

Fields of Working Knowledge

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In the field

My first period of research took a very literal approach to the idea of fieldwork: I arrived explicitly to take part in agricultural activities. In 1980 I had first walked up the Trisuli Valley in Nepal and became curious about the Tamang villages, and their homes and the ecological setting. The Tamang ethnicity had been relatively under-researched as compared to Gurungs, Sherpas, Magars, Rais and Limbus. In this period I also trekked to Jomsom, and journeyed to Darjeeling, Kashmir and Ladakh, coming to appreciate the variable distributions of wet-dry, up-down, rice-barley, masjid, mandir and gomba. By 1987 the plan for a research project evolved, taking a cue from seeing a rise in academic and popular interest in indigenous systems of food production and environmental knowledge (and having over several years myself practised organic vegetable growing techniques in a volunteer working organisation called Willing Workers On Organic Farms). In 1979 I had been staying with a Bahun family in Pokhara, and one morning saw the teenage boy of the house start to hoe the land at the back of the house to plant potatoes. I offered to join in, and as I had worked two summers with French small farmers, was able to keep pace, and enjoyed a meal of maize *dhero* and *saag* for lunch break. This had been one of the most interactive ways of spending time socially on my travels. I had probably doubled my Nepali vocabulary in a very short time, and I could foresee that research into the social dimensions of food growing would be a topic for original theoretical reflection on the anthropology of the Himalayas.

Drawn to explore further mountain cultures, I had fled the madness of England at the time of Margaret Thatcher's Falklands war to spend four months in Peru. Above the upper Marañon valley I had joined villagers and school teachers in their wheat harvest by carrying and trampling the crop under the hooves of horses and mules in a rotating, roped radius I helped to encircle. Later, back in the UK, I was inspired by reading the account by Wendell Berry of his sojourn with the anthropologist Stephen Brush in Peru, and saw

the value that non-anthropologists can derive from ethnographic knowledge, who are working to rethink human relationships to land and the food it can produce. Reading subsequently about Andean collective agricultural practices of *ayni* and *minka*, I put the elements of ethnographic reports of agricultural social practices from the Himalayas, and the Tamang in particular,¹ into a frame that had a comparative dimension – to investigate the phenomenon of collective or reciprocal labour groups in subsistence farming systems. Contrary to the two dominant approaches to indigenous subsistence systems within anthropology at the time, that of Marshall Sahlins' (1972) domestic mode of production, and French Marxist anthropology's ceding of explanatory primacy to reproduction rather than production, and thereby devaluing 'the labour process' (Meillassoux 1982), my goal was to investigate the co-production of food and social relations from toiling in the fields.

Leaving aside consideration of the time in which I was beginning fieldwork, (the hiatus of India's blocking of trade and transport to Nepal, the run-up to the *jana andolan* of 1990), I chose a village where I had stayed one night during a trek through the Trisuli and its side valleys in November 1988, and had received a good impression as a community which was of a reasonable size, and the people had been approachable. In basic Nepali I explained I wanted to learn Tamang words for farming activities, for foods, livestock, plants and trees important for the subsistence system, for aspects of domestic architecture, and kinship terminology. Naturally enough, a significant village faction did not accept this version of my purpose, but a man who was married to a classificatory 'daughter' of the father in the family I was lodging with, and who had a position of *haldar* in the Nepal army, conducted diplomacy on my behalf, not that anyone could dispel all mistrust of motives from living in such a community. The veteran Tamang ethnologist MacDonald had told me in 1988 that the Tamang "*probably* wouldn't kill me".

Cultivating knowledge.

With most of the development literature on rural Nepal being focused on poverty, and the chronic insufficiency of mountain farming systems, it came as something of a surprise that in my first day's work in March 1989 joining in with field labours of weeding

¹ Holmberg, March, Clark, Hoffpauir, Toffin, Euler

terraces with a hoe, and clearing gravel from the soil that had spread from a stream, diverted after rains, the tone of conversation among the small groups dotted across the fold of terraced hillsides was decidedly ribald. Sex was the main interest for conversation. My marital status was inquired into, and when I said that my wife had stayed in Britain, I added that I was perhaps like [a](#) lama. “The lamas in this village sleep with their wives every night!” came the reply.

Having cleared the gravel covering on the terraces by the edge of scrub forest, our family group continued with hoeing along the terraces ploughed and sown with maize. During the clearing of weeds (*mraa*), the woman beside me noticed some uncovered maize seeds in the ground and saw they had germinated. *Makai piiji!* she called out to the other small groups up above. This appeared to be a celebratory moment, an instance for declaring to those in earshot the evidence of this turning point in the year, when new life comes from people’s scratching and sweating labours, from their daily rounds of trotting up and down the mountain paths to coax sustenance from the varied patchwork of fields and forests that villagers’ lives depend on.

Within a few weeks I had learned to recognise enough faces and names to realise that the small groups that had been within earshot that day of the maize germinating were the families of the Shyangba lineage, with one of which I was staying. The great grandfather of the man whose house I had been welcomed in to, had first cleared the area of fields we had been working in, known as *Braa-di*. The other families working in *Braa-di* that day were the older brother’s and their father’s brother’s son’s family. More lineage land was held higher up, and similarly aligned against the edge of the cultivable slope by *Tengu shyong*, the stream marking the southern edge of village territory. These fields had first been cleared for swiddening (*mrangshing phyeeba*). Several years later I was to see a shift of focus in where people were cultivating, due to the wholesale relocation of the clustered village houses by the dirt road built 15 minutes walk above the original village, and due to the market prices that were attracted by growing potatoes for sale. The better potato land was on or above the altitude of the road, and old ‘clan’ fields were brought back into cultivation after a generation of fallow since the practice of swidden had been

banned by the Langtang National Park in 1976. The Shyangba lineage claimed their fallow clan land had been illegitimately cultivated and then registered by members of the more numerous and powerful Bongtso Ghale lineages. This way of speaking about ancestral clan land suggested that the institution referred to as *kipat*, and which is historically associated with ethnic groups in the east of Nepal, could have been more widespread.

The Shyangba married with Ghale clans, and the woman of the house I had become closest to was Ghale. She did not eat beef (*me shyā*). The Shyangba do. She would not cook it if it came into the house. She did eat water buffalo (*mai shyā*), and chicken (*naga shyā*). What was I to eat? Nepal was then a Hindu kingdom, and the Tamang clans who eat beef were consequently held in low regard by high caste Nepalis. In the UK I have been a vegetarian since 1981, but moving beyond Europe my penchant for cultural relativism kicks in, and especially when people offer you food which is a non-everyday item, it is often difficult even offensive to refuse. In this case though, the first time beef arrived in the house the question arose of dietary coming-out. Would the *Deshi* eat beef? I made a strategic decision not to join the beef-disparagers, and play in to the game of minor status differentiations whereby the Ghale present them to the Nepali mainstream as a rank above the Tamang proper. If I was to break my normal vegetarianism was it not right to follow the diet of my host lineage?

This was one form of deliberate self-marking required from fieldwork, of becoming a *persona* given shape and characteristics from response with field conditions and relationship dynamics. Another major step came with a question some men had begun to ask me, often after rather a lot to drink, and very insistent that I should comply. Would I become their ritual friend (*leng laba*)? There could well have been some collective pressure towards the men who asked me this question, as after a couple of months of being around, villagers were perhaps tiring of the indeterminate foreigner who was acting as if he was integrating, joining with work groups, even trying to carry head-loads of finger millet stalks as livestock fodder, but without a connection that would ascribe to me a normal location within the placing of clan-kinsmen solidarity and affinal alliances. The

option of rolling out dyadic fictions of ‘brother’ or ‘sister’ in reciprocal appellations made no cumulative sense if I was calling two men brothers, who were actually brothers-in-law to themselves. Tamang kinship practice needs to add up, and comes to be a constantly worked at, readjusted, making-place-for, and logically explicable collective enterprise that enfolds and contracts with new arrivals.

A further factor played in to my move to accept ritual kinship with my Shyangba host. It wasn’t simply my non-classifiable kinship status that had caused discomfort. My motives of wanting to learn the Tamang language, the names of plants, the practices of farming, the kinship terms, the histories of clans, the memories of trading with Tibetan nomads, the places and rituals of significance to the *bombo* and *lama* had not convinced the villagers of Tengu of my purpose. The idea of an anthropologist living among them in this way was not a locally credible subject position. Well yes, they did recall someone who had lived in Manigaon years back, an *Amrikan* ‘David [Holmberg]?’ I asked? ‘*David*’ that’s right. He could speak perfect Tamang, - well, ‘western’ Tamang! (*nuppa shimmm* they parodied the accent). Did you know someone in Shyabru Andrew [Hall]? Ah *Andrew* he spoke perfect Tibetan, and could lead the singing in a funeral dance. But for all these cases, (and some remembered that David had been compelled to leave the district, accused of cow killing), the innocence of observer neutrality was not a *persona* of any credence. I had to be intent on taking off with my host’s wife, or worse. The gossip mill was running in overdrive. ‘Small village, big words’. ‘People say bad things’, ‘those witches cause me grief with their talking, saying one thing from the mouth, another from deep down’. My enquiries about what the *leng* relationship entailed, and my observations of other relationships of *leng* and *romo* (as contracted between women, or the term used for your *leng*’s wife), led me into receiving local explanations of the institution: substituting the precise equivalence of terms of address as people would use for your *leng*, mourning when kin are lost, and polite verbal honorifics to be used at all events; and in an observation of sociological comparison I was told that in contrast to the practice of Khampa Tibetans, making *leng* or as the Tibetans call it - *robo* – does not entitle a man to sleep with his *leng*’s wife - *romo*. I was told other villagers had become *leng* precisely to make this ethical categorisation. So the big day came, I went through the

wedding-template ceremony of Nepali *mit laune* (Tamang *leng laba*), applying *tika* marks on each other's foreheads with eyes averted, and passing plates of rice and coins in exchange beneath a separating sheet held between us.

The integration by ritual kinship gave moral clarity to the relationally dense world in which I had arrived. I was initially taken aback by quite how many people called me 'grandfather', often people just ten years younger than me, but they were the children of Shyangba lineage 'older' brothers from previous generations' older brothers. Then there was the flip side to respect honorifics. Older brothers' wives enjoy taunting and 'joke'-flirting with their husbands' younger brothers. If the older brother's wife – husband's younger brother (*tsang teba* – *tewar*) relation has a formal structure and code for its proper conduct of impropriety, the more generic interface between cross-cousins was far more spontaneously explosive. Ribald verbal exchanges and playful assaults could erupt at a moment's notice, and contests of advance and repulsion, or counter attack could result in a rolling tumble of bodies on the floor. Suddenly my social world was split between the siblingship and own-clan world of lineage generation and age hierarchies, as opposed to those others who provide space for alterity at a number of levels: erotic, aggressive, and **contestatory**, but affinally constitutive from the outside of the core conditions of possibility for the lineage's own social and biological reproduction.

How far did all this extend in practice into the literal fields of knowledge it was my task to investigate – with 'the social context of agriculture' as my research project title? At one level, the flip back between parallel and cross kinship ties laid the basic warp and weft for the forms available to social discourse. Did the subsistence economy entirely concord with these forms? At the apical point of the socio-agricultural construction is the legitimate inheritance of property, confirmed at the mourning feast (*gewa*) of a household head. It is the arch affine, the mother's brother, who performs the central validating role of dispelling grief among patrimonial land- and livestock-inheriting sons, giving an external moderator's blessing to the passage of herds and fields of productive earth to the next generation of agnates. But the truth is that mourning feasts are often punctuated by violent outbursts among tired and emotional siblings. The fit between formal kinship

patterns of expectation and actual events of who gets what, can be variously scripted. The idea that structures of solidarity and actual cooperation emanate in onion rings of agnatic proximity as depicted in Sahlins' writings on the domestic mode of production and the sociology of exchange, and which had been applied as if this was the way things are in Fricke's (1986) study of Tamang demography and subsistence in Ankhu Khola, did not account for what I was seeing in the deep tensions that reverberated between siblings in particular.

The core evidence I gathered to look into these issues was from the observation of field labour, from a village wide survey of all households' socio-economic data, and from a specifically focused survey of domestic labour activities during the most intense working seasons. By holding back the bulk of my survey work to the last third of my time in the field, I had built up the linguistic and social competence to ask the right questions, knowing the terms & idioms for asking questions of measures e.g *dhaka* (carrying basket-loads of grain harvest), *borak* (bamboo matts tied into cylindrical silos to hold potatoes or maize cobs), also the place and field names, and the calculation of field areas in *hal*. Furthermore I was able to draw on observations of process and change from a previous year's activity. So when it came to compiling the survey of facts from questions like 'who belongs in this household?', I was able to see the actual domestic arrangement before my eyes as processually on the move. There were already several households where children had moved between as their main place of eating and sleeping, from one to another. There were young couples who had tried to make themselves economically independent, but had collapsed back into the larger extended family frame. There were contracted domestic workers for households that had insufficient labour of their own, but where the worker in question was also a clan relative of the mother or father of the house, and it was entirely through the idiom of kinship and the co-production of daily life that the relationship was conducted. Though it was clear there was to be the gift of a water buffalo or cow after the period of service, this was not to taint the qualitative **subsumption** of working hands as an activity between people of close kin relatedness. This worked the other way too. A twelve year-old son from a previous wife was told by

his father he could stay in his house if he worked. ‘Work and you will be fed’. Even direct agnatic consanguinity was not enough to merit belonging to a household.

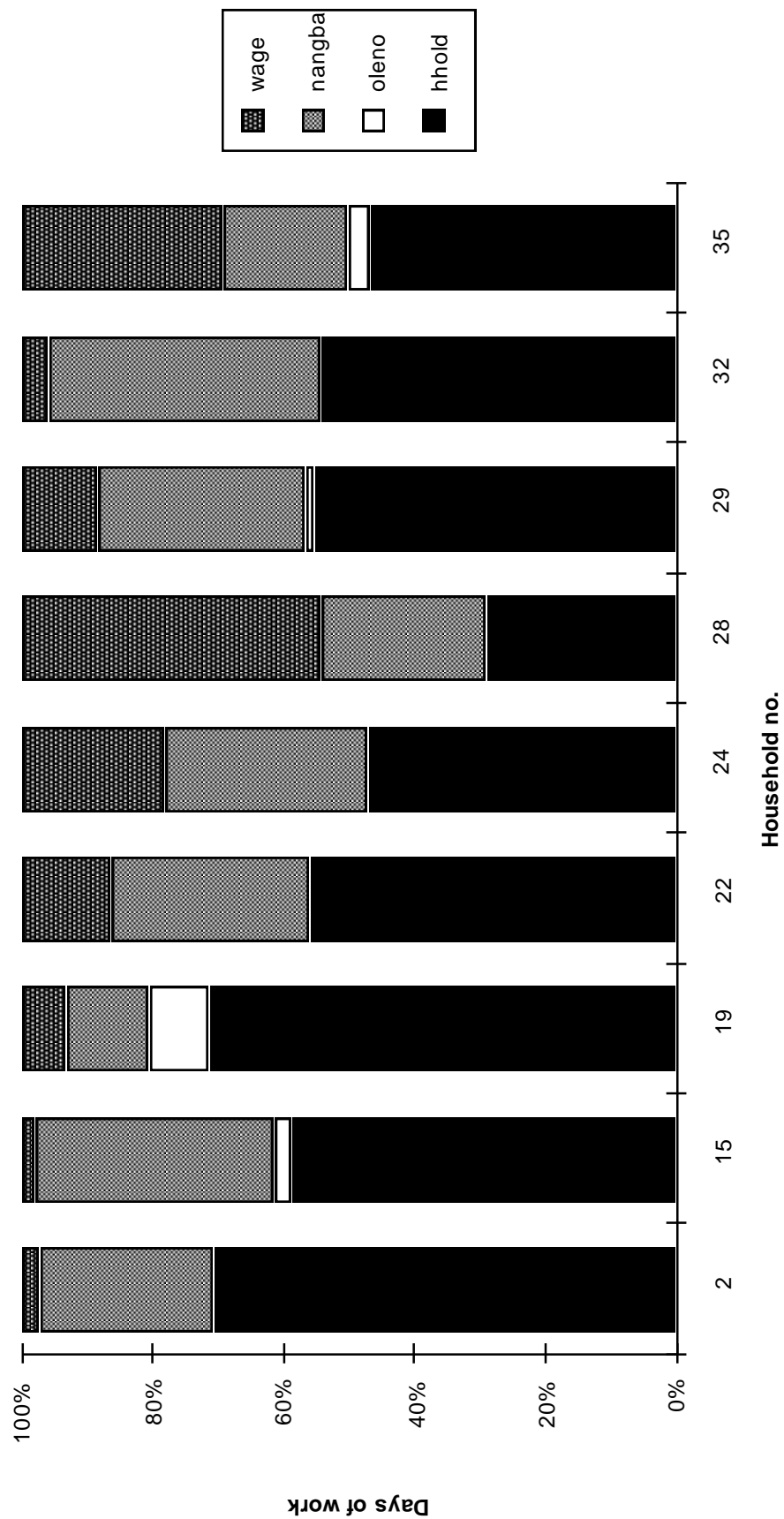
The resolution I came to in writing up the research was to posit an irresolvable tension between delimited domestic circuits, against extensive kinship networks. The actually existing units were further complexified by the Tamang agro-pastoral transhumant economy. At the time of my first fieldwork there was only one domestic unit among forty-four, that did not have a livestock *godis* (Nep. *goth*). To focus research into domestic economic sociality primarily on structures of four stone walls would miss the importance of the fact that people moved their *de facto* residence on average about twelve times a year (sometimes no more than a few metres at a time to camp on a different area of fields, to cultivate the ground or manure the terraces by staking the animals over night; sometimes to decamp further to high pastures or down to where some villagers held fields by the Trisuli river itself). But the movement, the reforming of micro-neighbourhoods, the decisions to open up some old fallow, plant potatoes next to a family with a loud, bellowing voice for scaring crop-raiding wildlife, or to make a new co-operation with a family with whom some marriage might be contemplated, led to a special dimension of constantly re-making effective social groups of everyday conviviality and work. Therefore in terms of social composition and in terms of how the ‘domestic’ was processually ‘done’ in recombinant memberships and place locatedness, the community of mobile human and livestock dwellings came to be seen in moving through the shifting patterns of transhumance, and by fieldwork days consisting of walking the pathways and stopping at encampments to understand why and with whom the next re-campment was to be made.

In April it was like there was a return to the forest. With maize and potatoes already sown, and the wheat not yet harvested, the *godis* retreated off the fields to scrubland where the finger millet seed beds were prepared. Set in among overhanging rocks, or in openings of woods at the field margins, the beds would be manured, ridged up and sown. The *godis* of the lineage clusters would come closer together than when spread out across

their field-holdings. Then a first period of intensive *nangba* would begin, weeding the maize and potatoes in April/May.

The sociality of *nangba* came to dominate the last phase of my fieldwork. On any day I was present in the village, I would try to keep up with how many *nangba* were working and where. *Nangba* dominate the agricultural season for the villagers. If people ask what time it is in the morning, the *nangba* takes over time reckoning for the **synchronics** of daily life: “it is time to go to *nangba*”, “it is nearly time for *nangba* to return”. When I had figured out which were the participating households in any given group, I usually only needed to know one or two names before having a good idea of who would be involved. Of course not every household could send the same member everyday, to the one or more *nangba* it participated in. Here was the interest. If normally a 30 year old woman goes to the group, but is indisposed one day with other tasks or illness, she might send anyone, a male or female between ages eleven to seventy two, in her place. Some *nangba* groups worked after eating a solid meal, starting about 10 am. Others began from early in the morning (*sho ense*), taking snacks of toasted maize or wheat with them, returning in the late afternoon to gorge on boiled potatoes dipped in chilli and salt.

Annual work on own cultivations by labour type



In the spirit of *nangba* the household is the primary unit of account, but in the spirit of *nangba* the household is insufficient to itself and its members. The normal hierarchies of the household's kinship forms are backgrounded, to be replaced by a more vigorously egalitarian and rowdy ensemble, focused on completing a day's work in a round of reciprocal exchange. It was moreover in the *nangba* that you found characters with somewhat ambiguous domestic belonging: the people in 'service' to the house, for contracted financial reasons, or absence of a primary alternative residence. Some widowed women came to join their daughters who had married in the village, making their contribution to the daughter's marital household by saving another household member the unrelenting toil of day upon day hoeing and weeding. In fact there was one *nangba* where the women of sixty years plus all gathered to keep each other company, just as the teenage girls had their own informal club, but never quite as formalised as one reads in reports of *rodi ghar* among the Gurungs (Pignède 1966).

My own relationships with villagers were possibly eased by a willingness to spend time in *nangba* groups. At least the supply of cigarettes I had with me was always appreciated when I arrived in the company of a group. If I had time to stay a while, I took bunches of finger millet seedlings to plant in rhythm with the women who mostly do this work, or I would help set the pace of the transplanting by adopting the more commonly male-performed role of clearing ground for the transplanters, with the rapid hoeing of the previously ploughed terrace. The *nangba* social networks were evidently the way in to village life for strangers. One woman who had turned up for several months but had not made a success of running a shop a friend had left her the responsibility for, was told by a village woman pointedly, "if we don't have money or food, we go to work with *nangba*". For the months of April through September, there is a living to be had, in terms of food and shelter, for any able-bodied person. For the duration of the growing season, the immediate 'short-term' (Bloch 1973) pragmatic interests of effective social networks to get the work of primary subsistence completed are fore-grounded, and the boundaries of domestic inclusivity are flexed. For less intensive agricultural periods of the year, the

longer-term alignments of domestic enterprises, and the principles of kinship hierarchies re-assert themselves to protect household property (*sampati*).

Forms of sociality were therefore creatively in play over different times of year, and in fieldwork over two years I was able to monitor the contraction and expansion of residential units, and their periodically cooperative arrangements for production. I became attuned to how the imagery of the house was far from that of a fixed edifice, constructed on firm foundations, but one of the most malleable and tactically performed institutions for social purposes. Hearing the phrase “we are of one house” invariably signalled using a past reality, that at some level of calculating appropriate exchanges in rituals, gifting, and kin terms will play a role, but as an everyday reality was a rhetorical gesture. The Himalayan ‘house’ of the Tamang-speaking communities of Rasuwa, emerged from research as a lively and dynamic enterprise. It was given shape and moulded to meet the diverse and demanding needs of producing livelihoods and social relationships from an ecological setting where food production has to be spread across different altitudinal zones and crafted to attend to familial, livestock and crop needs. To understand the role of the *nangba* in Tengu village was also to recognise that this institution maintained distinctly egalitarian modalities within the village community. When compared to Tamang villages with more powerful and wealthy local families, it was evident that one distinguishing features of this different class was the fact that these households did not join *nangba* groups. (The other locally salient feature was not sending their members to go portering for wages).

Research into domestic subsistence production gave a grounding to my understanding of social life among the Tamang. However, as the production-oriented ways of understanding social life gave way to more environmentally contextualised approaches, my second phase of fieldwork became an exploration of strands of enquiry I had begun pilot work on: that of social reflections on encounters with non-human others.

Natural Affinities

With fieldwork on environmental relationships, the research picked up on elements of mythological storylines, and narratives of historical oral accounts which spoke of how the Tamang interaction with other communities was frequently ecologically coded. My interest at this stage was less in describing the details of how people live in close daily proximity with biodiversity, and more in finding a characterisation of the qualities of the relationship with non-human others. The immediate context for this research was the political and cultural impact of the Langtang National Park criminalising much of the villagers' traditional subsistence practice, including hunting, swidden farming, and bamboo barter. The global messianic spread of biodiversity protection made people like the Tamang into iconic 'degraders' of the natural environment. Their supposed ignorance of forest depletion, and loss of species, their reckless use of forest species and habitual encroachment into forest spaces with utilitarian motives all signalled environmentally undisciplined populations that nature needed to be protected from.

There were two obvious strategies I knew could be taken to counter this view. One was to discuss the reports I had heard of the ways in which Tamang villagers had been historically forced into productivising the forest environment. Royal dairy herds pressing village labour into providing stabling and equipment for their annual passage was one example of this. Another was the mobilisation of village labour for hunting *tahr* and *ghoral* with rope trap-nets. In general though, Tamang areas in the immediate hinterland of Kathmandu's trading economy had been left deliberately underdeveloped to reproduce the labour force of porters, from their own resources in the areas of temperate forests of no value to commercial interests. The other strategy was to question the way in which 'Nature' has been introduced as an organising concept for framing human/non-human interactions. To see what alternative ways of talking and behaving signified that perhaps Tamang notions of their humanity did not involve the kind of dualism so directly contrasting biodiversity to human culture, which arrived into Nepal in the 1970s pre-scripted with narratives of imminent eco-perdition, and default boundaries of fragile nature to be defended by armed soldiers.

Fieldwork now took the form of amassing numerous accounts of interaction with non-human species, and also the quasi humans, such as ghosts, territorial spirits with inclinations to anger or retributive acts of malice, manifest in disease, or untoward events such as hailstorms or landslides. I went on the winter pilgrimage to balance my knowledge of the summer pilgrimage to Gosainkund, and see how mountain verticality provides an image of fertile abundance in space and time, that attracts diverse ethnic communities to participate in. As it happens, this was almost the last chance I had to learn from the *bombo* (shaman), to whom I owe most of my understandings of the non-human. I spent so much time in his company many people asked me if I was planning to become a shaman. In fact he was reckoned to be so efficacious with spells and mantras, that I was strongly warned not to continue with some of the medical aspects my curiosity had led me to enquire into. I was warned I would go blind if I were to speak the words of chants I was recording. This was another point I reached in the field when the notion of an objective, distanced observer merely gathering information about another culture in a disinterested manner did not convince many in the community, and I was told to stop this line of research for my own good. The *bombo* was however, a source of remarkable mythological tales, which opened a door on an indigenous imaginary of inter-species exchange and metamorphosis.

The majority of these tales, chants and local myths of place were explicitly categorised as coming ‘From the time when people spoke with gods and spirits’ (*Lha deng lu batiba bela ri*). Many were to do with the original processes of cosmogenesis, of adding difference in the forms and relationships of life. Such was the case in the myth of two sister yaks who used to return in summer to ever higher pastures for grazing. However, one time the younger sister decided against her sibling’s repeated calls, and even cautions, to stay below. She stayed, but transformed into a water buffalo and became the demonised sacrificial animal of humans. The options for analysing this story are intriguing, and as with tales of how rhododendron trees attempted to make marriage alliance with alder trees, there is an analogical possibility for interpreting the non-humans as metaphorical substitutes for human counterparts. There is obviously a parallel to the Tamangs’ migration from Tibet, and their acclimatisation to lower altitudes where they

have been ritualised victims of lowlanders' organised violence (Holmberg 2006). But the parallel narratives of human and non-human does not admit the ways in which many of these tales point to something altogether more ambiguous than analogy. There is a becoming-aware of other beings' outlooks on the world, which carries the recognition of non-humans into a different ontological realm than one of parallel substitution. Perhaps the most powerful of these accounts was the *bombo*'s very own story of how he became a *bombo*.

He tells the story in the film I made with my cameraman brother, *Shamanic Pilgrimage to Gosainkund*. The *bombo* was captured by *lo-ngai*. These are anthropoid beings, sometimes known as *nyalmo*, the Tamang equivalent of 'yeti'. They captured him in the forest and kept him for days. He spoke of seeing the *lo-ngai* children talking with their parents and threatening to eat him. They were all staking claims to which part of his body they would eat, 'the arm', 'the leg', 'this nose' he says feeling his body as chunks of meat for the predatory intent of the savage creatures. With this 'capture on the far side', the *bombo* was able to take up the position of other beings, and had an empathic curiosity for stories of species interaction, conflict and deceit. But this perspectivism does not make a stable cosmology as has been argued for Amazonian relations with non-human others (Viveiros de Castro 1998). Indeed with Himalayan ethnography the vertical factor of ecological, linguistic, economic and power differentials provides a sectional provisionality to any attempt by local or state actors, or even external analysers, to encompass or reduce local realities to wider complexes, or generative causes. There is rather a listening to neighbours that passes elements of myth and narrative history through transforming exchanges of borrowing, imitation, parody, and re-telling.

The Way of the Road

Will this fragmented array of relational positions adopted according to who or what one is confronted with all be flattened by how a road will be ~~drived~~driven (-OR-DERIVED) through to the China border? This was the scenario facing the second film I made, again

with my brother, in 2007. ‘Making links’ in circumstances not of one’s choosing is the Tamang disposition to accommodate travellers through their lands. The speed of the road traffic, its possible routing along the main river course rather than through Tamang village locations, and the subsequent risk this would pose to livelihoods of small traders became the film’s subject matter. Fortuitous timing, and an invitation from a VDC chairman in Bharku village to film the biennial re-enactment of ancient wars between Nepal and China, generated an arresting set of images that call for reflection on the Tamangs’ upside/downside, flip-around vision of the radically different universes they mediate on a daily basis.

Fieldwork using film provides a wholly different relation of access to the possible sense that can be made of recorded material. This was already realised by the village lama in Tenggu, who saw how the deceased *bombo* lived on through the previous film we had made. Therefore on our arrival with cameras, he chose the most important story to tell us – that of the passage up the valley of Guru Rimpoche, defeating the demons on his route to bring Buddhism to Tibet. With this story on film, he knew his unborn descendants will be able to hear him telling it.

Unlike the faulty memory that struggles in field notes to leave a trace of observation and the gist of conversations, with smatterings of verbatim phrases, the filmed interviews especially bare repeat viewing when each time the chances of layering meanings and points of reference accumulate. As the composition is, however, watched through repeatedly to communicate organised messages of linked conversation, text and image, there is a danger of missed perspectives dropped from the preferred edit, and a risk that untidy but significant surrounding material is left out. The more powerful interviews, and their performative impression, work an interpretive line. In the film, this is a sceptical opinion of the possibilities that road building, even in the name of the poor, as avowed by the Asian Development Bank, will seriously bring improvement to the economic wellbeing of the district. This perspective is actually delivered more by the traders whose enterprises stand to lose more, more suddenly, and they will have to adjust to the new landscape of small profits in different ways than the villagers, whose produce might find

markets they didn't previously reach, or shift their production to activities like fish farming. However, the confidence of the Asian Development Bank's literature that the road will alleviate poverty for this northern district of Nepal was shared by none of the people we interviewed except those most connected to the state (Campbell [Forthcoming2013](#)). It was an accident of the timing of our filming trip that in capturing the festivities of the war dances between Nepal and China, we missed the occasion to interview the Chief District Officer, who was on holiday. Among villagers there was considerable doubt that the local population would stand much chance of competing with richer and more experienced transport businesses, while the effective labour power of the local population had, in the economic crisis facing the rural population during the Maoist People's War, mostly departed for Malaysia and the Gulf years before.

Conclusion

From reciprocal labour groups to road-side development, from a cosmogenic story book of ancestral figures in the forest to Gulf-bound migrant workers, the fieldwork experience over two decades never ceases to change shape according to shifting priorities, and unforeseen events. New techniques and forms of enquiry, and new geopolitical contexts of explanation re-focus the ethnographic accounts and explanatory potential. While looking back over twenty years there has clearly been a process of rapid globalisation for a district once considered relatively 'remote', yet the fieldwork experience has constantly reiterated the discovery of perspectives on locality that were not always previously apparent, or did not hold salience in the same way. As the *janajati* movement took hold in Nepal, and all ethnic groups found new reasons to review their own histories, the work of anthropologists in presenting fieldwork-based accounts of the realities of economic, environmental and ethnic complexity in Himalayan societies has served to vitalise certain forms of cultural production. This has been quite dramatic in the case of filmed fieldwork episodes, and in villages that had no electric supply a dozen years ago, the complaint is now heard that people are no longer active in their cultural institutions because they are inside their houses watching DVDs. That is one side of the story. Another is the phenomenon I saw of a DVD of the wedding conducted between a clan nephew of my ritual friend and his wife from a Sherpa village far to the east. I watched the flickering

images of the big day, the *khata* scarves a-plenty, and marvelled at the sharing of subjectivities between the anthropologist-cum-part-time-local and the observational practice of watching and commenting on a cultural production of Himalayan communities in ritually inventive communicative interaction as to how Tamang and Sherpa can marry on mutually satisfactory terms. A new era had come in which the evidence of novel social practice in its grounded Himalayan variety has acquired extensively shared popular value.

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