

Report on Doctoral Research – Richard F. Salisbury Award

Context

After a long winter, spring had finally come to Ladakh in the Indian Himalayas. Everywhere in the Sham Valley, people were leaving the comfort of their kitchens and the warm fires of their wood stoves as the temperature outside was becoming more and more agreeable. The blanket of snow covering the surrounding summits was slowly melting, the precious meltwater feeding the streams that irrigate terraced fields through ingeniously complex arrays of channels. Soon, the glacier meltwater would quicken the current of the streams on which the region's agrarian village economy depends. We were in Ang, in the upper part of Tingmosgang village. *Abi* (grandmother) Lobsang was preparing tea for us. I was accompanied by my research assistant, Pema.

Misfortune seemed to befall the Buddhist community of Ang with particular insistence that spring. This was the sowing season and the whole hamlet was short of water to irrigate the fields. There is less water in spring because there is less snow these days, she explained. When I asked her why there was less snow, *abi* Lobsang paused for a moment, pensive. "It could be due to the warmer temperature", she suggested, "it is much warmer in winter these days". My question having piqued her curiosity, *abi* Lobsang carried on with her observations. The water in the stream that passes through the village was in the past much higher in springtime, a change she attributed to the recession of the local glacier and decreased snowfall. *Abi* Lobsang then recollected how, when she was young, villagers would bring charcoal into the mountains in order "to grow" one of the glacier that feeds the stream of the village. They would do this "when there was a fear the glacier would go", she explained.

As a young girl, she had found it a pleasant activity to go around with other villagers collecting charcoal from the fireplaces of every household. The villagers fulfilled a community responsibility by providing charcoal in order to make this small glacier grow. "This is what people would do", she said, reminiscing. I heard elders give such quasi-oneiric accounts of villagers trekking to glaciers with bags full of charcoal on numerous occasions in the Sham Valley. All indications are that that this practice today belongs to the past. Elders saw it performed in their childhood, but not since. "Why aren't people doing this today to try to help with the water problems?" I asked. Most Ladakhis I met have observed the glacier of their village recede over the years. "I don't know", she said, adding, "things were different before, now people have become really empty at heart". Such reflections were a leitmotiv that suffused the discourse of Ladakhi elders.

The practices through which Ladakhis once engaged with glaciers constitute the point of entry to my study of knowledge and relation to place in Ladakh for this research project. How have people come to lose their intimate connection to glaciers? How is it that the prospect of losing glaciers in the past compelled community mobilization, whereas today, the retreat of glaciers, widely acknowledged among Ladakhis, has failed to elicit a similar reaction? Whether or not such practices were effective in cultivating glaciers and maintaining water supplies is not what concerns us at present. Importantly for our discussion, however, *abi* Lobsang's account is evocative of a change in people's relationship with glaciers, and, by extension, with Ladakh as a place.

My doctoral dissertation is in many ways an exploration that seeks to understand what changing glacier practices say about a changing relationship with place and, more broadly, people's disconnection from the natural environment. Along the way, I will consider a series of questions that address different aspects of these changes. What factors contribute to sever a previously intimate link between people and the environment, including its natural elements, such as glaciers? What place did glaciers hold in the Ladakhi cosmology and how has it changed? What role has the Indian state played in redefining how people engage with places? What do these changing relations with a place tell us about local knowledge of the environment? Ultimately, what does the case of Ladakh tell us about the human dimensions of climate change?

Landscape Ethnography

This research project is an ethnographic study that examines the encounter between, on the one hand, the militarization and the bureaucratization of the Indian Himalayan region of Ladakh and, on the other, the local sacred and agro-pastoralist landscapes. The dissertation argues that the rationalization of Ladakh's natural environment by the state has significantly altered the local population's engagement with the environment, contributing to the fragmentation of the ties that unite the realm of nature and the realm of human beings in the local cosmology. The dissertation also seeks to demonstrate that the encounter between the state and local knowledge systems have significant implications for how the people of Ladakh perceive and respond to the environmental changes currently affecting the region. In bringing into conversation questions of territoriality with the material dimension of the landscape of Ladakh, my study also demonstrates the spatial organization and configuration of nature, culture and power.

Since the past decades, at the same time as Ladakh has experienced significant political, economic, and social change, largely resulting from the strategic position of the region as a border area, its natural environment is depleting: glaciers are receding, snowfall and rainfall have become scarcer, and natural springs are drying up; in addition, since vegetation in the mountains is depleting, wild animals forage closer to villages, attracting predators that prey on farm animals. In short, the landscape of Ladakh has changed significantly during the lifetime of Ladakhi elders.

In order to examine these questions I proceed by doing a "landscape ethnography", namely an analytical description of Ladakh as a place and the elements of its natural environment, from the perspective of state and non-state actors. Long defined as a static object of human observation, landscape has become the subject of growing interest for anthropologists, archeologists, cultural geographers, and historians. The present thesis, likewise, explores many themes that find common ground in the landscape of Ladakh. In the emerging literature, anthropologists give centrality to native perspectives¹, revealing how landscape constitutes a fundamental feature in people's existence, thus transcending the representational character of former approaches and moving away from notions of "framing convention" (Hirsch 1995:1).

¹ For scholarship in anthropology and other humanities that adopt a landscape perspective, see Gupta and Ferguson (1997), Ingold (1993), Tilley (1994), Hirsch and O'Hanlon (1995), Schama (1995), Feld and Basso (1996), Cosgrove and Daniels (1998), Bender (2002).

Landscape is often the prism through which authors investigate places and spaces. The theorizing approach to the humanity of landscapes (see Basso 1996; Cruikshank 2005; Thornton 2008) together with the scholarship on space and place (see Low and Lawrence-Zuniga 2003), demonstrate that landscape practices are intertwined with various forms of power, highlighting how places are socially constructed and how related experiences need to be culturally relativized (Ogden 2011:27). To make a landscape ethnography is therefore to attend to the encounter between ideas related to a specific landscape and the power relations involved in its production.

Despite efforts to conceive of landscape as more than a backdrop to culture and societies, the elements that represent landscape in much of the literature remain generally static and few studies have given extensive consideration to questions of human engagement with landscapes in a context of environmental change². This thesis examines environmental change as it is lived and perceived by those whom it affects directly. Processes linked to climate change transforming the landscape of Ladakh today include glacier recession, mountain desertification, changing rainfall patterns, and the drying up of water sources. Other changes, such as the decrease in cattle numbers and the progressive abandonment of farmland, are closely linked to state practices that are transforming Ladakh as a place. Hence, environmental changes in Ladakh are both the outcome of natural phenomena and human intervention resulting from the state's conception of the landscape.

By expanding on previous scholarship on the theorization of the landscape, in this study, I examine the political, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions of these integrated environmental changes. This places my approach in dialogue with the second generation of political ecology and, in particular, its orientation towards practice theory (see Biersack and Greenberg 2006). My underlying aim is to study the links between human actions and broader structural forces in order to reveal how acts carry their own rules and limitations (Ortner 2006). Applying this framework to the analysis of a landscape-in-the-making, I examine the actions through which people engage with the environment. These actions, I argue, are constrained by the state and, more specifically, by how the state conceives the landscape of Ladakh.

Within my conceptual approach, the landscape of Ladakh is tridimensional and comprises a sacred, an agro-pastoralist and a geopolitical constituent (what I term “border” landscape). While these three landscapes are entangled and form the whole landscape of Ladakh, each of them is characterized by specific forms of knowledge and specific sets of practices. The salience of each of these views (sacred, agro-pastoralist, and border) in the production of Ladakh as a place is characterized by unequal power relations so that the way the landscape is lived and the ideas that frame its practices are not always, as mentioned, in harmony.

Work Accomplished in the Field

During the course of 14 months of field research in Ladakh, I recorded 85 hours of semi-structured interviews with 109 respondents – mostly lay people, as well as a dozen religious

² Cruikshank (2005) is a notable exception.

experts – the majority of whom were over 65 years old³. I collected secondary data at various governmental and non-governmental organizations. I also collected “landscape data”: (1) I have identified elements that form the sacred landscape in the Sham Valley and I have recorded associated narratives and ritual practices; (2) I have identified elements that composed the border/military landscape, and I have identified associated practices; (3) I mapped the pastoralist landscape and I have identified associated practices. I also conducted a participatory mapping exercise. I trekked, along with two former cattle herders (see below), to the glacier of a village. I took photographs of the glacier, which I have shown to elders so they could identify the past dimensions of the glacier.

Elements of Analysis

Ladakh remained outside the scope of the bureaucratic state during the British colonial administration and was governed by the Dogra of Kashmir. At this time, and for about two decades after the independence of India, the household structure (extended family through polyandrous marriage) played a key role in the way Ladakhis engaged with and knew the environment by enabling various occupations – cattle rearing, agriculture, trading. The events of the first war with Pakistan that followed the partition of India, as they unfolded in the Sham Valley in 1948, were a moment of rupture in everyday life and marked the onset of profound changes in the region. After the war, Ladakh found itself refashioned into a strategic border area following India’s independence and successive wars with Pakistan and China.

The production of the state in the region has taken a distinct form, namely the taming of its mountains, primarily through infrastructure development and the co-optation of Ladakhis’ ability to navigate the landscape for military purposes by forming the Ladakh Scouts regiment, with crucial consequences for demographic dynamics. Far-reaching militarization has restructured Ladakh’s economy, consequently redefining household structure, contributing to village depopulation, displacing the centrality of agro-pastoralist activities and, as the dissertation argues, significantly altering the local population’s engagement with the environment. The increasing rationalization of the outlook on the environment today contributes to the fragmentation of links between the natural and human realms within the local cosmology and the abandonment of related ritual practices.

Concurrently, the region is impacted by distinct effects of climate change, in particular glacier recession. The majority of my informants for this research project are elderly Ladakhis and their perspective on climate change, besides relying on empirical observations, draws significantly from Buddhist notions of morality. In Buddhist cosmology, humans affect their environment through both the physical aspects and the moral qualities of their actions. In other words, as Harvey (2000:152-153) explains, “karmic effects sometimes catch up with people via their environment”.

As I delved into my fieldwork in Ladakh and began to speak with informants, I quickly realized that, in their view, the erosion of morality was manifest in the failure of too many people to

³ The vast majority of my informants were farmers; a limited number were former traders, teachers, or had been employed in various occupations for the government; some were former servicemen; many others had worked during a decade or more for the army, often as porters on a contractual basis.

adequately take care of land and livestock, in a rise of self-interest at the expense of community values, and how all this had changed life in the villages. These changes are intricately linked to the recent history of the region and the socio-economic changes that are profoundly refashioning the region today: in extracting labour from people in order to form the bureaucratic and military state, the Indian state has contributed to break an existing security net in Ladakhi society. The consequences are particularly salient for people of older generations. Changing social practices and the rural exodus suggest that many more elderly Ladakhis will soon be left to their own devices.

In Ladakh, glaciers used to be, in the past, the focus of a number of a community rituals and empirical practices. The redefinition of Ladakh as a place after the independence of India has greatly contributed to the rationalization of the outlook on the environment and therefore to the disentanglement of a holistic worldview, which integrates the natural, cultural, and social worlds. Moreover, the rise of individualism leads to the abandonment of many community practices. As a consequence of this, people are increasingly abandoning glaciers practices, despite a context of glacier recession.

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Short Précis (French)

Le présent projet est une étude ethnographique qui examine le savoir en tant que pratique située au Ladakh, dans l'Himalaya indien. Elle analyse les implications socioculturelles des deux moteurs de changement en jeu au Ladakh: l'un est d'origine socio-économique et lié à la production du Ladakh en tant que zone frontalière, tandis que l'autre est de nature environnementale et entraîné par les changements climatiques. Alors que le Ladakh est demeuré hors de la portée de l'État bureaucratique pendant l'administration coloniale britannique, la région s'est trouvée reconfigurée en zone frontalière stratégique après l'indépendance de l'Inde des suites des guerres successives avec le Pakistan et la Chine. L'Indépendance a mené à la partition de l'Inde et du Pakistan en 1947; cette thèse examine la portée à long terme des événements traumatisants de la partition tels qu'ils se sont déroulés au Ladakh et comment les Ladakhis établissent des liens entre ces événements et les changements climatiques. L'État indien s'est produit dans la région à travers une volonté de dominer les montagnes, principalement par le développement d'infrastructures et par l'intégration du savoir local des Ladakhis dans

l'appareil militaire. La militarisation a restructuré l'économie du Ladakh, redéfini la structure des ménages, contribué à l'exode rural, déplacé la centralité des activités agropastorales et, tel que la dissertation le soutient, altéré de manière significative la connexion de la population locale avec l'environnement. La rationalisation croissante de la perspective sur l'environnement aujourd'hui contribue à la fragmentation des liens qui unissent les domaines naturels et humains dans la cosmologie locale de même qu'à l'abandon des pratiques rituelles connexes. Parallèlement, la région est touchée par des effets distincts des changements climatiques, en particulier la récession des glaciers. La thèse juxtapose l'expérience subjective de ces vastes changements dans la vie quotidienne des villageois de la Vallée de Sham avec les faits historiques environnementaux, démontrant ainsi que les événements historiques locaux influent sur les perceptions des changements environnementaux. L'analyse démontre qu'un phénomène objectif tel que la récession des glaciers est interprété à travers des réalités locales. Plus précisément, selon la conception du monde locale, un glacier en retrait est une figure rhétorique d'une transformation de la condition humaine. Comme le fait valoir la dissertation, l'interprétation culturelle ne constitue pas un obstacle à l'objectivité de l'histoire naturelle de la cosmologie locale. L'interprétation culturelle et l'expérience empirique s'avèrent par ailleurs essentielles à la vitalité des connaissances locales sur l'environnement et à la performance des pratiques associées.