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the night-side of zangskar: spirits, landscape, and the uncanny

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ABSTRACT

Anthropological discussions of place and landscape have tended to be dominated by a focus on the Heideggerian concept of "dwelling", with an emphasis on values of wisdom, belonging and connectedness. This approach privileges descriptions of knowledge and harmony over those of uncertainty and fear, with the effect of obscuring the less positive associations of landscape. In this article, drawing on fieldwork in the predominantly Buddhist valley of Zangskar in the western Indian Himalaya, I will suggest that local stories of encounters with spirits instead demonstrate a sense of the "uncanny": a disorienting mingling of the familiar and the strange that emerges from the limitations of ordinary human knowledge and perception. The Zangskari landscape encompasses hidden places and villages of semi-human beings, and when night falls it takes on another aspect: in encounters with spirits and the "hidden people", boundaries are dissolved and the categories of the strange and the familiar are collapsed. These beings take on almost-human forms and project both an ambiguous familiarity and a basic otherness, revealed in the darkness, that stands behind the appearances of day.

Keywords: Ladakh, Zangskar, landscape, spirits, dwelling

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Introduction

One afternoon in November 2014 I walked back to the Himalayan village of Karsha in the central Zangskar Valley – where I was staying at the time – with Rigdzin, a villager who works as a tour guide in other parts of the region during the summer but returns to his home in the winter months. Some years ago, Rigdzin told me, his mother's father disappeared. It was three or four days before he was found, walking out of the mountains, making his way back into his home village of Rinam — dazed, dizzy, and with no memory of where he had been. What had happened to him, I asked? Oh, he had been taken by the *tsen* (Tibetan: *btsan*), the red-faced spirits with hollow backs that wander the roads at night.

This is not an uncommon story. Throughout the region, almost everyone I spoke to knew someone – a named person, a relative, or neighbour – who had been abducted by spirits in the past. The forms of these fragmentary accounts are almost all the same: someone vanishes for a few days, and is later found, unconscious or dazed, with no memory of the intervening period. Some later recall sketchy details of being carried away beneath the earth, but for most the whole period remains a blank. People blame the *tsen*, or *lhande* (T: *lha 'dre*; spirits, in a broad sense), or the female *manmo* (T: *sman mo*) that live in high places, or the *beyulpa* and *bilingpa* (T: *sbas yul pa, sbas gling pa*), the hidden people. These accounts are oddly elliptical: they are defined by what they omit, by the space of silence that lies between the disappearance and the rediscovery. They tell us only that somewhere, out there, people vanish. Most return; some do not. They go to places that are not on any map, and when they come back they are dizzy, or unconscious, or ill, and no-one knows in detail where they have gone.

Accounts like these gesture towards the presence of threat in the landscape, the limitations of human awareness and, by extension, the strategies that people employ to disentangle themselves from the world in which they live. Yet anthropological approaches to the topic of landscape have increasingly tended to overlook or gloss over these themes in favour of an emphasis on knowledge, belonging and environmental perception, often grounded in references to Heidegger's concepts of "dwelling" and "being-in-the-world" (Basso 1926; Ingold 2000, 2011; Tilley 1994). This emphasis has effectively replaced the constructionist model that dominated studies during the 1980s (Cosgrove 1984; Daniels and Cosgrove 1988), freeing the topic from a reliance on nature/culture and subject/object distinctions that positioned human actors as distanced observers of culturally produced images. And yet, as I will suggest, these approaches offer a skewed perspective on the topic.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork from the central Zangskar valley in the western Indian Himalaya, and on descriptions of spirits and places that I heard from Buddhist laity in the region, I will argue for a revised understanding of landscape that

addresses these concerns. This approach emphasises areas of doubt and uncertainty, foregrounding the "uncanny" qualities of landscape that emerge when the familiar world reveals a strange and even hostile aspect. Focusing on one story in particular – an account of a man's dealings with his spirit neighbours – I will suggest that such accounts are rooted in a basic unease concerning human immersion in the world. Dwelling as it has been used by anthropologists is, I will suggest, not a mundane reality but an ideal that is rarely attained and often undesirable; and in Zangskar, the demands of human life normally work *against* the open and participatory mode of existence implied by the concept.

I work from an understanding of landscape as both the totality of known places – "the world as it is known to those who dwell therein, who inhabit its places and journey along the paths connecting them", in Ingold's definition (2000, 193) – as well as a penumbra that is only glimpsed or suspected, defined by the negative space of paths not taken, places avoided and areas that remain permanently inaccessible. In drawing on Zangskari stories in this discussion, I seek to follow Allerton's discussion of speech in Manggarai on the Indonesian island of Flores: taking speech and narrative seriously as *activities* that play a role in constituting landscape. In Allerton's approach, 'talk is emplaced, becoming both an act of acknowledgment of a landscape of historical connections and an element in the ongoing constitution of that landscape' (2012, 178–179).[1]

I argue that Zangskari stories incorporate ambiguous elements that draw attention to areas of absence and irreducible doubt, and that these narrative qualities reflect anxieties about the limitations of ordinary human knowledge and perception. These accounts gesture towards the essentially unknowable quality of landscape, and to the unsettled or uncanny side of familiar places. This sense of the uncanny emerges from human immersion in a world that is beyond human understanding: it is a consequence of entanglement with the land, not of separation, and represents an inversion of the ideal presented by "dwelling". This is most apparent at night, when the landscape takes on a threatening aspect dominated by uncertain and unreliable forces that readily flow into the familiar areas of human habitation.

Context: Spirits and Landscape in Zangskar

Zangskar sits on the western edge of the Tibetan Plateau and forms the southern part of the former Buddhist kingdom of Ladakh. Until its creation as a separate 'Union Territory' in 2019 the sparsely-populated, arid and mountainous region of Ladakh accounted for half of the geographical area of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, administered by India but fiercely contested by Pakistan.[2] Zangskar itself has little direct strategic importance, and has been late to benefit from the roads and infrastructure built throughout the region to support the

Indian army. It remains largely cut-off during much of the year (from mid-November to early June) when heavy snowfall blocks the high passes that grant access to the valley. Until the completion of a long-delayed road to Ladakh's regional capital, Zangskaris have only one winter route to the outside world: the *chadar lam* (T: *ca dar lam*), the ice path formed by the partial freezing of the River Zangskar between mid-January and mid-February. While tourism in Ladakh booms during the summer months and the brief *chadar* season, Zangskaris have struggled to take advantage of an industry that is largely dominated by urban Ladakhis and by Indian companies from outside the region.

Zangskar is a predominantly Buddhist region with a small Muslim minority; and, as is typical across the Himalaya, local religion is defined by the presence of a multitude of spirits and deities that embody and inhabit the land. Karsha, the village in central Zangskar where I stayed for a short period in the autumn and winter of 2014, is watched over by the god of a mountain peak that stands high above the area of human settlement and provides the glacial meltwater on which the village relies (Figure 1). The fields around Karsha are dotted with shrines to subterranean *lu* (T: *klu*; spirits of water and fertility), while houses are daubed with red ochre paint to divert the wandering, red-skinned *tsen*. Every household and Buddhist monastery has its own protector installed in a rooftop shrine, and every settled area of the valley has its own spirit-landlord, its *sadak* (T: *sa bdag*), to whom the territory of Zangksar ultimately

FIG 1
Karsha village, central Zangskar.

belongs. Yet many of these beings have an uneasy reality, and people rarely agree on exactly which spirits are real and which merely stories. Despite this, the danger that they pose is widely recognised and addressed through ritual action, the employment of apotropaic devices and avoidance behaviour.

Knowledge about spirits depends on a mix of personal experience, story and rumour, and is pieced together through the circulation of fragmentary accounts of meetings between humans and other beings: a car crash following an encounter with a *shinde* (a spirit of the dead; T: *gshin 'dre*), a sighting of a tall, dark figure in a field, or the disappearance of a relative. Rigdzin's story of his grandfather's abduction by *tsen* is a typical example, and accentuates the seemingly incomplete nature of these accounts through the description of the gap in his memory. This break in consciousness experienced by abductees is comparable to Ladakhi descriptions of spirit possession, where the arrival of an incoming entity – whether a deity, witch or spirit of the dead – causes the host to black out for the duration of possession (Day 1989, 423). Yet in accounts of abduction this space of absence is located in the landscape itself, and corresponds to a period in which the abductee vanishes from the known world.

At times, it seemed to me that spirits were being attached to cases that were entangled with more mundane issues. In one account from eastern Ladakh, for instance, the regular disappearances of a young woman (attributed to *tsen*) were bound up with her attempts to avoid her drunken and abusive father. Yet whether these events are ultimately attributed to spirits or to human action, the effect remains less than comforting. The lack of detail leaves only the sense of a vaguely defined threat that lurks on the edges of known places, hiding within those blind regions into which people disappear. It is not the presence of spirits that makes such accounts unsettling; it is what they point to. These descriptions indicate a landscape that "opens onto the unknown", in the words of Jean-Luc Nancy, one that begins with "a loss of sight" at the point where the known world vanishes into darkness (2005, 53, 59). This is an understanding of landscape that is shaped less by knowledge, presence or what John Wylie terms the "coincidence or co-presence of self and landscape" than by spaces of absence (2009, 287).

Wylie has further argued for the essential impossibility "of unifying the visible and invisible, seer and seen" and for the role of "absence, dislocation and distancing" in the constitution of landscapes (*ibid.*); yet this is not quite the approach I intend to follow here. The absence at the heart of Ladakhi accounts of spirit abduction is one that ignores any distinction between self and landscape, and that sees the consciousness of the abductee displaced through their disappearance. Total immersion of self in the landscape – the sense of "co-presence" described by Wylie –

is a genuine possibility, but one that is experienced as an

overwhelming threat associated with areas that lie beyond the limits of knowledge. In this context, human existence depends on a conscious disentanglement from the influences of the surrounding world; and this, I suggest, points to the essentially unsettled quality of life in and with the landscape.

This is something acknowledged by Nancy, who states that the landscape "is the space of strangeness or estrangement and of the disappearance of the gods"; but the landscapes that he is describing are those of Western Europe, and are marked by a historic alienation that he appears to identify with separation from the land and the decline of paganism. "[D]epopulated, the landscape estranges," he tells us, "it renders uncanny" (Nancy 2005, 60–61). Nancy is responding here to Heidegger, and in so doing assumes the existence of a bygone golden age in which human existence was characterised by dwelling: a state in which life, as for the peasants of the Black Forest, was organised through "the self-sufficiency of the power to let earth and sky, divinities and mortals enter in *simple oneness* into things" (Heidegger 1977, 361–362; emphasis in original). This is a romanticised image of a way of life, and it gains its force through contrast to the world the writer knows: the industrialised landscapes of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Europe, where human existence seems alienated from the land and "divinities" through some historic fall from grace.

Anthropological uses of this model have not always relied on such stark contrasts, but have tended to take the ideal of dwelling as a universal norm that manifests through different social and cultural forms. This is apparent in Keith Basso's defining essay on Western Apache landscape, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, which describes how people cultivate a sense of place through attentive awareness directed through speech and song. In the Apache context, stories act as teaching aids that encourage the development of "wisdom" through the observation and knowledge of places, and a "sense of place" is nurtured through embedded knowledge driven by "sentiments of inclusion, belonging, and connectedness to the past". Aside from a brief mention of "the forces of fear" and the efforts that people must make to overcome "uncertainty and doubt", Basso's characterisation of this process maintains a consistently positive tone: places, he notes, "are really very good" (Basso 1996, 79, 84–85, 87).[3]

But stories in Zangskar are not typically focused on the cultivation of "wisdom", and do not emphasise inclusion or connectedness so much as the unreliability of the landscape and the presence of uncertain threat. Both fragmentary accounts like Rigdzin's description of his grandfather's disappearance and longer stories with clear narrative structures employ absence and ambiguity to evoke the strange and unreliable qualities of familiar places. They focus on intrusions from areas that remain beyond human knowledge, and show the known landscape becoming unpredictable and haunted by night. Places reveal an

unsettled or "uncanny" quality, defined, following Freud's discussion of the etymology of the German *unheimlich*, as an "ambivalent" confusion of the familiar and the strange (Freud 2003 [1919], 132–134). This ambivalence is central to the meaning of the term.

For Freud, the cultural uncanny was bound up with a "return of the repressed" in which archaic "spiritual forces" lingered on as an eerie presence (Taussig 1993, 269 n. 16); and yet Zangskar is thronged with spirits and deities that embody and watch over the mountains, glaciers, rivers and fields, and form the primary mode through which people encounter and understand the land. Similarly, the sense of the uncanny described by Nancy (2005, 61), as with the "absence" described by Wylie (2009, 287), depends on a sense of estrangement: a loss of connection to the landscape, following a drift away from some former state of co-existence. This is established on Heidegger's understanding of *unheimlichkeit*: the "unhomeliness" or uncanniness of human existence, an unsettled "rootlessness", a fear that "human beings can *never* be at home in the world" (Dreyfus 1991, 37; cf. Withy 2015, 2–4). For Heidegger (as for Basso) it is this that drives the need for dwelling, for wisdom of places, for harmony with one's environment. Yet this works from the assumption that such a state is both possible and desirable; the Zangskari attitude to the landscape begins, instead, from a sense of the essential limitations of human awareness and the risk of being overwhelmed. The uncanniness of the landscape emerges not from a fear of distancing, but from a sense of the fragility of human life amidst the confused and entangled ground of existence.

Gifts from the Hidden People

Popular descriptions of the Zangskar valley tend to focus on the image of the so-called "supine demoness" (T: *srin mo gan kyal*), a representation that seems to originate in a medieval record of land grants held by one of Zangskar's older monasteries (Crook 1994, 435–436; Francke 1926, 152–153) but which has filtered into oral discourse in several slightly distorted forms. In this image, the valley is described as having the shape of a monstrous demoness lying on her back. The parts of her body are marked out and held down by the hemispherical Buddhist monuments called *chorten* (T: *mchod rten*; *stūpa* in Sanskrit), and the text describes a network of ancient temples scattered across Zangskar that pin down her head, her heart and her legs. Men in Karsha identified two domed hills topped by *chorten* on either side of the River Zangskar as the breasts of the demoness, a detail that does not appear in the original description (Figure 2).

This is a common trope in Tibetan Buddhist descriptions of landscape, appearing most famously in geomantic conceptions of the Lhasa Valley in Central Tibet (Mills 2007, 8–9). Such images represent the land itself as exerting a demonic influence that is expressed through its effects on human life: the unrestrained land falls prey to earthquakes and floods, and to the banditry

FIG 2
The hill marking the heart of the demoness at Pibiting, central Zangskar.

and irreligious behaviour of its human inhabitants, while the "non-human" or "anti-human" beings (T: *mi ma yin*; the native spirits of the Himalaya) gather and roam freely (Gyatso 1987, 37–39; Sørensen 1994, 253–256). Buddhist monuments – exemplified by the *chorten* of Zangskar – mark out the features of the monstrous land, and work to convert its power to make it safe for human habitation and the dissemination of Buddhism. Human settlement is established against the land, not in harmony with it; yet this begins from the understanding that humans form part of their domain, embedded within the landscape and subject to influences that emerge from below.

In this context, architecture works to rewrite landscape in order to redirect such influences; and Buddhism is represented as a civilising project that brings order to a basically hostile and intransigent land. In the past this process was regularly co-opted by the kings of the region, something visible outside Karsha in the presence of one of three *maṇi ringmo* (T: *ma ṇi ring mo*): long, white-painted walls topped by stones bearing the Buddhist *mantra oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ* (Figure 3). Constructed by the seventeenth-century king Deldan Namgyal, the walls watch over paths into the villages of Karsha and Pibiting, and into Zangskar's de facto capital of Padum. Viewed from above they ostensibly form an immense triangle, an image described in the medieval record of land grants: a Buddhist *dharmōdaya* (T: *chos 'byung*), the generative ground of all phenomena (Beer 1999, 353). Like the *chorten* that mark out the body of the demoness, these *maṇi ringmo* work to make a textual Buddhist symbol – a

FIG 3
The *maṇi ringmo* outside Karsha.

"cultural image", of a sort (Daniels and Cosgrove 1988, 1) – visible in the landscape, and in so doing emphasise the authority of the former kings of Ladakh.

Yet at night, the wall outside Karsha is widely known as an especially bad and dangerous place. Referred to in stories as the *maṇi nagpo*, the "black *maṇi*-wall", it becomes a haunt for spectral *lhande*. In this it is typical of such sites across Ladakh: Buddhist monuments built just outside villages, routinely identified as meeting-places for harmful spirits. While the reality of these beings is always open to doubt, the areas where they gather nevertheless become focal points for avoidance after dark. Night transmutes the familiar landscape into something threatening, embodied by spirits with little regard for spatial divisions observed by day. The red-faced *tsen* that took Rigdzin's grandfather, for example, are said to use invisible roads (*tsenlam*, T: *btsan lam*) that pass right through the village and around human houses. They are, if anything, more likely to be encountered in areas of human settlement than elsewhere.

This is not always the case. On one occasion Rigdzin took me to meet Mutup, a middle-aged man living on the edge of Karsha in a house that looks out towards the *maṇi ringmo*. Mutup had a story about his grandfather Kunga, who had been a famous *amchi* (T: *em chi*): a specialist in the Tibetan medical system of Sowa Rigpa (T: *gso ba rig pa*). The efficacy of an *amchi* depends not only on their knowledge and skill, but on less definable personal qualities; and Kunga's success originated in his *pharha tonpo* (T: *spar kha mthon po*), his high vitality or life-force. Under

normal circumstances spirits pose little threat to one with high *pharha*, who can walk alone at night without worrying about the things they might meet on the road; and as a result, Kunga was well known throughout Zangskar for his power as a physician whose skills who could be invoked to defend against wandering *lhande*, *tsen* and the like.

His house –where his grandson now lives – sits on the eastern edge of Karsha. One evening, as it grew dark, he was sitting inside when he heard someone shouting out his name: Kunga, Kunga! Stepping outside, he saw that the *beyulpa*, the hidden people, had come to his gate and were calling for him. They had heard of his skill as an *amchi* and had come to seek his help on behalf of their children. He took a horse and followed them to their village, beyond the end of the *maṇi ringmo* and up in the hills to the east of Karsha, somewhere across a small lake; they made the way clear for him and led him into the their village, the *basbeyul*, a place normally hidden from human sight.

In the hidden village Kunga was taken to see the children of the *beyulpa*, who were sleeping on black-and-white yak wool rugs of a traditional Zangskari style. Kunga had brought medicine – pills made from minerals and herbs – that he administered to them, and repeated Buddhist *mantras* on their behalf. For treating their children, the *beyulpa* paid the *amchi* with a number of black goats, a large copper plate and a handful of *phemar* (T: *phye mar*), a sweet edible dough made from roasted barley flour and butter. His grandson still has the plate, somewhere.

Kunga spent the whole night in the *beyul*. When he got up to leave, the *beyulpa* led him out of their village, down from the hills and along the *maṇi ringmo* back to Karsha; there, they left him at the gate of his house, disappearing as the sun began to rise. But as day broke and the *beyulpa* departed, Kunga found that the *phemar* they had given him had turned to white cow dung in his hands. In the days that followed, he discovered that the attention of the hidden people remained fixed on him, and that they could now enter his house whenever they pleased. The *beyulpa* visited him invisibly, night after night, and Kunga soon felt his *pharha* (his vitality) beginning to suffer: his confidence waned and his skills as an *amchi* began to decline.

To protect against the *beyulpa*, Kunga constructed a *rigsum gonbo* (T: *rigs gsum dgon po*) overlooking his front door: three *chorten* in a line, painted red, white and black, and dedicated to the Buddhist divinities Mañjuśrī, Avalokiteśvara and Vajrapāṇi (the manifestations of enlightened wisdom, compassion and force) (Figure 4).[4] As an apotropaic device, the *rigsum gonbo* protects through its perspective: it watches over an area, repelling malevolent entities through the power of its threefold gaze. The figures for whom the *chorten* stand possess "pure" or perfect vision (T: *dag snang*) as a consequence of their superior "wisdom" (T: *shes rab*). The Sanskrit name of Avalokiteśvara, the figure evoked by the white *chorten*, translates as "the lord who

FIG 4
The *rigsum gonbo* outside Kunga's house.

looks down [upon the world, with compassion]", and reflects the fundamentally detached nature of these beings. They are unaffected by the dangers of the world because they are beyond the world, and the ultimate wisdom they possess is bound up with their distanced perspective. The *rigsum gonbo* works by drawing on their perfect vision to compensate for human inadequacy, and Kunga's use of the device was founded on an acknowledgment of the limitations of human awareness that treats human immersion in the world as a vulnerable and undesirable condition. After its construction, according to the story, the *beyulpa* never bothered him again.

In a sense, the *rigsum gonbo* and the story that explains it act as adverts for Kunga's power as an *amchi*: so good, even the hidden people came out to seek his services. Compared to the abduction accounts mentioned earlier, this story offers far more description of what happens to its protagonist in the realm of the spirits; and yet we are told simply that the hidden village is exactly like a human village. The notable details – the lack of a cash economy, the presence of traditional black-and-white rugs – apply as much to the human occupants of Zangskar in Mutup's grandfather's time. The *beyulpa* are depicted as utterly familiar, a nocturnal mirror image of human society. It is only in the last part of the story that their harmful and alien quality is made apparent, with the inevitability of a bad dream — yet this only serves to emphasise quite how like real people they are.

Normally, high *pharha* ought to protect against harm from spirits; but for Kunga, this personal quality – and its manifestation through his ability as an *amchi* – is precisely what draws the attention of the *beyulpa* towards him in the first place. It is this

attention that causes him to suffer, and that threatens the very power that the story advertises. In this, the harm brought by the hidden people mirrors the process called *mikha* (T: *mi kha*): literally the "mouths of people", a term sometimes glossed as "gossip" (Kapstein 1997, 528), but with local connotations of envious or admiring attention. *Mikha* is a force that acts through relations between neighbours, and overlaps in its causes and effects with the more serious processes involved in witchcraft possession: outward shows of success and happiness (as at a wedding, or through the ostentatious display of wealth) draw attention that can be admiring or resentful, and this drains the strength from its targets. At weddings, monks create scapegoat effigies of this highly gendered concept in the form of dough sculptures of a woman with upraised hands and a pointed tongue (the *mikha pumo*, sometimes glossed as "gossip girl"; T: *mi kha bu mo*) (Figure 5), while laity seek to divert it from their houses through printed door protectors designed to make neighbours avert their gaze (Figure 6).

In the story, the *beyulpa* effectively embody their own harmful attention – like manifestations of *mikha* – when they invisibly visit Kunga in his own house. Their effect on him reverses the usual operation of spirit-harm by ignoring the strength of his vitality, and mirrors the consequences of envy and resentment among ordinary people. What the *amchi* encounters in his night-time journey outside Karsha is utterly familiar, a reflection of the human world, and his involvement with it only emphasises the presence of a threat that lurks within both the village and its hidden counterpart: the *beyulpa* are

FIG 5
A *mikha pumo* constructed for a wedding in Sakti, eastern Ladakh.

FIG 6
A door-protector intended to divert *mikha* and harmful spirits from the house. From Sakti, eastern Ladakh.

fundamentally like people, but this similarity only underlines the threatening side of one's fellow villagers. As the unreliable payment of *phemar* that turns to dung suggests, appearances are deceptive and intentions unknowable; and the village is no more a safe place than the spirit-haunted desert and mountains beyond. Hidden threats and harmful forces are, potentially, everywhere: they follow Kunga home unhindered, and are only diverted by the construction of protective architecture outside his front door. It is only the house that can be made safe against spirits and one's neighbours, that can provide a secure dwelling-space, and this can only be achieved through separation from the village and the wider landscape. In winter, at night, the house becomes an island of certainty; and the kitchen, warmed by the stove, becomes a refuge against both the bitter cold and the threatening forces that flow through the village outside.

Implications: Zangskar by Night

The story does not make a case for the existence of the hidden people: the audience may accept their reality for the purposes of the narrative, but not necessarily outside of this context. Ritual specialists in Ladakh do not always recognise *beyulpa* as a category of harmful spirit, and they are often described by Buddhist laity as little more than fairy tales. Similarly, the demoness that the Zangskar valley is said to resemble is, for the

most part, little more than a figure of speech (albeit one rooted in geomantic practices); and the disappearances and abductions that are reported across the region may not be seriously attributed to the actions of spirits. These localised accounts all contribute to the constitution of the Zangskari landscape, but there is not necessarily a direct relationship between the content of the stories and the world in which people live. Taussig, among others, has argued for the way that "people delineate their world […] in stories and story-like creations", and for the circulation and development of "ideology and ideas" through "the coils of rumor, gossip, story, and chit-chat" (1984, 494); and yet stories do not "delineate" a world so much as hint at different possibilities. They do not have to be taken seriously to be effective; nor do they need to be consistent with one another. Spirits remain primarily objects of suspicion and fear, not belief, and maintain an uneasy and implied presence on the edges of awareness.

Zangskari stories are emplaced acts of speech that derive their relevance from references to known places: they cite familiar place-names and landmarks, while the events they describe occur in the margins of the landscape in which people live and leave behind material reminders (cf. Allerton 2012, 194–195). They are effective because they build upon what people already know. They contribute less to the construction of a systematic and self-contained "ideology" or "world" than to the ongoing emergence of a *landscape*, defined by something akin to the "sense of place" that Basso describes. And yet Basso's emphasis on "wisdom" and the value of "connectedness" (1996, 85) is a poor fit for Zangskari stories, which do not serve as teaching aids and do not extol the virtues of open engagement with this landscape. To the extent that Mutup's story of his grandfather teaches anything, it is of the dangers involved in trafficking with the hidden people and the need to protect oneself against the forces of the outside world. The familiarity of the beings encountered in the story only serves to emphasise their uncanny and unreliable quality, and draws attention to the presence of an invisible threat that pervades both the village and the mountains and desert beyond.

Basso's focus on known places presents a further problem. Zangskari stories circle around unknown regions: the space beneath the mountains, the hidden villages of spirits and the places where people go when they disappear. In shorter abduction accounts these areas are left entirely blank, as inaccessible to description as they are to experience, but even Kunga's visit to the hidden people depends on the presence of a village that cannot be reached and provides a description of this place that is pointedly inadequate. The story describes a path that leads nowhere. It points towards a hidden place that must remain beyond ordinary knowledge, out of which emerge beings that intrude onto the familiar world; and yet the detail that it offers on this place is practically banal, emphasising only

the unreliability of appearances. Description does not dispel the strange or threatening quality of these hidden regions, which figure on the edges of the known landscape not as realms of imagination so much as a penumbra of suspicion. In such a landscape, "sense of place" is defined by an underlying sense of doubt that flows out of these areas of the unknown.

This is not to imply a spatial division between zones of the familiar and unfamiliar. Zangskaris do observe a loose distinction between the *yul*, the village or area of human habitation, and the *ri*, the inhospitable mountains and desert outside; but the threat posed by spirits is rooted in the way they confuse such categories. The hidden people inhabit a human-like *yul* in an inhuman place, and the harm they cause operates, as I have suggested, according to the mundane logic of envious attention between neighbours (i.e. *mikha*). Such spirits are routinely described as being "like people", or readily mistaken for people, and are described elsewhere in the region as coming into town to visit the market posing as ordinary humans. The *tsen* that took Rigdzin's grandfather are likewise known for riding along paths that pass through human villages; a warning repeated across Ladakh notes that if you meet a stranger on the road at night, you should always take care that they are not a *tsen*. This confusion of the familiar and the strange is strongly linked to the onset of darkness: it is specifically at night when the unsettling aspect of landscape comes to the fore, when sense of place shifts into the realm of the uncanny. Distinctions and divisions that seem clear by day – between the village and the mountains, or between spirits and one's neighbours – are erased in the darkness. Like the *maṇi nagpo*, the black *maṇi*-wall outside Karsha, places change when night falls. In this, the darkness has a revelatory power: the night-side of landscape uncovers threats that remain unseen or even unreal by day.

What the night reveals is not merely the presence of spirits, but an essential unease concerning the relationship between people and the landscape within which they live. Buddhist attempts to control the land – as represented by the *chorten* that mark out the supine demoness – begin from the understanding that humans form part of their worldly domain and are subject to influences from within it. It is the management of these influences that determines Zangskari relations with spirits and the land. Accounts of abduction (like incidents of spirit possession) show the self being overcome or displaced by the embodied forces of this landscape, an extreme instance of the relatively mundane processes by which humans suffer illness or harm from spirits. For the *amchi* Kunga, the chief consequence of his dealings with the hidden people – and of his openness to the forces of the surrounding landscape – is to feel his strength and confidence drained away, and this begins with the greatest of indignities: the intrusion of alien forces into the familiar space of the house.

In all of this, we see the antithesis of the ideal represented by the Heideggerian concept of "dwelling". In Zangskar, to remain open to the sentient world is to expose oneself to illness and dissolution; the demands of human life necessitate a turning-away, a conscious disentanglement from the landscape. For someone walking outside at night, this involves averting one's eyes and avoiding certain places. For Kunga, this meant constructing a *rigsum gonbo* to sever the connection that the hidden people had formed with him, shoring up the violated boundary of his front door to seal his house against undesirable influences. Architecture – whether in the form of the house, the *chorten* on the body of the demoness, or Kunga's *rigsum gonbo* – manages and restrains the movement of these forces: diverting spirits, pinning down the land and driving off unseen threats that would invite themselves in.

Unlike these other structures, the *rigsum gonbo* works specifically by evoking the transcendent gaze of the Buddhist divinities for whom the three *chorten* stand: their all-encompassing and fundamentally detached vision allows them to identify and dispel the invisible, compensating for what Zangskaris routinely describe as the "imperfect" state of human perception. Danger emerges from the way humans are immersed in a landscape that is perceived only partially, and from the essential vulnerability of human existence. The known world borders the unknown, but beyond the house there is no definite boundary and no clear way of distinguishing the familiar from the strange. One's neighbours are as unknowable as the hidden places inhabited by spirits, and both exert influences that may imperil or overwhelm. This becomes most apparent at night, when the uncanny quality of landscape is revealed: a confusion of the familiar and the strange, an exposure of threat in the midst of the village and of human-like villages concealed in the mountains.

Conclusion

Anthropological approaches to the topics of landscape and place have tended to be dominated by assumptions inherited from Heidegger (Basso 1996, 54; Ingold 2000, 154; Tilley 1994, 12–13), with an emphasis on the concept of "dwelling" as a desirable ideal: a state of harmonious co-existence facilitated by social knowledge and by relations between human and non-human beings. Similarly, when commentators have turned to the sense of the "uncanny" – the unsettling co-mingling of the familiar with the strange – the concept has typically been addressed as something akin to a loss of dwelling. For Jean-Luc Nancy, drawing on ideas from Heidegger and Freud, the uncanny emerged as Christianity silenced the pagan deities of the landscape and severed human relations with the environment (2005, 58–59); while for Heidegger himself, *unheimlichkeit* – "unhomeliness" or uncanniness – was associated with the fear

of alienation from the world (Withy 2015, 2–4). The immersive state of dwelling is presented as dependent on attentive awareness – the "wisdom" discussed by Basso – and the uncanny appears as the absence of dwelling: a sense of the unhomely that arises with a loss of connection and the failure of knowledge.

Yet Zangskari stories routinely evoke the "uncanny" quality of landscape through descriptions of intrusions by strange forces into the familiar world, evoking a sense of doubt and confusion that is entirely compatible with a landscape populated by a host of gods and spirits. These stories help to constitute the landscapes in which people live, but do so without foregrounding the values of belonging and harmony with the land. They highlight areas of irresolvable uncertainty, drawing attention to the hidden places that surround known areas, the unreliable side of one's neighbours and the impossibility of distinguishing the familiar from the strange. In briefer accounts this is achieved through an absence of description: the use of ellipsis indicates the presence of threatening forces without providing enough information to allow the listener to resolve the danger. In longer stories, familiar imagery is shown to possess a hidden ambiguity: the hidden people encountered by Kunga appear utterly normal, and the threat they pose only emerges after he has returned home. In all these accounts, description runs up against the limits of human knowledge and emphasises the continual presence of areas beyond ordinary awareness.

Human vulnerability is shown to be directly linked to immersion in the landscape: it is the very fact that human existence is known to be shaped by influences from the land that makes it all too easy for the self to be overwhelmed or sapped of strength. Entanglement with the land and the various entities that embody it is an unavoidable condition of life, yet it is anything but desirable; and this is precisely because human awareness lacks the scope to safely encompass all the half-real forces that populate the landscape. Harmful spirits may or may not be real; a stranger met on the road might be a *tsen*; and the hidden people might be invisibly present on one's doorstep. Human perception is too limited to identify such dangers, and greater engagement with the surrounding world only increases the risk of dissolution. This becomes most apparent at night, when things emerge that are normally hidden by day: as distinctions between the known and the unknown blur and vanish in the darkness, so ever-present and hostile forces make themselves felt in normally familiar spaces. The night reveals things that are usually invisible, exposing ordinary people to a sense of uncanny threat as a direct consequence of human immersion in the landscape.

The shortcomings of human knowledge and perception ensure that the detached awareness of an enlightened being becomes the ideal; in its absence, it can only be evoked through

protective architecture in the hope of safeguarding the house. In contrast to dwelling-oriented approaches that emphasise living with the land, with "places" or with the environment as a whole, in Zangskar it is the house that stands *against* the wider landscape as the only reliable dwelling-place. Relations with landscape are defined by the management of threat, and built architecture – Buddhist *chorten*, *rigsum gonbo*, long *maṇi* walls – is employed in efforts to make the land safe. Yet at night security is found only between the walls of the house, sealed off from the wider landscape, and even this can be threatened by inadequate precautions; at night, the homely becomes almost eclipsed by the *unheimlich*.

I am not arguing here for a rejection of the approach championed by Basso, Ingold, Tilley and others so much as a reorientation. To put it bluntly, places are not necessarily good; and sense of place is shaped as much by the continual presence of the unknowable as by understanding and knowledge.

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notes and references

[1]Allerton's description of Manggarai "agricultural animism" as a form of "being-in-the-world" (2009, 281) emphasises the mundane and familiar presence of spirits, effectively ruling out the possibility of a strange or uncanny aspect to the landscape. While similar observations might be made for Ladakhi relations with the gods and spirits of soil and water – the *lhalu* (T: *lha klu*), in local terms – I would argue that it is a poor fit for the less well-defined spirits of the night: the *tsen*, *beyulpa*, *shinde* and so on, collectively referred to under the broad term *lhande* (T: *lha 'dre*; Pearce 2017, 198). The distinction between these two umbrella categories is not fixed, however.

[2]For the purposes of this paper, I am using "Ladakh" as an umbrella term referring to a broad region covering the administrative districts of Leh and Kargil, and "Zangskar" to refer to the area centred on the Zangskar Valley within Kargil district.

[3]Shortly after arriving in Ladakh in 2013, I got into conversation with an older man in the village of Sakti. "What do you think of Ladakh?" he asked me. "Oh," I answered, hoping to sound polite, "*ma demo*, it's very nice." "No!" he said, "Not nice. *Difficult*." He was referring mainly to the scarcity of water and the severity of the winter, but there is a broader contrast here with the attitude quoted by Basso. It is worth noting that, unlike the Western Apache, Ladakhis have not had to contend with the effects of settler colonialism and have never been forced to assert their rights and connection to the land in a comparable way.

[4]Also known in Ladakh as Jamyang, Chenresig and Chagdor (T: *'jam dbyangs, spyan ras gzigs, phyag rdor*). I have used the Sanskrit names here as they are more widely recognised.

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