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# 2     The Properties of Territory in Nepal's State of Transformation[1]

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**Abstract**

How do Himalayan peoples conceptualize 'territory'? In English, this concept joins the multiple scales of individual land ownership, communal emplacement in locality, and belonging and ownership of sovereign space at the national level. But how are the links between these different scales envisaged in Himalayan worldviews and languages – if at all? These questions emerge out of my ongoing study of the state-restructuring process in Nepal since 2006 – in which political debates over all three scales of territorial belonging have played an important discursive role. Here I investigate how such political categories are constituted in relation to *practices* of territoriality at the grassroots level in rural Nepal, both before and after the 2015 earthquakes.

**Keywords:** Nepal, Himalaya, territory, state transformation, disaster, politics

## Introduction

How do Himalayan peoples conceptualize 'territory'? In English, this concept joins the multiple scales of individual land ownership, communal emplacement in locality, and belonging and ownership of sovereign space at the national level. But how are the links between these different scales envisaged in Himalayan worldviews and languages – if at all? These questions emerge out of my ongoing study of the state-restructuring process in Nepal since 2006 – in which political debates over all three scales of territorial belonging have played an important discursive role.

These are not new questions for Himalayan anthropology. Several classic ethnographies address these issues for specific linguistic and cultural communities. Place and space have also been major orienting frameworks for multiple strands of analytical engagement with the region over the last few decades. Think, for instance of edited volumes like *Himalayan Space* (Bickel and Gaenszle 1999), which addresses the relationship between language and terrain; *Selves in Time and Place* (Skinner, Pach, and Holland 1998), which considers emplacement in the subjective terms of phenomenology; or *Territory and Identity in Tibet and the Himalayas* (Buffetrille and Diemberger 2002), which explicitly addresses the relationships between territory and identity with reference to anthropological, Tibetological, and comparative religion approaches.

There are also strong, if contested, links between traditions of cultural and political ecology and the Himalayas. This was perhaps initiated in Fredrik Barth's (1965) work on the 'niches' that the Swat Pathans and their neighbors inhabited, and followed by the much-critiqued theory of Himalayan degradation (see Ives 1987 for an overview), which linked certain 'cultural' behaviors to specific outcomes in land-use change. But these bodies of literature have rarely investigated the relationships between such localized political conceptions of territory, and the broader national and transnational configurations within which they are nested. A recent notable move in that direction is Joelle Smadja's edited volume, *Territorial Change and Territorial Restructuring in the Himalaya* (2014).

At the same time, broader recent literatures on the theme of territory in anthropology, but also geography and political theory, have largely proceeded on Foucauldian premises where territory is understood primarily from the state's perspective, and is conceptually linked most strongly to the notion of sovereignty as a mode of biopolitical control (Elden 2013; Moore 2005). This top-down notion of territory also plays a strong role in constituting James Scott's vision of how state power works – both from the state's perspective

in *Seeing Like a State* (1998), and from the perspective of what he calls the inhabitants of 'nonstate spaces' in the *Art of Not Being Governed* (2009). These are people who have sought out specific types of terrain in which they choose to live precisely because it is beyond the scope of the state's territorializing power. Yet in none of these approaches are we given much insight into *how* such marginal peoples themselves territorialize the land on which they live, how they produce their own geographical boundary concepts, and what they believe the properties of their territory so enclosed to be.

Then there is the political economy literature, which seems to come more out of British social anthropology, which addresses 'the land question' or 'agrarian question' as it has often been framed in India. This body of work entails largely Marxian approaches most recently exemplified in the context of Nepal by Fraser Sugden (2009, 2013) and Ian Fitzpatrick (2011). This work ties in with trends beyond the Himalayas, such as Tania Li's recent *Land's End* (2014) about capitalist relations in indigenous Indonesia, or work by Jens Lerche, Alpa Shah, and Barbara Harriss-White (2013) in India on revisiting the agrarian question. However these works do not interface directly with the phenomenological and linguistically informed earlier wave of work on space and place for individual Himalayan communities that I just invoked.

For both social science in general then, but particularly in Himalayan anthropology, we are at a juncture where a rapprochement between various approaches to territory, territoriality, and terrain are necessary to understand how and why certain political claims are being made. For the purposes of this chapter, I will focus specifically on dynamics within the contemporary nation-state of Nepal; however, I believe that the larger analytical framework, as well as the specific territorial concepts described here may have broader applicability beyond Nepal's borders.

Debates over all three scales of territorial belonging (individual, communal, national) have played an important discursive role in the ongoing process of state restructuring in Nepal that began with the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2006, and culminated in the contentious constitutional promulgation of 20 September 2015 (see Shneiderman and Tillin 2015 for background). Although the importance of territory has been taken for granted in Nepal's state-restructuring process, political actors seem to have proceeded based on the assumption that everyone in Nepal – and in the international community – understands territory in the same way. Perhaps this conflation of multiple perspectives on territory is one of the factors, beyond the obvious political ones, leading to the 'lack of consensus' which has long dominated Nepali media headlines. Such different views

continued to be in evidence as protests over provincial demarcation and other elements of the 2015 constitution escalated.

My recent research has sought to understand how political expressions of territoriality are constituted in relation to *practices* of territoriality at the grassroots level, or how such practices and expressions of what I call the 'properties' of territory articulate with properties of other key categories under debate during this process of transformation, such as citizenship and religiosity. In other words, although one of the key questions at the central political level has been how to restructure Nepal's internal territorial boundaries, it seems that there is relatively little policy-relevant evidence base for understanding *how* various Nepali citizens actually understand their own relationships to place and to existing boundaries, for instance of village, municipality, district, and zone, and therefore *how* they might like to see those boundaries shift – or not.

Of course, one of the major vectors of the debate over restructuring has focused on identity, ethnicity, indigeneity and their putative links to certain territorial spaces. Much of my own previous work has addressed these questions of ethnic consciousness. Here I do not want to rehash this, but rather focus on the category of what Mukta Tamang (2009) has called 'territorial consciousness' in broad terms, delinking it for analytical purposes for a moment from ethnicity per se. My contention is that while much of the debate over restructuring initially focused on indigenous claims to belonging in certain territories, this is actually a more broadly significant category for all Nepalis that deserves deeper investigation. Recent agitations in the Madhesh, or Tarai plains, are strong evidence of this fact. Specific indigenous groups certainly have special relationships with specific territories that should be acknowledged by the country's new political and cartographic form. However it is also important to find ways of recognizing these special relationships that do not either collapse all indigenous territorial consciousnesses into a single, flat, undifferentiated category, or exclude those citizens who are not formally classed as indigenous from the possibility of possessing territorial consciousness. All of us are emplaced in the environments in which we live, and for many Nepalis of all backgrounds – both rural and urban, indigenous and other – territorial belonging is an important component of identity, even across very different kinds of terrain.

## Methodology

In an effort to understand these relationships, and their community-specific differences as well as commonalities, I first began to envision the 'territory'

component of the research project 'Restructuring Life: Citizenship, Territory and Religiosity in Nepal's State of Transformation' (see note 1 for details). The idea behind the larger project was to conduct an ethnography of the state-restructuring process between 2006 and 2015 'from the outside in' – in other words, to move away from a focus on the perceived lack of actual transformation at the central political level to understand what kinds of transformation actually occurred at the level of consciousness for common people in various parts of Nepal between the end of the civil conflict between Maoist and state forces in 2006 and the constitutional promulgation in 2015.

I chose three districts out of Nepal's 75 in which to conduct research: Mustang, Dolakha, and Banke (see figure 1). In some ways, these choices replicate the hackneyed framework for understanding Nepal as a series of ecological zones: mountains, hills, and plains. But I chose them not because I think they are 'representative' of the entire country – as no three districts could be – but because they highlight three different sets of relationships between individuals, political agency, and concepts of territory. Mustang and Dolakha were places in which I had significant experience from past research, giving me a fairly good grasp of broader historical, political, and social contexts, but Banke was a new location for me. I have been working with Nepali research collaborators in each district, and altogether we had conducted approximately 230 interviews by the time of the 2015

**Figure 1   Map of Nepal's current 75 districts, with research districts of Banke, Dolakha, and Mustang highlighted**

earthquakes, which put the project on hold. We used a shared question-naire with open-ended questions regarding experiences and understand-ings of citizenship, territory, and religiosity. This was complemented by participant-observation in day to day life – accompanying interlocutors to the district administration office to apply for citizenship (*nagarikta*), for instance, observing the process of surveying land for registration, and participating in temple management committee meetings.

## Translating Territory

One of the first challenges in designing the research, as always, was figuring out how to ask questions. As I said at the outset, in English 'territory' has multiple connotations, at least for me: individual land ownership, com-munal emplacement in locality, and belonging and ownership of sovereign space at the national level. That is why I chose the term, instead of 'land,' for instance, 'place,' 'space' or 'landscape.' But I realized as I sat down with my coresearchers to design the questionnaire in the summer of 2014 that when I wrote the research proposal I had not thought carefully enough about what the Nepali term for 'territory' might be.

As our research team talked – one researcher from Banke, one from Dolakha, one from Mustang, and myself – it became clear that the region-ally, ethnically, and linguistically specific concepts that each was familiar with did not align easily. Moreover, within each of their sociolinguistic worldviews there existed a variety of terms which approximated some elements of what I was hoping to describe with 'territory,' but none which linked them in the same way. Just within our research group, we were dealing with four different speech forms: 'standard' Nepali, Thangmi (a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in Dolakha and Sindhupalchok districts; see Turin 2012 for details), the Mustang dialect of Tibetan, and a Khas dialect spoken in the western part of the country. Even when everyone spoke the presumably shared language of Nepali, each used vocabulary with which the others were unfamiliar. Our colleague from Banke spoke about the uncertain political valences of *ailani jagga*, or unregistered land, on which many people in Banke lived. The researcher from Dolakha spoke about the figure of the *amin*, the surveyor from the district land revenue department who was responsible for designating the boundaries of property owner-ship. Then there were the *yulsa*, the territorial deities who marked village boundaries in Mustang. Each researcher drew blank looks from the others, to whom their fundamental conceptual frameworks for understanding the

shared thing that I called 'territory' were in several important ways alien. They all gently told me that I was misguided as I continued to insist that they were all talking about the same thing with different words.

Eventually, after hours of discussion over several days, we agreed upon a shared vocabulary in Nepali that could be used to ask the questions that we desired, providing enough of a broadly comprehensible framework to allow comparison between responses from the different districts, but allowing enough space for locally specific terminology and issues to be discussed.

In the interest of moving the discussion of territorial concepts in the Himalaya forward, I list below some of the terms that we discussed in both Nepali and Tibetan, and group them in conceptual categories. Some of these have their own extensive literatures, while others are less well-described. Here I simply cite key existing scholarly sources, but much more could be said about each term, its pragmatic uses, and political and affective valences.

The first set of terms in Nepali pertain in some ways to the spatial, physical, emplaced aspects of territory, not necessarily as a bounded political unit:

> *Bhume* – earth, soil[2]
> *Jamin* – 'land,' or earth as a natural resource (often grouped with *jal* [water] and *jangal* [forest] especially in indigenous rights discourse)[3]
> *Sampatti* – property, usually in the individual sense but also can be used in terms of collectivity, also in the sense of 'cultural property' in discussions of 'heritage'[4]
> *Jagga* – 'place' in the generic sense, as in Thangmi migrant laborers from Nepal describing Darjeeling with: *yo jagga pharak ho* ('This place is different')[5]
> *-than/-sthan* – location, often divine abode: Bhumethan, Bhimsenthan (derived from *sthana* in Sanskrit)

The second set of terms in Nepali comprise a political vocabulary aligned with what I described earlier as the state-based approached to understanding

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2    According to Turner, 'the ground, a place' and 'belonging to the earth,' as well as 'sacred place or ground' and 'a particular class of deities' (1997: 480-482). For scholarly discussions of the concept, see Lecomte-Tilouine (1993) and Shneiderman (2015b: chapter 6).

3    See Poudel (2008) for an interesting exploration of these concepts as the basis for integrated development.

4    'Property, possessions, effect, riches, prosperity' (Turner 1997: 588).

5    Turner (1997: 206) defines *jagga* as 'place, land, field, estate.'

territory. These terms work to aggregate specific instantiations of the first set of terms into a singular whole, territorializing specific terrain into a flat, governable, and knowable landscape:

> *Desh* – country[6]
> *Muluk* – possessions[7]
> *Bhugol* – geography

Finally, I list the term *kipat* on its own, as it indexes a specific relationship between a designated collectivity and designated territory, as mediated by state recognition. Defined as, 'a customary system of land tenure' (Forbes 1999: 115), it is in some ways comparable to other specific land tenure terms such as *raikar, guthi, adhya, kut* (all described in Regmi 1976). However, *kipat* is the only form of land tenure that historically recognized the collective rights of particular ethnic communities. I've argued elsewhere (Shneiderman 2015b: chapter 6) that in contemporary discourse, *kipat* has come to signify the special relationship between indigenous bodies and territory, or in other words, to embody territorial consciousness. That being said, how can we figure this kind of relationship for members of other communities who did not have documented historical *kipat* – whether they style themselves as indigenous or otherwise? In other words, how do we think territorial consciousness beyond the frame of indigeneity? Again, this is a key question for understanding how Madheshi regional identities and their movements fit into the bigger picture.

The Tibetan terms used in the interviews we conducted in Mustang district to describe the embodied, subjective dimensions of territorial emplacement (roughly paralleling the first set of Nepali terms as above) are as follows:

> *Yul* – country (roughly cognate to *desh*)
> *Sa* – earth, soil (roughly cognate to *bhume*)
> *Yulsa* – territorial deity, also used to refer to small territorial monuments[8]

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6    Perhaps best articulated in the poetry of Bhupi Sherchan, for instance in the 1960 work, 'I think my country's history is a lie' (translated in Hutt 1991).

7    See Burghart (1984) for an in-depth discussion of the political meaning of '*muluk*' as 'possession'; and see a critique of Burghart in Chalmers (2003).

8    See Samten Karmay (1996) for a discussion of how *yul sa*, which literally means 'local land,' has come to mean 'deity of the local territory.' He ultimately argues that the cognate 'concept of the *yul lha* type deity was originally connected with the territorial divisions of the polity in early clanic society' (1996).

*Lungsa* – village
*Shing* – field, agricultural land

The final set of terms in Tibetan, which invoke administrative and political boundaries are:

*Gyalsa* – administrative territory (community-based)
*Gyalkhap* – administrative territory (state-based)

These may be different usages from those that scholars are familiar with from central Tibetan standard dialects. I am grateful to Emily Yeh for pointing this out.[9] She highlights the fact that *rgyal khap* would be understood as 'country, nation-state, or kingdom,' rather than the lower levels of administration that Mustang interviewees used it to refer to; and that *rgyal sa* would mean 'capital' rather than a community-based sense of administrative territory. My sense is that these different usages derive from Mustang's long-standing incorporation into the Nepali polity, which provokes a scaling of territorial terminology to the local political context.

There is a bountiful literature in Tibetan studies that discusses such terminologies, and the strong linkages that they effect between concepts of 'sacred space' and concepts of 'political territory' (see Blondeau 1998; Blondeau and Steinkellner 1996; Buffetrille and Diemberger 2002; Ramble 1995, 1997, 2008). However, this literature focuses primarily on expressions of territoriality within historical Tibetan polities, rather than on how such Tibetan conceptions are reconfigured in relation to contemporary nation-states, such as Nepal, India, or China. Building upon the rich Tibetological literature in this domain to consider how Tibetan worldviews about the relationship between space, the divine world, and political boundaries articulate with contemporary political claims over territory within the nation-states in which Tibetan-speaking peoples live today may be a productive long-term endeavor.

## Administrative and Affective Boundaries[10]

Now I'd like to go a step further by considering the relationship between what I call 'administrative boundaries' and 'affective boundaries.' As I have

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9    In discussant comments at the American Anthropological Association panel 'The Properties of Territory and Terrain,' November 2015.
10   The first three paragraphs of this section are based on Shneiderman 2015a.

described elsewhere (Shneiderman 2015a), until the 2017 local elections,[11] the smallest unit of state administration in Nepal was 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 75 districts, 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 which 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 village development committee: *gau vikas samiti*.

Recognizing that *gau* and *gavisa* signify distinct, but related categories helps tease out the different meanings of 'the village,' as discussed further in the recent *Critique of Anthropology* special issue 'Resiting the Village,' that I coedited with Jonathan Padwe and Tony Sorge. 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 that significantly. When asked where the territorial boundaries of their *gau* are, most respondents from our research sites answered in concrete terms that allude to specific geographical features such as rivers and hills, as well as particular patterns of human settlement. They provided similarly

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11    Phase 1 of the 2017 local election was held on 14 May 2017. Phase 2 was held on 28 June 2017. Phase 3 is scheduled for 18 September 2017, but has not yet taken place as this volume goes to press. These were the first local elections for 20 years, since 1997. Before the elections took place, a Local Level Restructuring Commission redrew boundaries, combining VDCs into a smaller number of larger units known as *nagarpalika* (municipality) and *gaupalika* (rural municaplity). This chapter was submitted before local level restructuring was implemented, and is based on research conducted between 2014-2016. It therefore describes administrative boundaries as they were at that time, before the 2017 local level restructuring was completed.

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descriptive responses when asked where the boundaries of their *gavisa* were – but clearly differentiated between the two sets of boundaries, and the affective content of each zone so delineated. This begins to tell us more about the constituent elements of 'territorial consciousness' (Tamang 2009).

Here I want to extend the argument about territorial consciousness and its importance in shaping political subjectivity beyond *gau* or *gavisa*, to the urban contexts where increasing numbers of Nepal's citizens live. Simply because one has not lived there since time immemorial, or because one has a village elsewhere does not mean that territorial consciousness is not present in the city. This is something that we saw evidence of from our interviews in the city of Nepalgunj, an urban center in Banke district in Nepal's western Terai.

There, it is the municipality, or *nagarpalika*, that frames meaningful political territory. Interviewees from diverse caste Hindu, Muslim, and indigenous Tharu backgrounds were well aware of where the boundaries lay between the municipality and the VDCs beyond them. People situated themselves as either being a person of the *nagarpalika* or a person of the *gau* who happened to be living or working temporarily in the municipality. These distinctions were in some sense affective, carrying with them the valences of the classic urban/rural binary, but in another sense were shaped by administrative prerogatives, as the location listed on a person's citizenship card remains a defining feature of identity regardless of actual place of residence. Even people who had been born and spent their entire lives in the municipality alluded to villages from which their parents had migrated, often stating that they were a person of that village because it said so on their citizenship card, even if they had not spent much time there themselves.

In Dolakha, interviewees in a VDC adjacent to the municipality of Bhimeshwor, which included the district headquarters of Charikot, expressed concern about plans that had been floated to merge their VDC with the municipality. They expressed that they would be subject to greater governmental regulation if they were incorporated into the municipality – while remaining a VDC would enable better management of their own properties of territory.[12]

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12   This VDC was eventually annexed to Bhimeshwor *nagarpalika* in the 2017 local level restructuring.

**Figure 2    District administration office, Charikot, Dolakha district**



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**Figure 3    Border post between Nepal and India, Banke district**



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## Trajectories of Territorial Integration

Each of the three districts in which we conducted research – Banke, Dolakha, and Mustang – experienced different historical trajectories of territorial integration within the Nepali nation-state, which to a significant extent shapes the way that contemporary residents experience and understand territorial concepts. These different experiences are especially relevant in our effort to understand how people move between different scales of territorialization. In other words, the way that people navigate the interface between their locally produced knowledge of affective boundaries, and their knowledge of administrative boundaries as produced in relation to larger scales of territory such as the district and the nation-state is mediated by regionally specific historical experiences of state incorporation.

Dolakha, Banke, and Mustang were all parts of independent principalities before their incorporation into the Nepali nation-state. The year that is usually cited as marking the country's unification at the hands of the first Shah king, Prithvi Narayan, is 1769. However, a closer look at these particular territories tells a more complicated story.

Dolakha was a strategic entrepôt on the Kathmandu-Lhasa trading route, famous for minting the first coin in the region in approximately 1546 AD (Regmi 1980: 171). Although annexed by P.N. Shah, it was only under Bhimsen Thapa's rule in 1805-1806 AD that its Newar rulers began paying tax regularly to a central government.

What is now Banke was part of an area of contemporary western Nepal that in fact remained under the British East India Company's control until the 1860s. This presents an anomaly in Nepal's nationalist narrative of noncolonization, and Nepal's prime minister, Jang Bahadur, finally only gained control of these regions in exchange for his complicity in helping the British subdue the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny. He bestowed the label 'Naya Muluk' – or 'new possessions' – on the area. This term, which is still used today, highlights the historical lack of integration into the central polity that the region has always experienced, and also points to its status as an uncomfortable reminder of what journalist Prashant Jha has called Nepal's 'partial sovereignty' (Jha 2014).

Mustang still maintains its identity as a Buddhist kingdom with a ceremonial royal family. As Ramble (2008: 24-28) describes, in 1789 P.N. Shah's Gorkha forces swept through Mustang en route to battle with the kingdom of Jumla, and in recognition of Mustang's lack of resistance the region was allowed to retain de facto autonomy while paying tribute

to its new rulers. It was only, 'the democratic reforms that followed the implementation of the Partyless Panchayat System in the 1960s that precipitated the decline of this system' of traditional governance in Mustang (Ramble 2008: 28).

I cannot delve further into these distinctive histories here. But I recount them in brief to make the point that it is hardly surprising that there are multiple vocabularies of territoriality at work in contemporary Nepal. From diverse locally embedded linguistic and cultural practices that produce concepts of territory in the phenomenological sense, to diverse trajectories of political integration into the nation-state at work in each region, these multiple vectors of territorial experience intersect with each other to produce the full range of territorial imagining in Nepal today. If we wish to understand the political conjuncture at which Nepal finds itself, it is essential to bring these diverse histories into conversation with each other in a rigorous manner that preserves the distinctiveness of each locale's trajectory of territorial experience, yet brings them into a single analytical frame.

Of the three research districts, Dolakha was the earliest integrated into the nation-state structure, and is now most completely incorporated into its administrative architecture. This is to some extent signaled by the strong presence of *kipat* as an index of state-society relationships in the territorial vocabularies encountered there, which was not present in our discussions in the other two locales. Yet we documented very strong statements of territorial knowledge and belonging in all three research contexts albeit expressed in very different ways. Mountains oriented people's description of both affective and administrative boundaries in Mustang, while rivers played the same role in Banke. Both natural features present formidable challenges to daily life, but are also orienting features of it.

The engagement with which people described their territories and the boundaries that define them was remarkable – especially when in many cases they then claimed ignorance about political debates over territorial restructuring. When asked whether they thought boundaries should change, those who were familiar with federalism debates and in favor of federal restructuring stated just as strongly as those who were not that administrative boundaries should not change. Many people made strong statements about their affective comfort level with their own territorial situatedness, even when they had a political desire for administrative change; but often seemed not to have considered the possible impact of administrative boundary shifts on the affective dimensions of territorial

consciousness before being asked these questions. Some of these politics were played out further in resistance to the recommendations of local level restructuring committees across the country, often in vain.[13]

All of this once again emphasizes the multilayered nature of territorial consciousness. It can not be reduced to either its affective or administrative dimensions, but rather the relationships between these must be better understood. Certainly any process of political restructuring that seeks to redraw territorial demarcations would proceed more effectively with reference to an evidence base that acknowledges the validity of these multiple layers of territorial belonging, and seeks to bring them into pragmatically viable alignment.

## Postearthquake Dynamics

To conclude, I want to consider how the major earthquakes of April and May 2015 have compelled people in many parts of Nepal to rethink the contours of territorial belonging on multiple levels. Of our research districts, this is only directly relevant in Dolakha, which was one of the fourteen districts classified by the Nepali government as 'severely affected.'[14] However, the other districts have also been affected by the earthquakes' political aftermath; and although the 2015 earthquakes unleashed an especially forceful set of disruptions, these were not unique. Lessons from the earthquakes are applicable for understanding other forms of territorial change, such as landslides and floods which affect the entire country and broader region on a regular basis.

The earthquakes compelled a deeply physical reshaping of both terrain, through landslides, large cracks in the earth, and so on; but also a reshaping of relationship to territory in sociopolitical terms. Due to the dynamics of relief distribution and earthquake-induced displacement, family residential patterns are being restructured, often from joint to nuclear family abodes, largely due to the ever-increasing constraints on buildable land. Many people have relocated near recently built roads, both because these are often the only available flat areas to settle, and because there is a strong sense that those on the road have better access to facilities.

13  See, for instance, a 7 December 2016 article that describes protests in Mustang over proposed revisions to local administrative boundaries. https://nepalmonitor.org/reports/view/12468. This story was echoed across the country in many other locales.
14  http://data.unhcr.org/nepal/.

The earthquake appears to have heightened the sense of ownership over particular territories – in the political sense of *gavisa* – at the same time as people have sought to make use of the natural resources that their *gau* affords. In this context, *gau* might be understood as the intersection of specific geographical terrain, embodied knowledge of it, and a network of emplaced social relations. People have rapidly adapted to the new situation by mobilizing resources within both frameworks. When they realized that the *gavisa* was the operative unit for the distribution of relief people petitioned the *gavisa* secretary for better response by the international organizations that had divided up their service areas by *gavisa*. They also mobilized existing local administrative structures, such as the Community Forest User Group, to rethink the communal use of natural resources embedded in the *gau* at a time when wood and water, for instance, were in higher than ever demand.

In this context of ongoing environmental and political upheaval, the question then becomes: what will happen after the new constitution as promulgated in September 2015 actually restructures administrative boundaries?[15] Will citizens who before the earthquake supported identity-based territorial restructuring turn against this idea as they seek to maintain the existing administrative boundaries that the earthquakes have compelled them to mobilize within to negotiate for state resources more effectively than ever before? Even preearthquake interviews suggested this tension – between a desire for territorial recognition of the affective boundaries of identity, and a desire to maintain familiar administrative boundaries for pragmatic purposes – that is now significantly heightened.

I'll be watching carefully how the reassertions of territorial self-determination, so to speak, that the earthquakes have brought about at the affective micro-level articulate with the macro-level process of federal restructuring as it proceeds in administrative terms. Even while aftershocks continue, at the time of writing community members are asserting belonging and a renewed commitment to property ownership through the sweat and heartache of the rebuilding process. We might see this process as one of reterritorialization, or maybe regrounding – which along the way compels those engaged in it to become even more intimately aware of the specific properties of the terrain in which they live, and the territory that such terrain defines. Despite their trauma, those affected by the earthquake are

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15    As this volume went to press, local level restructuring had just been implemented in some portions of the country through the 2017 local elections. Further research will be necessary to understand how, in fact, the reshaped administrative boundaries shape territorial concepts.

likely to be ever more confident in their own political agency and willing to defend their place as they seek recognition as active owners of territorially embedded futures on their own terms.

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