

**]pt[Shifting relations between state, capital, and place**

**]RUNNING HEADS:**

**]VERSO: BEN CAMPBELL**

**]RECTO: MORAL ECOLOGIES OF SUBSISTENCE AND LABOUR[**

**]t1[9 Moral ecologies of subsistence and labour in a migration-affected community of Nepal**

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]abs[Labour migration from subsistence households in Tamang-speaking communities of Northern Nepal heralds their transition from an agrarian to a remittance economy. This migration entails the abandonment of subsistence labour processes that once wove households together in reciprocal mutuality. Migration thus dislocates persons from moral economic institutions and norms, and reciprocity is replaced by cash-calculative decisions about food systems. However, migration is a broader sociocultural response to historical precarities and struggle over de-territorializing effects of state development. Moving beyond standard ‘peasant economy’ forms of analysis, and domestic autarky in particular, this essay explores neglected areas of the comparative anthropology of subsistence labour, and situates the ethnography of work and power relations in indigenous and other critiques of development nationalism in Nepal. Redirecting labour abroad creates tensions in domestic reproduction. These surface in intra-clan gift exchange, in managing agro-pastoral viability, and in the ritual maintenance of order among humans and nonhumans that invokes ancestral migrations for dealing with dilemmas about contemporary dispersals.

Decades of globalization have changed moral economies of subsistence agriculture in once-remote locations. The reorientation of local-and-national frameworks of production to global markets sucks out labour power and commodities from previously peripheral societies and territories. Labour markets in emerging economies in the Gulf States and Malaysia have dislocated old production logics and dynamics of rural social differentiation in far-flung transnational hinterlands. This destabilizes the institutional ground for quasi-autonomous, culturally distinctive livelihood systems in communities that historically reproduced themselves at a distance from national regimes by working through tributary and co-operative labour processes. This is a much-overlooked theme of economic anthropology, which is distracted by notions of the primacy of kinship and domestic autarky. People's new contexts of life and work bring a problematic dependence on the cash nexus. The newly distributed domestic networks struggle to maintain relational threads of extended moral obligation.

This longitudinal study traces steps in the move to work abroad that concern the problematic inclusion of marginal ethnic groups in Nepal's project of national modernization. Incentives to intensify production and become market actors were constrained by the many ways in which caste and ethnic status mediated market access. Tamang cultural difference (language, kinship, Buddhist religion) was tolerated by a hierarchization in which archaic economic exchanges operated through creative misrecognition of status, and coercion, rather than via a Polanyian embedding of roles and complementarities. Tributary labour was marked by uneasy and provisional moral economic inflections, periodically erupting into violence. Not properly belonging to Nepalese society and economy, nor among the favoured ethnicities recruited by British colonial powers into Gurkha regiments, Tamang economic practice was often a brokering

of regimes of value, which literally involved doing the heavy lifting of others' property. Asian neoliberal capitalism now gives these people minimal rights as migrant labour, playing off pre-modern structures of socioeconomic inequality to realize value from workers whose national economies fail their households and communities.

### **]ha['Chasing hunger uphill and downhill'**

]p[During my first fieldwork (1989-91), agro-pastoral subsistence livelihoods in Tamang-speaking communities of Nepal's Rasuwa district consisted of periods of intensive cultivation of a number of staple crops, and managing domestic herds of livestock to supplement the diet with meat and milk and fertilize fields with manure. Most households owned fields in a vertical scattering across the mountainside, offering possibilities for growing various crops at different altitudes. The growing season around the villages (between 1,700 and 2,100 metres above sea level) began with maize and potatoes sown by early March. Seedbeds for finger millet were prepared in April. Over-wintered wheat and some barley was harvested in late April and May. Then the monsoon rains came in June.

]p1[The most labour-intensive times of year were transplanting and weeding finger millet to grow through the monsoon and be harvested in November. Finger millet makes good beer and distilled alcohol. Its flour is cooked into a thick porridge eaten with a sauce, which is far more sustaining for a worker than a meal of rice. In 1990 and 1991 I followed the work groups starting with the transplanting of *blu chida* ('small grain') finger millet on the higher slopes with the first rains, descending to lower fields and the transplanting of varieties such as *tar sanga* ('white finger millet'). Inter-planting of finger millet into growing stands of maize was feasible on terraces below approx 1,700 metres. The first cobs of maize would be brought into the houses by

early July. Then came two rounds of weeding. By this time of the season, plates of newly dug, boiled potatoes would greet workers at the end of the day.

1[Most of the work just described was not performed by households on their own, but in different forms of mutual assistance (Campbell 1994). The interactive component of subsistence practice among groups of households made the daily labouring less of a chore. Songs, jokes, cigarettes, and snacks would be shared. As one woman told me back then, ‘You cannot survive alone. There is too much work on your own’. The ways to avoid being on your own were organized by clearly understood forms of reciprocity. The most common form of co-operation was the balanced-reciprocal exchange labour group (*nangba*).<sup>1</sup> This functioned on the egalitarian principle of every participating household sending one person (male or female between the age of 12 and 70) to work for a pre-set full day (starting about 8 a.m.) or half day (starting about 11 a.m.) continuing till about 4 p.m. While those joining the groups were all kin to each other, it was not due to the moral commitments of kin relatedness that they participated. The *nangba* was an organization founded not on kin ties but on arranging horizontal commitments among a set of similar land-owning households for a fixed, short-term period (cf. Bloch 1973; Erasmus 1956; M. Moore 1975; Sallnow 1989). Voluntary association of equal turn-taking in a limited time schedule was the underlying principle of labour co-operation, not the enduring kinship hierarchies of age, gender, and affinal deference.<sup>2</sup> However, while keeping to the reciprocity-sustaining principles of equality in labour processes, an important variation happened in relation to inequalities of labour and landholdings among these participating households.

1[If a household did not have as much land as other *nangba* group participants, and its own task of transplanting or weeding was already completed, it could convert labour days owed into cash. This household would call in the credit days from having worked rotationally at the

other households' fields and take the group's labour for their own turn to another household willing to pay the day labour rate. Back in 1990, the rate was 15 rupees per person-day. This was the same price as a heaped measuring container of potatoes (roughly a gallon), which some people preferred to cash. People sought to bridge the opportunities of reciprocity, barter, and cash according to need and convertibility. By households organizing in mutual association, there was no grand opposition between kinship and cash.

Subsistence labour in reciprocal exchange groups made 'the domestic' an arena for inventiveness and negotiation. This happened over the relations between different households, in the manipulation of boundaries between them, and in strategies for claiming alliances across them.<sup>3</sup> Movements through and across domestic hearths were vital tactics for realizing productive work and the sourcing of food, land, livestock, and labour. Especially at the most labour-intensive moments of the agricultural year, kin ties did not provide a clear-cut programme of work. It was organized reciprocities of balanced exchange that gave equitable form to the subsistence task-scape. An alternative institutional pattern to kinship and clan framed the organization of labour, and accomplished the critical phases of transplanting finger millet and weeding maize on an equitable basis of symmetrical households not determined by kinship obligations.

Kinship was thus not a commanding institutional mechanism for regulating expectations in the daily flow of mountain farming. However, kinship with its asymmetrical gender and age criteria did provide for long-term transfer of land. Labour from 'wife-taking' in-laws could be called on, but it was the alternative ethics and symmetrical sociability of short-term co-operation that gave impetus to each growing season (Campbell 1994). To say that production and consumption are simply 'left to kinship ties' (Hann & Hart 2009: 2) does not stand up to

scrutiny when looking at the array of strategies in Tamang agro-pastoral production. Kinship's time depth and relational expansiveness provide very different frames of reference and moral inflections from those relevant to fulfilling immediate claims for domestic provisioning, or for calling on help with standing crops in the fields in need of harvesting and lugging up hill.

]p1[The creative overlaps between kin and house provide alternative institutional groundings that are rhetorically manipulated. Lineage 'sons' from poorer households would get invited to take up residence and look after a richer household's herd. They would be spoken to as 'son' by 'father' without metaphorization, as shared agnatic bone makes a classificatory body of kin, and father's brothers are all 'father'. Such arrangements for squaring immediate needs and opportunities across different households' subsistence profiles can be made to coincide in the short term with enduring bonds of kinship among 'our own people'. This does not mean, however, that kinship presents a subsistence imperative, or a constitution for regulating labour processes between property-owning domestic units. Neither extensive kinship nor the delimited material interests of domestic resourcefulness can provide sufficiency. People need to switch creatively across these modalities.<sup>4</sup> Most domestic subsistence labour was enacted not in autarkic isolation, as Sahlins' (1972) domestic mode of production would have us think, but in contexts of collaboration with members of other households.

]p1[Household subsistence was backed up by access to forest produce to overcome villagers' domestic insufficiencies (most households only produced enough food for six months) – until the creation of the Langtang National Park in 1976. The park banned all trade in forest products, along with hunting and swidden farming, and imposed a system of licensing for cutting timber. My first fieldwork was fifteen years after the creation of the national park. I asked older villagers if there was not previously some regulation on bartering bamboo or taking planks of

wood to market. They replied that the headman (*mukhiya*) had charge of the local territory, including the forest and its pastures, and when people needed to barter or sell produce from the forest to meet a domestic shortfall ‘the headman said nothing’. Conversations on the subject would discuss demands on villagers’ labour by the headman to perform services for the state and for cultivating his own fields. If a household resorted to selling planks of wood in Kathmandu at the end of a week’s walk across the mountains, it was made clear to me that this constituted an entitlement of moral economy counterbalanced by the demands put on villagers by the headman. There was thus a mix of redistributive and citizenship rights in this villager-headman relationship. The headman played a secular role in a moral ecology of justice and responsibility, alongside ritual specialists showing respect for territorial fertility gods, who were attributed with local sovereign powers.

jp1[The park’s regulation of access to forest produce and pastures increased households’ need for cash from other sources, and reduced their ability to barter independently to feed hungry mouths at home. There was a shift from occasional petty commodity transactions of forest products as foods, medicines, craft and construction materials, and animal parts to a licensed commodification imposed by national park bureaucracy. Regulation of forest access still rankles. The imposition of park regulation coincided with out-migration of several villagers for work in India as road labourers and miners in the 1970s. These India-bound migrants were not so dissimilar from seasonal labour gang migrants, who would return after two or three months.<sup>5</sup>

**lha[Revaluing subsistence in the light of migrant labour**



lp[The houses of migrant labourers now have linoleum floors, steel-reinforced concrete pillars in their walls, and DVD players in the treasured displays of domestic furniture. The parents and daughters-in-law struggle to grow what food they can. Several family herds of cattle and flocks of sheep have been replaced with pigs, which are less time-consuming. New kinds of low-labour high-value crops now appear in fields, such as the medicinal herb chiraito (*Swertia chirayita*). Most significantly, much less finger millet is being grown. The role of cash has increased for buying in work groups, as people don't have the dependable numbers of household personnel to commit one person day after day for reciprocal labour. The logic of food-growing activity on family fields has become selectively financialized. A woman told me when she did the cash accounting for a typical area for growing finger millet, it costs 3,000 rupees (spent on ploughing and preparing seed beds and fields, transplanting, weeding, harvesting, and carrying). The cash value of the end-product was hardly 1,000 rupees, competing against shop-bought finger millet. In place of finger millet in the less productive upper elevations, many people are growing potatoes and fodder mixes, including some wheat. Raising factory-farm chicks with proprietary feed and electric light bulbs has become common during warmer months. Others have invested in trout farms.

lp1[Meanwhile, when the migrants do return, they expect to socialize, and plan further trips abroad. They do not rejoin the domestic food-growing labour force. They are an agriculturally non-productive class, creating an emerging dislocation (Melhuus this volume) between themselves and their siblings and parents. They leave wives behind with babies they may not see for two years or more. The disembedding of labour from subsistence value regimes entails a financialization of livelihoods, but the cold rationality for labour migration also poses excessive risks to personal and collective interests.<sup>6</sup>

lp1[The levels of debt people get into to fund the overseas travel include *say ko panch* (5 per cent interest *per month*). This results in cash servitude in enclaves of unfreedom, threat, and violence (see, e.g., Kesang Tseten's film *In search of the riyal*). It is not a global marketplace of free exchange. There is no simple economic rationale for poor people's out-migration from rural Nepal: conflict, climate change, economic failures of the state, consequences of state assault on customary subsistence patterns (e.g. national park regulations), and prospects for modern consumer lifestyles all enhance the allure of Kathmandu airport's departure lounge. The massive uncertainties and indebtedness produced by out-migration searching for livelihoods elsewhere are being dealt with by inventive, handmade making-do at the village level.

lp1[It is notable that as it is mostly men who are migrants, women are increasingly left with proxy roles in keeping up their husbands' public reputation as dutiful kinsmen and household heads. Clan gender identities are performed in life-cycle rituals. A marriage was traditionally marked by dowry gifts of livestock. Seasonal exchanges of wool passed from clansmen to clanswomen, who gave home-brewed alcohol in return. Supportive relations between same-clan women and men (*busing* and *phamyung*) are morally and ritually contrasted to the erotically charged relations between different clans. Migration now presents occasions of moral economy hiatus in the proper conduct of these spheres of clan-based gender exchange. People are never just householders, and their fuller relational lives are dramatized in moments of public performance, which require negotiation of appropriate roles and duties. The visibility of status and relationships becomes problematic when migrants who are central to a household's well-being, and relational embedding are missing from symbolically marked exchanges (Barber &

Lem 2008). A husband's absence often leaves a woman having to beg for money on her husband's behalf to maintain his reputation in the eyes of his clan sisters.

]p1[From this ethnographic perspective, the story of the domestic is not a focus on the smallest unit of a society that encounters complexity at higher orders of integration, or that presents a singularity of moral values and relationship radically opposed to cash calculation. The domestic is already given life and dynamism via relational complexity (Donham 1981). Ethnographic attention to the switching between household and kinship frames unsettles analytical assumptions about fixed institutional patterns for livelihood activities, and reveals complex levels of moral economy at work.

]p1[Thinking about changes in domestic life-ways affected by people migrating out of subsistence, how would the artistry of householding differ, or the activities that make foods visible, and visibly effective, as objects of giving and receiving? There is still a strong sense of resilient autonomous production in cycles of ecological practice adjusted to new circumstances. Anxieties over the absence of household members are not simply allayed by the remittance economy because in many cases the cashflow is not reliable, and does not satisfy immediate needs. Some people adapt old subsistence knowledge and habits to make do and fill the gaps (such as boiling nettles to feed pigs). Others adopt more commercialized versions of the agro-pastoral economy, and keep yak-cow hybrids to supply yak cheese factories.

]p1[Householding is to hand-craft a world (terraced fields, pastures, and forest) where accommodation to place involves engagement with domestic animals, wild creatures, different clans, territorial deities, and temperamental spirits. Achieving personhood in the domestic orbit consists in rounds of hard work, shared meals, gifted foodstuffs, and encounters with human and nonhuman visitors.

From the moral economy angle, there are new anxieties that accompany the migratory flows of people and things and their effect on ethical subjectivities. The anxieties are not simply to do with the social ravages of the global economy. There were ten years of insurgency and conflict in Nepal, followed by years of civil instability. The younger Tamang generations have been damaged and traumatized, making compliance with old forms of public ritual difficult. They question the vernacular subject positions for evaluating what can be fulsome or abundant, what is regarded as depleted and scrawny, or what is capable of being suitably restored or healed. Signs of personal and relational well-being are realigning to new desires and subjectivities. The following three ethnographic vignettes explore these impacts of migration on the domestic moral economy in more detail.

### **Phoning home**

The first vignette describes a telephone conversation recorded when filming in 2007.<sup>7</sup> A young wife deploys rhetorical skills to get her husband to realize that while he is away in Malaysia, and has not been sending money regularly, she has to look after his clan relatives. The responsibility falls on her to entertain his clan sisters at the festival of Tihar, presenting them gifts of money on his behalf. The husband responds over the phone that she should ask his father and uncles for money to tide her over this period, and insists he has sent money that she should have received. She vigorously dismisses his responses as lies, and condemns his suggestion of approaching his uncles as pathetic, belonging to a by-gone era of ancestral wealth and lineage solidarity. In this classificatory rationale, one agnate stands for another in public ritual and livelihood support. She screams down the phone, ‘What good will it do asking your dead grandfathers for money at Tihar? In what country has your arsehole money got lost?’

]p1[An appropriate performance of kinship obligations at Tihar should involve being able to receive visits from the clan sisters and daughters, who bring offerings of home-cooked doughnuts and home-distilled *raksi*. How the clan women present and lay out their special food and drink for the clan men is closely observed. The quality and quantity of the display is assessed to calculate how much money should be given to them. For this young family, the priority is to maintain its reputation in public displays of domestic obligation, despite the husband's absence. The reality is that the woman's natal family is wealthier than her husband's or any of his clansmen. However, she cannot ask her father to support her husband in this ritual context, which focuses on morally bounded circuits of intra-clan prestations. The wife cannot get a loan from her own father to help with her husband's obligations to his own clanswomen. This would put into question the entire support logic of gift exchange in the solidarities among men and women of the same clan. The telephone conversation was conducted on the one village landline (prior to mobile ownership), with a considerable audience listening in. The wife ends by rebuking her husband for unbelievable stories of remittances gone astray, and implores him not to spin yarns about sending money if he cannot actually send any.

### **]ha[Dairying dilemmas**

]p[The next example takes us to a sector of the pastoral economy that provided good cash-generating livelihoods for people with big enough families to dedicate a specialist herding camp to breeding yak-cow hybrids, or to milking them to supply seasonal cheese-making units. Five contiguous village areas had cheese-making units of this kind. I made acquaintance in 2011 with a herding woman in her late sixties by her camp fireside, while numerous chickens ran about the herd shelter. She began talking about the economic dilemmas she and her husband faced, and she

expressed worry about the long-term viability of their herd enterprise. The woman said she didn't know what to do. Should she buy more milking animals or sell up? Her concerns were in part due to the absence of her children and their labour. One son had died in a factory accident in Malaysia, another son was in Kathmandu, and a daughter was in Malaysia. The woman's train of thought was diverted by interruptions to her preparations of food around the fire-pit.

Conversations in herding camps are often interrupted by animals, and in the course of shooing the chickens away from the raised sitting area by the fire, the woman expressed annoyance at her chickens acquiring social airs and graces. They had grown to prefer rice instead of maize, just as spoilt children beg for rice. In the era of migration, this rejection of dependable, old strength-giving foods, in contrast to which boiled rice is a delicacy, is a very common complaint by the older generation. 'These times are topsy-turvy', the woman said. The fabric of values organizing everyday life, investing time and work in the care of animals, and appreciation for subsistence staples was visibly unravelling.

jp1[Interactions between humans and animals, plants and processes of material transformation, brings into view distinct ways of being human. Migration renders uncertain the roles and expectations of shared activity for the production of everyday life. Habits of a lifetime are disembedded from their obviousness in the way of things. The old woman herder faces selling up in the light of her children having died abroad or not wanting to follow a life so tied to caring for the needs of thirty cattle. The dilemmas she faces look terminal for her domestic dairy enterprise, which is unlikely to be passed on to another generation. The disturbance to normal sequences of expectation for family roles in this way of life can understandably get projected onto the precocious dietary tastes of the hens pecking on the floor, as if they too aspire to a better life of eating rice rather than home-grown staples.

### **]ha[Hereditary housework**

]p[The third ethnographic vignette leads into the terrain of domestic intimacy that the Tamang-speaking communities make visible through ‘winnowing tray’ rituals conducted by village priests (*lhaben*). They call into play the common world of humans, animals, spirit beings, and foods across thresholds of domestic fortune. Witnessing one of these rituals in a house with migrant absentees made me reflect how the ritual’s intimations of pathways and relationships did not simply index a traditional world losing relevance, but also provided linkages to migratory genealogies from the past to inform the present.

]p1[One morning in 2011, a village priest was invited to perform a minor domestic ritual of purification. He took up a position in the centre of the room facing the door, putting tiny piles of fermented grain, uncooked rice, a boiled egg, a piece of iron, a tobacco leaf, and a chilli pepper into the winnowing tray. In this house, two young women were raising children while their husbands were abroad. They did not pay much attention to the priest mumbling over his tray. The morning’s slow pace continued. The priest addresses the pragmatic cosmic vulnerabilities of households, and attends to fears about unwanted spirit beings that will cause disharmony, sickness, and niggardly bad words in houses. He takes onto himself the risk-laden dimension of dealing with malevolent forces. These presences will also crave and spoil the quality, the storage, and proper fermentation processes that the foods of the fields and animals furnish for human domestic residents.

]p1[As the priest organizes and recognizes the various substances on the winnowing tray through chanting, he invokes a world order that locates people in a precarious condition of

needing continual replenishment, and protection from accident and harm. He reminds humans, gods, and spirits where they are in relation to the directions north, south, east, west, and centre to negotiate a *modus vivendi* with the benign presences of the local landscape, and literally to show the door to nefarious nonhumans with unwelcome cravings and desires. These provoke irritations and squabbles among people of the house. The priest works back in time to the ancestral migrations of the Tamang and Ghale clans from Tibet who took up residence in their current homes. Primordial Buddhist Rinpoches are invoked to convey blessings for household fortune in crops, livestock, and monetary valuables. Two spirit sisters accompanied the ancestral migrations, and on different sides of the valley have to be given either eggs or chickens to appease their hunger for human foods. These spirits are lured by chanting over the tempting array of domestic materials in the winnowing tray: grains, eggs, butter, beer, incense, and a lump of iron. The priest rhythmically dips a ladle into a bowl of rice beer. Eventually he stands, takes the tray through the door, and expels the unwanted spirits, shouting and turning the winnowing tray over, much to the excitement of nearby chickens that come running to this sudden feast.

]p1[The priest himself had children and grandchildren working abroad, and in these days was sporting an elegant jacket over his traditional Nepalese man's clothing. I knew him well fifteen years previously, when he had fallen onto hard times through debt, and had taken off with his old parents to find work in another district, cursing his village as backward and undeveloped. Here he was restored to his hereditary priestly role, with a new sense of duty in modern times to keep malign influences away from human affairs. His own home is newly constructed and has linoleum on the floor, presenting a picture of domestic achievement that he was never able to aspire to before his children went off to labour in Malaysia. In this case the migratory experience has converged with forms of domestic cosmology, in which disturbance, awkward tensions, and



problematic materialities of livelihood are explicitly dealt with. Indeed the ancestral migratory mythology lays down something of a template for contemporary excursions, and makes explicit each household's routedness in movement up and down the mountainside in the cycle of agro-pastoral renewal, and between the towns of Nepal and Tibet for trade. Through chanting place names and pathways, the priest enunciates a sentient ecology of connection by imaginatively moving and recognizing distinct landscapes in passing. He makes visible in the winnowing tray the ingredients of raw, cooked, and fermented life-bringing foods. He focuses attention on domestic space and time and asks, 'Who is missing? Who needs to be remembered?' while attracting the greedy, harming, lurking spirits of malice to guzzle the contents of the tray outside, beyond the domestic threshold.

### **]ha[Homesteads under threat**

]p[These three vignettes concur with other research on Tamang communities on the new discrepancies between handcrafted and monied worlds (Steinmann 2016), and the new antinomies of gender and person (March in press). My first two examples portray women who find themselves in positions of not knowing what is the right thing to do, and feeling unable to act properly.<sup>8</sup> Migration impacts both the institutional landscapes of extended kinship ties and the composition of domestic residence and sustenance practices. It creates disjointed expectations and tensions in making the social and economic ends of domestic livelihood meet up. If conditions for gender and generational complementarity have been shaken up, however, certain elements of the cosmic embedding of domestic realities speak across generations, as shown in the third vignette.

jp1[When migrants return from periods abroad, they are scrutinized not only for signs of wealth brought back, but also for evidence of the toll taken by estrangement. Village women, and especially the clan sisters, will declare whether the returnees are physically plump (*tsojim*) or thin (*chipjim*). It is not just bodily condition that marks a difference from the migrant's previous persona. The crisis facing middle-aged householders is of their migrant children's self-description as global proletarians, having no interest in helping out with tasks of agro-pastoral economy when back home. A class has been formed, some of them aided by literacy, with no intention to respect outmoded norms of work that now appear as self-exploitation. Not just the work itself, but the very foods of subsistence, such as maize and finger millet, are being rejected for purchased rice.

### **]ha[Hierarchies of dislocation**

jp[Thinking how to explore labour dilemmas facing the community I once knew as busy with subsistence work teams, Narotzky (this volume; 2015) provides some useful pointers in her approach to moral economy, and recommends anthropologists bring into view lived dilemmas, perturbations, and conflicts as capitalism remakes personal and public interests. Tamang villagers suffer shortfalls both in subsistence output and in capacities to conduct inter-domestic exchange. Squeezed by the effects of state environmental protection, subsistence anxieties are heightened for those left supporting migrant workers' households. The migrants are institutionally problematic, proxy persons as they leave social responsibilities and relationships in the hands of others, to make do and rethink the possibilities for subsistence and social reproduction. There is turmoil in the order of roles and activities for people of different clans, genders, and generations. Public and reciprocal dimensions of domestic moral economy have been challenged and

transformed by the role of cash-calculative decisions over food systems and the relationships that sustain them. These are tied to the presences and absences of people in new accommodations of value. In the lived worlds of the Tamang, this is not a purely human affair, and calls attention to the animals and spirits that move in, and need removing from, the domestic orbit. For this reason and the link of iconic foods with collective fates, I contest Graeber's (2009) term 'human economy'. While understandable as a counter to the impersonal market, it is too anthropocentric for attending to how people's livelihoods are networked through conviviality with nonhumans, and are imbricated in local and global political ecologies.

]p1[Perspectives from Tamang homelands cut through the idea of economic processes embedded in stable institutional regimes of value. Livelihood practices are indeed embedded in ethical concerns and reciprocities as proper transactions in meeting everyday needs of household residents, but these are frequently in conflict and people are mindful of misuse.<sup>9</sup> The principles for the conduct of conduct are not the same for everyone, especially in the intermixtures of Himalayan frontier society. A grand instability of moral regimes concerning the status of 'human economy' results from paradoxical elements of the caste system, contested state control of forests, and the ideological essentialization of patrilineality.

]p1[The commercial adaptation of the yak-cow pastoral economy to supply cheese factory units provided a version of development for the mountain economy from the 1970s. It enabled production based on new technical processes, and a degree of wealth and aspiration for communities to imagine themselves living well. This source of wealth accumulation was put in jeopardy with the creation of the Langtang National Park and the challenge conservation presented to livelihood development, restricting movements of livestock and produce in the park area. New conservation priorities for protecting musk deer, red pandas, and the high forests

confronted market logics and state support for national economic development. Moreover, there is ethnic differentiation in the dairying moral economy. This region produces the largest quantity of yak cheese in Nepal, and behind this specialization lies the fact that unlike other ethnicities, Tamang clanspeople will eat the meat of stillborn calves and cattle that die of disease or fall down landslides. Status discrimination and economic advantage converge as the Tamang will put cow meat into the pot which is taboo to other clans and castes. Hindu high castes hierarchize this dietary practice, but the Tamang have more food available as a result. Some herders allegedly kill male calves by feeding them salt to increase available milk. Moral guilt over this illegal and sinful practice causes herders to donate conspicuously at pilgrimage sites of the mountain god.

Questions about the status of ‘the human’ in this scenario raise broader issues of comparative ontologies of human and nonhuman interaction. In Descola’s (1996; 2013) terms, the cosmology of ‘naturalism’ presents utterly different terms of engagement for humans to protect nature in national parks than the animistic perspectives of Himalayan yak herders, who maintain intimate relations with territorial spirits of the mountains to protect their families and livestock. Caste also essentializes different orders of humanity in endogamous groups analogous to species, marked by unequal dietary taboos. These discrepancies of human status and subject positions on nonhuman ethics and moral ecology defy institutional resolution. In this mountain crossroads of religion and ontologies, an economic niche has made keeping yak-cow hybrids more substantially nourishing and advantageous to the beef-eating Tamang clans than to others. Tamang villagers centre their worlds and livelihood practice in knowing contradistinction to other ways of doing things, with different outcomes for the kinds of persons and bodies that are thereby produced for labour of various sorts.

jp1[New adaptations of subsistence resourcefulness, such as keeping pigs and fattening them by boiling cauldrons of nettles, maintain the appearance of households coping while their sons go abroad in search of value in the status of migrant labourer. In the countries where they go, their lack of rights and freedom of action within the market make their lives as migrants massively dependent on social support networks sustained by phoning home and watching DVDs in their native languages. Migrants' accounts of working in the Gulf express wonder and appalling stories (such as the annual death toll in Qatar of some 600 Nepalis). But there is hope in the oral contact maintained through mobile phones that contrasts with earlier migration. There has also been a political imaginary of hope for a Tamang homeland in an anticipated federal constitution for Nepal, enhanced by cultural products of songs and DVDs in Tamang and other indigenous languages, recovering a sense of going somewhere in a collective project of transformation, rather than be stuck in place.

## **]ha[Conclusion**

jp[Capital penetration into Tamang regimes of domestic value is a story of a labour force created at the expense of subsistence viability. Roads and national parks undermined subsistence economies that had been partially integrated into national production logics through labour service and employment. Agrarian productivist logics were displaced by a re-territorialization of rural areas into conservation zones spurred on by environmental crisis narratives. Rights to forest provisioning were denied to communities who then went in search of labour markets. Subsequently the civil war of 1996-2006, and growing accessibility to Southeast Asia and the Gulf, put in train a genuine outpouring, challenging the viability of domestic subsistence practices and food-growing regimes.

]p1[Whether this loss of labour from village subsistence and the increased cash calculus lead to households becoming more insular, more acquisitive, and less interested in wider kin or solidarities is not so easy to say. Anthropological studies of work in ‘the domestic domain’ have tended to search too readily for dichotomous transitions (Spittler 2009) between kinship reciprocities and the market. The long-term research behind this essay has revealed ‘the domestic’ to be a far more malleable and interestingly worked set of social forms than the concretization of a primary household ‘unit’ suggests in the canonical literature (Gudeman & Rivera 1990; Hann 2009:270; Sahlins 1974). Looking at subsistence practice a generation ago revealed a non-dichotomous working of moral economy oscillating between autonomy and co-operation in different institutional and strategic contexts. The operations of subsistence livelihood were far from determined by kin ties. An often-overlooked seam of anthropological literature on informal practices of labour co-operation recognizes variety in ways people get things done under different categories of reciprocity (Bloch 1973; Donham 1981; Harvey, this volume). The Tamang – with reciprocal reflexivity – evaluate expectations of benefit against the social offence that might be caused in not attending particular reciprocal work parties, or requests from NGOs to contribute labour for supposed community benefit.

]p1[This reciprocal problematic informed Tamang perceptions of their historical relations to state power and the forms of coercive labour demanded of them. Repetitive seasonal labour tasks of portering and pathbuilding were performed as service tax for rights to residence and landholding. Seasonal trans-Himalayan trade offered some labour opportunities for cash income, later enabling the trekking industry to grow from the 1960s with a subsistence-fed labour force. The tributary moral economy meant that village headmen who organized and personally benefitted from corvée labour turned a blind eye when households ran out of food and resorted to

barter or sale of forest products.<sup>10</sup> This agro-ecological moral economy requiring silences and misrecognition<sup>11</sup> broke down when state environmentalism targeted the inappropriately productive mountain peasant as a scourge of the environment.

lp1[If social forms of household and community are in danger of reification, so are notions of instituted moral orders setting the room for manoeuvre in scenarios of practice. Hierarchies project ordered complementarities of difference and conceal dissonant interpretation. In the three ethnographic vignettes discussed in this essay, the transition from peasant producers to migrant labourers has been explored by listening to people's articulations of the social gaps this transformation has created. For those left at home, people's conflicted reflections about maintaining relational worlds with absent kin (and the absence of their promised money) make it uncertain 'what to do?' Reputations of patrilineal provisioning require symbolic gifts of money by clansmen whose absence as migrants actually makes it more difficult to satisfy the traditional role that money played in rituals that once anchored livelihoods in gendered complementarity. The second vignette visited dilemmas faced by ageing herders, who see local cash incentives that worked for their generation now failing to keep their children interested in the herding enterprise. If the old patterns of kinship ritual, and property devolution, are facing novel threats, the third example was selected for its less pessimistic storyline. A ritual specialist of chthonic deities finds a dignity he never previously had thanks to his children's remittances from abroad. He cares for the therapeutic needs of families with absent menfolk by domestic convocation of beneficial spirits and expulsion of malign influences. He dispels the anxieties of migrants' dependants in chants of ancestral trails leading through the cosmos, and remakes order and regulation of the homestead, removing bad spirits attracted to the human hearth.

lp1[What kinds of persons will these new labourers become? Is the pathway of migrant labour more about masculinity and a rite of passage in modern personhood than about calculating returns from different employment options? These questions need to be approached ethnographically and with the active scepticism of these communities, who have conceded the fight for subsistence productivism in favour of a global reorientation. In doing so, they confront dislocation. Struggling to sustain meanings of money as gift, human-livestock viability, and the hearth as ritual microcosm, they deploy indigenous resources for reimagining plausible worlds of home and abroad.

lp1[South Asian migrants are not lone figures transacting in the labour market, but are relational actors. They carry relatives' and financiers' interests, which amplifies the exploitative characteristics of employment that does not match the contracts that lure them. Becoming migrant labourers with minimal workers' rights and no formal identity other than as a unit of labour leads to multiple senses of dislocation among these persons, and back among their families. This provides a strong example of the contemporary global economy taking on an 'uninstituted' character, as Gregory (2009) proposes. In the affective circumstances of such dislocation, ethnic belonging and religious affiliation take root. For those who return to Nepal, they find a homeland nation that struggles not to be labelled a failed state. The earthquakes of 2015 destroyed the material fabric of rural life for half a million people around its Tamang epicentre. The national economy in 2016 was officially listed as dependent for over 30 per cent of GDP on foreign remittances – the highest in Asia (ADB 2016). People are at a loss regarding what to do as the prospects for reshaping rural-urban asymmetries and giving prospects of devolved government through a federal constitution were substantially blocked in 2016.



Capital has nonetheless been channelled into infrastructure projects such as roads and hydropower in select locations, giving opportunities for returnee migrants with relevant skills, such as truck-driving. However, people who were raised in conditions of labour-intense subsistence farming and then went abroad struggle to find work in their natal country using the skills they acquired as migrant labourers. The potential transition from subsistence agriculture to cash economy is deferred, much to the benefit of the economies employing temporary migrant labour. The collection *Global Nepalis* (Gellner & Hausner in press) clearly shows that Nepal has exported its poverty as labour since its encounter with the British Empire. The dislocated and uninstituted character of contemporary labour regimes abandons migrant labourers to non-productive roles back in their home communities, thwarting the desired transition from subsistence to more capitalized forms of local livelihood. In this failed transition to post-peasant modernity, within a poorly performing national economy, and with a state that has not served its indigenous citizens' aspirations to federalism, global capital parasitically exploits a reserve of labour power (Narotzky, this volume) that is reproduced by people's resourcefulness to reinvent subsistence in pathways of migratory livelihood .

## NOTES

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have been indispensable for the broader contexts to the development of my understanding of socioeconomic and environmental change in Nepal. The Tamang and Ghale clanspeople of Dhunche and Bharku Village Development Committees in Rasuwa district especially need thanking for never forgetting the *meme kyekpa* (old grandfather) who keeps returning like an improvident labour migrant for new ethnographic sustenance.

<sup>1</sup> *Parma* in Nepali.

<sup>2</sup> If for some reason a household experienced a crisis and could not commit a member for a whole task cycle to a *nangba* group, an alternative was to call a *gohar*. This involved providing a full meal on the day with rice, local beer, and regular snacks in the fields. Households could not rely on *gohar* except the village headman's, as this form of work mobilization blended into tributary obligation.

<sup>3</sup> The role of inter-household labour has tended to be given more prominence by feminist anthropologists and theorists in their recognition of co-operative work teams and informal reciprocities (Gibson-Graham 2007; Guyer 1991; Harris 1981; March & Taqqu 1986; H. Moore 1988).

<sup>4</sup> This is a point Bourdieu recognized: 'The archaic economy cannot escape the opposition between ordinary and extra-ordinary occasions, between regular needs, which can be satisfied by the domestic community, and the exceptional needs ... which require the voluntary assistance of a more extended group' (1990: 118).

<sup>5</sup> Sharma (2008) makes comparable points in relation to men from Western Nepal working in Delhi.

<sup>6</sup> Obviously, the motivations to go abroad are not ethnically unique, and the national picture of the growth of remittance economy needs to be mentioned. Graner (2010) locates the search for foreign labour markets for former carpet industry workers in the mid-1990s. Malaysia opened conveniently for Nepali labourers at the height of the civil war. Bruscia (2010) and Gardner (2012a; 2012b) give accounts of Qatari labourers' camps and their restrictive working conditions. Gardner (2012b) discusses people maintaining fictions of beneficial outcomes from their work, clearly beyond any cost-benefit analysis.

<sup>7</sup> This conversation features in my 2009 film *The way of the road*

<[www.cultureunplugged.com/thewayoftheroad](http://www.cultureunplugged.com/thewayoftheroad)> .

<sup>8</sup> March (in press) has described the loss of point of view for Tamang women, who take on men's subsistence roles, or move to the city to await remittances, subverting the life expectations that their mothers raised them for.

<sup>9</sup> Sahlins pithily observed that 'everywhere in the world the indigenous category for exploitation is "reciprocity"' (1974: 134).

<sup>10</sup> Similarly disrupted expectations concerning corvée labour were at the heart of resistance to British colonial interventions in the Indian Himalaya, described in Guha (1989).

<sup>11</sup> Bourdieu brings subtlety and ambivalence to the guises of embedding strategies:

[jexn/[The discovery of labour presupposes ... the disenchantment of a natural world henceforward reduced to its economic dimensions alone; ceasing to be the tribute paid to a necessary order, activity can be directed towards an exclusively economic end ... This means the end of the primal undifferentiatedness which made possible the play of individual and collective misrecognition (1977: 176).]/ex[

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