloped, for instance. Som Bahadur first moved back and forth between village and town, and then decided to leave the toxic environment permanently when an opportunity arose to purchase land and build the house in which we now sat.

“Do you think you'll ever go back?” I asked. “Why would we?” chimed in Som Bahadur's wife, in a heavy tone that seemed to etch even deeper lines in her face, “there is no one for us there now, we prefer to live next to people from other places, as we can here, rather than next to our own.” She pointed to the other houses visible from the rooftop, telling me where each family came from – all emigrants from different districts, like them, all seeking respite from the oppressive side of village social relations, she implied. “In a village all you have is your family and your land. Here, we have wide clean streets and friends from different places who can understand us but who do not expect anything of us.” But what happened to their land in the village, I asked? She replied, “We sold most of it to build this house. But still we want something there, to remind everyone, ‘They are not defeated, they are just living better elsewhere.’” For that reason, Som Bahadur added, they still maintained a small plot of agricultural land in their home village, which they employed others to till. Now that the conflict had ended and it was safer to travel, they visited a few times a year to collect their share of the harvest, and to assert their own perceived privilege in village hierarchies by reminding those who remained that they had opted out. In this sense, they had not actually forsaken the

village as a set of social relations, but rather refigured what it meant to them and also – at least in their own minds – what they meant to others within it. It remained one of the key phenomenological principles structuring their daily lives: how they oriented themselves in the new built environment that they now inhabited, how they related to family members and more distant relations, and how they managed their property, both agricultural and otherwise.

The notion that village social relations are not always positive and may constitute oppressive structures from which individuals seek escape is hardly new. In fact it is a well-known trope in Nepali literature (Hutt, 1998), as in a novel from the late 1950s by Lila Bahadur Kshetri, in which one of the main protagonists states, “But there’s no question of living in this village, is there! We might leave, but where can we go?” (as cited in Hutt, 1998: 199). Eventually he and his pregnant lover elope to India to find a new life away from the watchful eyes of co-villagers. The point here is that village social relations may be both warm and positive, as they are often idealized to be, but also oppressive and violent. Even in the latter case, however, those social relations persist as primary organizing principles in the lives of those who are embedded in them.

Conclusion

There is much more that can be said about each of these ethnographic cases. For the moment, I am content to let them suggest the multiple ways in which villages continue to serve as important fields of meaning making, belonging, and identity production for a wide range of people across South Asia and the Himalaya. This is perhaps ever more so for people whose experiences are characterized by mobile livelihoods. The village stands not in opposition to mobility, but rather as a central tenet of its formulation. Those who move within and between the Himalayas, South Asia, and beyond take the village with them, and reformulate its reality upon return – through their remittances if not their bodies. Such patterns of mobility both dissolve boundaries between regions constructed for scholarly purposes, and call for careful analytics that recognize the complicated relationships between universal and particular within and between each locale.

Moreover, the generalizable principle of the two-sided coin of “Village” and “village” – as administrative and affective reality respectively – continues to connect people from specific locales to regional and national sociopolitical frameworks, just as the village as both a geographical and social referent has long worked to link sites perceived as peripheral, such as the Himalayas, to broader scholarly conceptualizations of regionality, such as South Asia. While the concept of the village may be critiqued for its presumed universalizing tendencies, it is precisely these characteristics that make it an analytic of continued value in an era of ever greater mobility. For this reason, villages must continue to be a site of social scientific inquiry, particularly for those of us who seek to understand the complex relationships between kinship, territoriality, and belonging, and their

experiential effects and affects. In resiting the village once more as a central location for ethnographic practice, we stand to learn a great deal about both scholarly and political pasts, and their implications for the future.

Epilogue

The geological metaphor with which Fisher (1978: 44) described how South Asia “collides” with Central Asia took on distressing new meaning in the final days of preparing this article. What is now being called “The Great Earthquake” hit central Nepal on 25 April 2015, just as I was making final revisions and was followed by a second large jolt on May 12, 2015. If any evidence was ever needed that villages do not figure adequately in contemporary empirical paradigms, this disaster is it. As journalist Thomas Bell writes, “while projections foresaw a catastrophe in densely populated Kathmandu, the actual disaster has unfolded in remote rural areas” (Bell, 2015). This failure to prepare for a catastrophe that has affected 8 million people is in part due to the genuine unpredictability of seismic forces, but also highlights how an analytical turn away from village contexts, where up to 90% of Nepal’s citizens have their official residence, may have contributed. Those anthropologists who do maintain strong ties with specific villages have in recent weeks found ourselves advising strategic actors ranging from helicopter dispatchers to multilateral agencies, Nepali businessmen to independent charities. Highly localized information, such as the latitude and longitude coordinates of a landslide site, the cell phone numbers of villagers nearby, and an understanding of their socio-economic and linguistic context, was suddenly necessary in order to plan relief efforts (in addition to helicopters, tents, and large supplies of food aid), but was sorely lacking in any coordinated, centralized fashion.

Central Nepal’s villages have been devastated by the radical materiality of their mud and stone houses, flattened in place by forces larger than any framework for social analysis. At the same time, it is the village as a set of social relations which has made many of the immediate relief efforts possible on the micro level: the fact that so many villagers reside in Kathmandu, away from the material structures that mark their ancestral homes on the map, yet in constant contact with them, enabling them to guide rescuers to the affected areas; the phone calls between people who had lost their homes, and their kin working in the Middle East, who posted details of their villages’ needs on social media, which eventually made their way to teams of citizen relief volunteers.

In Lubra, the village described in Sketch 1, the villagers are lucky this time, homes remained largely undamaged, as they did throughout much of Mustang. However, from the neighboring village of Dakardzong came the sad news that a local man who had been working as a cook in the trekking trade in the district of Rasuwa further east had lost his life. Shared on Facebook, the death notice included contact numbers for people collecting funds for his family in Mustang, Kathmandu, India, and New York. Those in Banke district, such as Som Bahadur and his family from Sketch 3, were let off lightly. They were far

enough southwest to escape significant damage. Of those described in this piece, the Thangmi villagers of Sketch 2 have lost most: almost all buildings are destroyed across a wide swathe of Sindhupalchok and Dolakha districts. “These houses are no longer useful things,” said my long-time research assistant on the phone. But when I asked if he wanted to relocate his family to Kathmandu, he said no, they had rice to plant.

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