

## CHAPTER 10

### BEYOND CULTURAL MODELS OF THE ENVIRONMENT: LINKING SUBJECTIVITIES OF DWELLING AND POWER

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For many decades the idea of ‘cultural model of the environment’ was a valuable tool for anthropologists and other social scientists to contest the bio-physical realism of natural scientists. If we were to understand how diverse human groups interact with their specific environments, it was not adequate simply to describe the objective features of those environments and human adaptation to them. We could explore what meanings people constructed of their environments, and indeed see how their categorical organisation of the natural world built into distinctive worldviews of human-environmental relationship<sup>i</sup>. It seemed in effect there could be no pre-cultural human response to nature.

By the 1980s, the analytical approach of culturally constructed environments acquired a certain affinity with the idea that Western constructions of the environment were about domination, profitable use, and control, whereas indigenous or traditional constructions were respectful, reciprocal and even sustainable. With the ecological sustainability agenda being increasingly addressed to ethnographic evidence, the question of how cultural models of the environment related to ecological practice assumed a new significance (Descola 1994, Baviskar 1995, Shiva 1991). At the same time a movement in environmental anthropology that became wary of the homogenising, reifying and ethnocentric implications that the concepts of culture and nature can carry, shifted away from the frame of linguistic and symbolic systems as ordering perceptions of the material

world, to focus instead on the qualities of interaction between people and their environments (esp. Ingold 1992, Palsson 1996). Instead of presuming that cultural categories and classifications operate deterministically on what people do and think, like some kind of software, the engagement of people with the affordances of their environment provides an alternative route into human ecological relations. This attends to the conditions in which people's skills, knowledge and intentions come about *as practices of dwelling* within environments, rather than as being applied *as cognitive designs* to environments from an exterior position of a human world separate from a bio-physical one.

There are problems and gaps in some of Ingold's theorizings, which I will explore in this chapter, especially concerning power. There is, though, a common current in critiquing nature/culture frameworks in Ingold's dwelling perspective (2000), and in political ecology (Castree & Braun 2001). The latter has de-naturalised Malthusian interpretations of population-resources dynamics to present environmental change as conditioned by structures of social inequality, rather than as gross elemental processes attributable to sheer numbers of people exploiting finite resources. With the further incorporation of discourse analysis, and its attention to the power-dimension of ways of organising and representing environmental knowledge (Brosius 1999, Leach and Fairhead 2002), a powerfully anti-essentialist tool kit for analysis of the environment and the representations social actors make of environmental processes has come about. Little of this has percolated so far into Himalayan anthropology. While critical studies of resource management policy exist (Ghimire 1992, Kollmair et al. 2003, Brown 1998), and the authority of forestry and agronomic science has been challenged by evidence of

value in many indigenous practices (Stevens 1993, Messerschmidt 1990, Fisher and Gilmour 1999), there remains very little theoretical work on bringing the vast literature on identity, ritual and symbolism in the Himalayas, to relate to that on the environment.

Given that the thrust of anthropological work on Nepal has been to ‘de-tribalise’ discussion of ethnic groups (Clarke 1980), and that nearly thirty years ago Sagant declared ‘ethnic particularism is dead’ (1976:270), it would be a mistake to return to ethnically circumscribed worldviews for understanding environmental relations.<sup>ii</sup> What I suggest is important is to investigate through ethnography the various claims made by social theorists, biodiversity scientists, and conservation institutions regarding human-environmental relations, and to evaluate critically the adequacy of our tools for understanding processes of environmental change, and the effects of representations concerning these processes on attempts to intervene in them. Do we find anything comparable to ‘the environment’ as a category used by Himalayan villagers? How are histories of human interaction with forests spoken about?<sup>iii</sup> What claims to environmental legitimacy and control are made on the ground for local and state structures of power? What reflexivity is there among villagers of the impact of their actions on the environment, and alternatively, what are the most pressing ecologically-related agendas as seen from the bottom up? I do not pretend to offer fulsome answers to all these questions in this short space, but put the questions as indicating the sorts of enquiry that are worth looking at ethnographically, and to find what people, whose interests are much spoken about, actually say in their own voices.

Perhaps more promising than the approach of culture or worldviews is that of subjectivities. In phenomenological anthropology (Ingold 2000, Viveiros de Castro

1998), in environmental discourse analysis (Leach and Fairhead 2002), in political ecology (Peluso and Watts 2001), and now in common property studies (Agrawal 2003),<sup>iv</sup> there is a convergence on the notion that distinctive subject positions acting in environmental matters should be better understood. In contrast to the doubtful reality-status of ‘cultural impact’ (where are the agents, locations, collective presences, boundaries and scales of ‘culture’?), a focus on subjectivities offers better possibilities for observing agency, knowledge, social interaction (including domination and resistance), experience of change, and the deliberate negotiation of relationships that have environmental effects.

‘Culture’ as it has been discovered by economists and environmental policy managers risks presuming too much internal consistency, as if it were a domain or sector among others (which Williams 1961 identified as a distinctly enlightenment notion), while the issue in the Himalayas is rather of competing dialogues, coexisting eclectic practices, and hierarchising tendencies among mutually referencing, and interpenetrating registers of belief, practice, and identity. I am not here primarily arguing with sophisticated cultural theorists, but with the unreflexive use of culture as a new policy instrument by development institutions, that are not prone to reflect on the effects of their own unspoken cultural practices on environmental outcomes (Fisher and Gilmour 1999). Yet there is a slippage from the policy instrument model of culture into some anthropological attempts to render the physical environment ‘cultural’, which then come to postulate culture as a meaning-generative device held by all people. This posits as a universal truth that a real physical world exists out there but we all have culturally

particular apprehensions and models of it, distributed according to one's communicative socialisation.

My approach is to question the proposition that something called 'culture' operates on something else called the 'environment'. Holding these abstractions to be separate, objective and symmetrical entities is a strategy for ordering the world that has been extremely powerful in the global history of science, nature and colonialism (Drayton 2000). This gives rise today to 'systems thinking' among planners in attempts to bring domains of practice into controllable relationships,<sup>v</sup> and has resulted in projects to integrate cultural practice and belief (as stable and identifiable kinds of phenomena), with knowledge of biological processes.<sup>vi</sup> The notion that culture has determining agency (as a kind of normative technology for action) on people's everyday practices has led to bizarre suggestions, for example that for purposes of conservation, the entire Himalayas could be declared a sacred grove – imagining that if declared by an appropriately sacred authority, obedience would follow. In less exaggerated form, culture has become identified as a potential tool for effectively promoting conservation initiatives. The introduction to the e-conference on "Integrating Mountain Culture and Natural Resources", hosted by ICIMOD in 2001, suggested that by creating partnerships with religious and spiritual leaders the management of natural resources and the aims of cultural integrity and survival could both be strengthened. While many contributors to this e-conference made well nuanced analyses about problems with reifying culture (Kenneth Croes, and Manjari Mehta in particular), it remains evident that such attempts to mobilise cultural inputs are conceived in the main with the view of culture as a substantive adjunct to conservation goals: in terms of translating one set of purposes into

the language of another linguistic-cultural frame. This occurs typically within development interventions that are designed to fit outcomes and data with original project goals, without problematising the disambiguation process needed to make this fit come about (Pottier 2003). In conservation programmes, culture is a thing of knowledge rather than a problematic with which to consider epistemic transformation. When concepts such as the environment are processed from being an object of modern scientific perception, and are translated into local terminologies such as for sacred places, and ethno-pharmacological knowledge, these appear in the image of corresponding to the original epistemic model. Proper cultural analysis should instead consist of being reflexive over the provisional and synthetic quality of the product of translation, and the relational-epistemic postulate that serves for thinking the same reality is being discussed.

### **Locating the Environment**

In Nepal, any attempt to deal with cultural relations with the environment is confronted by a tension between deeply particular local complexes of symbolic-material practice and the national context of development. To illustrate how my own thinking about Himalayan human-environmental relations has been influenced by fieldwork, I recall several moments when after periods spent among herders and farmers in their dispersed mountain pastures and terraces, I had my experiences of seamless, dwelt engagement with people, plants, soil and animals – in other words deep in the stuff of Ingold's approach - abruptly confronted by encounters on the dirt road through the valley, setting villagers' environmental engagement in stark contrast to the pace of the internal combustion engine, the bazaar and bureaucracy. Were these two worlds or one? For the

political ecologist within me, it is clear that the continued reliance of mountain families on subsistence production is inextricably linked to historical class and capital relations of uneven national development and peripheral neglect, yet the qualitative ethnographer, alongside, insisted on the radical disjuncture of relational universes.

Of course similar disjunctures have been a theme of Himalayan research and analysis for the last thirty years. Holmberg (1989) wrote of the historical ‘involution’ of Tamang society, producing an appearance of ‘tribal’ features as a result of systematic exclusions from centres of cultural and political power. Burghart (1984) wrote of how the different *desh* of Nepal with their diverse environmental qualities created quite distinct worlds of value and social locatedness between *lekh*, *pahar*, and *tarai*. The ‘complementarity’ of Himalayan ecological niches was for Führer-Haimendorf (1975) a landscape for enterprising exchange relations and different possibilities for accumulation. Humphrey (1985) alternatively saw this as a kind of economic ‘dis-integration’. Schrader (1988) analysed the quasi-autonomous economic worlds of the mountains as a system enabling the use of paternalistic community relations to limit costs for village-based elites to pursue trade with capitalist regimes of value in India. Blaikie et al. (1980) saw people such as the Tamang-speakers of my research, who are transhumant agro-pastoralists, as ‘anarchic petty commodity producers’, tangentially affected by national markets, and Sagant (1976) remarked on the nationally distributed differentiation of technologies and landscapes for irrigated rice versus highland pastoralism in Nepal. In addition to these broadly economic appraisals of differentiated Himalayan landscapes and circuits of exchange, Ramirez’ study (2000) emphasises the radical political autonomy of decision-

making that characterised the village universes of headmen up to the middle of the twentieth century.

Across all this literature it seems as if local particularity, and its incompleteness, is an inescapable element of what makes up the interrelations of people and ecology. The local can never provide an adequate context of explanation, yet the structures of cultural, political, and economic integration between localities can only be understood by the role in them of local-ness. The corollary in approaching human environmental relations is that villagers' own activities of production and provisioning are not carried on in closed worlds, and have to be referenced to wider circuits, or progressive contextualisations of interaction. Yet any analysis of power relations reaching into the micro-worlds of mountain subsistence and symbolic practice is unsettled by the pervasive irrelevance of accounts that are not locally-sensitive to the subjective experience of different kinds of power in actual people's lives. This problem with generality directly parallels that identified in the over-simplistic theory of Himalayan environmental degradation (Ives and Messerli 1989).

In my book (Campbell n.d.) I describe an orientation of the villagers from Rasuwa District that declares an ontology of in-betweenness. They live self-consciously in the 'middle ground' between juniper and palm tree, which is celebrated through ritual language as a golden ecology of dwelling and fertility, and yet their vertical in-betweenness is evoked in other contexts to stress the hardships of a world which is peripheral to the wealth and comforts of Tibetan and Nepali urban life. Subjectivities are thus framed both through extensive vertical environmental interactions, and by profiles of explicit cultural difference. Yet to speak of culturally 'mediated' environmental relations



(as if culture was a cognitive enabling device on an inert material external reality), would be to displace attention from the qualities of interaction that are formed through reciprocal relations with the non-human world. It would further gloss over the significant differences within the total field of competing repertoires of relationship, knowledge and reality, which people encounter and negotiate through diverse and unstable contexts of class, kinship, ethnicity, territorial residence, and ritual in particular dynamics of history and place.

### **Sightings of nature-culture dualism**

My research interests have been to understand the environmental relationships of Tamang-speaking communities who reside within the Langtang National Park, living on a front-line of state-sponsored, category-induced dualism between nature and society. In the prism of modernist nature protection, human presence has been perceived as inherently destructive of ecological integrity. My studies have revealed numerous ways in which this idea of nature as a non-human domain clashes with the Tamangs' modes of relationship with their environment. Approaches which do not prejudge the suitability of 'integrity' and 'interference', and use terms other than those so implicated in the situation at hand, are needed to understand the pragmatic and ontological problems the Tamang villagers face in confronting a categorical boundary-making of nature. The anthropological task of describing and analysing human-environmental relationships in these circumstances needs to interrogate rather than depend on the nature-culture opposition.

In my first ethnographic work with the Tamang, I had expected to meet people who would produce relatively consistent narratives about the landscape, explain their 'Indigenous Environmental Knowledge', and be able to discuss matters of plants, animals, soil and weather with some reflexive facility. Instead, I found people's environmental knowledge and relationships to be discursively fragmented and not at all like a textualised body of knowledge. Their environmental practices and the contexts in which environmental factors took on relevance did not easily translate into linked strands of verbalised discourse, that the ethnographer can straightforwardly access.

I had been discouraged by the fact that many villagers only knew specific names for a basic range of the most useful plants. They were mostly not inclined to reveal local pharmacological knowledge when I asked them directly, often for reasons of not claiming expertise when such kinds of knowledge are linked to ritual healing practice and occult power, though they spontaneously volunteered bits of information about the medicinal qualities (Tam. - *men daba*) of certain foods when they were cooking, like frogs and the prickly pepper spice (Tam. - *prumo*, Nep. *timur*). They often said I would do better consulting someone else about such things, and differed significantly in their willingness to indulge my enquiries about ambient spirits and territorial gods and demons, or offer theories as to the cause of landslides. People in the village seemed too individually diverse and contradictory in their interests, activities and interpretations to justify the quest for a core cultural disposition toward the environment, beyond the basic commonalities of their dispersed, though collectively attuned, agro-pastoral production in mobile shelters (*godi*).

It was only after my initial research that I realised a fuller ‘environmental’ packaging was possible with the various kinds of data I had. Unlike ‘kinship’ which is a far more explicit and symbolically coherent language of relational identity, personhood and social practice for the Tamang, the ‘environment’ needed to be constructed as a synthetic analytical composite of various aspects of practice and perception in the world. There was no simple indigenously recognised entity of nature or environment, nor was there a coherent and explicit, singular cultural response to it, which certain theories of classificatory models of the environment would imply.

In the course of fieldwork days when incessant monsoon rains had cancelled arrangements for workgroups, or simply during conversations hanging out in camps of livestock shelters (*godī*), I was told oral narratives of animals and plants in mythological and everyday genres that brought alive their characteristics and habits. Later I began to translate and collate from fieldnotes various ‘environmental’ registers through story tellings, origination myths, and fragments of healing chants. I sought to bring these narratives into conjunction with accounts of wildlife damage to crops, and contemporary forest resource regulation issues. To give a perspective on the changing politics of environmental interactions I gathered oral histories of life before the time of the national park when swidden agriculture, barter of forest produce, and pasture burning were common practices (that are now criminalised), and when the headman (*mukhiyā*) coordinated collective movements of village herds in the forest. Combined with the practical environmental intimacy of the *godī* (Nep. *goTh*) way of life, herding animals, tending to fields, and gathering wild foods in the forest, here in these conversations was a basis for talking of an indigenous eco-relational sensibility expressed in stories of an

animated landscape of interacting, diverse beings. Men, women, kings, lamas, shamans, gods, spirits, creatures, vegetation, rocks and soils featured in accounts of life process, wilful intentionality, erotic attraction, cosmic connection, species conflict, bio-type mutation, treacherous deceit, and personal fate. With the accumulating body of data came a realisation that issues of power were a constant theme in these narratives. They were very different kinds of power than that exercised by the national park authorities in claiming territorial dominion over the forest as a domain to be protected from human intervention. They constituted an indigenous ecology of power, recognition and contest in which acting subjects confronted the perspectival otherness of life kinds, inhabiting distinctive ‘own worlds’ of being, and entered relationships of coercion, alliance and trickery with them. Non-humans were active participants in social reality as animate beings.

### **Dissonances**

In contrast to the view that people’s cultural models and classificatory schemes provide individuals with the means to operationalise knowledge of the world in order to act upon it, I would emphasise how people’s relationships and interactions, their practices of dwelling, are, if not ontologically prior, at least in tension with categorical systems which are themselves mutually inconsistent and morally ambivalent. Rather than producing a coherent, culturally specific Tamang way of relating to the environment, different subject positions, agro-pastoral options, and technico-ritual dispositions – such as the knowledge specialisms of lamas, shamans (*bombo*) and territorial priests (*lhaben*) - - jostle with each other, often discordantly. Differences between men and women,

between clans, between village-born people and those married-in from elsewhere, all generate distinctive subjectivities of orientations and interests in environmental relationships. These differences affect how people as actors engage intentionally with their ecological circumstances, and understand their interactions as persons involved in a sociality of life forms where the social is constantly prone to cross the human/ non-human divide<sup>vii</sup>.

The mythical narrative that most clearly addressed human-environmental relationship was *Yaa Wei* (The Song of Primordial Eternity). In the sequential flow of this recitation of cosmogenesis, elements and associative patterns of ecological difference are built up to offer a grand overview of human locatedness in a tripartite cosmology of high, middle and low. Within the song, notions of vertical landscape formation, and differential botanical range, provide the context for the altitudinally distributed emplacement of gods, spirit creatures, and humans. It is the tree of the middle ridge, ‘sandalwood’ (*surudsen*), which in the song generates a swelling of abundance. The tree’s own processes of growth sustain a rooting, sprouting, branching, budding, blooming environment that affords a place to dwell for spirit residents (Kaliama Damsi Dolmo and Aba Naru Bön) and eventually their human offspring. The component parts of the tree as a structured organism are mirrored later in the part-by-part construction of a first ‘golden’ house in the song. That the sandalwood tree is actually unknown to its singers, except in mythical language, warns us against an over-literal interpretation of this song for understanding Tamang attitudes to actual trees, yet as with certain other myths, it is significant that a tree specified to be ‘of the middle ground’ becomes the means of vitalising effect for humans. In another myth of the primordial shaman Dinsur Bon, it is *shingara dongbo*,

(*Castanopsis tribuloides*) that plays the role of iconic middle-ground tree. This eco-ontology of mediating positionality between vertical extremes pervades Tamang language, thought and practice, and finds frequent reiteration in phrases that draw attention to ‘the meeting-place of high and low’ (*la deng lung ki tsam ti*).

From a phenomenological ‘dwelling perspective’ the *yaa wei* can be seen to sanctify a being-in-the-world of engagement and connectedness. Yet, in other cultural narratives, the in-between-ness that in *yaa wei* is a centering of domestic existence in cosmic replenishment is turned into an in-betweenness of peripheral abandonment and poverty. On the villagers’ pilgrimage up to Gosainkunda for the Bhadau full moon, one of the many verses of the ‘*se-se bombo*’ song cycle declares that the singers are not from the Tibetan town of Kyirong, nor from Kathmandu, but “born in the middle ground, weak, unclothed and hungry”. The mid-range dwelling is here not a fortunate placement for wholesome ecological complementarity, but a marker of backwardness and misery, on an un-giving mountainside of rocks and dark forest. It characterises the fate of middle ground occupants as stuck in a state of powerlessness, contemplating the wealth and cultural authority of adjacent ‘great traditions’. *Tserpa-i lungba* (“a miserable place”) is how villagers frequently described their homeland to me.

Similar examples of disturbances to the seamlessness of human-environmental interaction, as the dwelling perspective would like to have it, featured in conversations I had with villagers about subsistence labours, especially the care of livestock. Ingoldian seamlessness can actually be heard in many accounts of pastoral abundance, milk flowing freely, and days spent in high, flowering meadows, while at night the lights of the Kathmandu valley could be seen sparkling miles away. However, these were

counterposed with bitter narratives that shifted from unreflexive, direct engagement with animals, pastures and the happy flow of time, to the abandonment many people experienced when left alone on the ridge top, running out of flour and salt to eat, having to spend hours fetching water, and forced to rely on wild spinach and plants such as rhubarb for sustenance.<sup>viii</sup> For young wives in such situations, they imagined their husbands running around with girls down in the village. For hired herders (*gothalo*), it was frequently not by choice, but on account of their parents' financial debt that they spent months and years of solitary, burdensome toil, worrying that thieves, accidents on trails, and leopards would take the animals in their care, and as a result they would not receive payment in cash or cattle.

### **Landscapes of Activity**

It is only by understanding the collective commitment to mobile agro-pastoralism, that human-environmental relatedness can be understood in upper Rasuwa villages. The opposition of village and forest is not of such great significance to these Tamang-speakers as it is to fully settled cultivators. Landscape is spoken of more through the imagery of the pathway (*gyam*) than by the orientations of a *mandala* model of space (Höfer 1999). Most villagers for most of the time do not live in the nucleated clusters of houses that characterise their village geography (for outsiders this emphasises their *jangali* 'nature' or *jat*). Houses are occupied by much of the population only at the great ceremonial times of year, and for funerals. Mostly they function as storehouses. The rest of the time is spent in shifting *godī* residence between field and pasture locations, balancing the priorities of crop cultivation and surveillance, with seasonal fodder

availability for livestock. Periodic movements between a household's dispersed fields break up the flow of everyday social and ecological interactions. Micro-communities of neighbourliness reconfigure themselves every month or two weeks, producing a distinctive sociality of flux and temporarily made alliances of mutual aid among new clusterings of residence, that are far more adaptable than the ideological structure of lineage solidarities (Toffin 1990).

Human conviviality with livestock induces a closeness of human-animal relations in a practical dwelling sociality of nurturance and subsistence livelihood, which sometimes even blurs ethical boundaries between humans and non-humans (Campbell 2005). From childhood spent in the *godi*, knowledge is learnt of the tasks of looking after specific categories of animals, taking them to their best feeding grounds, and developing awareness of individual animals' desires, habits, tricks and cunning. Beyond the emotional sentiments that can arise with individual animals as characters, an understanding of the animate sociality of desires common to animals, humans and spirits of different types is developed: a common paradigm of 'giving to eat', evoked by the word *whaaba*. Humans, animals, and gods-spirits (*la-lu*) all require particular attentions and have their specific dietary requirements and characteristic desires, which if not satisfied lead to the danger from neglected relationship of anti-social, unrequited need: a world of volatile hungry subjectivities that never know stability, but demand constant recognition and feeding for on-going sociality.



### **The political ecology of transhumance and forest provisioning**

It emerged from conversations with older villagers that the patterns of transhumance I witnessed during fieldwork differed substantially from a generation ago, when the *mukhiya* (village headmen) operated as semi-autocratic leaders and tax collectors (in practice till about 1960). They regulated collective movements of village cattle herds around timings of crop harvest and pasture regeneration, of sheep and goat flocks to pastures across the Tibetan border, and received fees from visiting herders of other territories. The relatively autonomous freedom of subsistence use of the forest enjoyed by villagers was contingent on relationships with the headman, involving considerable tribute in labour, and gifts of the heads of any slaughtered animals. Because of the history of an implicit moral ecology of exchange bound up in this relationship, the contemporary notion of total environmental regulation that has been introduced with the national park is problematic in its detachment from local accountability. In talking of a moral ecology, it is not to suggest there was a singular, formal cultural template of entitlements and codes of behaviour that determined how villagers and headmen pursued set roles. It seems, rather, to have been the case that the symbolism of tribute focused on the headmen, as mediators of state power and authority, was susceptible to considerable local critique for arbitrary acts of fine-imposition and excessive demands on people's labour time. A discourse from below that spoke of Tamang clans in terms of an ancient polity constituting a balance of inherited authority between kings, ministers and officials came up in conversations with older villagers as a means of symbolically contesting the singular authority conferred from above onto the old *mukhiya*, by his annual attendance at the court of the palace at Nuwakot. By the end of the Panchayat regime, the headmen's

tributary demands were frequently spoken of as a structure of rent extraction that drew livestock and labour towards the headman's own domestic enterprise. The moral ecology was thus more of a compromise between collective village practices and the performance of a model of village administration for external consumption by the state, that masked considerable ambiguity over where the extent of authority lay in everyday practice.

Subsistence rights to the resources of the forest were understood as an inherent part of belonging to the community of tax-paying households, and their performance of exacting services for the headman. Older villagers spoke of the fact that “the *mukhiya* said nothing” about forest product use. When for instance they cut timber planks and carried them three days to Kathmandu for sale, they implied he saw and took notice, but said nothing against this activity. These days with people conscious of the punitive consequences of park regulation infringements, and the power of gossip reaching officials' ears, a more limited provisioning has to be done *amrangnale* (“without being seen”), beyond the formally licensed access to timber for projects like house-building. Local forest use regulation before the park was seen as specific to certain kinds of legitimate activity for subsistence. This did not postulate the environment as a totality in need of protection, because the very diversity of topology, plants, and animals afforded such variable uses and relationships for people, that it constituted an interactive domain of specificity rather than generality, only brought into a framing of unity as the territory of one village as opposed to another. The forest environment is still perceived as a collective good for legitimate domestic needs, but it is now inhabited by a increasing number of protected predatory wildlife, that make their unpredictable incursions on village subsistence (Campbell 2000).

From villagers' perspectives, there was a consensual dimension for the authority of headmen that derived from functions of coordinating movements of herds, maintaining intervillage pasture boundaries, and allocating land to new settlers. This position of leadership has imploded with the national park's territorialisation of user rights (e.g. only land-owners may graze or cut fodder), and the categorical prohibitions on traditional practices such as managing ecological succession by burning, and the criminalisation of exchange of forest products without formal licensing arrangements. The crisis of legitimacy spoken of at a national scale (Gellner 2003) has its parallel at the village level in the absence of effective, consensual institutions for local subsistence accountability. Reports of the success of community forestry (Chetri and Yonzon n.d., Fisher and Gilmour 1999, Jackson 1999) in devolving responsibility and management in much of Nepal's middle hills contrasts with the picture I have drawn of people's disempowered forest agency in the national park. In the gulf between the state's capacity to enforce park regulations and the continuing dependence of villagers on reproducing their livelihoods through engagement with forest ecology, a more atomistic sociality of forest interaction takes place, using tactics of illicit invisibility<sup>ix</sup>. This more furtive forest relation hidden from public view could not be more different from reports by older villagers who recalled the collective social practice of large scale hunting parties commanded by state officials.<sup>x</sup> Indeed, on one occasion when government hunters did kill a wild boar, the procession with the animal into the village centre, and its dismemberment and distribution of thighs, head and shoulders to the park and military officials, ritualised an unusual unity of purpose between villagers and state authority. Prior to park regulation, villagers additionally used to gather pre-monsoon wood-fuel stores by collective reciprocal labour

groups. Such visible and publicly accountable interventions in the forest have now been outlawed, replaced in the breach by individualistic, direct engagement with the affordances of the environment. Ironically, with large-scale social forest interaction prohibited, this appears now much more like Ingold's characterisation of solitary hunter-gatherer practice, though with a glance over the shoulder for watching eyes.

To speak of 'political ecology' at the village level, it is necessary to problematise the understandings of power that relate to human-environmental interaction. For modernist administrations of biodiversity conservation, nature is explicitly a matter of territory and resources subject to a singular logic of secular control, state sovereignty and the defence of national interests, though it carries in its wake a host of inexplicit agendas of taming the cultural periphery. With the sustainability agenda 'local environments' and 'local culture' have become privileged, but often ignoring progressive contextualisations beyond the local (Kearney 1996:105). For the villagers, power is distributed across a multitude of life contexts, and people's accounts of forest relations tell of agency in self-provisioning, tributary recognition of entitlement granted to local leaders (see Nightingale's chapter too on gifts made to such figures in return for rights to collect forest produce), and regulatory defiance towards state officials. People's ability to circumvent the intervention of the state in providing for domestic subsistence is one among several other concerns that require negotiating with powers that can be made to show malign and benevolent faces. In the villagers' ongoing pursuit of their extensive environmental practice they move through territories where the state is less likely to be encountered than wild animals, stray livestock, illicit grass cutters, and in recent years Maoists. The office of the Chief District Officer is one location where they occasionally

go to try and alter the conditions that affect their lives, seeking to counter the authority of the national park by calling on more responsive state institutions. But many more travel the longer distance on pilgrimage to Gosainkunda or Shikar Besi to ask Mandeo (Mahadev) in person for good fortune and blessings of fertility. Their ultimate spirit of locality, Mandeo, is said to have entrapped a Newar prince as a son-in-law in an uxorilocal marriage by capture, under the waters of the high lake. This 'cultural model' of power, fantasy or delusion perhaps, sustains a challenge to the state's presumptions of territorial control, which do not attend to the making of connections with the perceived sources of environmental influence on human life. At the village scale, greater behaviour-influencing effect is noticeable in the prohibitions and taboos concerning territorial gods and spirits there (*Shyibda*, *lu* etc), and the negotiations that are made with these forces as personal interactions between animate and responsive subjectivities. Relationships with such non-secular powers contrast with the impersonal order of park bureaucracy, peopled predominantly by plains or urban Nepalis, who for the most part are unmotivated to get to know villagers' perspectives in reciprocal dialogue with them.

## **Conclusion**

The approach I have taken towards environmental ethnography with the Tamang is that forefronting the environment has to be understood as a *synthetic manoeuvre* for perceiving diverse processes and relationships. It brings together various aspects of life-process in combinations that are not inherently held together as 'environmental' in the characteristics of their social production. Correspondingly, 'culture' is a similarly synthetic frame of analysis. The historical and cultural circumstances in which 'the

environment' has been forged as a perceptual reality should not be lost sight of. The notion of the natural environment as an objectively linked whole appeared along with the revelation of its finite character, its fragile incompleteness in modern times, and the threat of its potential disappearance (Grove 1993, Guha 1989). When the environment is seen as analytically synthetic, and a historical product of human consciousness, the task of environmental anthropology becomes clearer. When brought under rigorous ethnographic scrutiny, what can be classed synthetically as environmental relationships from an outsider's standpoint (material processes and interactive relationships), decompose out of singularity and lead in many rhizomal directions beyond anything resembling a specifically 'environmental' domain. They diffuse out into social life and practice, ritual and politics. Drawing together accounts of patterns of interaction and discourses into a frame of biodiversity, requires simultaneous reflection on this process as an act of synthetic abstraction from an ethnographic totality. From an anthropological point of view, the act of abstraction that goes into producing accounts of environmental relationships needs to not forget the threadwork of social relations that give them vitality and value in the first place. Tracing associations of practices and discourses in relationships between people, plants, animals, and places has to be undertaken with an eye towards their contingency to other aspects of social reality that the Euro-American construction of the environment as an external object for the purposes of protection, does not pretend to draw into its own synthetic capacity – such as power relations.

In this task of environmental ethnography, my aim has been to identify the recognisable political-economic dimensions of transformed social relations of resource control, but in addition it has been to talk about the effects that objectifying the

environment has for relations of signification regarding human personhood, collective identities, and social hierarchy in Nepal. Modern awareness of the environment as an objective and finite resource is not merely a cognitive phenomenon, that enables instrumental management, but a new element to the order of things in which historical relations of power over territory, and formations of subjectivity and difference become articulated.

In Nepal, elements of the discourse of the objectified environment and its regulation merge with caste-based ideologies of differential human closeness to natural processes through engagement with dirt, soil, sexual reproduction, and impurity. Unlike the Euro-American ideology of biologically single, universal humanity, in caste ideology humanity is radically differentiated in terms of purity-pollution that permeates all human interactions of the body with other symbolically marked bodies and with environmental elements. These terms of human differentiation operate through practices of agricultural manual labour, and carrying porters' loads, on distinctions made regarding diet (especially eating beef), and the somatic influences of local foods and water. They extend into marriage and funerary practices, and medico-ritual knowledge cumulatively distinguishing humanity into quasi-naturalised kinds. Protecting the environment becomes appropriated within ideological dynamics of national and class projects of defining inequality in a new language. As Drayton says of British imperial science "[b]iology merely provided a new vocabulary with which to express old explanations for dominance, subordination and violence" (2000:225). Eco-primordialism and biocentrism in conservation approaches reconfigure discourses on the legitimate residents of certain areas (Brosius 1999), with definite consequences for excluding marginal groups' access

entitlements, and the ability of local communities to negotiate livelihood arrangements and exchange complementarities with outsiders.

Instead of thinking in terms of culture as a model of learned classifications that order the meanings people give to their surroundings, imposing cultural constructions on the material world of nature, Ingold argues that knowledge of the world is gained via interaction with it. If, ontologically speaking, people understand environments primarily through engaged practices of dwelling rather than through mediations of concepts, this can open up important new ways of thinking about the anthropological effects of nature conservation. When observers have noted cases of resistance to conservation, these have often been explained in terms of economic consequences for people's livelihoods (and it is through economic incentives that conservation programmes try to garner support for their projects). What the dwelling perspective makes clear is the radical ontological dissonance that can be expected by positing an objective material environment detached from human involvement, which can then be managed by conservation bureaucracies. This is most striking when Ingold discusses hunter-gatherer peoples as not being custodians of their environments in anything like the way that scientific notions of conservation based on responsible control imply:

For hunter-gatherers this responsibility is inverted. In the last resort, it is those powers that animate the environment that are responsible for the survival or extinction of humans (Ingold 2000: 68).



What is interesting is how the Tamang villagers resist attempts at disciplined persuasion to convince them of their powerlessness, and criminality, and continue to voice accounts of environmental relations and history which effectively place state actors as similarly motivated and compromised by their own particularistic practices as the villagers are. The processual habits and encounters of human-environmental relatedness are daily in evidence for the Tamang, who perceive their mountain environment as a field of social agency (in which villagers, the state, the supernatural, and wildlife are participant subjectivities of power), and not as a separate domain of nature in the exclusive power of others.

In her book on Eastern Tamang lyrical traditions, Steinmann writes “Rather than being in a specifically human world, the life of people...inscribes them in a society in which gods, demons and animals participate, and it is to this society that universal laws apply” (2001:280, my translation). This non-dualist view of human interaction with the world, bears similarities with Viveiros de Castro’s (1998) innovative perspectivist approach to humans’ relations with non-humans in animist Amerindian cosmologies, and yet the Tamang live in a world of competing versions of the good life, tradition, modernity and the nation. The society of people, gods, demons and animals as Steinmann puts it, is but one possibility, and its hold on people’s understanding of the world is being eroded by new careers pursued by Tamang youth eager for literacy and trekking agency jobs.<sup>xi</sup> The applicability of a naïve ‘dwelling’ perspective has to be suspect in this landscape of multiple actors, conscious of alternative regimes of value and orderings of the world. It is within this complexity and its discordant juxtaposition of interpretive schemes and valuations of practice, that the Tamang relationship with their environment

has been historically located: not fully 'up' nor fully 'down', but at a median verticality where forces of attraction and exclusion operate with Tibetan and Hindu versions of the world, and where the in-between situation of both ecology and class (seasonal migrant labour) has offered a collective refuge of sorts. In this respect I diverge from Ingold's seamless engagements to draw in the active contestations Tamang villagers articulate in the positioned subjectivity of their environmental practices and representations, and to suggest their on-going interactions with the environment have elements that are socially and politically reflexive.

In the post-Theory of Himalayan Environmental Degradation era, a limited opening to thinking about the environment as 'cultural' has been useful to try and render once absolute positions more partial and uncertain, and to listen to a more diverse set of voices (Forsyth 1998). However, within anthropological problematisations of human-environmental relatedness the analytical value of culture is an area of dispute that deserves acute theoretical and ethnographic reflection. Modernity's cosmological dividing line between the human and non-human simultaneously posits that all humans symmetrically have 'a' culture. As de Castro puts it, this results in one nature (mute, and obeying universal laws known through science) that is perceived by a multiplicity of cultures (conveying meaning and consciousness exceptional to the human, knowable through the principle of cultural relativism). Descola (2005) has attempted to turn this insight into a typology of comparative modes of relation with the non-human, in which modernity's one nature, many cultures stands structurally opposed to the cosmology of 'many natures, one culture' in the perspectivism of different beings on each other (all species granted human-like intentionality), that is characteristic of Amazonia. In his

comparative typology Descola gives totemism a separate status of its own, and a rather cumbersome residual category of ‘analogism’ is generated for covering the agrarian societies of Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, the Andes and Meso-America. While a case is made for caste ideology’s analogical referencing of differential ritual status among humans to distinct kinds of relation with the non-human, and the *mandala* symbolisation of landscape indeed corresponds to an analogical frame of thinking, I suggest the ethnographic circumstances of people like the Tamang represent modes of relating to the non-human that exhibit elements of perspectivism (notable in mythological accounts of affinity among beings of different kinds), and of analogism (especially the symbolism of tribute which provides chains of connection to ritual power centres). More recently modern ‘naturalism’ is of course the cosmology being propagated in the form of nature conservation. Therefore, rather than seeing culture and the environment as two domains of reality that anthropologists and conservation policy thinkers are attempting to bring into relation, it is more appropriate in conditions such as pertain in the Himalayas to ask what different kinds of versions of human relationship with the non-human inform peoples everyday livelihoods, their local practices of sociality, their material and discursive relations with outsiders, and their ability to negotiate with languages of power in changing significations of territoriality and citizenship.<sup>xii</sup>

Interventions to protect the environment are now required to be reflexive over social and cultural implications and impact, and ethnographic accounts of livelihoods and forest interactions have become tools of management and policy rhetoric. In this context, it is important to think about how people understand the changing possibilities of relationship to their environments as social, and to see how relational bridges are capable

of being made across the gaps of inequality between the powerful and those subject to power, when the environment becomes a principle focus of differentiation among sections of society. Under conditions of national park regulation it is actually less possible to witness ethnographically a public and visible culture or collective community of practice in environmental relations, as state conservation imposes a mantle of protection over non-cultivated land, and defines the activities that are deemed legitimate there. A consequence of national park regulations has been to make many of people's forest interactions covert, atomistic and self-interested. In the very limited arenas for local participation with park authorities, which have emerged through buffer zone initiatives, an organisational template for a community of users accountable through management plans and committee processes, does not easily translate to the internal village dynamics of lineage and party factions. Their possibilities for alliance around common interests are restricted, as the post-*mukhiyā* context of village authority has constantly struggled with a *de facto* acephalous structure, in which reversible hierarchies of kinship and affinity offer immediate constituencies of opposition to any externally 'legible' (Scott 1998) singular authority, that entities like user groups are intended to be. Alternatively, creative acts of performative solidarity with the park authorities are not entirely absent, as evidenced dramatically during my fieldwork in the common participation of villagers with the ritualised distribution of the state hunters' wild boar meat. Here a bridge of common interests and reciprocity between villagers and park guardians appeared, in which the inequality of power was validated from below.

My goal in this chapter has been to put questions of how people locate themselves as actors in places, in relationships and in problematic circumstances of livelihood. These

questions have been quite peripheral to the project of nature conservation till the last two decades, when policy rhetoric has turned more favourably to indigenous viewpoints, and anthropologists have even dared to ask what might be the unintended consequences of regimes for environmental protection founded on scientific parameters for intervention (Fisher and Gilmour 1999:185)? However, the accounts and characterisations of local culture and knowledge favoured by conservation institutions are far from those recognised by contemporary social theory. Rather than returning to nature and culture I suggest a focus on the ragged and unstable experiences of interaction and subjectivity in a world of differential powers will bring human-environmental relationships into new light, and interrogate the diminished relational possibilities for human agency that attach to an environment conceived as 'out there' and under threat.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> M. Aris (1990) gives an eloquent account of this approach for the Himalayas, paraphrasing the words of historian Keith Thomas concerning the classifying power that the term 'nature' assumed from the eighteenth century. But imposing this classifying characteristic to the Himalayas deserves greater attention to the effects of such a transposition across cultural and historical contexts. Thomas' argument is that 'nature' assumes a historically unique semantic and classificatory conceptual space in the European enlightenment.

<sup>ii</sup> Concepts such as 'worldviews' can be too easily deployed as implying cultural breaks when categories such as yak-herder and urban shopkeeper are contrasted. Many people have both in the same family. 'Tibetan' patterns of polyandrous domestic

economy are known in the literature to combine such occupational differences with regularity.

<sup>iii</sup> Nightingale in this volume takes up the issue as one of seeing forests inseparably from social, cultural and political relations, and Aggarwal's chapter notes the instrumental possibilities of making over forests to local deities' protection, on which point Sutherland (2006) gives a remarkable account of 'rule by deity' for that same corner of the Indian Himalaya.

<sup>iv</sup> "[C]hanges in human subjectivities, as these occur concomitantly with changes in institutionalized governance of the environment, are the least well understood and investigated of all environment-related changes" Agrawal (2003:258).

<sup>v</sup> For example, the e-conference 'Integrating Mountain Culture and Natural Resource Management'. ([www.icimod.org/iym.2002/culture/mcnrm](http://www.icimod.org/iym.2002/culture/mcnrm)) website visited 24th July 2001.

<sup>vi</sup> See e.g Pei Shengji (1996) for a normative and functionalist view of cultural values as regulating people's environmental interactions.

<sup>vii</sup> This approach contrasts with the disaggregation of human-environmental relations into utilitarian resource interests on one hand, and cultural models of sacred landscapes, stable values of traditional heritage, and ethno-pharmacology on the other.

<sup>viii</sup> See March (2002:45) for a vivid account of pastoral drudgery by a Tamang woman married to a herder.

<sup>ix</sup> Buffer zone management committees have been initiated in the park since 1998, but these have yet to prove themselves as a popular mechanism of participatory resource use (Campbell 2005b).

<sup>x</sup> Bhatt (2003) discusses the royal hunting tours up to the time of multi-party democracy, as visible performances of state power and patronage that drew park staff into close identifications with the monarchy.

<sup>xi</sup> Ramble (1995) points out there are within the Tibetan tradition more objectifying accounts of human presence (and distance) from environmental forces.

<sup>xii</sup> For the Tamangs of Rasuwa, territoriality would signal the shift from their place of residence being a neglected zone of forest to becoming a national park and tourist destination. Their citizenship would have to cover their low caste status, their predominant relation to other classes of society through manual labour, and the changes in notions of collectivity brought about by Nepal's janajati movement of ethnicities, and the globalising routes of sub-continental and international labour migration.

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