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The Focus: Road Horizons in the Himalaya

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Road Horizons in the Himalayas

Stéphane Gros

The constraints and limitations imposed by topography, climate, and ecology are characteristic of the Himalayan experience. The history of human settlements in this mountainous region is intimately tied to various forms of mobility: river valleys constituted natural pathways for the flow of life, and mountain passes supplied the air that breathed life into society. In the Himalayas, people connected through trade, migrations, or pilgrimage and established long-standing economic, religious, and political relations across cultural differences between pastoral nomads or swidden cultivators of the highlands and agricultural communities of the lowland valleys and plains.¹

Along Asia's highest mountain ranges, from the Pamirs in Central Asia to the great bend of the Hengduan edging the east of the Tibetan plateau, people, goods, skills, and ideas circulated regionally and beyond. Trails and now roads are the connective tissue between communities. This connective tissue is increasingly stretched by changing economic and political conditions that affect how people relate to their environment, move through (un)known landscapes, and maintain a sense of belonging. Today, social and spatial mobilities are increasingly the result of inequalities that they themselves help to (re)produce. However, through their mobile activities, people continue to immerse themselves in particular landscapes and generate their own visions of the future.

Pathways

Many historical variables and uneven temporalities have shaped the complex sociopolitical spatialities of Himalayan communities. This range of hills and high-elevation mountains exemplifies contrasted

A dense network of ancient mountain paths and modern roads connects the communities living in the Himalayas. Recent infrastructure building, carrying different life opportunities, has altered and expanded people's social worlds while opening new horizons. The road epitomises the state's governmentality and vision of progress. It sometimes symbolises hope and developmental desire, and large public infrastructure projects often reshape circulatory regimes. For local communities, paths and roads manifest various forms of collective legacies, investment, and expectations which can be political, material, and spiritual.

experiences of mobility and isolation, and the physical landscape greatly determines the routes along which connections can be established. This connectedness – an essential dimension of the Himalayan experience – takes shape, as anthropologist Martin Saxon has argued, along “pathways.” More than connecting lines between locations, pathways constitute “bundles of exchange” that tie together particular places in relation to circulation patterns.²

In this Focus, a similar inspiration leads us to ask: how can circulations at different scales reveal the ways people inhabit spaces? How do Himalayan dwellers do so according to particular social, economic, or spiritual horizons? We bring together several participants from the “Himalayan Journeys” conference held in Paris in June 2022³ to highlight how the social life of roads and infrastructure in the Himalayas, from the Karakoram to eastern Tibet, can be fruitfully studied through the lens of the relations people weave between them and with the broader non-human environment. Many avenues for reflection were sketched out on this occasion and our aim here is to provide but a glimpse of particular pathways

of sociality that emerge along the trails or roads that traverse the Himalayas.

Infrastructures

Since the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) came into being, the issue of roads and connectivity in the Himalayas and beyond (Highland Asia, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia) has galvanised the fast-growing scholarship on infrastructure.⁴ In this Focus, we are interested in infrastructures broadly speaking, whether physical or immaterial, large or nearly invisible, as sites of human encounter and sharing. We look at what they embody, enable, or promise, and how the environment and non-human worlds are entwined in these social processes.

Our purpose here is not to engage with the lively and productive “infrastructural turn” but to pursue a relational and processual approach that investigates how one particular type of infrastructure, the road – that is, an open way that allows for the movement of animals, people, and vehicles – co-constructs the social landscape or the environment at a broader level. In other words, we are interested in

what roads can tell us as “stretched-out spaces of social relations.”⁵

As many authors have shown, roads and infrastructures more generally tell us about states' efforts to assert their sovereignty as part of regimes of territorialisation.⁶ Here, we write about infrastructure insofar as it reveals the importance of power and social relations without leaving out the non-human and the environment as realms of active engagement. We do not focus on roads in and for themselves, but on what they reveal or generate, on how different kinds of roads affect people differently. Specifically, focusing on the ongoing life of roads and pathways, their accessibility, construction, and maintenance, highlights their temporality, the shifting boundaries between the tangible and the intangible, and the transformative role of hope and futurity.

Roadwork

Building roads has more than ever become a government motto synonymous with connection, development, and wealth, symbolising the current neo-liberal ideology of mobility as a sign of adaptability, autonomy, and agency. There is a common belief that roadless territories cannot embrace globalisation and that tarmac is the visible sign that elected governments take care of local communities who will benefit from new connections with the outer world.

The transformative power of roads is often overestimated. However, when roads are considered as processes, they transform landscapes, create unexpected disruptions in the geomorphology of the mountains, and produce well-documented social effects, whether positive or negative, on people and places.

New routes have either replaced historical pathways crossing the Himalayas or created new corridors and have become significant agents of change. The contrast between the mountain path and the asphalted road places them not so much in opposition as on a spectrum of varied instantiation of the visions of the future.⁷ To what extent are roads profitable, and for whom?

Besides the geopolitics of road-making as such, what comes across as lacking in the literature is scrutiny of locally lived realities of what is (dis)connected, and how. Several contributions to this Focus explore the complex interweaving of relations between state strategies and rationalities of road building and local practices. The ethnography of local development projects exposes state visions and ideologies that may run counter to local imaginations of

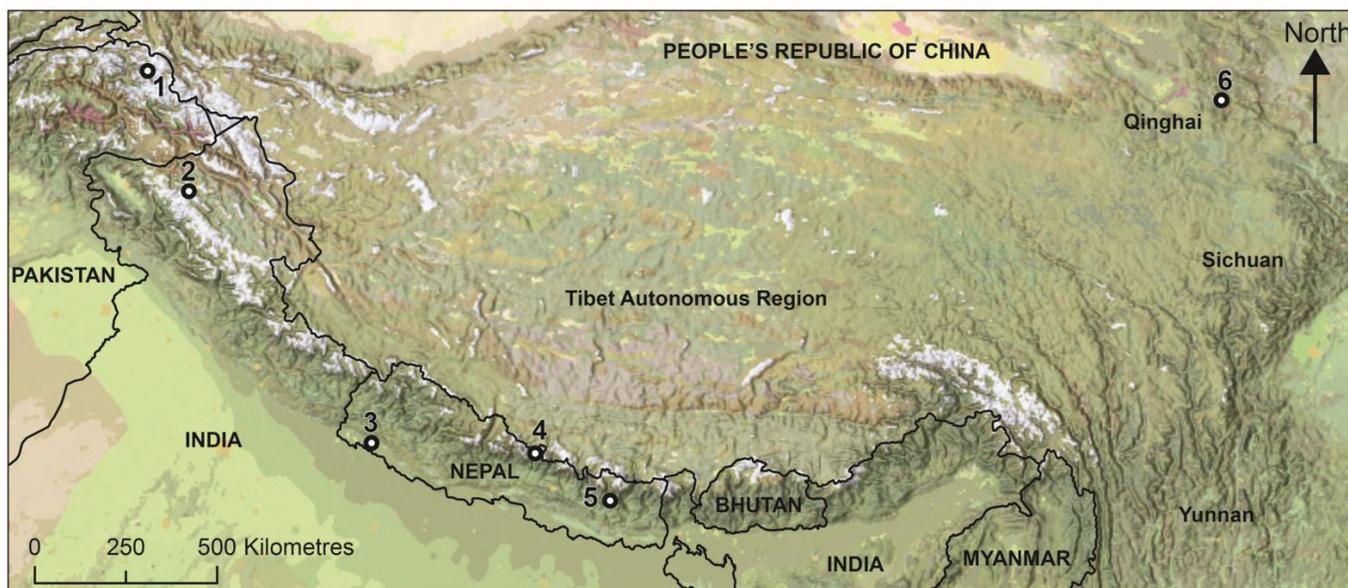


Fig. 1: General map of the area showing the localisation of the case studies in this Focus (Map design by Jérôme Picard).

● Place of study

1: Thibault Fontanari

2: Callum Pearce

3: Amy Johnson

4: Nadine Plachta

5: Florent Grazide

6: John Smith

— International boundary
The boundaries drawn on this map are approximate and have no legal value

Sources : Esri, USGS



Fig. 2: Road in Eastern Tibet Khams region. (Photo by the author, 2004)

connectivity.⁸ The articulation of several scales of analysis enabling one to grasp the dialectics of influences and power embodied in the road as a much sought-after infrastructure – sometimes imposed but rarely neutral regarding local power dynamics – deserves further research.

The papers

In this edition of *The Focus*, our authors build on the basic idea that a qualitative approach brings to light how the various stakes around the movement of people, goods, and skills, as well as the facilitation of this movement, are embedded in geopolitical orders, value regimes, and cultural or ontological frames of reference. They take us along diverse pathways and encounters imbued with fears and hopes.

We generally see infrastructures as what enables the flow and movement of matter in various forms: think of the house and the multiple ways it is connected through lines, wires, and pipes, or nowadays wirelessly to the outside. Under the visible surface, many invisible pathways contribute to the movement of things, people, and other-than-human beings, multilayered webs of connections and circulations. The road can take various meanings – not just metaphorical – and also be a channel for circulating energies and surprising travellers.

This *Focus* opens with an article by Callum Pearce, who discusses how in Buddhist areas of Ladakh, Himalayan India, spirits or “ghosts” travel along their own invisible roads that correspond to those used by humans by day. For this reason, Ladakhi are concerned with managing their beings’ movement and attest to the potential threat to which ordinary paths and roads are open. This management manifests the potential dangers – real and imagined – to which roads open. Precisely because these lines of travel are openings onto an outside of the safe enclosure of the community, they are sites of vulnerability and risk. They are also, at the same time, the materialisation of social commitments.

In its modern version of the asphalted motorway, the road carries with it all the knowledge and vision of a specific scientific and technological approach to the environment. However, not all built structures rely on similar knowledge and political economy. Here, Thibault Fontanari alerts us to yet another aspect of the invisible dynamics that contribute to the materialisation of built forms and roads in particular: that of the gift and the solidarity it generates. In the Shimshal Valley of Pakistan, we see how infrastructures not only play on the distance and time between things and humans, but more importantly, become the very sites of a collective becoming with profound social and spiritual dimensions.

Circulation pathways can also carry people across time, space, and embodied

differences of culture and language. As such, they enable the emergence of new values, of crossings that nurture a longing to become otherwise. What new circuits of belonging can roads facilitate? The next articles switch the narrative to local power structures to illustrate how mobility issues are thoroughly entangled with tensions around divergent visions for the future.

Amy Johnson highlights how sensitive questions around social and spatial origins permeate national and sub-regional politics in the borderlands of Nepal’s Far Western Tarai. She brings an intimate look to this issue by revealing how larger social, political, and gendered dynamics unavoidably shape women’s everyday movements and activities. In the lowlands of Tarai, Indigenous Tharu and resettled Hill-origin persons navigate social differences and diverse legacies of migration. In the context of Nepal’s new federal constitution, passed in 2015, the provinces gained substantial new powers, extending national politics into gendered fields of labour and belonging.

The next two articles also reference the particular context of post-conflict Nepal and the changes that unfolded after the Maoist revolution leading to the elections of 2022. Nadine Plachta shows how, in the Tsum Valley (Manaslu Conservation Area) in Nepal, Indigenous imaginaries and government narratives diverge around the stakes of a new road. But it is not so much a story of clashing visions of infrastructural futures as, rather, that of the emergence, under changing conditions, of a discourse that values and advocates for Indigenous knowledge systems and alternative relations to land and the environment.

As Plachta points out, when countrywide local-level elections were held in 2022 in the Manaslu Conservation Area, people voted for a predominantly Indigenous-led local

government. This presents an important step in strengthening self-determined development planning and designing more sustainable and sovereign futures for Indigenous Peoples in Nepal. This echoes Florent Grazide’s description of the evolution of local politics in a small village in the Solukhumbu district. There, the predominantly Tamang population supported one of their own in the local elections so that their voice could be better heard. Again, the promises and failures of a major road project crystallised tensions around questions of belonging, the local interplay of ethnicity or group affiliation, or at another scale, the meaning and prospects of one’s inclusion in the nation-state. However, in this case, what comes to the fore is how local politics is not necessarily shaped by larger issues around Indigenous rights but remains embedded in local power dynamics between kinship networks, ethnic groupings, and party affiliations.

How the state’s project translates into people’s daily lives and materialises (or not) through specific infrastructural projects varies across contexts. The keywords of Chinese development discourse are similar to those of global development and its associated notion of progress, which we also see at play in Nepal. However, they differ in practice, given the nature of state interventionism: China’s massive infrastructure projects are embedded in large-scale, top-down social engineering programmes. Of particular relevance regarding our interest in evolving pathways and the impact of roads is how the state has implemented forced sedentarisation of Tibetan pastoralists and shaped new mobility patterns. As John Smith (a pseudonym) shows in his study conducted among a Tibetan community in the region of Amdo, their horizon has shrunk from the

openness of the grassland to that of the linear concrete line, taking them to the city where their life is increasingly anchored. Their sedentarised life entails driving on the newly built road. Paradoxically, its use is made difficult because of the requirement of a government-issued driver’s license, a hard-to-obtain new necessity of life. Here, the rugged terrain no longer constrains mobility, paperwork does.

The footpath and the motorable road inhabit peculiar temporal space: that of walking as a kind of engagement along a mountain path or that of driving on the smooth surface of a road, which likely took decades and may yet remain unfinished – going nowhere. Overall, the contributors to this *Focus* on “Road Horizons” provide rich ethnographic texture to engage with the questions of the local social imaginaries and practices around movement along particular pathways and the impact new roads can have on the worlds they reshape. They not only highlight the many heterogeneous networks (family, community, market, labour, expertise, etc.) that operate at differing levels beyond the built form of the road. They also emphasise that pathways are always in the making and forever evolving with the broader political, economic, and spiritual forces that shape their destiny.

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Notes

- 1 Tristan Bruslé contributed significantly to the shaping of the ideas sketched out in this introduction, and I thank him for all the stimulating exchanges that took place before, during, and after the organisation of the “Himalayan Journeys” conference, of which this *Focus* is an outcome (see note 3).
- 2 Martin Saxer, “Pathways: A Concept, Field Site and Methodological Approach to Study Remoteness and Connectivity,” *HIMALAYA* 36, no. 2 (2016): 104–19, <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol36/iss2/15>. See also Martin Saxer, *Places in Knots: Remoteness and Connectivity in the Himalayas and Beyond* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 2022).
- 3 This international conference was convened by Tristan Bruslé and Stéphane Gros on behalf of the Centre for Himalayan Studies at the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS). Since January 2023, this centre has merged with another research team to create the Centre for South Asian and Himalayan Studies (CESAH).
- 4 For a recent synthesis, see Alessandro Rippa, Galen Murton, and Matthäus Rest, “Building Highland Asia in the Twenty-First Century,” *Verge: Studies in Global Asia* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2020): 83–111.
- 5 Fiona Wilson, “Towards a Political Economy of Roads: Experiences from Peru,” *Development and Change* 35, no. 3 (2004): 525–46.
- 6 For Nepal, see Katherine Rankin, Tulasi S. Sigdel, Lagan Rai, Shyam Kumar, and Pushpa Hamal, “Political Economies and Political Rationalities of Road Building in Nepal,” *Studies in Nepali History and Society* 22, no. 1 (June 2017): 43–84. See also Vibha Arora and Raile Rocky Zippao, “The Roads (Not) Taken: The Materiality, Poetics and Politics of Infrastructure in Manipur, India,” *Journal of South Asian Development* 15, no. 1 (2020): 34–61.
- 7 Pace Akhil Gupta, “The Future of Ruins: Thoughts on the Temporality of Infrastructure,” in *The Promise of Infrastructure*, eds. Nikhil Anand, Akhil Gupta, and Hannah Appel, 62–79 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 63.
- 8 See for instance Ben Campbell, “Rhetorical Routes for Development: A Road Project in Nepal,” *Contemporary South Asia* 18, no. 3 (2010): 267–79.



Fig. 3: The gorge of the upper Salween at the border between Yunnan and Tibet. (Photo by the author, October 2010)

Ghost Roads in Ladakh

Callum Pearce

In Buddhist areas of Ladakh, Himalayan India, red-skinned beings called *tsan* wander through villages at night causing illness. These spirits or “ghosts” travel along their own invisible roads that correspond to those used by humans by day, passing through villages and by houses. Almost every Buddhist house in Ladakh is distinguished by red ochre marks or stones: waymarkers for the *tsan* that show a Ladakhi concern with managing the movement of other beings and that attest to the potential threat to which ordinary paths and roads are open.



Fig. 1 (left): *Tsan* stone outside a house in Sakti, upper Ladakh. (Photo by the author, October 2013)



Fig. 2 (right): Red ochre marks and a large *tsan* stone in Semkar, Lhasi, Ladakh. (Photo by the author, February 2014)

Waymarkers of the *tsan*

Buddhist houses in Ladakh almost always display red ochre marks on the walls or a red-painted stone near the front door [Fig. 1]. With a surprising degree of consistency, everyone I spoke to across the region – men and women, adults and teenagers, laity and monks, from the town of Leh to the Zangskar valley – described them as signposts or waymarkers, directing the movement of red-skinned beings called *tsan* or *tse* (Tibetan རྩ་ས་, *btsan*; pronunciation varies by region) that wander through villages at night. *Tsan* are a kind of *lhande* (Tibetan ལྷ་དྲེ, *lha’ dze*, loosely “gods and/or demons”), spirits or “ghosts” in Indian English, who travel along their own invisible roads causing illness by their presence. The routes taken by these roads seem to correspond to those used by humans by day: passing through villages, by houses, connecting places of settlement and opening up lines of passage for threats from outside.

These markers appear in different forms and under different names across Ladakh. The red-painted stones are variously referred to *tsando* (Tibetan རྩ་ས་ལྗང་, *btsan rdo*, “*tsan* stone”), *tsandos* (Tibetan རྩ་ས་ལྗང་མོ་, *btsan mdo*, loosely, “ritual vessel for *tsan*”), or *tsankhang* (Tibetan རྩ་ས་ཁྱང་, *btsan khang*, “*tsan* house”), and are sometimes conflated with *tsanchos zhangches*, the act of setting up such a stone (Tibetan རྩ་ས་ཚོས་བཞག་ཅིང་, *btsan chos bzhang ces*, loosely, “to undertake a *tsan* ritual”). These are almost always pointed stones painted with a red ochre called *tsok* (Tibetan རྩ་ས་, *btsag*), though variations on this pattern exist: in central Zangskar people use a naturally red-tinted quartz instead, while in some areas of Sham, the lower Leh valley, they are replaced by red-painted bricks arranged in the triangular shape of an incense platform. These objects are often accompanied by *tsak* markings on the outer walls of houses: red triangles painted on the corners, lines of dots leading around the house, sometimes auspicious symbols like swastikas and faces [Fig. 2]. In the Sham village of Hemis Shukpachan, one house bears images of a sword and a rifle painted in *tsak* – emblems

of the warlike *tsan* [Fig. 3].¹ Most of these markings and stones are so rough and unobtrusive that an unfamiliar observer might miss them entirely.

Tsan

Tsan are a well-known category of spirit in Ladakh, playing a relatively prominent role in Tibetan Buddhist ritual imagery. Two of the best-known oracular deities of the region are identified as *tsan*: known as the red and white Rongtson, they annually possess a pair of monks during a festival at the monastery of Matho and deliver prophecies on behalf of the former kingdom of Ladakh.² Several widely-known Tibetan Buddhist protector deities are closely associated with *tsan* – notably the *dharmapala* Tsiu Marpo who, like the Rongtson, annually possesses a monk during masked dances at the small Nyingmapa monastery of Takthok in Ladakh. These deities are typically depicted in art, ritual, and textual descriptions as appearing in the form of *tsan*: as red-skinned warriors mounted on red horses, clad in lamellar armour and brandishing weapons [Fig. 4]. The popular image of the spirits in Ladakh usually follows this pattern, but with one major difference: in Ladakh, and apparently in no other Tibetan-speaking areas, *tsan* are almost uniformly described as being “backless” creatures. From the front a *tsan* may appear *demo* (Tibetan རྩ་ས་མོ་, *bde mo*), “beautiful,” but from behind there is only a gaping hole where the back ought to be – organs and bones visibly jutting out.

Tsan are often treated as semi-ridiculous entities. Stories I heard about personal encounters with them, or with inexplicable things later identified as *tsan*, often seemed to employ topsy-turvy imagery: outsized red animals met on the road at night, multiple strangers in red clothing riding a single donkey, or glowing shapes glimpsed in the distance. The Ladakhi laity I spoke to differed hugely in their attitudes towards them, as with ghosts and spirits in general. While I knew one former Buddhist monk who treated them as unquestionably real,

most people I spoke to seemed doubtful of their existence at best – even asking me, on occasion, whether *tsan* were real.³ The ubiquity of *tsando* and *tsak* markings does not necessarily conflict with this, but they have other purposes: the use of red markings on walls is also a way of visibly distinguishing Buddhist houses from those of Muslims, in a region where communal tensions between the two groups have become more and more fraught since the 1980s.

In keeping with their depiction as mounted warriors, *tsan* are commonly described as galloping through the villages of Ladakh by night. Where they linger, households suffer from illness and misfortune (Tibetan རྩ་ས་ལྗང་ལྗང་, *btsan gyi gnod pa*, loosely “harm caused by *tsan*”); people experience bad dreams or inexplicable anxiety, ailments like fevers and paralysis, but also sudden accidents or the death of livestock. Outside of Buddhist ritual imagery and the public performance of spirit possession, it is in these experiences of misfortune that *tsan* are most likely to be encountered – usually after being identified as the root cause of problems by a ritual specialist, whether an *onpo* (Tibetan འོན་པོ་, *don po*, a diviner and exorcist) or a lay spirit medium. The process of treatment typically involves identifying where the *tsan* passed by the house, for *tsan* are understood to travel through Ladakh along their own, invisible roads: the *tsanlam* (Tibetan རྩ་ས་ལམ་, *btsan lam*, “*tsan* paths/roads”). Only a specialist can identify where these invisible ghost roads lie; having done so, and having located the specific *tsanlam* running by the house afflicted by illness, they can direct their patients to set up stones and markings to avert the *tsan* in future. A line of red dots painted on the walls directs the *tsan* to pass around the house away from the front door; a red stone, swastika, or painted sword acts as a waymarker that leads the *tsan* to continue along their roads.⁴ In effect, these stones and markings make the invisible *tsanlam* visible: materialising the nocturnal movement of spirits, as an attempt to control or redirect their passage through areas of settlement.

Lines of movement

What is significant about this is that it shows Ladakhis responding to threats not merely by trying to drive off or shut out harmful forces – as, say, with ritual exorcisms that cast spirits out from the area of the village, or apotropaic devices that seal up the doors of the house – but rather by trying to direct and manage their movement. Keeping the house safe involves more than ritual boundary-maintenance: it requires careful attention to be paid to the movement of spirits and other creatures around and through the village. *Tsan* are diverted around houses like water in a stream, as a force that can be channelled and redirected but not cut off.

In this, the process follows a pattern often seen in Tibetan medical systems, as with the use of *lungta* (Tibetan ལུང་རྩ་, *lung rta*) flags: the brightly coloured “prayer flags” used to harness and direct the flow of “wind” (Tibetan ལུང་, *lung*), the element or humour involved in “wind disorders.” This wind passes between the body and the outside world, and treatment of the forms of illness associated with it involves acting on the external element to bring about balance in the body.⁵ As with the actions used to divert *tsan*, the process works not by shutting out external influences but by managing the flows of forces in the surrounding world.

Tsanlam appear to pass through every part of Ladakh inhabited by Buddhists, to the extent that their routes seem to correspond almost totally to the ordinary roads and paths used by people during the day: the roads that pass through villages and by houses, and the paths formed by repeated human movement. The idea that *tsanlam* could exist in areas that are not frequented by people is treated as ridiculous. When I suggested this to a group of students in a village outside the town of Leh, they laughed: why would there be *tsan* roads in the middle of a patch of desert, nowhere near human settlement?

In the use of *tsan* stones and *tsak* markings, we see a particular way of conceptualising the space of the village: as defined by flows of movement, of human

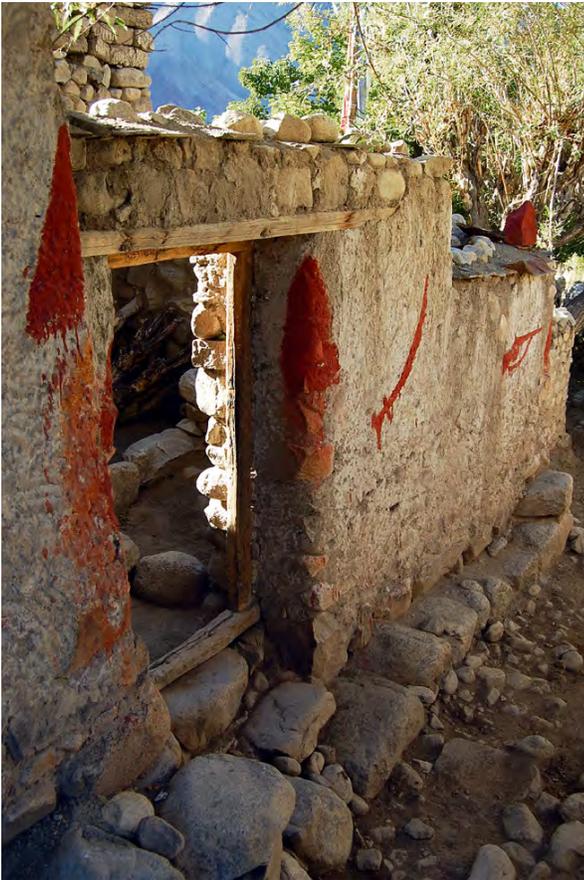


Fig. 3 (above): Red ochre markings including a sword and a rifle outside a house in Hemis Shukpachan, lower Ladakh. (Photo by the author, September 2013)

and non-human beings, who pass between the area of habitation and the world outside. The movement of *tsan* mimics the processes that sustain Ladakhi villages, the constant flows of movement of people and animals and substances: of water literally flowing down from mountain glaciers; of farmers going out to work in the fields; of grazing animals kept in pens by night, taken out to pasture by day; of people travelling to the towns of Leh or Kargil for paid employment; and, increasingly, of those leaving Ladakh entirely to find work elsewhere, returning periodically (if at all) to bring back money. Villages are composed of these flows and could not exist without them, but movement

brings its own dangers: of harmful forces that enter from outside, and of depopulation as people leave for good.

In his book *Lines: A Brief History*, the anthropologist Tim Ingold argues that "life is lived [...] along paths, not in places," and that it is through the entanglement of lines of movement that a sense of place emerges. This leads to the image of the landscape as a "meshwork" composed from the "trails along which life is lived," the paths, stories and lines of movement of human and non-human beings that sustain and create a place.⁶ This image is intended as an alternative to conceptions of places, organisms, and social units as bounded entities sealed off

and separate from one another, and to static conceptions of human dwelling.

The concept of the meshwork may seem a good fit for the way Ladakhi villages are constituted by paths and movement, but this image does not quite capture the profoundly negative character of *tsanlam*: the appearance of these ghost roads is enabled by the cessation or contraction of human movement at night – when, as visibility reduces, people cede the space of the village to other beings – while the movement that they represent is basically antithetical to the normal operation of human life. These lines are an uncertain, unwanted, and normally invisible contribution to the meshwork of the Ladakhi landscape: associated with the passage of ridiculous and half-real beings, for most people they exist only in an implied form. They are made meaningful only in the experience of disorder, as the paths by which misfortune enters the village.

Strangers in the night

Crucially, the movement of *tsan* is confined to the night, when human movement is typically reduced to almost nothing. While Ladakhis tend to draw a clear distinction between the area of human habitation (Tibetan ཡུལ, *yul*, loosely "village" or "land") and the uninhabited regions beyond (Tibetan རི, *ri*, literally "mountain" or "hill" but with broader spatial connotations), the ill-defined boundary between these two areas shifts on a daily and seasonal basis. By day, and especially in summer, the village can seem to expand to encompass its surrounding fields. At night and in winter, as people retreat indoors and spend less time moving around outside, the mountains and their inhabitants encroach on the area of habitation. In Zangskar, in autumn, bears occasionally enter villages by night and can be heard trying to break into food stores. Later in the year, across Ladakh, wolves come down from the mountains and prowl around settlements looking for stray livestock. In particularly bad winters, wolves are even occasionally spotted on the edges of Ladakh's urbanised areas, becoming the focus for excited rumours in town. Ghosts seem to accompany these mundane threats, and they are proverbially described as entering villages by night riding on the backs of wild animals. Ghost stories are primarily associated with long winter evenings sitting by the kitchen stove – though their role as winter entertainment has been largely usurped by modern media – and encounters with ghosts are reported more frequently in the colder and darker portion of the year.

The space through which *tsan* and other beings move is enabled, then, by a lack of human movement: by the way people

withdraw from the outside world, creating a negative space that becomes populated by non-human forces. *Tsan* embody the flipside of human patterns of temporality, being depicted in stories as "like people" (with men, women, and children living in *tsan* villages of their own) but inhabiting an inverted, nocturnal image of human social life. This is most evident in descriptions of their ghost roads, the *tsanlam*. While these are supposedly invisible and impossible for ordinary people to locate, the *tsan* stones and red ochre markings that indicate their presence are ubiquitous: there are few Buddhist houses unadorned by red waymarkers.

On some level, then, we might see *tsan* as presenting a kind of shadow-image of Buddhist Ladakhis. *Tsan* appear as strangers met at night; they travel along roads that follow the routes of human roads; and the houses of Buddhists are marked by colours and designs associated with them. The anxiety that attaches to the invisible roads of the *tsan* and the dangers that they pose are not clearly distinguished from the dangers of ordinary, human roads. Paths and roads attract unchecked movement that brings illness and misfortune, whether from strangers or spirits. An awareness of the village as sustained by lines of movement between the inside and outside, lines that pass across the porous and shifting boundaries that separate the village from the mountains beyond, brings with it an awareness of threat. Roads are dangerous: where people may pass by day, harmful forces move by night.

Conclusion

It would be easy to see the ubiquitous *tsan* stones and red ochre markings as just another species of apotropaic device, and to an extent that is simply what they are. But they are also testaments to a particular way of inhabiting a living, moving world: one in which human movement is shadowed by the movement of harmful forces that flow through areas of settlement after dark. The red stones and markings that appear outside almost every Buddhist house in Ladakh make these flows of movement visible, rendering material human attempts to manage the movement of other beings. Above all, they demonstrate an awareness of the two-sided potential of roads and paths: used by friends and by strangers, by humans and by *tsan*, roads are simultaneously sustaining and afflicting.

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Notes

- 1 See also Pascale Dollfus, "De quelques histoires de *klu* et de *btsan*," *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 2 (April 2003): 4–39.
- 2 See Eva K. Dargyay, "The White and Red Rong-Btsan of Matho Monastery (Ladakh)," *Journal of the Tibet Society*, no. 5 (1985): 55–65.
- 3 Crook noted that in the 1980s Zangskaris spoke of *tsan* and other entities, "with a sort of half-belief, jokingly." See John Crook, "Zangskari Attitudes," in *Himalayan Buddhist Villages*, ed. John Crook and Henry Osmaston (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994), 541.
- 4 Kaplanian suggests that *tsak* markings indicate that, "this house belongs to the [*tsan*], who will therefore not harm its inhabitants." Patrick Kaplanian, "The Constituent Elements of Architecture and Urbanism in Ladakh," *Cambridge University Ladakh Expedition Reports 1977–1979* (unpublished manuscript, 1979), 136.
- 5 See Martin A. Mills, *Identity, Ritual and State in Tibetan Buddhism* (London: Routledge, 2003), 258.
- 6 Tim Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History* (London: Routledge, 2007), 2–3, 80–81.



Fig. 4 (above): Protector deity in the form of a *tsan*, Hemis gompa, upper Ladakh. (Photo by the author, September 2013)



Fig. 3 (above): The "Muhabbat Trust Bridge." (Photo by the author, 2016)

which date from the beginning of the 20th century. What seems most important to note, perhaps, is that although the way people combined their gifts has remained relatively similar, the type of infrastructure built, the groups participating in *nomas*, and their motivations to do so have changed since the beginning of the 20th century with the comings and goings of the inhabitants on the Karakoram road network.

By connecting the villages and pastures of the rural areas to the cities, roads have become the ground on which the inhabitants have made unprecedented cultural contact with other inhabitants and communities of the region. As Harvey, Bruun Jensen, and Morita have argued, infrastructure and society mutually shape one another throughout time.⁴ In the Karakoram, and among the Wakhis in particular, tracing the development of herders' road networks thus amounts to charting a history of these forms of solidarity and belonging to the territory and the environment.

In Shimshal, what is known today as *nomas* seems to have been imposed on subjects by the prince Muhammad Nazim Khan of Hunza (1892-1938), primarily to serve the interests of his state. To do so, he

relied on the coercive power relationship his predecessors had enforced in Wakhi communities at the turn of the 19th century. This power relationship resulted in the imposition of annual taxes on Wakhi communities of the valley, which generated a stratification of lineages between those who could pay them and those who could not. Those who could not pay the tax directly had to carry their taxes on foot to the prince's court in the form of agriculture and livestock.⁵ It was from among the wealthiest lineages that the prince appointed a representative to implement this policy. It was also through them that the prince forced his subjects to accept material resources and to use them to build structures. The prince himself sponsored at least two such structures in Shimshal: a stretch of pathway named after his mother, Qorban Begum, and a bridge on the old mule track built in the name of Muhammad Ameen, the father of Ponshehmi, the village chief. Just after the completion of these works in approximately 1920, Ponshehmi and his son, Ghulam Nasir, sponsored another *noma*, a bridge over the Shimshal river far in the east, close to Darwaza, the place where the principality's defensive walls stood [Fig. 2]. While the first

two were intended to facilitate the flow of taxes, the third was intended to provide easier access to the principality's only salt mines, from which the less fortunate lineages of Shimshal had to extract the precious mineral and bring it to the prince.

Nomas remained in place even after the last prince of Hunza was deposed in 1974 and the Hunza Valley was administratively integrated into Pakistan. Henceforth, the sponsors would mainly be the wealthiest lineages of the village, even though many historical structures prove that the other lineages contributed greatly to infrastructural development. Even when Pakistan and the NGO the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) became involved in the development of the Shimshal road, which would replace the old mule track, the *nomas* proved essential in filling in many sections. This can be seen today with the Muhabbat Trust Bridge built in 1999 [Fig. 3], a structure whose name pays tribute not only to its eponym, Muhabbat, but also to the collaboration between the locals and the members of the AKRSP.

Walking and the archaeology of forms of giving

Highways, asphalt-paved or stone roads, trails, or pathways differ in terms of the materials from which they are made, the construction techniques used to build them, and the religious, political, or even geostrategic reasons that prompted workers, sponsors, or contractors to devote themselves to the work. At Shimshal, this diversity also extends to the mountain footpaths themselves. Their typology is so rich that in July 2016, while we were visiting the summer pastures, one of my partners ventured a comic comparison to answer my unimpeachable question about the history of mountain paths: "You French-speakers have 400 names to describe your cheeses, so we have just as many to name our pathways." In the Karakoram, when you hit the road, you have to expect to travel on many different routes. This diversity does not easily lend itself to hierarchisation. Not all pathways become roads as the Shimshal mule track did, and when the Shimshal road is blocked

for long weeks by a landslide that a few travellers are unable to pass, the local people follow new, ephemeral trails.

The locals rebuild the sections of path destroyed by rockfalls, landslides, or erosion, and do not hesitate to rename the sections they improve. This happened to an old *perien* ("staircase-shaped pathway") that a family, the Bari, built in the late 1960s in the name of a woman, Gulchin [Fig. 4]. Between 2009 and 2012, the woman's son Sadiq rebuilt the lower section in the name of his wife, Sulemani, and the upper one in his own name. This is how pathways create a palimpsest, and the walkers who tread them retrace the history of their builders, of the different infrastructures, of their users, and finally, of the paths themselves. A history of these pathways must therefore consider them not only as connectors between places, but also as places of connection between humans and non-humans, such as animals, dead people, or deities.

The history of the diversity of roads and pathways sheds light on the multiple forms of solidarity that builders mobilised to develop and rebuild them. The descriptions given above demonstrate the reciprocal role of roads and paths in the implementation of forms of solidarity, whether the latter be the result of pre-reflexive, direct, immediate, phenomenal, and ephemeral collective action, or rather planned, thought-out, and strategic action. Surveying the roads and paths ultimately amounts to experiencing them as agents who generate forms of solidarity. It also means tracing their history, which, like the paths, has nothing linear about it and is necessarily linked to the political and religious relationships of its protagonists.⁶

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Fig. 4 (above): The Sulemani and Sadiq Pathway built between 2009 and 2012 on the old Gulchin Pathway, constructed for the first time in the late 1960s. Gulchin was the mother-in-law of Sulemani and the mother of Sadiq. (Photo by the author, 2016)

Notes

- 1 Maurice Godelier, *The Imagined, the Imaginary and the Symbolic* (New York: Verso, 2020), 62; Maurice Godelier, *La production des grands hommes: pouvoir et domination masculine chez les Baruya de Nouvelle-Guinée* (Paris: Flammarion, 2009).
- 2 Jonah Steinberg described them in detail in his book *Isma'ili Modern: Globalization and Identity in a Muslim Community* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011).
- 3 Or, as Hénaff would put it, social recognition is about expressing one's respect for another by acknowledging their status. See Marcel Hénaff, *Le don des philosophes: repenser la réciprocité* (Paris: Seuil, 2002), 204.
- 4 Penelope Harvey, Casper Bruun Jensen, and Astura Morita, "Introduction: Infrastructural complications", in *Infrastructures and social complexity: A companion*, ed. Penelope Harvey, Casper Bruun Jensen, and Astura Morita, 1-22 (London: Routledge, 2017), 12.
- 5 Hermann Kreutzmann, *Pamirian Crossroads. Kirghiz and Wakhi of High Asia* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2015), 407-412.
- 6 I would like to express my deep gratitude to the inhabitants of the village of Shimshal, who gave me hospitality and educated not only my body to walk their mountain pathways, but also my conscience to the importance of walking, taking care of the infrastructures, and remembering the names of those who built them. I would also like to extend my warmest thanks to Stéphane Gros, editor of the Focus section, for his meticulous editing work, which has considerably improved this text.

Fig. 1: Collecting fodder in Pathakpur fields. (Photo by the author, March 2017)



Gendered Fields of Constitutional Politics

Women's Routines and the Negotiation of Territorial Belonging in Nepal's Far Western Tarai

Amy Johnson

Origins and destinations

"Where have you come from?" is a standard greeting exchanged by friends and strangers crossing paths on Nepal's roads and foot trails. Whether asked at the outset of a day's trip to agricultural fields or at the end of a jolting bus ride to Kathmandu, answering it invites the respondent and questioner into a social geography facilitated through idiosyncratic relationships to places near and far.

In regions that have experienced repeated waves of migration and settlement, such as the lowland Tarai-Madhes region along the southern Nepal-India border [Fig. 2], talking about where one starts the day, and where one might end up, can facilitate a sense of connection amongst people moving across a shared but differently experienced landscape. It can also shift conversation toward another kind of origin: family. While ostensibly seeking a point of connection between unfamiliar persons, such inquiries probe for information about an individual's affiliated caste and ethnicity, which can either be the basis for inclusion or exclusion from the social world of questioner and respondent.

Throughout much of Nepal, questions about social and spatial origins are a routine part of daily life. Yet in the decades since the end of the ten-year conflict between the Communist Party Nepal-Maoist and the Government of Nepal in 2006, such inquiries have gained heightened significance. In the aftermath of the conflict, Nepali citizens embarked on a joint project of constitution writing and state restructuring in the hopes of resolving longstanding social tensions in Nepal surrounding the discrimination of marginalized groups and regional

underdevelopment.¹ Over the course of two elected Constituent Assemblies between 2008 and 2015, lawmakers worked to design constitutional provisions for social inclusion and demarcate new federal provinces.² Arranging legal boundaries for social inclusion and territorial boundaries for provinces raised important conversations amongst the Nepali public about the past and present identity of the Nepali nation-

state and ways of belonging to it. For many, this was an anxious time filled with competing visions of Nepal's future form.³ Constitutional and territorial models of the future Nepali state diverged strongly in the southern Tarai-Madhes region. Along the southern borderlands, competing demands for federal province-based territorial recognition raised by Indigenous, caste Hindu, and other regional Tarai-

Madhes groups brought lived experiences and historical legacies of Tarai-Madhes migration and settlement to the foreground of contemporary regional and national constitutional politics.

Kailali district, in the Far Western Tarai, was especially affected by Nepal's post-conflict federalism politics. The Tharu community, an Indigenous Tarai group, supported the creation of Tharuhat or Tharuwan, a province recognizing the Tarai as the Tharu homeland. Meanwhile, other residents of the region, many of whom had origins and ancestors in the Hills, advocated for the formation of a Hill-Tarai integrated province through a regional political movement called Akhanda Sudurpaschim, or United Far West. In September 2015, the constitution was promulgated and a new map of federal provinces was demarcated. Many residents of the Tarai-Madhes, including those of Kailali district, voiced their dissatisfaction with the map and constitution, proclaiming that it failed to generate the socio-political transformation promised by the state restructuring project. The map did not demarcate provinces championed by Indigenous peoples, such as the Tharu. Instead, six of the seven provinces included on the final federal map followed the integrated Hill-Tarai model for provinces

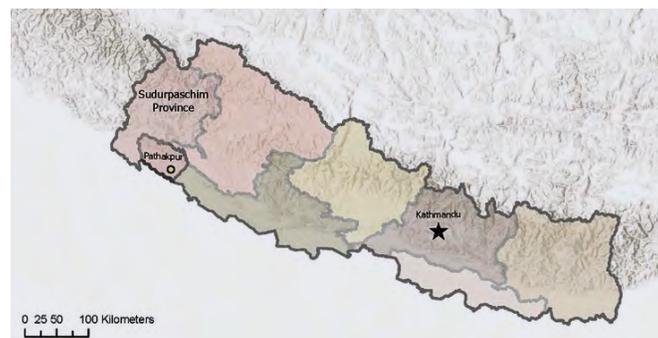


Fig. 2: Nepal's Far West Province (Sudurpaschim Province) featuring Kailali district and the approximate location of Pathakpur (a pseudonym). (Map prepared by author)

supported by groups such as the United Far West. The lack of recognition for the homelands and territorial attachments of Indigenous peoples on the federal map undermined public faith in provisions for social inclusion outlined in the constitution. In the months and years after the constitution's promulgation, unresolved tensions around the federal system and the federal map thickened the air in Kailali. They resonated in mundane interactions and conversations, extending the field of politics into the routines of everyday life.

Routine politics

In Fall 2016, a year after the promulgation of the Constitution of Nepal and a year before the delineation and implementation of local federal units, my Tharu confidants Meena and Anju and I set out to spend the afternoon gathering fodder grass in a neighbor's field a mile or so from the women's homes in a village (which I anonymize as Pathakpur) in eastern Kailali district. Collecting fodder grass was a daily activity for us [Fig. 1 and 3]. I learned how to identify good and poor grasses for goats and buffaloes and how to tell the difference between familiar and strangers according to Meena and Anju's studied criteria. On this afternoon, Meena and Anju were joking loudly while filling their repurposed grain sacks with grasses, and they missed the sound of approaching footsteps pushing through the tall wheat plants. She startled us, this woman, small and bent, when she tossed down her woven basket from her back and lifted her arms up in greeting. Rising steadily with her sickle in hand, Meena looked the woman up and down before calling out to her: "Budhi, kaha bata aayo?" (Nepali for "Old woman, where have you come from?"). With her own sickle, the woman gestured behind her to a cluster of mud-plastered houses barely visible on the horizon. The distant houses were established by people who had settled in Kailali from the Far Western Hill district of Doti. Meena took notice of the grass filling the woman's well-used basket, and I watched Meena calculate the size of the load to the woman's frail frame. "Who's helping you?" Meena asked, again in Nepali. A short thin boy rose soundlessly from the field. His lean legs kicked out at the basket lying at the older woman's feet. "This one helps me," she responded rustily. In short sentences she told how she came from Doti two months ago to live with her son and his family after her husband died. "There was nothing in the hills for me after his death," she explained, "only drought and hardship. But here too life is hard," she added, gesturing to her basket. Sharing a look with Meena, the woman knelt to the ground while the boy hefted the load onto her back. With a heave, she lifted her basket and secured its strap to her forehead, nodding to us in farewell.

Meena and Anju sucked their teeth watching the woman's head duck in and out

of sight across the fields. Her presence that afternoon gave us a point of contrast to mark the differences between our lives. For Meena and Anju, the fields were part of their daily realm of work and routine, and they reached them from Tharu-established villages where they have lived nearly all their lives. Their movements into and out of the fields weave the landscape into an ever-tightening social fabric they feel as home. But it is a landscape where they have grown accustomed to speaking first in Nepali, not Tharu, when encountering an unfamiliar person like the older woman, whose own mother tongue is likely not Nepali but a Far Western Hill language such as Doteli. As we headed for our own house, Meena turned to me and said, "I feel so sad for these Pahadi [Hill origin] women. They come here lost."

Her words reminded me of the poem "Sala Pahadme Kya Hai?" ("What's in these Bastard Hills?") by Nepali poet Minbahadur Bista, published in 1983:

Young sons are walking out,
leaving the places they were born,
taking loved ones with them,
carrying bags, neatly tied
with red kerchiefs on their shoulders,
khukhuri knives hang from their waists,
dull and unpolished for years;
they tell their sick old parents
to look after homes, homes which are lifeless.⁴

In this small encounter, Meena's question – "Where are you coming from?" – extended into an unasked, yet eventually answered, question: "Where are you from?" They were asked to ascertain spatial position on the landscape as well as social position among the multi-stranded ties people have to Kailali. Their significance stands in further relief in the context of Kailali district's importance as a popular destination for internal and international migration and as a historically important frontier of the Nepali nation-state.

Basai-sarai (residence-shift)

In Kailali, the Tharu, an Indigenous Tarai group living along both sides of the international border, are recognized as the area's original residents. Alliances brokered with Tharu elites in the 18th century and earlier afforded political powers in North India and Kathmandu a toe hold of authority in the southern lowlands. Yet, for the most part, distance, dense forests, and virulent malaria slowed the arrival of non-Tharu to the Far Western Tarai over what is thought of as the long 19th century. Instead, a seasonal rhythm of movement into and out of the region was observed as folks, predominantly men, from the Hills and Gangetic Plain arrived over winter months to grow crops and trade before the onset of monsoon and malaria transmission.

However, by the mid-20th century, the Nepali government had begun to experiment with technologies of environmental management, most importantly indoor residual spraying with DDT for mosquito population control. The advent of malaria eradication in the Tarai altered the rhythm of seasonal mobility and encouraged peoples from near and far to move into Kailali for land and opportunity.⁵ The Nepali government attempted to keep the wave of population transfer in check through techniques of population control, such as the creation of planned settlement colonies and land redistribution programs, as well as punishing individuals living on state-controlled forest land with jail and the destruction of their homes and property. Eventually these measures gave way, and Kailali's population boomed in the second half of the 20th century, rising from 128,877 in 1971⁶ to 616,697 in 2001.⁷

While historians of Nepal focus on the mid-20th century as the moment of the Tarai's demographic transformation, migration into the Far Western Tarai is still underway. The 2021 Census of Nepal⁸ indicates that migration or *basai-sarai* (residence-shift) remains high in Kailali. Out of a population of 904,666, Kailali counts 571,061 persons as enumerated in the same place (local administrative unit) where they were born. Respondents indicating that they were born elsewhere in Kailali district from where they were enumerated numbered 71,747. A much higher number of respondents (245,841) state that they were born elsewhere in Nepal. Respondents relating that they were born outside Nepal, likely in neighboring India, numbered 15,626.

Comparing results from the 2011 and 2021 censuses underscores the continued shifts of people and language use in Kailali district. In 2011, 41 percent of the total population of Kailali reported speaking Tharu as a first language. The 2021 census used more discrete language categories than recorded in earlier censuses, differentiating Tharu and Rana Tharu languages. Yet even when combining numbers of Tharu and Rana Tharu first language speakers, the overall percentage of reported first-language Tharu speakers in Kailali decreased to 38 percent in 2021. Meanwhile Nepali first-language speakers increased between 2011 to 2021 from 27 to 36 percent. Languages such as Doteli, Acchami, Magar, Maithili, and Hindi were spoken by over 0.5 percent of Kailali residents in both 2011 and 2021, although numbers of Doteli speakers decreased overall from approximately 19 to 14 percent. These results suggest that significant minorities of Kailali residents include people with linguistic ties to the Far Western Hills (Doteli, Acchami, Magar), the Central and Eastern Tarai (Maithili), and North India (Hindi).

The municipality I have anonymized as Pathakpur, however, has experienced less demographic change between 2011 and 2021 than the district overall, maintaining a majority Tharu-speaking population. Before being consolidated into the newly established Pathakpur municipality in 2017, the two Village Development Committees which today make up Pathakpur were recorded by the 2011 census as having a much higher percentage of Tharu residents than the district average. Eighty-five percent of the population in one unit and 72 percent in the other reported being Tharu. They also claimed Tharu as their mother tongue, making Tharu the most spoken language in both units. After the Tharu language, Doteli, Nepali, and Achhami were recorded to be spoken most frequently as a first language in both administrative units in 2011. In 2021, 79 percent of Pathakpur residents identified as Tharu and reported the Tharu language as their mother tongue. Meanwhile, 4,407 persons selected Doteli as their first language, followed by 2,610 Nepali and 539 Achhami first-language speakers. These linguistic signs tell of near and distant ancestral origins for people who live in Pathakpur. But they also communicate continuity in place for Pathakpur's Tharu and Hill origin residents. The combination of residence shift and intergenerational place-making underscores the intensity of territorial politics around belonging to Kailali in the era of constitution writing and federal restructuring.

Signposts

Asking someone about where they have come from prompts a follow-up question: "Where are you going?" Where are places like Pathakpur, districts like Kailali, and women like Meena, Anju, and the old Pahadi woman headed in the newly federal Nepal? The future is uncharted. But there are signs that the future will look very different from Nepal's past. Already, Pathakpur has aligned itself with the pro-Tharu Nagarik Unmukti Party, the People's Freedom Party. The Nagarik Unmukti Party was established by Ranjeeta Shrestha on behalf of her husband, the Sudur Paschim Province House of Representatives lawmaker and activist Resham Chaudhary. Resham Chaudhary was released from prison in June 2023 after being delivered a life sentence for his alleged involvement in the 2015 Tikapur Incident, in which security personnel and a toddler were killed during fighting that broke out at a Tharuhat/Tharuwan rally on the eve of the constitution's promulgation. The Mayor and Deputy Mayor of Pathakpur in 2023 also belong to the Nagarik Unmukti Party and are Tharu. The election of Tharu candidates and the use of Tharu language in government offices has removed barriers for Tharu access to local government that had long been felt in the region.

Tharu speakers, like Meena and Anju, and Pahadi residents in Pathakpur will continue to navigate each other's lives across a district landscape they share as a consequence of the ebbs and flows of migration, settlement, and nation-state building in Nepal's Far Western Tarai. But their negotiations today can be seen to proceed on more even footing than in the past. Who can answer "Where are you going?" with so many destinations in sight?

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Notes

- 1 Sara Shneiderman and Louise Tillin, "Restructuring States, Restructuring Ethnicity: Looking across Disciplinary Boundaries at Federal Futures in India and Nepal," *Modern Asian Studies* 49, no. 1 (May 2015): 1–39. doi:10.1017/S0026749X1300067X
- 2 Budhi Karki and Rohan Edrisinha, *The Federalism Debate in Nepal: UNDP and Support to Participatory Constitution Building in Nepal* (Kathmandu: UNDP, 2014).
- 3 Pitamber Sharma, Narendra Khanal, and Subhash Chaudhary Tharu, *Towards a Federal Nepal: An Assessment of Proposed Models* (Kathmandu: Social Science Baha, 2009).
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- 5 Amy Johnson, "Settler Sensibilities and Environmental Change: Unmaking Malarial Landscapes in Nepal," *Journal of Asian Studies* (August 2023). Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1215/00219118-10687313>
- 6 CBS (Central Bureau of Statistics), Nepal, "National Population Census 1971," Ref. NPL CBSNPC1971V0, accessed July 10, 2023, https://censusnepal.cbs.gov.np/Home/Details?tid=58d6cid=b1591f60_9877-456196d060c65c1a45328f5id=45.
- 7 CBS (Central Bureau of Statistics), Nepal, "National Population and Housing Census 2001," accessed September 10, 2023, <https://censusnepal.cbs.gov.np/Home/Details?tid=58d6cid=ba2ae3a6-fd9e-402d-8f65-40c40e08e46b8f5id=26>.
- 8 National Statistics Office, Nepal, "National Population and Housing Census 2021 Provincial Report: Sudurpaschim Province," accessed September 10, 2023, <https://censusnepal.cbs.gov.np/results/downloads/provincial/7>.



Fig. 3: Two agricultural plots where Meena and Anju collect fodder. (Photo by the author, March 2017)



Fig. 1 (left): Chorten Jangchub Namgyal in the upper Tsum Valley. (Photograph by Nadine Plachta, 2012)

Stories of Infrastructure and Environmental Justice in Nepal

Nadine Plachta

On a clear winter morning in January 2014, I stood on the veranda of Dhawa Gyanjen's house in Tsum, a long mountain valley in the Nepal Himalaya, bordering the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). The sky was a bright blue, and frost glistened damply on the grass of the front yard. The days had grown increasingly cold. I was watching a group of villagers who sat in a circle on plastic chairs in the warmth of the high-altitude sun, debating the arrival of a long-anticipated road. "What good is a road if it does not go from village to village?" asked a man sporting a faded blue sweater, his eyes shaded with sunglasses. "It will risk the pollution of our river and streams," responded another, with thin graying hair hanging loose over his shoulders. "Besides," the latter said, turning more serious, "it might also cause damage to our ancestral places." A girl from a neighboring house in the village appeared, filling up cups of steaming tea for everyone from a thermos.

The heavy construction machine that was clearing ground for a motorable road through Tsum and up to the Tibetan border had reached the village boundary about a week prior. Having removed soil and scrub across mountain pastures and below cliffsides for the past several months, the excavator was now parked for the barren winter, when the valley sits beneath thick blankets of snow. Dhawa, who lives in Kathmandu but was in Tsum to visit his aging father, had sent handwritten letters to elders and knowledge holders of all remaining villages along the planned road, calling on them to discuss its further alignment after snowmelt in spring. People needed to decide the road's route through the valley if they did not want it to follow the alignment established by government engineers, which would have considerable effects on Indigenous relations to land and kin. Should the road follow the northern banks of the Syar Khola, the main river running through the valley, and bypass some villages but protect sensitive mountain landscapes? Or, instead, should it cross the river more than once, lead through all remaining

For Indigenous communities living in remote Himalayan areas of Nepal, infrastructural developments are agents of profound change. Their resource-based livelihoods and the location of their homes in vulnerable environments make them particularly sensitive to road construction. The Tsum Valley in the Manaslu Conservation Area is one such place where government narratives and local Indigenous imaginaries of infrastructural futures diverge. Rather than opposing the construction of a new road, people advocate for the respect of Indigenous relations to land and kin.

villages, and potentially damage the interconnected network of human and other-than-human beings that sustain Indigenous life? The people who gathered in Dhawa's front yard had already been discussing the matter for hours.

Members of the Indigenous Tsum community had been asking the government for a road since the region was opened for controlled tourism in 2008. At that time, the nearest domestic road head was in Arughat, a sprawling market town along the Budhi Gandaki River, a five day walk to the south, from where one could reach Kathmandu in another day by bus. Daily essentials, such as rice, salt, and tea, but also kitchen utensils, batteries, and clothes were imported from Arughat on mules via a footpath that was often precarious during summer, when monsoon rain washed away sections in landslides. A less treacherous, and much shorter, route was to cross the mountain pass into China, where a dirt road pucker with potholes snaked downhill to merge with a highway that led to the larger town of Dzongka. For people in Tsum, a road connecting these two loose ends embodied development; it promised economic growth, job opportunities, education, and health care. Yet when the government, over a period of two years in 2011 and 2012, sent engineers to the region to conduct a feasibility study and sketch a detailed plan of the road, the situation quickly turned awry.

In what follows, I present the story, through pictures and text, of what went wrong. I analyze and interpret tensions

at the intersection of Indigenous knowledge systems and state-led development programs to highlight the different actors, political stakes, and invested perspectives that continuously collide amidst current infrastructure projects in Nepal. In doing so, I bring attention to the critical role of local communities in Himalayan homelands – and help to amplify another kind of story that is sometimes silenced by the noise from political centers.

The promise (and perils) of infrastructure in Nepal

Infrastructure appears at the center of current political debates in Nepal. It is framed as a nation-building project of a fledgling democratic state, and the Nepali government is seeking to build roads to every town and sizable settlement in the country.¹ Promising to boost regional development and introduce new forms of mobility, these paved, gravel, and dirt roads are part of an ambitious effort to strengthen rural livelihoods after a social movement ended the decade-long civil war in 2006. According to national development narratives, roads will ultimately lead to greater wellbeing by extending market relations to hill and mountainous areas, which have some of the lowest road densities in the world.²

Governing the allocation of resources for road construction projects in Nepal is the National Planning Commission (NPC). Since its establishment in 1956, the NPC

has been implementing a series of periodic infrastructure development plans. Each of these periodic plans specifies development policies and programs under a national vision, and road building has continuously been given the highest priority to help consolidate a modern bureaucratic state. Once the government approves a road project and a registered construction firm emerges successfully from the tendering process, the firm outsources work to local contractors, creating a broker economy of both public and private actors. Social anthropologist Brian Larkin writes that infrastructures, roads included, are ultimately matter that enable the movement of other matter. They facilitate material flows and allow for their exchange across space.³ But roads also exceed their most obvious form. "In contrast to their representations on maps as seemingly smooth and straightforward lines," Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi explains, roads are also "a place of experiencing, a place where ideas, things and relationships come into being and fall apart."⁴ The capacity to connect and disconnect is a persistent feature of infrastructures. Roads bring resources, opportunities, and relations within reach of some, while often restricting them for others. They do not simply reflect existing inequalities, but may engineer and entrench new forms. In other words, roads shape life in profound and sometimes unexpected ways.⁵

The complex material and social realities of roads are visible across Nepal's Himalayan regions. It is here that infrastructure development ties closely into practices of mapping, itself a process of control that political scientist James Scott identifies as a territorial tool through which states make geographically remote places more legible.⁶ Especially for Indigenous Peoples living in hill and mountainous areas, the idea of a road is a highly contested one.⁷ Their multiple forms of relatedness with the environment stand in stark contrast with the expansion of capitalist frontiers and resource extraction pushed by the government. Consequently, infrastructure development programs are often seen as a continuity of the historical marginalization and dispossession that Indigenous Peoples have been facing in Nepal. Recent calls for Indigenous sovereignty and environmental justice are increasingly pointing out violent infrastructure practices in an effort to protect land, mountains, and water, thus challenging linear narratives of development emanating from the capital Kathmandu.

Infrastructure and Indigenous relations of ethics and care

Once the intense debate between the villagers who had gathered in Dhawa's front yard ceased, one after another prepared to leave. The atmosphere was tense. Having reached no agreement on an alternative road alignment through Tsum, they pledged to resume the conversation the next day. I wondered what had happened that motivated people to oppose current road construction plans so vehemently. Having sensed my interest in the matter, Dhawa's father invited his son and me to a more comfortable seating arrangement inside the house. Tsering Phuntsok had high cheekbones and a beguiling smile. He used to be a savvy trader but now, at age seventy-four, he spent most of his days taking yaks from the village to high alpine pastures. Tsering Phuntsok pulled out a plastic jug filled with *arak*, the local whiskey distilled from barley, and sloshed some of the clear liquor in three stained ceramic cups. He then reminisced about his encounter with the development planners in Tsum: "I was walking home from a local pasture when I saw the engineers doing their work. They carried survey instruments and measuring tapes and, along the main footpath meandering through the valley, painted red signs on our gompas, *khani*, *chorten*, and *mani* walls, mapping



Fig. 2 (left): Film Poster for *Mani: The Hidden Valley of Happiness at a Crossroads*. (Poster by Sonam Lama)

where the road would go.¹⁶ The unexpected meeting with the engineers was a crucial moment for the elderly man – and one that changed his perception of development.

In Tsum, *chorten*, *khani*, and *mani* walls are spiritual as well as geographic markers, as they protect people and territories and are embedded in everyday place-making practices [Fig. 1]. Made of rocks and carved stones, these markers are found in villages, on ridges and hillocks, as well as along walking trails. Together with mountains, lakes, and trees, they form part of a complex landscape that is animated by other-than-human beings that bestow blessings, generating the conditions for human life to flourish. Human inhabitants, in turn, maintain their relatedness with the animated landscape through institutions, narratives, and bodily practices, such as circumambulating these markers and performing prostrations, or by integrating them into larger pilgrimage circuits. This interconnected system of responsibilities creates a sense of place and home for the local community. If disrupted, environmental calamities (e.g., storms, landslides, and droughts) or sicknesses are believed to likely follow. Tsering Phuntsok pointed out that while it seemed easiest to build the road along the locally used walking trail, it would inevitably damage some of these ancestral places and thus violently disrupt villagers' embodied practices of care for the land and its beings.

Talking with Sonam Lama, a professionally trained architect and community member based in Kathmandu, I learned that the Tsum road was categorized as a "national highway" under the Ministry of Physical Infrastructure and Transport's Strategic Road Network. Under this project, the road would connect the mountainous region to the district capital Gorkha and further to the Madan Ashrit Highway near Bharatpur in the southern Terai, along the border with India. The Madan Ashrit Highway currently carries 90 percent of all international traffic in the country, and its extension to the Chinese border in the Himalayan highlands would create an economic corridor with significant trade and transport prospects.

Sonam further explained that, as a national highway, the road in Tsum was expected to have a width of about ten meters – a scope that would make it profoundly impactful in many ways. Ecologically, for example, it would quickly become a major source of pollution for agricultural fields and grazing grounds and, therefore, would severely affect customary traditions of environmental management such as seasonal irrigation systems. Sonam's face mirrored this concern. The architect took a deep breath, choosing his words carefully: "Coming from the lowlands, the engineers didn't know about our various relationships with the land. But they also didn't ask us." Sonam indicated that the government failed to consider the environmental consequences of the road. Known as a standard Environmental Impact Assessment, this procedure is used to identify likely adverse impacts before decisions about a proposed development project are made. Impact assessments are technically mandatory in Nepal under the Environmental Protection Act (1996) and Environment Protection Rules (1997), but their enforcement has been largely ineffective. While laws and mechanisms are in place to mitigate potential environmental harm, they are often ignored in practice by both developers and monitoring agencies.

The planned road through Tsum challenged Indigenous practices that ensure mutual flourishing by disregarding responsibilities for all beings present in the landscape. Without any effort to include the local population in the road planning process, villagers were reminded of complex histories of peripheralization they have long experienced as a community living in the Himalayan highlands. For them, full participation in decision-making processes affecting their territory was an important milestone in the project for self-determination and environmental justice.

Not long after the government engineers came to Tsum, community members began to mobilize for an alternative road alignment. People did not oppose the road as such; they still believed in the road as a path to the future that was supposed to bring wealth and prosperity. But they argued for a culturally sensitive road construction that respects Indigenous practices of caring for the land in a fragile mountain environment.

Activist efforts first centered upon Kathmandu. Following a meeting with conservation specialists from the Manaslu Conservation Area Project (MCAP), people organized a workshop in the capital. The workshop fostered a critical dialogue between local leaders and knowledge holders, environmental organizations, and development practitioners in order to achieve a solution for road building based on local participation. Following the recommendations that emerged from the workshop, people formed the Tsum Conservation and Development Committee (TCDC), a local nonprofit organization focusing on the protection of important landmarks and monuments storing local history. In turn, the TCDC prepared a document listing potential environmental harms and endangered ancestral sites. This document was then presented to Chhabiraj Pant, Minister for Physical Infrastructure and Transport, and Ram Kumar Shrestha, Minister for Culture, Tourism, and Civil Aviation. A delegation also went to other national-level government offices, including the Department of Roads, the Department of Archeology, and the Ministry of Forests and Environment.

More publicly oriented, Sonam Lama co-directed a documentary film that portrayed the debate over the planned road, drawing on interviews with local community members. Titled *Mani: The Hidden Valley of Happiness at a Crossroads*, the film was screened at the Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival and in several villages in Tsum, as well as in the United States [Fig. 2]. Sonam also wrote articles in the *Nepali*



Fig. 3: Men carrying a new motor for the excavator across the mountain pass from China. (Photograph by Nadine Plachta, 2019)

Times, an English-language newspaper, which addressed the haphazard realities of development programs in Tsum.¹⁷ However, the various efforts toward a self-determined and ecologically sustainable road construction met with little success. As has been observed elsewhere in Nepal, the road was driven by political agendas, as well as by the greed of construction firms and petty contractors wanting to make profit from large government budgets.

When on a cloudy day in September 2013 an excavator was airlifted to Tsum, people decided to take matters into their own hands. Each time the heavy construction machine reached a village boundary, people gathered and, following intense debates, settled on the direction of the road. They bribed the single young Nepali man from the lowlands driving the excavator who, outnumbered, succumbed to their demands. In fear of attacks to his machine, the driver slept in the excavator for months. Still, he would sometimes wake to a cracked windshield or sugar in the tank (which supposedly clogs the fuel lines and disables the machine). The road successfully diverted from its original direction, but without the proper engineering knowledge, the excavator came dangerously close to the base of a steep cliff. Failure to stabilize the slope for protection triggered rockfall and – when a young village boy walking on the freshly dug road was injured – sparked discussions about whether the balance in the relationships between humans and the animated landscape was being upset.

Over the following years, progress on the road was slow and hampered by many obstacles. Because the area is not situated in the rain shadow of a mountain range, which is responsible for dry and arid zones in other nearby Himalayan regions such as Manang, Mustang, and Dolpo, summers in Tsum are moist and green. Persistent rainfall turns the ground muddy, leaving most of the road building to spring and autumn. In addition, the excavator itself showed signs of mechanical wear due to abrasion, corrosion, and damage. When the heavy machine broke down and needed to get repaired, spare parts were difficult to source [Fig. 3]. Regular fuel shortages, too, caused the machine to be parked and covered with a tarp for weeks at a time. In 2017, four years after construction on the road had started, the excavator reached an active landslide area behind Nile, the last village of the valley on the way to the Chinese border. It took another two years, until 2019, for it to navigate over the difficult terrain, and construction has stalled since.

Initially delayed by the geography and climate of the Himalayan highlands, the status of the road in Tsum was also affected by government priorities and changing political leadership. Firms and contractors are closely linked to politicians and bureaucrats, making road construction a complicated affair that frequently blurs the boundaries between public and private, legality and illegality.¹⁸ Once envisioned as a transit corridor, the Tsum road was eventually suspended in favor of another, more promising highway through the neighboring valley of Nubri, where the government sought help from the army to expedite construction. Today, nearly ten years after the excavator first landed in Tsum, the distance covered by the dirt road takes people no longer than six hours to walk and even less on horseback. No vehicles or motorcycles are driving on the road in Tsum, and sections of it are now overgrown with bushes and strewn with rocks.

Conclusion

In Nepal, infrastructure programs are an emblem of national progress and resource wealth, but they also organize inequality. Similar to other development projects across the country, the planned road in Tsum emerged as a site of struggle over the representation of Indigenous Peoples. The road was designed and initiated without free, prior, and informed local consent, and the lack of legally recognized mechanisms for dispute resolution left the community with limited options to defend their rights.

Yet the condition of infrastructural suspension, fostered stronger human relationships with one another and the land

in Tsum. The renewed sense of community that came through shared efforts to resist ongoing practices of capitalism and resource extraction enabled people to work for the legal protection of ancestral sites and the continuation of sustainable relations with the natural world – a sense of kinship – that was central to the defiance of the road.

In 2022, when countrywide local-level elections were held under Nepal's evolving federal system, people voted for a predominantly Indigenous-led local government in the Manaslu Conservation Area. One year into its tenure, this local body adopted a new law that formally protects Tsum's Indigenous knowledge systems and customary traditions of environmental management. The Shagya Act, as well as another law recognizing the community's traditional healing practices (the Amchi Act), requires the informed consent of the local population prior to the approval of federal projects that would affect land, water, culture, and livelihood. This presents an important step in strengthening self-determined development planning and designing more sustainable and sovereign futures for Indigenous Peoples in Tsum, as well as in Nepal more broadly.

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- 8 In Tsum, *gompa* (གོམ་པ་) refers to both a village temple and a local monastery or nunnerly. While *kani* (ཀ་ཏི) are gates standing at the entrance to villages, *chorten* (ཇོ་མོ་གསལ་) and *mani* (མ་ཏི་པོ་ལྷ་མོ) walls are monuments that represent local ontologies and are found in and outside of settlements.
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Chimerical Emancipation

The Road to a Better Future in Nepal

Florent Graziade



The last decade has seen many significant political changes in Nepal. These came with promises of better lives and infrastructural and industrial development. But in Solukhumbu district, the inhabitants of a small Tamang village are still waiting for the roads to be built. Overcoming a feeling of powerlessness, they have decided to take matters into their own hands. By presenting one of their own in local elections, they decided to help shape a new horizon. These developments reveal how much infrastructure projects are embedded in local politics and the historical context of place.

Paths of yesteryear, roads of today

Before the road was built in Chhiwa,¹ in the south of the Solukhumbu district, the Tamang² inhabitants used the same paths their ancestors used before them, paths leading to the various bazaars (markets) in the area [Fig. 1]. To the west is the Lokhim market, and to the southeast, over the Deurali ridge that follows the border with Khotang district, is the path to Gope, Mulkharka, and Suke Pokhari [Fig. 2]. Twenty-five years ago, these roads were the main arteries of economic and social life. The incessant walking that characterised the daily life of the Nepalese working classes was part of the Nepalese ethos and can be found in a large number of ancient and contemporary songs and poems. Indeed, many well-known Nepali poems express a relationship with movement, such as Bhupi Sherchan's *Asāra* (असार, "June"), written in the 1950s, which evokes the return to the village of those who have migrated to work. In the poem, rhymes, assonance, and onomatopoeia make palpable this link between the labouring body and the natural world through which men move. Nowadays, this "on foot" way of life is changing due to the rise of infrastructure development projects. Since 2017, the government has conferred a large degree of autonomy on rural municipalities, giving villages unprecedented power to launch projects. Federalism has given ward chairmen new tools, which they are gradually putting to use.

Once elected, the Rai³ ward chairman of Lokhim embarked on several projects, including the construction of several kilometres of roads, combining the municipality's funds with a request for financing from the Koshi Province. After assessing the needs of his people, he ordered the creation of a road connecting Chhiwa to the Deurali ridge, accessible by motorised

transport from other towns. The aim of the project was, firstly, to reduce the daily suffering of local residents who regularly walk all day to carry out their tasks, and secondly, to enable the development of new livelihoods.

One day, a friend and assistant of mine in Chhiwa introduced me to his eighty-year-old uncle (आर्याङ्ग, *āryāng*) named Harka [Fig. 3], who started telling me a story about an infamous former local despot. It is the story of a kitchenware merchant (होँस, *bhōṅḍā*) who came from Bhojpur district to marry a local woman, and who got elected head of the village assembly in 1976 and reigned over a village complex called Bakachol (Chhiwa, Mamare, Gope, Jhakri Bas, etc.) until 2006.⁴ This man profited handsomely from the free labour of the surrounding Tamang for many years, in what appears to be a form of serfdom in Nepal's pseudo-democratic *Pañchāyat* (पञ्चायत, "village assembly") era (1961-1990). When people came up from the valley over the ridge to the bazaars, they were repeatedly asked for free services in threatening ways. In return, the "kitchenware merchant" (as people continued to call him) was supposed to feed them, which he failed to do.

This situation lasted 33 years, as Harka recalled it, and was a fairly common form of forced labour that often consisted of portage in exchange for *rakam* (रकम, "land tenure rights").⁵ However, all forms of land tenure rights had been officially banned in 1963. The old man continued: "All the Tamang, those from Chhiwa, Mamare, Jhakri Bas, worked for him. How did he use them? They did not agree at first when he asked them to work for free, but when he conquered the position of head of the village assembly, he started discriminating against all the Tamang [...]. He would say to all the people from Bagur, Mamare, Chhiwa, etc., 'If you bring me stuff from Aiselukharka, I will make you tea and cook good food for you.' But oh oh... the tea was never ready and he would say,

'Oh next time, sorry, I didn't have time.' I used to go to his house too and we were afraid of him..."

In his retelling of these events, Harka conveyed his frustration with the situation. While the head of the village assembly was also doing some good for the community, he was obviously exploiting people with impunity: "He was very rich, looked very rich. One day, on a Saturday, I was going to the bazaar with my bag to buy some things and I came across several Tamang from Mamare, Chhiwa, and Bagur who were bringing back some things for him. I asked them, 'Why do you still agree to work for the kitchenware merchant?' They said, 'If we don't work for him, we are not allowed to take the path to the ridge, he will kill us, what can we do?'"

This story exemplifies how much the history of the path linking Chhiwa to various economic centres and bazaars is embedded in past power relations. Today, for the villagers, its transformation into a road suitable for motorised vehicles is important not just economically but also socially and symbolically.



Fig. 3: Portrait of Harka, Adrien Vivière, digital drawing, 8.25 x 8.25 inches, 2023, Bordeaux (France). (Image courtesy of Adrien Vivière)

Fig. 1 (above): Man walking in Chhiwa village. (Photo by Florent Graziade, 2020)

Fig. 2 (inset): Location of Chhiwa and surrounding area. (Source: Open Street Map, adapted by Florent Graziade)

Election promises and disappointments

In the local elections of 2017, a young Rai Maoist, a man named Bhupal, was elected ward chairman of Lokhim. His constituency was made up of numerous village units that were far apart and did not all have the same services. His stated aim was to improve the lives of all his constituents. A year and a half later, in the winter of 2019, as his Tamang opponent was gaining traction among Chhiwa's inhabitants, he decided to start the construction of a road. He could see that the residents wanted rapid improvements following elections that had not been held for years. This new road would connect Chhiwa to the ridge for easier access to the town of Aiselukharka, another municipality where the inhabitants of Chhiwa go to buy food and petrol, among other supplies, or to go to the hospital.

As the full moon and the preparation for ancestor of the house rituals (दिमि लाह पूजा, *dimni lāh puja*) approached, people conversed while sitting on their front porches. Conversations about the upcoming construction of the road and the chairman's actions were on everyone's lips. More than a political visionary, the new young ward chairman became a road project manager, the paragon of development. Election often resets residents' expectations and hopes for "development" (विकास, *vikāsa*) that never happens. Supporters of the opposing camps, represented by the Unified Marxist Leninist party (UML) and Nepali Congress (NC) candidates, seized every opportunity to discredit the chairman's policies.

Chhiwa's inhabitants are for the most part *svatantra* (स्वतन्त्र, "free from any political affiliation"). They often say politicians in general are not to be trusted and are mere opportunists (अवसरवादी, *avasaraবাদी*). Yet, they have a different view of the Tamang candidate, Sun Kumar Tamang, for whom they voted in large numbers. A social worker in his forties who lives in the neighbouring town of Gope (where people support the road construction project), he became the unaffiliated

candidate with almost no financial resources, and he and his constituents remained cautious about allegiances.

The construction of the road, an infrastructure project commissioned by the Maoist ward chairman, generated a complex set of reactions among the villagers. At first, they were enthusiastic about the idea of change, and the Maoist party was well-liked in the village. Then broken promises started feeding growing suspicion and discontent. Aware of the lack of support for his candidacy from the people of Chhiwa during the last election and hoping to increase the villagers' participation (सहभागिता, *sahabhāgī*) in political life, the chairman delegated part of the project management to the villagers. Several young people joined a "road committee" and became responsible for project monitoring. Villagers expressed their concerns about the conditions of their involvement, however – NGOs and public authorities have made a habit of requesting free collective work from the beneficiaries of development projects when such projects should promote employment opportunities instead. And unlike in the past, they also expressed their desire to influence the way work was carried out, although the engineers still had the final say.

In early 2020, bulldozers started to dig what was to become the road from Chhiwa to the Deurali ridge. The road, a symbol of present and future wealth, generated fantasies and desires as soon as work began, exemplary of a kind of "infrastructural fetishism."⁶ The work began awkwardly without anyone knowing who was doing what. Surveyors, civil servants, bulldozer drivers, and officials all came and went to and from the site. Soon, the opacity and lack of transparency (पारदर्शिता, *pāradarśitā*) that characterises this kind of project created tensions and generated rumours. Some were accused of corruption (भ्रष्टाचार, *bhṛṣṭācāra*), which is present throughout the country, though generally invoked by those who feel wronged.

Authorities could not guarantee the road's completion, and construction slowed to a halt during the Covid pandemic. At the time, conversations on Facebook provided fertile ground for investigation into inhabitants' sentiments. The ward chairman, himself very active on social media, started receiving negative comments from various residents: "Bhupal has sabotaged himself in five years! Even if Bhupal wins again, nothing will happen! What has he done for Lokhim in the last few years? The people of Lokhim must understand. Politics is service [to the people], not selfishness!"⁷

Sensing the lack of local support, Bhupal left the Maoist Party to join the UML and run

for a different position in the next election. Sun Kumar, a Tamang social worker, ended up as the new Maoist Party candidate for the Ward No. 9 Lokhim elections in December 2021. The road was not yet bringing the "development" for which the people had hoped, and the outgoing ward chairman's uneven record awakened distrust and generated slander. Six months later (in May 2022), Sun Kumar was finally elected. Some Chhiwa residents were on the electoral list, so they became his assistants and took over the construction of the road [Fig. 4].

A horizon of opportunity and the melancholy of return

Between the old story of the kitchenware merchant despot and the recent election of a Tamang candidate, we can see signs of a slow evolution in the integration of the Tamang into the representative bodies of political power, and ultimately a change in class relations. In this region, the dominant class historically has long been that of the Newar merchants. Today, the Kirat populations, and particularly the Rai, are involved in ethnic movements that actively contribute to reshaping inter-ethnic power relations. The Tamang minority, for their part, are still struggling to find their place.

While this evolution is slow-paced, the inhabitants of Chhiwa remain convinced that a road would improve their daily lives. The anthropologist Dimitri Dalakoglou writes that "the majority of people understand how infrastructures are foundational systems of reference for the entire society,"⁸ but what road construction actually helps create is often implicit and left to interpretation. In Chhiwa, social relations are part of a coherent social and symbolic system in which sharing is the rule and individualistic impulses without redistribution are frowned upon. The prospect of a motorable road reinforces the ideology of progress and generates desires, imaginaries, and fantasies about a different life far from home. Many talk about leaving the village, an individual choice that makes it possible to seize potential economic opportunities.

Almost all young people in Chhiwa want to take the road in one direction or the other: to go north, where the Sherpas have made their fortune in the Everest region as porters or guides; or to go to Kathmandu, a city that represents wealth but where life is not always easier than in the village. With no straightforward path to follow when they leave the reassuring social sphere of the village, they often conform despite themselves to a pattern of social reproduction of marginality.

The road is a symbol of departure but also of return. Men build roads to get out of the village and travel to where they can generate income. The young people of Chhiwa have taken the opportunity offered by the road to extract themselves from the village-level sphere of social relations and mutual obligations, but the social world to which this road has given them access also generates a "desire to return." For some who have been away for many years, a good road actually makes it possible to return to the village. As a young man from Chhiwa, now a resident of the Kapan district in northeast Kathmandu, told me: "As soon as the roads are good, I will return to Chhiwa [to live]." For those who have been living in Kathmandu or elsewhere for years, returning to the village when they "have money" and the road is finished is a good idea. They are nostalgic for the return to their lost country.

As historian Rudolf Mrázek points out, "infrastructure creates a sense of modernity that passes through the body and mind, the sight of a long, straight, smooth road produces a sensory and political experience."⁹ Many think of their return home as a straight and smooth one. But what kind of experience will they be bringing back with them? Once in Kathmandu, their experience of modernity is often confusing and disappointing. In Chhiwa, construction of roads takes time and money; it is a bumpy process of negotiation that needs to be continuously renewed and is not always successful. If it produces a kind of sensory, emotional, and political experience, it also often generates a sense of disillusionment and powerlessness. This experience does not give politics a revolutionary aura for the young villagers to whom I spoke, nor does it determine ideologies or political labels. In fact, through this experience, they come to realise the value of kinship ties and social relations back in the village. Distrustful of party politics, they vote for people they know well and trust.

Conclusion

By definition, the horizon is a line where the earth and sky meet at the edge of the visual field, and it is always pushed back as the viewer moves forward, never attainable. In political language, the horizon designates a desirable future to be built together. Political party leaders in Nepal often use this imagery to explain their political programs. The inhabitants, however, sensing that the politicians' promises will be difficult to keep, are now saying that they vote "more for the person (व्यक्ति, *byākti*) than for the Party." The construction of the road in Chhiwa is embedded in a local history of relations and does not modify the deep social structures that underpin Tamang relationships with the rest of Nepalese society. The political evolution and the increased power conferred on the rural municipalities were, however, crucial to the development of infrastructural projects. As anthropologist Ben Campbell argued a decade ago, "it is an old rhetoric of modernisation that thinks a rural and ethnically marginal population can be brought into modern economic ways and opportunities through simply providing infrastructural connection."¹⁰ The building of a road contributes to the construction of the political subject in several ways. In the particular social situation of road construction, a series of social phenomena and conflicts are at play which reinforce the subject's awareness of being marginalised and distant from circles of power. The social order of a village like Chhiwa, which does not attract a lot of tourists, is rarely shaken up and old class and hierarchical relationships persist.

What the poorly completed road construction project produces in this small Tamang village is a feeling of "stagnation." Generally speaking, the decentralisation of federalism and the hyper-centralisation of political parties has not promoted the advent of "tribal" (जनजाति, *janajāti*) representatives in power.¹¹ The people of Chhiwa have partly solved this problem by nominating and then electing "one of their own" to the position of ward chairman in 2022. But when that happens, what difference does it make?

This victory did not prevent more villagers from leaving for other horizons. Movement is still the best way to fight stagnation, and perhaps that is why young people, faced with so many difficulties, leave the village, abandoning local politics while at the same time reinforcing the idea of a liberating mobility.

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Notes

- 1 Chhiwa is inhabited by about 350 people, the vast majority of whom are Tamang. According to the new administrative division of Nepal in 2015, it now forms a quarter of ward no 9 Lokhim, which is part of the Thulung Dudhkoshi rural municipality, chiefly inhabited by Rai.
- 2 The Tamang population numbers around 1.639 million and is one of the largest Indigenous groups in Nepal. They are Buddhists and speak a Tibeto-Burman language. For a long time, they were confused with Tibetans by the Nepali administration. During the 19th century, they were also known as *māsīnē matavāī* (मसिने मसवारी), which means "enslaved alcohol drinkers." This term refers to a category of people in the Muluk Ain legal code and to the "impure consumption" that characterised them, like other Indigenous peoples of Nepal. See Andras Höfer, *The Caste Hierarchy and the State in Nepal: A Study of the Muluk Ain of 1854* (Lalitpur: Himal Books, 2004). Even today, the Tamang have difficulty integrating into the circles of power (occupied by the Bahun-Chhetri-Newar caste trio) and are fighting to preserve their identity and language.
- 3 Rai are one of the Indigenous groups of Nepal. They belong to the Kirant people (along with the Limbu). Kirant designates ethnic groups mainly located in the mountains of East Nepal but also numerous in Sikkim and Darjeeling. They speak a Tibeto-Burman language and follow their own religion.
- 4 The old man, Harka, refers to "Bakajal" as a territory in which Chhiwa was included before 1976. Subsequently, Chhiwa was attached to Lokhim VDC (Solu) in 1990 and Jakhri Bas to Bakajal VDC (Khotang). Today, these localities are neither in the same district nor in the same rural municipality, although their inhabitants have strong kinship links.
- 5 For example, see David Holmberg, Kathryn March, and Suryaman Tamang, "Local Production/Local Knowledge: Forced Labor from Below," *Studies in Nepali History and Society* 4, no. 1 (January 1999): 5–64. In 1963, legislation was enacted to abolish the *rakam* system in its entirety, see Mahesh C. Regmi, *Landownership in Nepal* (Delhi: Adroit Publishers, 1999), 169.
- 6 About "infrastructural fetishism" see Dimitri Dalakoglou, "The Road: An Ethnography of the Albanian-Greek Cross-Border Motorway," *American Ethnologist* 37: 132–149; and Morten A. Pedersen, *Not Quite Shamans: Spirit Worlds and Political Lives in Northern Mongolia* (London, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).
- 7 Facebook post written by Lokhim resident to the ward chairman (April 2021).
- 8 Dimitri Dalakoglou, "The Road from Capitalism to Capitalism: Infrastructures of (Post) Socialism in Albania," *Mobilities* 7, no. 4 (2012): 584.
- 9 Rudolf Mrázek, *Engineers of Happy Land: Technology and Nationalism in a Colony* (Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 8..
- 10 Ben Campbell, "Rhetorical Routes for development: A road project in Nepal," *Contemporary South Asia* 18, no. 3 (2010): 276.
- 11 As Professor Krishna Haachettu noted in his talk entitled "Federal Nepal at its Formative Phase" (Federalism Conference, EHESS, Campus Condorcet, Paris, France, 24 May 2022).



Fig. 5: Local meeting before the 2022 election. (Photo by Florent Graziade, 2021)

New Road, New Rules

Modernized Road and Certified Mobility

John Smith

Fig. 1: A dirt road in Yangden. Most dirt roads looked like this after the community's land was divided into individual family plots and fenced in the 1990s. (Photo by the author, 2018)



In the past decade, the Chinese state settled many mobile pastoralists in the Tibetan region of Amdo. Primary features of their newly sedentarized life were new forms of housing and new forms of mobility. For some pastoralists, mobility now entails driving on a newly built road that replaced a rough, bumpy dirt road. Despite the smoothness of a glimmering concrete road, the road has proven more complicated to use for drivers than the previous road because it requires something that is very difficult to access: a government-issued driver's license.

Modern road and more requirements

The Tibetan yak and sheep herding community of Yangden, where I conducted fieldwork in 2021, is located on a vast grassland surrounded by mountain ranges at about 4000 meters above sea level on the eastern Tibetan Plateau in Amdo, Qinghai Province (People's Republic of China). It is connected to the vibrant Galkar Town, located at the bottom of a valley and reachable by a 50-kilometer-long road.

"What is the point of having this shiny road if I am not allowed to drive on it?" Tsering said in frustration as we waited for the night to come so he could drive his car from Galkar to Yangden.¹ Tsering knew police were stopping every car on the road that day, asking drivers to show driver's licenses and insurance papers. Consequently, we waited until around 7:00 PM when the police left. Tsering was a 45-year-old father of three children. He was a good driver who had been driving between Galkar and Yangden without a license for decades, as documents were not previously required and transportation regulations were less restrictive. In 2007, for example, Tsering drove his family to the famous Labrang Monastery on pilgrimage without any problems. Every year between 2005 and 2008, he also often drove to Golog during the caterpillar fungus season. But that was before the tightened road regulations and requirements for driver's licenses and insurance registrations. The contemporary situation includes surveillance cameras, police checkpoints, and new driving rules. The only way Tsering and many other drivers could cope was to drive at night or at other times when surveillance was relaxed.

Before it became a concrete road, Yangden residents used this road to trade, embark on religious pilgrimages, and visit neighboring communities. Today, they depend on this road more than before to send children to schools, take ill community

members to hospitals, and buy goods in Galkar Town markets. The government rebuilt this road in 2013 as part of a campaign to bring modern development to Yangden. Local nomads are pleased that the bumpy dirt route [Fig. 1] was transformed into a concrete road that made travel much more convenient [Fig. 2]. However, driving on this road is now inconvenient due to the government-certified license requirement. Ironically, therefore, the locals' excitement about this road is paired with a lack of easy access to actually use it.

Changing regimes of mobility

Galkar Town did not exist before 1953. The track between Yangden and contemporary Galkar was a broken, narrow path leading to a key local monastery – Changchub Ling. It also linked Yangden to the residence of a local Tibetan chief and several neighboring Tibetan farming villages at the base of the mountains. When the local chief administered the Yangden community, there were vibrant interactions between the nomadic community of Yangden at the top of the mountains and the neighboring farming villages located in the warmer valley bottoms more suited for farming. The track accommodated local trade between the farming villages and nomadic Yangden. Every autumn, men in Yangden families packed yaks and horses with sheep wool, meat, butter, and cheese and took them to farming villages to trade for barley, wheat flour, rapeseed oil, fruit, wooden milk buckets, and the like.

Locals called the trail between Yangden, Changchub Ling Monastery, and the farming villages a *kang lam* (Tib. རྩེ་ལམ།), a "footpath" for walking and riding horses or yaks). The path came into being through repetitive use over generations. There were no signs along the path. The path itself disappeared in places and was again visible only in certain areas. But names of different parts of the trail were learned through experience and shared stories. Passing through rocky and forested mountain ranges and grassland, locals knew where to find the safest and most convenient areas to walk and ride. Part of the path was also a *kye lam* (Tib. རྩེ་ལམ།), which refers to wider transportation paths Tibetan nomads used when they packed belongings on yaks and horses and moved to seasonal pastures.

In 1953, Galkar County Town was established as the local government seat not far from the chief's residence. In the era of the People's Communes (1953–1983), the old footpath linking the residence to Changchub Ling Monastery and Yangden was turned into a wider road for tractors and a few trucks known as the "liberation vehicle" (Ch. *jiefangche* 解放车) used for collecting wool, cheese, butter, animal skins, and more for the commune and transporting them from one place to another. The tractors were brought to Yangden for agriculture. During the People's Commune period in the 1970s, a large part of Yangden's wide grassland was plowed for farming. I talked to Yangden elders who were part of a local team assigned to build the road between Yangden and Galkar, which involved using hand-held shovels and occasionally explosives. Lhundrub said, "I can never forget this.

Explosives were used to clear the roadway through the foot of Dram Mountain, which caused the death and injury of many frogs." Lhundrub chanted Om Mani Padme Hum, a Buddhist mantra, three times and then continued telling the story of making the road when he was about 21. "It took about three years to complete. Winter was too cold, and the earth was frozen, so we had to wait for spring to continue the work. We were afraid of digging the earth, especially where there were springs, boulders, and trees, without proper consultations with a local lama. But it was a time when we were told, 'There are no gods and no ghosts,' so we dug where we were told to do so."

In the late 1990s and 2000s, the road between Galkar Town and Yangden was used by a few locals traveling on foot and riding horses or bicycles, and a few driving tractor-trailers or motorbikes. During the late 1990s, a section of this road was known among the locals for its ghosts. This understanding was based on several tractor-trailer accidents at night. The drivers lost control and the vehicles tumbled down the narrow, zigzagging mountain road. One family lost their parents, and some others were seriously injured. Until about 2005, night driving on that road was not recommended. Rumors abounded of encountering frightening images and hearing cries while driving on the curved, steep part of the mountain road. Locals blamed ghosts as well as poor road conditions for accidents. Stories of ghosts on the road are no longer heard very often, however. No one is afraid of driving and encountering ghosts at night. Instead, they are afraid of driving in the daytime and being caught by the police for driving without proper licenses.



Fig. 2: Part of the new concrete road in Yangden. (Photo courtesy of Gur Gon, 2023)

As Yangden residents increasingly bought motorcycles in the mid-2000s, the number of pedestrians, bicycles, and horseback riders decreased. The number of tractors, which were popular in the late 1990s and early 2000s for transporting families' belongings from one pasture to another during seasonal movements, also gradually diminished after the community's land was divided into individual family plots and fenced. Around 2015, the dirt road between Galkar Town and Yangden that local Tibetans had built in the 1970s was turned into a shiny concrete road with the help of giant bulldozers, road rollers, and excavators. In 2018, a section of the road near Galkar Town became an asphalt road. Many locals were hired and paid to help build the road that became known as the *lang khor lam* (Tib. ལང་ཁོར་ལམ་, "vehicle road").

Challenges of motorized life

Road construction was also linked to establishing a nomad settlement town in Yangden for approximately 400 herding households beginning in 2015 and continuing today. The number of vehicles has increased since the establishment of the new road and the community's changing lifestyle.

New road signs and billboards in Chinese and Tibetan were displayed along the road, welcoming and celebrating this modern development project. For about two years, car ownership in Yangden increased as locals enjoyed driving on the road. Locals' lives became more dependent on vehicles, especially for settled families who no longer herded livestock. Many families who relocated to the settlement town sold their livestock and used the money to buy vehicles. Many young people became truck drivers, transporting goods and construction materials, and unofficial taxi drivers. Most local car owners drive the China-manufactured Xiali, a five-person car, or Wuling, a mini pickup truck [Fig. 3].

Each vehicle costs about ¥50,000 (\$7100 USD). According to the locals, these two types are appealing because they are more affordable and fuel-efficient than other vehicles. A popular phrase goes, "Xiali and Wuling only smell gasoline while other vehicles drink gasoline."

Driving rules and regulations enforced on the road between Yangden and Galkar Town now require that motor vehicles be certified and that their operation be properly learned from driving schools. For many herders, initial delight about road improvement turned to disappointment and concern. Document requirements have created new barriers for local drivers to legally access the road. Although the government mandates a driver's license, acquiring one is challenging. Passing the highly technical Chinese language exam (or the inadequately translated Tibetan exam) to qualify for a license is one barrier. For some, this entails living for months at certified driving boarding

schools. For many, getting a driver's license is a prohibitive personal expense that takes years. It costs from ¥3500 to ¥10,000 (\$491 to \$1400 USD), depending on an individual's driving skills, location, knowledge, and time commitment. Most Yangden residents above age 35 cannot read and write well in Chinese, making passing driving tests more challenging.

I met Tsering in Galkar Town in the summer of 2021. Tsering's two children were enrolled at the County Town boarding school, and Tsering came to visit them on the weekend. When Tsering came to town, he had to get up and drive at 4:00 AM, when few were awake, to avoid the police because he was driving illegally without a driver's license. When we drove his Xiali car back to Yangden that night, Tsering told me he had been attending a driving school in Galkar whenever he had time. Two years had passed and he still had not received his driver's license. Although Tsering is an

experienced driver and had been driving safely for decades, he had to relearn how to drive according to the standardized and prescribed driving rules.

For Tsering, like many others in Yangden, the most challenging barrier is passing the written test. He reads some Tibetan but knows no Chinese characters. He is unsure if he will ever be issued a license. Many locals never successfully pass their license requirements despite trying for years due to their lack of reading ability in Chinese or Tibetan. Tsering had heard of a few people his age who eventually received their licenses and was determined to continue trying.

A modern, shiny road seems promising to ensure safer and more accessible mobility. Tsering and many other drivers wanted it; however, its arrival has also brought new demands, such as learning legalized driving skills and acquiring licenses, which have decreased access to legal mobility. This raises larger questions of mobility on the Tibetan Plateau and in other areas. As more people are sedentarized through urbanization, mobility is increasingly dependent on motorized forms of transportation legalized through licensing. These transformations raise questions about the accessibility of roads and what might be done so that locals have worry-free access to motorized mobility.

John Smith (a pseudonym) works in the field of anthropology, focusing on state intervention, mobility, and nomadic agency.

Notes

- Names of the people and specific places in this article are pseudonyms for confidentiality. Tibetan scripts are provided for some important local Tibetan terms. Non-English terms are Tibetan ("Tib.") unless indicated as Chinese ("Ch.") and provided in Pinyin.



Fig. 3: A Wuling pickup truck in Yangden (Photo courtesy Gur Gon, 2023).