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Voices from the Mountainside: Vernacular *sbas yul* in the Western Himalaya

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The term *sbas yul*, ‘hidden land,’ typically evokes images of the great sanctuary-landscapes of the eastern Himalaya: of Padma bkod, Mkhan pa lung and ‘Bras mo ljongs, those vast interconnected valley-systems sealed away by Padmasambhāva in the 8th century that they might later be opened by charismatic *gter ston*, ‘treasure revealers’, in times of need (Childs 1999, 127–129). In what follows, I will be dealing with a very different use of the term. Drawing on material from Ladakh, on the western edge of the Tibetan plateau, I will discuss what I refer to as ‘vernacular *sbas yul*’: the everyday stories of the hidden places and hidden peoples that surround the villages of the Leh valley, Zangksar and Nubra. These are not special places, sacred sites or preserved sanctuaries; they are, in most cases, more akin to abodes of spirits concealed within the ordinary landscape. And yet, as I will demonstrate, there is a connection between these different understandings of the term.

My argument here is, first, that there is an evident continuity between Ladakhi accounts of *sbas yul* and the stories reported in ethnographic works from the eastern Himalaya – in other words, that the vernacular *sbas yul* is a trans-Himalayan phenomenon. Second, I will suggest that the presence of vernacular *sbas yul* has been obscured by the tendency within Tibetan studies to privilege written knowledge: encounters with the hidden people are described in oral accounts associated with the perspectives of Buddhist laity, and are not typically represented in textual guides conveying the pure vision (*dag snang*) of advanced tantric practitioners. Third, I will argue that these stories of hidden places point to a particular way of perceiving and understanding the landscape, one in which the margin of potentiality that surrounds human existence – that is, the ways in which humans *might* live, or have lived – may be actively apprehended by laity in the landscape itself. The ideal and even utopian possibilities contained within the landscape may be glimpsed out of the corner of one’s eye or encountered at night in the form of the hidden people of the *sbas yul*. The act of opening a *sbas yul* for human habitation works by

drawing these inchoate possibilities into the everyday world, converting the potential into the actual. *Sbas yul* are transformed and redefined in the course of this process, while the hidden peoples that inhabit them retreat: the land is reclaimed in order that it might be occupied by humanity.

In this argument, the tradition of revealed sanctuaries – as represented by the great *sbas yul* of the eastern Himalaya – must be seen as embedded within the unbounded and normally invisible context of the vernacular *sbas yul*. This context is neither specifically Tibetan nor Buddhist; it is, as I will argue towards the end of this chapter, a shifting and unfocused zone that exists on the edges of perception.

1 Overview: *sbas yul* in the Western Himalaya

The earliest account I can find of *sbas yul* in the western Himalaya comes from the published works of the Moravian missionary August Hermann Francke. He mentions that in July 1909, on crossing into Spiti from the east, his porters described the mountains as concealing an invisible abode of spirits:

At Horling the coolies from Chang, pointing towards the Purgul group of mountains which is here called Gung-ri (perhaps the *Kungrang* of the maps), said that on those mountains was the fabulous ‘aBa-yul [*sic*], the abode of spirits. Its inhabitants are believed to be numerous, but ordinary people can neither see nor hear them. It is only very good men or lamas who are capable of perceiving anything. When such a pious man approaches that region of eternal snow, he hears the voices of its invisible denizens or the barking of their ghostly dogs, but sees nothing. This tale reminds me strongly of a passage which I had repeatedly found in inscriptions with reference to the Kailāsa mountains – *dgra bcom bzhuḡs gnas Tise*, ‘Kailāsa, the abode of those who have conquered all enemies’ (*arhats*). The ice mountains evidently are not only the abode of the gods, but also that of the dead who, according to the belief of the Tibetans, have acquired paradise.

FRANCKE 1914, 37

As far as I can tell, this seems to be the first and last time that Francke mentions *sbas yul* – or “aBa-yul,” in his rendering, presumably in an attempt to transcribe an unfamiliar spoken term for which neither the missionary nor his

companions recognised any written equivalent.¹ This brief mention attracted no comment and very little attention; in contrast to Jacques Bacot's influential descriptions of "Népémakö, la Terre promise des Tibétains", published in France two years earlier (Bacot 1912, 10), Francke's reference to the *sbas yul* appears to offer little more than a fairy tale told by unlettered "coolies."

This account concerns men from Spiti, and emerges from outside the area with which I am concerned here – namely the Ladakh region of India, located to the west of Chinese-controlled Tibet – but both Spiti and Ladakh fall far beyond the eastern Himalayan *locus classicus* of the *sbas yul*, and this account is clearly at odds with the standard Tibetan presentation of hidden lands. It is, however, a characteristic description of the key themes of the western Himalayan *sbas yul*: this "region of eternal snow" on the edge of Spiti is presented not as a sacred valley-system that may be settled by humans, but rather as a hidden place populated by invisible beings. These hidden people are perceptible only to those with great merit, and even then, not by sight: the presence of this *sbas yul* is primarily signalled through sound, through the disembodied voices of the *sbas yul pa* or the barking of their dogs. Francke's later chthonic interpretation of the *sbas yul*, and the association he draws with the abode of the dead who "have acquired paradise," is not, I think, warranted by the description provided by the men of Chang.

These *sbas yul* are discussed primarily in the oral accounts of religious laity and exist on a notably smaller scale than the great *sbas yul* of the eastern Himalaya; they are 'vernacular', in the sense that they present local, quasi-dialectical variations on a recognised Tibetan Buddhist theme. These vernacular *sbas yul* are known throughout Ladakh, where "*beyul*", "*baiyul*" and "*beyulpa*" commonly appear in oral stories. Terms vary across the region: the central Ladakhi "*beyulpa*" becomes "*sbeyulpa*" in western Ladakh (*sbas yul pa* in both cases; the *s-* prefix is pronounced only in western dialects), and Ladakhis in some areas will also speak of "*bilingpa*" (*sbas gling pa*) or "*bilungpa*" (*sbas [lung?] pa*) instead – that is, the people of a hidden place, or possibly a hidden valley.² I have also heard "*basbeyulpa*" (*[sbas?] sbas yul pa*), which seems pleonastic. These terms are frequently used interchangeably and seem to share the same broad set of connotations.

1 And which makes very little sense as a Tibetan term, as far as I can tell. I have chosen to read this as a transcription of something like "*baiyul*", a pronunciation that I have heard in modern Ladakh.

2 As the Ladakhi use of these terms appears to be entirely oral, all such Tibetan spellings must be viewed as speculative.

The agentive forms of these terms are more common, and Ladakhi *sbas yul* are typically mentioned in descriptions of the hidden people that dwell within these places; their presence is indicated through encounters with these beings. To some extent, “*beyulpa*” and “*bilungpa*” are used as broad descriptive terms that cover a range of different beings: they are used to refer to any invisible beings or categories of spirit that are thought to be “like people”, that behave like *yul pa* living in villages in a kind of parallel social world. *Sbas yul pa* are social beings by definition, not vengeful ghosts or wandering demons: they live as men, women and children, perhaps even with their own monks.

Ladakhi “*beyul*” and “*bilung*” do not cover huge areas of land, unlike the great *sbas yul* of the eastern Himalaya, but are located in particular directions on the edges of the human world: hidden in the subterranean spaces beneath villages, or higher up in particular valleys, or somewhere in the mountains away from human paths. These terms carry a certain ambiguity, and it is not always clear if these places are ‘hidden’ because they are invisible to ordinary perception or because they are buried beneath the ground. They are, however, ubiquitous – in the sense that almost every Ladakhi village has stories of nearby “*beyul*” and “*bilung*” – and consequently almost mundane, with one even said to be hidden beside Leh’s Kushok Bakula Rinpoche Airport. They exist on the fringes of awareness in the ordinary landscape, and to the best of my knowledge there are no Tibetan textual accounts discussing the identification or revelation of Ladakhi *sbas yul*. Similarly, while they have been mentioned by a number of researchers, they have received no direct academic attention.³

The *sbas yul* of Ladakh may seem to be little more than the otherworldly abodes of spirits, but they are *also* seen as potential sites for settlement: people do speak of the possibility of “opening” or revealing these sites for human habitation, as with the *sbas yul* of the eastern Himalaya. This typically involves consultation with the current Rtogs ldan Rin po che: a charismatic (and somewhat controversial) ‘Bri gung pa *gter ston*’ born in the eastern Ladakhi village of Durbuk, near Shachukul (Lotus King Trust – H.E. Togdan Rinpoche no

3 Thus: Kaplanian, drawing on material from the central Ladakhi village of Matho, has described the presence of invisible “Bal-yul-pa” [*sic*] inhabiting “un monde parallèle” (Kaplanian 1979, 207); Day has quoted villagers from just outside Leh who viewed their home as part of “an erstwhile bayul”, opened by a *rinpoche* who drained a lake covering the valley (Day 1989, 322, 570 note 22–23); Riaboff has described local claims that the village of Garara, in a valley to the southwest of Zangskar, is a “secret land” populated by “*sbas yul mi*” (Riaboff 2004, 186); and, more recently, the archaeologists Devers, Bruneau and Vernier have noted a “recurrent association” between “rock art sites, very ancient settlements and *bayuls*” throughout Ladakh (Devers, Bruneau, and Vernier 2015, 74). Taken together, these scattered mentions add up to barely 500 words on the topic.

date-a).⁴ While he remains closely linked to that area, he is also an influential figure across Ladakh. Trained by the second Bdud 'joms Rin po che (himself born in Padma bkod) and rooted in Rnying ma pa tradition, he is famed for his power against spirits and witches – what in Ladakh would be referred to as “*lhande*”, “*gongmo*”, “*gongpo*” (*lha 'dre*, *'gong mo*, *'gong po*) and so on. There are stories across the region of consultations with the Rtogs Idan Rin po che in reference to local *sbas yul*, most of which involve his refusal to open such sites out of fear that to do so would harm the hidden people living within. There are, though, places identified as “open” or “former” *sbas yul*, where the Rinpoche is said to have agreed to act.

One of these is the village of Kungyam in the south-eastern part of the region, which locals say used to be a *sbas yul*. The Rtogs Idan Rin po che was brought in, and he “opened the gate” (*sgo phyes*) to Kungyam, allowing it to be settled. He refused, however, to further open up the stream that brings water to the village, saying that to do so would cause harm to the *sbas yul pa*. This idea of a water source uneasily shared with invisible neighbours comes up repeatedly in Ladakh and is often linked to restrictions on the amount of water that villagers are expected to take. In this case, there is a sense that the opening of Kungyam was a partial process: the *yul* remains partly locked away, partly hidden, and the invisible portion of the village is still inhabited by *sbas yul pa*. The human inhabitants of the valley glimpse these beings from time to time, along with the six or seven houses of their tiny hidden settlement.

The Rtogs Idan Rin po che claims publicly to have revealed “hidden lands” in other parts of Ladakh: his website declares that he “is widely known for having found and opened several hidden lands of Guru Rinpoche for pilgrimage”, including “the hidden land of the mandala of Chakrasamvara and Vajrayogini” near the village of Basgo and the “[h]idden land of Tarsing Karmo in East Ladakh, where there are the great Guru Rinpoche caves” (Lotus King Trust – H.E. Togdan Rinpoche no date-b). Yet this draws an explicit connection with Padmasambhāva that is *not* apparent in lay descriptions of Ladakhi *sbas yul*, and most of the locations mentioned by the website – “Tarsing Karmo”,⁵ for instance – are not *sbas yul* so much as religious sites based around miraculous *rang byung* images (Butcher 2013, 20–21). Nevertheless, this pattern of opening fits broadly within the standard mould provided by the revelation of *sbas yul* elsewhere.

4 Full name and title: “H.E. 9th Choje Togdan Rinpoche, Tertön Rigched Dorje, Konchog Tenzin Thupthen Tenpei Gyaltzen” (Lotus King Trust – H.E. Togdan Rinpoche no date-a).

5 *Dar gsang dkar mo*, the “secret [place of] white ice”, is a pilgrimage site located in the mountains around 20 km northeast of the village of Shayok in eastern Ladakh.

As far as I can tell, this use of the hidden land is a recent development in Ladakh: there is no established tradition of revealed *sbas yul* in the region. What we are seeing is rather an expansion (or perhaps a revival) of the concept driven by the Rtogs ldan Rin po che, who is bringing Rnying ma pa ideas and practices pioneered in the eastern Himalaya into Ladakh.⁶ This is an important point, but it is not the focus of this chapter. I would argue that the presence of vernacular *sbas yul* in the western Himalaya precedes their use by the Rtogs ldan Rin po che: that there are pre-existing hidden lands, of one kind or another, that have no explicit connection to either Rnying ma pa tantric tradition or the cult of Padmasambhāva. In what follows, I will run through some key themes in the description of these vernacular *sbas yul*: I will discuss how they are apprehended and located in the landscape, and how the beings that live within them are presented. I will be drawing on material from across Ladakh, but especially from the village of Karsha in the central Zangskar valley.

2 Locating the *sbas yul*

The *sbas yul* of Ladakh are defined, first and foremost, by their presence in the mundane landscape: they sit on the edges of the human world, and under the right circumstances they may be perceptible to ordinary people. Just as Francke described how the presence of the *sbas yul* on the borders of Spiti was made apparent through “the voices of its invisible denizens or the barking of their ghostly dogs”, so the presence of Ladakhi *sbas yul* is routinely indicated by sound. Among Buddhist laity in the region, this is typically expressed through descriptions of monastic music emanating from the mountainside: I have heard second-hand accounts of the sound of cymbals playing out from the rocks in the Leh valley, and of monastic chanting heard outside the village of Rangdum, west of Zangskar.

In Karsha, local stories identify two main *sbas yul* sites near the village: one located somewhere in the mountains to the east, and another in a small valley enclosed by the village and overlooked by the *dgon pa* on the cliffs above. In both cases the *sbas yul* are located just beyond the areas occupied by people, on the edges of settlement: just off the path, or further up the valley that opens

6 The Rnying ma school of Tibetan Buddhism is represented in Ladakh, albeit only at the small *dgon pa* colloquially known as Takthok (Brag thog). This institution is affiliated with the Byang gter sub-school founded by the *gter ston* Rig ‘dzin Rgod ldem can, and is described in a local history as having been revealed by Padmasambhāva (*gnas sgo phye*; Stag lung rtse sprul Rin po che 1995, 79), but does not appear to be linked to any textual tradition of local *sbas yul*. Takthok is a relatively marginal *dgon pa* within Ladakh and has no resident *tulku*.

out into the village. This latter site is also the location of the shrine (*lha mtho*) of the village's mountain god Chodalha,⁷ and Karsha's snowmelt water supply flows down into the village through this valley from the hills above. Here, people speak of the sound of a conch-shell trumpet emanating from the rocks: the sound of the *sbas yul pa dgon pa* calling in the monks of the hidden people. Again, there is the sense that the life of the *sbas yul* parallels life in the outside world: the *sbas yul pa* are essentially "like people", living in villages with *dgon pa*, but their lands are located on the other side of the mountains, in the flip-side of the human realm. Yet the proximity of the human *dgon pa* here may suggest that the hidden people quite literally embody – or inhabit – the echo of human life: that there is very little distinction between the presence of actual spirits and the conscious misinterpretation of ordinary phenomena. The *sbas yul* in this case is perhaps only one step away from a joke, or a customary saying: a way of referring to sounds with no obvious source.

The same basic motif of the heard *sbas yul* is found in Reinhard's description of a visit to *sbas yul* Mkhan pa lung in eastern Nepal – an area that has been studied more recently, and in greater detail, by Diemberger (Diemberger 1993, 1997). Reinhard writes of visiting a cave associated with the hidden portion of the *sbas yul*, within which live an invisible people whose voices are sometimes heard by outsiders:

We were also told that people live underground in the cave but cannot be seen. They were placed there by Guru Rinpoche and will only appear when disaster strikes the outside world and the hidden valley is needed. In the event that all mankind in the outside world is destroyed, these people will come forth to perpetuate the human race. Until then they simply bide their time, but one man said that their voices can occasionally be heard by pilgrims while they are passing through the cave.

REINHARD 1978, 11

In this case, the hidden people are linked to a kind of eschatological prophecy associated with Padmasambhāva: they are presented as a kind of "seed people", who will emerge to repopulate the earth in the distant future. I will return to this later, though this theme does not appear explicitly in Ladakhi descriptions of vernacular *sbas yul*. Similarly, while there are a number of *dgon pa*, trees and footprints across the Leh valley and Zangskar associated with Padmasambhāva, this connection is only applied to the hidden lands of the region in the works of the Rtogs ldan Rin po che. And yet the presentation of *sbas*

7 Or "Chorala" (Riaboff 1997, 111). Possibly from *jo (bo) dgra lha* (Gutschow 2004, 266, note 46).

yul pa as a perceptible – and specifically audible – presence within the landscape, in both Ladakh and Mkhan *pa lung*, points to something that is often obscured within descriptions of the hidden lands of the eastern Himalayan: the vernacular aspect of the *sbas yul*, as an abode of invisible beings that impinges on the human world.

The motif of the heard *sbas yul* locates the hidden land within the physical landscape, placing it beneath the ground or behind the mountainside and accessible through caves or cracks in the rock. The hidden nature of Ladakhi *sbas yul* often seems to be a reference to a subterranean location – less ‘hidden’ lands than ‘buried’ lands, perhaps. This can be seen in one story located in the Nubra valley in the northern part of the region, a story I heard from a man in Karsha who had worked as a tour guide in other parts of Ladakh: a man following a lost goat into a cave was said to have discovered an apparently deserted village in a vast cave underground, the houses filled with gold and jewels and ancient Buddhist texts. Yet access to the *sbas yul* seems to have been largely a matter of chance, and he could never again find the entrance once he returned to the surface world. This is a conventional tale, but in less developed accounts of abduction by the *sbas yul pa* – something that seems to be relatively common across Ladakh – people speak of abductees being “carried beneath the ground”, though they typically remember nothing more than this. The *sbas yul* remains an essentially physical location, albeit one that is normally hidden away beyond the reach of ordinary people.

Along the same lines, in the eastern Ladakhi village of Shachukul the “*bi-lungpa*” are said to live beneath a large sandy mound at the centre of the village near the *dgon pa*. These beings are normally invisible to humans, and only those who possess great merit (*bsod bde can*) can see them. The “*bilungpa*” of Shachukul are usually described as hungry for salt, and there are local families who are said to have gained great wealth in the past when an ancestor gave salt to one of these beings. These are both recurrent motifs in Ladakhi stories, which often mention ancestral dealings with spirits or pacts made with spirits. One story, which I heard from a young woman originally from Shachukul, tells of how a villager found her way into the “*bilung*” itself:

Once, a woman from Shachukul was walking home at night, past the *gompa*, when she saw a richly-dressed stranger pass by on horseback. Curious, she quietly followed the rider home – even as they disappeared underground, into the sandy mound, and returned to the *bilung* hidden beneath Shachukul.

She followed the *bilungpa* into his house, where she found that none of the hidden people could see her. After a short while, though, she noticed

that some of them – at first only the children and the older *bilungpa* – were beginning to fall ill. After some time, the hidden people sent for their lama. The *bilungpa* lama came to the house, and the woman watched as he brought out *storma chodpa* (*gtor ma mchod pa*) and began to perform a ritual. As he chanted, suddenly, in an instant, she found herself back in Shachukul, standing by the river, right where she had come from.

I refer to this as the story of the unwanted guest. Versions of it can be found throughout Ladakh, all of them localised to particular villages; but they do not all mention “*bilungpa*” or “*beyulpa*”, and in at least one case – described by Dollfus (Dollfus 2003, 24–25) – the story is told instead about the red-skinned and backless *btsan* spirits. It has also been recorded among Tibetan communities in the Nepal Himalaya (Mumford 1989, 230–231, Ramble 2013, 75–76), and from much farther afield: according to Russian folklorists, versions can be found in various forms across Siberia (Stépanoff 2009, 292, Nekludov and Novik 2010, 393). In this story, then, the term “*bilungpa*” is being used to refer to something that would be recognised in non-Buddhist areas of North Asia.

Essentially, the different versions of the story almost all consist of four elements or motifs: first, a human follows a spirit back to their village; second, they find that they are invisible to the spirit people; third, the spirit people are made ill by their presence; and fourth, they are finally exorcised by a ritual specialist of the spirits. The central theme here is one of inversion: it demonstrates that humans are to spirits as spirits are to humans – that is, invisible and harmful. The “*bilungpa*” are depicted here as the night-side reflection of humanity: they live in villages as men and women and children, like people, they have their own lama, like people, and are just as susceptible to illness and affliction as people; and yet the “*bilungpa*” are nocturnal and subterranean while humans live in the daylight world above the ground. The hidden people dwell in the shadow of human life, beneath the village and out of sight – a murky mirror-image of the world above.

Once again, all of this is consistent with descriptions of *sbas yul* from Tibetan groups in the eastern Himalaya. Thus, another version of the same story appears in Mumford’s account of religious life in the Tibetan village of Gyasumdo, in highland Nepal, along with the theme of the subterranean *sbas yul*: there, “behind the great wall of rock on the west side of the valley”, people speak of a “hidden land”. This land is almost impossible to enter, accessible only through a crevice in the rocks or through a door “hidden in a high cliff overlooking a lake” that “would open and close as rapidly as clashing boulders”, but signs of its presence are apparent to locals: some speak of “seeing old boots thrown down into the lake by the Beyul people” (Mumford 1989, 230–231).

Mumford also gives a local version of the story of the unwanted guest, though one in which the protagonist – a hunter following a deer – does not appear invisible to the *sbas yul pa*. Again, as in Ladakh, the vernacular *sbas yul* appears as a concealed and subterranean aspect of the ordinary landscape. In contrast to more abstract understandings of the perception of *sbas yul*, these buried *yul* seem to be contained physically within the familiar, everyday world: beneath the ground of Shachukul, in caves under Nubra or somehow hidden within the mountainside outside Karsha. Access to the *sbas yul* may still depend on personal merit or the faculty of pure vision, but the concealment of these sites has a material quality that is not always apparent in textual accounts of the opening of *sbas yul* elsewhere.

3 The People of the *sbas yul*

In all these accounts, the awareness of the *sbas yul* is bound up with the presence of the *sbas yul pa*: there is no concept of the hidden land here apart from the existence of the hidden people. The Ladakhi *sbas yul* is defined by its status as a *yul*, as a territory or place of habitation: a place that is either already inhabited or potentially habitable. In this sense, the *sbas yul pa* act almost as placeholders: they occupy *yul* that are not (or not yet) inhabited by humans, and by their presence they make these places apparent.

This is especially evident in a Zangskari story of the founding of Shade, a tiny and remote village located between central Zangskar and the *Lung nag* valley. Shade is described as a former *sbas yul* – a partly open *sbas yul* – and the story tells of how the place first came to be settled:

A hunter from the village of Stongde in central Zangskar, a man from the Chodpa household, had chased an ibex up into the mountains to the south.⁸ As night fell, he stopped in a small valley and lay down on the ground to sleep, using a rock as a pillow – a rock that can still be

8 There are two points to note about this detail: first, the motif of the hunter stumbling upon a *sbas yul* while following an animal is clearly quite widespread and is also described in Mumford's version of the story of the unwanted guest (Mumford 1989, 230). Second, the implied link between the ibex, the spirit women and the *sbas yul* may be an expression of what Templeman has referred to as an "ibex cult" found throughout western Tibet, Ladakh and Spiti (Templeman 2002, 210, Bellezza 1997, 70, note 28). This argument suggests a partial identification of the *sbas yul pa* with the Central Asian *peri*. *Peri/pari* are attested in Ladakh's predominantly Muslim Suru Valley, and like *sbas yul pa* are also implicated in unexplained disappearances (Grist 1998, 107).

seen there, even today. As he lay on the ground, seven young women appeared out of nowhere and approached him; as they came closer, he saw that one of them was blind. They offered him jugs of *chang*, but he refused. Insulted, they poured it out over his *goncha* (belted woollen robe) and vanished.

In the morning he woke and found that his clothes were soaking wet. He got up, and saw seven cows grazing in the valley, one of which was lame. He chased after them but was only able to catch the one lame cow – and where he caught it, he later founded the village of Shade. Shade has only nine houses, but if the hunter had caught more of the cows it would be much bigger today.

When I heard this story from a man in Karsha, it was not clear to me whether the hunter's encounter with the seven women occurred in dreaming or waking. In a sense, though, the distinction is irrelevant: the encounter is presented as a true vision with material consequences. It seemed to be implied (though not stated) that the women were *sbas yul pa*, just as it is implied that the seven cows were the same beings in disguise.

The story connects the settlement of Shade to this moment of visionary perception experienced by the hunter, and positions the oneiric women of the valley as mediators between the hunter and the *yul*: it was the hunter's perception of these beings, his resistance to their attempts to lure him away and his later capture of one of them that enabled the foundation of the village. The valley in which Shade is now located "affords" the possibility of human habitation, to employ Gibson's now widely-used term (Gibson 2015 [1979], 119–121), but on some level this affordance remains hidden from ordinary perception: the valley's role as a *yul* is obscured until the hunter's vision, and it is only through his encounter with the people of this *sbas yul* that its potential for settlement is made plain. The affordance is signalled through the presence of the hidden people, and the ability to open the site depends on the perception of these beings.

I see a parallel here with the Scots Gaelic term *sithean*, at least as described by Macfarlane: "a knoll or hillock possessing the qualities which were thought to constitute desirable real estate for fairies", qualities that "also fulfilled the requirements for a good shieling site" (Macfarlane 2015, 20). Like the *sbas yul* at Shade and Kungyam (mentioned earlier), a *sithean* is both a site of potential habitation and one that is already occupied by invisible beings. In the Ladakhi examples, the establishment of villages leads to the retreat of the *sbas yul pa* as humans move in and displace the hidden people. We see the significance

of this in accounts of consultation with the Rtogs ldan Rin po che, where the desire to open a *sbas yul* for settlement must be balanced against the harm this will cause for the current occupants (Day 1989, 322).

While these hidden peoples are typically absent from conventional textual descriptions of the great *sbas yul* of the eastern Himalaya, they are nevertheless easily found in vernacular accounts: the hidden people are a standard, trans-Himalayan feature of the vernacular *sbas yul*. Thus Reinhard's brief account of the vernacular *sbas yul* at Mkhan pa lung mentions the invisible people who will emerge in the distant future "to perpetuate the human race" (Reinhard 1978, 11), a theme that also appears in Mumford's account of the *sbas yul* near Gyasumdo. Mumford presents the hidden land as

like a womb from which the first people emerge to begin the world again after all others have been destroyed by a holocaust at the end of the age. They are called 'seed people' because they repopulate the earth.

MUMFORD 1989, 231⁹

The theme of the "seed people" does not appear explicitly in Ladakhi descriptions of "*beyulpa*" and "*bilungpa*"; but the way these beings occupy sites of potential settlement nevertheless marks them out as people of the future, on some level. Yet there is a duality here: Ladakhi *sbas yul* are also routinely linked to the sites of prehistoric rock art and ruins of ancient settlements, something mentioned by archaeologists working in the region (Devers, Bruneau, and Vernier 2015, 74), while "*beyulpa*" and "*bilungpa*" are typically described as appearing in the guise of traditional Ladakhis and are strongly associated with idealised representations of the region's past.

In one story from Karsha, an *am chi* is said to have entered a *sbas yul* to the east of the village and seen the children of the hidden place sleeping on simple black-and-white wool rugs – a key signifier in the region today for the time before the widespread use of colourful modern dyes. After treating the children at the behest of their parents, the *am chi* received payment in sweet *rtsam pa*

9 A parallel can also be found in Lepcha descriptions of Mayel Lyang in Sikkim, the autochthonous equivalent of the Tibetan and Lhopo *sbas yul* 'Bras mo ljong. This land is normally understood to be inhabited by the Mayelmu, the "seven brothers, seven couples or seven families" of Mayel people. Like the 'seed people' associated with *sbas yul* elsewhere, the Mayelmu are occasionally described as playing an eschatological role: they "will one day be required to repopulate the world." The Mayelmu are also presented as ancestral beings and may formerly have played an important role in Lepcha agricultural ritual (Scheid 2014, 72–76, Gorer 1984, 235–237).

dough, *phye mar*; but, like fairy gold, the *phye mar* turned to cow dung in the light of day. The detail of this payment locates the transaction in a time before the recent development of the cash economy in Zangskar, and while this reflects the period in which the story is set – in the lifetime of the storyteller's own grandfather – it nevertheless summons up a nostalgic version of Ladakh, embodied by the hidden people. Similarly, across Zangskar, *sbas yul pa* women are often described as wearing the *pe rag*, the turquoise-studded headdress that forms a key part of formal Ladakhi female dress but is now normally only worn at weddings. The beings of the *sbas yul* are consistently presented as a people unchanged by time, who continue to live in the style of the past – or, perhaps, a somewhat romanticised image of that past.¹⁰

Throughout these examples, the inaccessibility of the *sbas yul* takes on a chronological aspect: a dual association with the human past and future. Ladakhi “*beyulpa*” and “*bilungpa*” appear in traditional guise, embodying an ideal and half-forgotten mode of life, but are also encountered in places that may come to be settled by humans. The past encompassed by a *sbas yul*, and the future that it occupies, are thus located within the hidden portion of the landscape itself. They remain unreachable to ordinary people, but only just: they are merely locked away beneath the ground or standing invisibly present alongside the human world. These vernacular *sbas yul* occupy a margin of potentiality and lost memory, only occasionally glimpsed or heard, comprising spaces concealed within the ordinary, experienced landscape – spaces that contain the possibilities and echoes of human life.

4 The Landscape Out of Focus

All of this can give the appearance of two *sbas yul*: on the one hand, those grand and paradisiacal valley-systems described in visionary guidebooks; on the other, these abodes of spirits on the edges of the mundane world. It may seem as though these little *sbas yul*, these vernacular *sbas yul*, have little in common with their better-known cousins. Yet this is partly due to ambiguities inherent in the term *sbas yul* itself: while it has become normal to treat this as a defined Tibetan category of place – as “valleys situated on the southern slope of

10 Again, there are perhaps parallels to be found in the Lepcha identification of the Mayelmu as “ancestors” (Scheid 2014, 73) and the Tamang re-casting of the concept of the “*beyhul*” as an ancestral realm visited in ritual “soundings” by the shamanic *bombo* (Holmberg 1989, 148–149, note 10).

the Himalaya” that “could be used as sanctuaries in time of need” (Childs 1999, 128) – it is in truth merely a descriptive term with broad application.

Sbas yul may be ‘hidden’ in the sense that they are invisible, or physically inaccessible; but ‘hidden’ can also indicate ‘buried’ in this context, and *sbas yul* can also be subterranean realms. Similarly, the *yul* can be understood as a discrete territory – a valley or valley-system – or simply an area that has the potential for habitation. On another level it can be used to suggest a village or occupied land, even one that sits in an impossible location (behind the mountainside, beneath a sandy mound) and is occupied by non-human people. These ambiguities are central to understanding the vernacular context of *sbas yul*: the broad usage of the term does not necessarily imply any of the paradisiacal or idealised features routinely associated with the great *sbas yul* of the eastern Himalaya, features that are noticeably absent from the vernacular descriptions I have presented here. These are not the central characteristic of *sbas yul*; a *sbas yul* is, in the most reductive analysis, simply a *yul* that is hidden.

The divergence between written and vernacular accounts suggests to me that we are looking at different levels of the same phenomenon – or, more accurately, at different perspectives on the same phenomenon. The purified and symmetrical descriptions contained in Tibetan pilgrimage-guides record the pure vision of advanced tantric practitioners and represent a very particular way of seeing the landscape. In this they form a kind of parallel to Cosgrove’s description of the European idea of landscape as a “visual ideology”, one imposed through artistic representation, cartography and architecture. For Cosgrove, this European ideology of landscape employed linear perspective and a faith in the “certainty of geometry” to effect “the control and domination over space as an absolute, objective entity, [and] its transformation into the property of individual or state” (Cosgrove 1985, 46–47).

In comparison, the visual ideology employed in Tibetan written accounts of *sbas yul* is that described by Huber as “graded perception” (Huber 1999, 76). The subtle and sublime aspects of certain sites remain “the sole preserve of highly realised individuals”, those with the capabilities of a tenth stage *bodhisattva*, while ordinary people can perceive only the “inanimate, material form” of the landscape (Huber 1994, 46–47). The greater one’s spiritual status, the closer one gets to the perfected reality perceived by an advanced practitioner; and yet this remains fundamentally inaccessible to ordinary people, whose claims to insight into supramundane realities are explicitly rejected. As Huber notes, “commonplace traditions” akin to the vernacular *sbas yul* are typically repudiated for the way they “erode the notion of the Tibetan lamas’ exclusive access to [tantric] powers” (Huber 1994, 48).

As I have already suggested, there are enough accounts of voices from the mountainside, hidden villages and ‘seed peoples’ from across the Nepal Himalaya to demonstrate that the vernacular *sbas yul* is a trans-Himalayan phenomenon. That this has been consistently overlooked in academic discussions of hidden lands is largely due to the way that Tibetan studies reproduces indigenous attitudes towards written knowledge: prioritising texts, and specifically those authored by advanced practitioners. The “commonplace traditions” described by Huber are not only repudiated by the Tibetan lama, they are also typically neglected by the foreign academic. They are treated as being of secondary importance: of marginal relevance except insofar as they relate to the primary, textual reality. This has the effect of privileging not only the written word, but also the perspectives of the religious elite that they represent.

Yet accounts of vernacular *sbas yul* point to other ways of perceiving and describing the landscape, ones that emphasise other ways of knowing and other senses than vision – something that is suggested most clearly by accounts of the music of the *sbas yul pa* and the barking of their dogs. And, as the account of the hunter’s foundation of Shade should indicate, they show that visionary experiences may be offered even to those with little or no Buddhist merit: graded perception does not seem to apply, and even a hunter may open a site for settlement under the right conditions. These *sbas yul* are present in the world already, before the appearance of a *gter ston*, and may in principle be apprehended by ordinary people on unexpected occasions. These descriptions are obscured by the actions of figures like the Rtogs ldan Rin po che, actions that have become the focus for academic understandings of Tibetan landscapes.

The written accounts produced by such elite practitioners offer an understanding of landscape as an iconographic representation, one that – as with the European emphasis on the notion of landscape as viewpoint – serves to suppress other perspectives and other landscapes, denying contingency and process. There have been attempts to address this issue through the redefinition of landscape as a way of “being-in-the-world”. This new gloss brings with it the understanding that landscapes are never truly static, objective or circumscribed by a field of vision, but are “always in process, potentially conflicted, untidy and uneasy” (Bender 2001, 3). Hirsch has attempted to reconcile these two understandings of the term through his discussion of the “foreground” and “background” of landscape, with the former referring to “the concrete actuality of everyday social life (‘the way we are now’)” and the latter to “an ideal imagined existence”, a “perceived potentiality [...] (‘the way we might be’)” (Hirsch 1995, 3). Yet this introduces a distinction between the experienced real (the foreground within which we live) and the cultural or imagined ideal

(the background to which we aspire) that cannot stand up to scrutiny, and that takes the implications of “concrete actuality” largely for granted.

What was once in the background may move into the foreground, and as Hirsch notes the ideal is routinely drawn into the experienced world: just as European landscape gardeners of the 18th-century remodelled English estates to better resemble a Romantic, painterly ideal (Hirsch 1995, 2, 22–23), so the actions of historic and modern *gter ston* to open and settle *sbas yul* work to realise the ideal possibilities of pure vision. These processes begin by applying a way of seeing to the landscape: they first make the potential apparent through an act of focused attention.

In these contexts, the actual is little more than a realised manifestation of the ideal. In a broader sense, the norms of everyday life are foregrounded only in that they are made apparent in ways that other possibilities are not; the distinction here is not between the experienced and the imagined so much as between that which has been made subject to attention and that which remains only implied. I would suggest, then, that the foreground of landscape is simply that which is in focus; the background simply that which remains out of focus, at least for the present. The iconographic landscapes of both linear perspective and pure vision are focused and foregrounded in the sense that they are granted attention: the act of representation, whether through painting, architecture or written description, draws the attention of its audience towards certain features of the world and certain ways of perceiving that world.

Vernacular *sbas yul*, in contrast, belong to a background landscape that is rarely if ever subject to direct perception. This background has a phenomenological reality, but one that is not often directly perceptible. It operates on the edge of awareness, on the fringes of vision and hearing, and in accounts of vernacular *sbas yul* we see people encountering the edges of this background landscape within the normal world: stumbling upon the subterranean and invisible lands that impinge on the daylight world of humanity, hidden lands that make their presence felt through the sound of distant music or through shadowy meetings – or rumours of meetings – with the *sbas yul pa* themselves. This background may be glimpsed or heard on occasion, but for the most part it remains in the shadows: indicated in stories or customary sayings, hovering somewhere on the edges of awareness.

The *sbas yul pa* that dwell within this twilight margin of experience embody the longed-for past and possess the forgotten wealth of history; they also occupy valleys that may later be opened for human habitation and point the way to future villages. Yet they are unpredictable and uncertain things, who may betray human trust or steal children away beneath the ground. Unlike the great *sbas yul* described in written guidebooks and subject to the attention of pure

vision, vernacular *sbas yul* maintain an uneasy reality and are rarely more than one step away from a joke.

In the village of Lingshed, in western Ladakh, two juniper trees by the river marked a spot where locals used to say the entrance to the local *sbas yul* could be found. The trees died some years ago, but now two new junipers have sprouted in the same place. Villagers may point to the trees and say that the *sbas yul* has been born again – but this is barely serious, and the existence of this *sbas yul* seems to be less than definite. This is characteristic of vernacular *sbas yul*, descriptions of which tend to circulate as half-truths, rumours and stories that may be no more than stories. Their reality is uncertain, their presence unfocused and they are not yet subject to direct attention; but they are nevertheless inherent within the landscape and are on some level already apprehensible to ordinary people.

The actions of a *gter ston* like the Rtogs ldan Rin po che work to draw this unfocused background into the foreground, making the implied and uncertain presence of *sbas yul* clear and explicit. The focused attention of a *gter ston* brings the glimpsed possibilities of a *sbas yul* into the light, making it available for human occupation. This attention makes what was previously only rumoured, vaguely sensed and threateningly half-real into something official, recognised and apparent; but in a broader sense, *sbas yul* are a constant and mundane aspect of the ordinary perception of landscape. Vernacular *sbas yul* belong to the inchoate context out of which the great *sbas yul* emerge: they are different levels of the same basic phenomenon, different stages within a single process.

5 Conclusion

The terms “*beyul*”, “*bilung*”, “*beyulpa*” and “*bilungpa*” are used quite broadly in Ladakh: *sbas yul* operates as catch-all term for subterranean spaces, areas of potential habitation and abodes of spirits – for all these quasi-human spaces beyond the immediate bounds of human experience. As I suggested earlier, in Ladakh the ability to perceive the presence of a *sbas yul*, or of the *sbas yul pa*, is to some extent comparable to the perception of hidden affordances in the landscape: the perception of the hidden people hints at the presence of a potential, and hidden, *yul*. Yet for the most part, glimpses of *sbas yul* and *sbas yul pa* are only partial and uncertain: for most people, they remain within the unfocused background as nothing more than rumour or superstition. Many

Ladakhis do not consider *sbas yul pa* to be real, and usually treat them as less real than *btsan* or witches.

The vernacular *sbas yul* of Ladakh are not yet associated with Guru Rinpoche and are not seen as important – or, rather, they have not yet received the kind of attention that would make them important, that would give them definition and substance. As such, they are not typically represented in the image of Ladakh that is sold to foreign tourists: they remain part of an unfocused background, vague and uncertain elements that have not yet been transformed into something akin to sacred landscape. I have heard a trekker describe how he and his guide came upon footprints in the snow, high in the mountains of the Stok Kangri range to the south of Leh; the Ladakhi guide explained them away as traces of “*bilungpa*”, a term for which the foreign tourist had no referent. It is not something that would normally be discussed outside of this context, and for the most part “*beyul*” and “*bilung*” remain things that are encountered on the margins: not focal points for pilgrimage, not special or sacred places, but an aspect of the ordinary landscape that may be glimpsed or heard on occasion.

The unfocused background represented by the vernacular *sbas yul* forms an overlooked aspect of *sbas yul* elsewhere in the Himalaya, and I am arguing here for a layered understanding of the landscapes out of which *sbas yul* emerge: one characterised by an unbounded and unfocused background, inhabited by uncertain hidden beings, within which people may glimpse or sense possibilities of those other forms of life that stand behind the foregrounded reality of the mundane world. *Sbas yul* link these two contexts, and it is through the actions of charismatic *gter ston* that the ambiguous potentiality of these hidden lands may be brought into the everyday world. And yet *sbas yul* have a prior existence, beyond ritual action or the pages of a guidebook: they may be confined to the edges of awareness, perhaps, their presence only glimpsed, or signalled through story or rumour, but they are already there, hidden within the landscape.

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