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Reimagining spaces, species and societies in the Himalayas

Réimaginer les espaces, les espèces et les sociétés en Himalaya

Erik de Maaker

Mutuality, modernity and co-becoming

- 1 The ecology and geology of the Himalayas has shaped its people. Mountains, glaciers, rivers, trees, animals, plants, spirits and gods have created the conditions for human life, subjected it to restrictions and taboos, and provided the inspiration for complex ways of imagining, seeing and sensing the world. Likewise, the mountains have, over generations, been shaped and transformed by the people who inhabit them, as well as by those who have conquered and governed them. While current emphasis on the Anthropocene in the social sciences and the humanities reveals how people influence and transform the world, the papers included in this collection also show how these environments and ecologies define the people who live with them. The mutuality that undergirds these processes of co-becoming (Country et al 2016: 1) or becoming-with (Haraway 2008: 12) foregrounds interdependencies between humans and non-humans. Humans do not and cannot exist on their own, but depend on complex multispecies relationships (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010). Multispecies studies have developed at the crossroads between the social sciences and the humanities, notably drawing inspiration from the environmental humanities. This discursive field has critiqued the dominance of 'Western' ways of perceiving and engaging with the world, and the 'nature-culture' dichotomy that it has facilitated. This epistemology from the North has allowed for an unprecedented exploitation of natural environments and has often taken precedence over the more relational ways of being and belonging to the world which characterise the worldview of the vast majority of the people indigenous to an environment such as the Himalayas (Escobar 2016). This thematic is central to the edited volume *Environmental Humanities in the New Himalayas: Symbiotic indigeneity, commoning, sustainability*, which Dan Smyer Yü and the author recently published (2021). New

Himalayas refers to ‘the anthropogenically impacted Himalayas since the early modern era’, thus focusing on human-induced changes to the mountains (Smyer Yü and De Maaker 2021: 4). In this book, the chapters of which are written mostly by authors who are from the Himalayas, we explore the ways in which the region has been anthropogenically conditioned, as is evident – among others things – in how people engage with water and are confronted with the impact of (human-induced) climate change. This special issue extends the scope of this enquiry to explore how Himalayan spaces, species and societies are also transformed by state making and, by extension, by large-scale processes of development as well as increasing dependence on trade and markets.

- 2 In this special issue, we do not restrict ourselves to how the Himalayas are conventionally perceived but include the adjacent mountain ranges of Southwest China, based on the geophysical, climatic and cultural continuities within this broader highland zone (Van Schendel 2002; Sheiderman 2010). Most of the international borders that currently segment these extended Himalayas were not defined until the late 19th century. Once conceived, they were merely a token presence ‘on the ground’ until well into the 20th century. In the aftermath of military conflicts such as the 1962 Sino-India war, and – from 1947 onwards – the high-altitude stand-off between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, many Himalayan borders were militarised and thus ‘hardened’ (Van Schendel and De Maaker 2014: 3). This transformed the areas in the vicinity of these borders into frontier zones (Bergmann 2016). In these zones, over the last couple of decades, states have systematically increased their presence. This includes extending infrastructures such as roads and airports, building hydroelectric dams to generate ‘green’ energy, establishing wildlife sanctuaries or biosphere reserves and, more generally, transforming the residents of these border zones into citizens of the respective countries. The international borders have resulted in the division of mountains, valleys, pastures, animals, people, deities and spirits across distinct national realms. What I call ‘partitioning’ of the Himalayas by the absorption of the respective parts into distinct states has weakened connections and restricted interactions between its residents across mountains, foothills and valleys.

Human and non-human relationships in changing spatial contexts

- 3 The papers included in this special issue follow two angles of enquiry, both of which have so far, in combination, barely been studied. On the one hand, the contributions scrutinise the changing framing and interpretation of human and non-human relationships, and the way these find expression in everyday life. On the other hand, the papers explore how large-scale interventions instigated by state making, development initiatives and the expansion of commercial ventures transform mountain spaces, creating new contexts that generate new meanings. These two angles of enquiry have received scholarly attention, but interconnections between the two continue to be neglected. It is this lacunae that this special issue wishes to fill.
- 4 The four papers in this collection were initially presented at the graduate seminar ‘Storying the sustainable intelligence of the earth in the new Himalayas: Symbiotic indigeneity and transboundary commons’, which was held online late 2020 and organised by Dan Smyer Yü (Yunnan University) and Erik de Maaker (Leiden

University). Referring to the growing impact of the political divisions that are being imposed on the Himalayas, ‘symbiotic indigeneity’ denotes indigenous modes of facing non-indigenous forces of change, and ‘transboundary commons’ the fragmentation and ‘bordering’ of what were traditionally shared common-pool resources. Supported by the Himalayan University Consortium (HUC) of the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), seminar participants responded to a call for papers.¹ Participants were graduate students and early-career scholars and scientists in Himalayan social and environmental sciences. Most of the participants were affiliated to research centres located across the Himalayas, thus allowing the seminar to contribute to one of HUC’s main aims, which is to strengthen and build academic capacity in the Himalayan region. Led by a group of multidisciplinary experts,² the seminar offered a series of interactive lectures, thematic discussions, peer presentations and group mentorship opportunities for research writing as part of an effort to advance new perspectives derived from environmental humanities in the Himalayan region. Apart from scholarly competence building, participants were introduced to partnership- and leadership-building approaches to prepare a new generation of scholar-leaders for a sustainable future for the Hindu Kush Himalaya (HKH).

- 5 The four papers in this collection titled ‘Storying multispecies relationships, commoning and the state in the Himalayas’ address these issues through empirically strong case studies. Of the four papers in this collection, one concerns the western Himalayas (Tara Bate, ‘Competing perceptions of landscape in the Limi valley: politics, ecology and pastoralism’), another focuses on the eastern Himalayas (Sangay Tamang, ‘Environmentalism in the Darjeeling hills: an inquiry’), and the two others relate to Yunnan (Ma Zhen, ‘Water as a relational being in Xishuangbanna: presence, scarcity and management’ and Sun Rui, ‘Yunnan flowers: storying cross-species love beyond metaphors’). As mentioned above, the inclusion of two papers that focus on Yunnan extends the geographical scope of enquiry from what is conventionally perceived as the Himalayas to include adjacent south-western China.³

Multispecies perspectives and statist discourses

- 6 All four papers are grounded in a multispecies perspective. This creates room for world views in which humans, even though exceptional in their ability to shape and transform the world, are only one among many species present. It allows for a localised and situated perspective of how environments can be shared common spaces. Engaging with the innovative potential of new theory from the environmental humanities, the papers recount Himalayan community narratives proceeding from human-Earth relations in practical and affective terms.
- 7 In the precolonial era, political structures in the Himalayas were mostly radial, focusing on the control of strategic places and the people and goods passing through these (Misra 2011). Political power could be wielded by controlling and taxing trade, therefore reducing the need to control territory. This gradually changed in the colonial era, when consolidated states emerged, fostered by mercantile elites for whom the valleys, hills and mountain slopes came to constitute resources that gained value in developing global market economies (Sheiderman 2010: 295). In the early colonial period, mountain forests became prized possessions because of the hardwood trees

they contained (as in the hills of Darjeeling, Sangay Tamang, this issue). Much more recently, Himalayan rivers gained value as a source of hydroelectricity, fit to support the ‘greening’ of the increasingly energy-hungry economies of the region. Precious metals and minerals contained in the mountains created further incentives for states to gain territorial control. A major consequence of this territorial partition of the Himalayas has been that the people of the region became either Indian, Pakistani, Nepali or Chinese (among others), amounting to a denial of their pre-existing cross-border ethnic allegiances (Tara Bate, this issue). Similarly, the categories by which mountain residents were ranked changed as a consequence of statist discourses. Historically, residents of the Himalayas have been able to combine being place bound with being seasonal migrants. Every year, pastoralists would take their herds from low-altitude winter grounds to higher-altitude summer pastures, making them permanent residents of different parts of the mountains. Yet in the colonial era, for example in the Indian Himalayas, a distinction emerged between indigenous and migratory communities, which often had serious consequences for forest rights because the authorities gave preference to the former over the latter (Sangay Tamang, this issue).

The reconfiguration of shared spaces and shared goods

- 8 The partition of the Himalayas across a range of modern states resulted in a denial of cross-border environmental knowledge and practices. Divided and dispersed, local indigenous voices have been drowned out and the interests of those concerned have been disregarded when it comes to nation states and international organisations implementing, for example, environmental conservation projects (Tara Bate, this issue). Examples of such a disregard for indigenous ecological knowledge are restrictions imposed on high-altitude pastoralism or a ban on practising shifting cultivation, both of which are historically proven to be environmentally nurturing practices (Ramakrishnan 2007). Fortunately, such alternative perspectives do increasingly resonate in the policy reports published by national and international think tanks (USAID 2017: 296, Pant et al 2018: 2).
- 9 The Himalayas and, by extension, Southwest China have never been isolated. Historically, caravan routes allowing for the transportation of valuable goods for trade and of people have traversed the region. These ‘silk routes’ also allowed for the communication of (religious) ideas and practices, military campaigns and so on (Harris 2013: 92). The incorporation of the Himalayas into modern states has blocked many of these historic routes, which has been supported if not justified by lowlanders’ perspectives on the mountains, which presented them as hostile and impenetrable and the people residing there as isolated and primitive. In identifying the epistemological challenges that have thus emerged, Sangay Tamang (this issue) foregrounds what he calls ‘environmentalism of the hills’, to exceed the divisions imposed by a rigid understanding of indigeneity that is dominant in approaches to the ecology of Darjeeling (India). This allows him to overcome the ‘ethnic closure’ that comes about when ‘a given community and its respective knowledge are utilised as a dominant form of resistance against environmental destruction’ (Tamang, this issue). Instead, he argues for the recognition of ‘a co-existing and relational framework beyond exclusionary and ethnocentric forms of environmentalism’, that can highlight how

indigenous relationships with the forest have been restructured by colonial forestry. Arguing along the same lines, Tara Bate (this issue) phrases this environmentalism in more relational terms, coining what she calls ‘ecological ethics of care’. This resonates with what John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker identify as a shared attribute of indigeneity when they write ‘diverse forms of ecological responsibility, environmental ethics, and sustainable behavior are (...) broadly identifiable features of indigenous societies’ (Grim et al 2014: 198). As for Ma Zhen, writing about the importance of water in Xishuangbanna (China), water is integral to the generative capacities of land; local appreciations of territory foreground relationalities which conventional dominant perspectives typically miss. Beyond the territorial, Sun Rui situates Yunnan flower growers’ relationship to roses in a multispecies context. Such a multispecies context foregrounds the interconnectedness and inseparability of humans and other life forms, thus extending ethnography beyond the solely human realm (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010, Ogden et al 2013, Van Dooren et al 2016).

- 10 From a multispecies perspective, shared spaces or commons are integral to the environments they create. This sheds light on why the colonial-era approach to forests in Darjeeling constituted such an infringement of indigenous rights, because it regarded the Himalayas as primarily ‘spaces free of humans’ (Sangay Tamang, this issue). After all, this amounts to a denial of all the other entities that co-constitute the forest. Commons are, according to Tara Bate (this issue), less to be understood as resources that ‘belong to all’ than as ‘shared and shaped by multiple sentient entities with both overlapping and conflicting interests’. Similarly, interventions by the provincial government in the management of water in Dai Autonomous Prefecture (Yunnan) denied Dai people the relationship to water they had previously cherished. Treating water as a type of commodity went against the Dai experience of water as a relational being that embodied both worldly and transcendental values. For Dai people, Ma Zhen (this issue) states, ‘(w)ater is the critical source of irrigation...and has been an important component of their Theravada Buddhist ritual practices since ancient times.’
- 11 The regional division of the Himalayas between various countries and the integration of its constituent parts in these states therefore not only have political and economic consequences but also an impact in terms of ontology. This facilitates the imposition of external notions of environment and ownership that necessarily challenge the localised and situated relationships that people maintain with the multiple species among which they reside. Tara Bate (this issue) notes how, due to the closing of the border between Nepal and China and the subsequent inability of Limey pastoralists to reach what used to be their summer pastures now located in China, the nature of the relationship between humans and their herds has changed. Where earlier people would consider their animals as kin, the changing nature of Limey pastoralism has introduced much more distance in these relationships. Addressing how the role of humans in the Himalayan environment is being contested, Sangay Tamang (this issue) notes that, whereas from a multispecies perspective ‘local communities have always been integral to the landscape of Darjeeling...British colonialism excluded these communities.’
- 12 Market relationships imply commodification and anonymisation, changing the way people cherish goods and how they interpret and value their environment. For Dai people, water never used to be a passive object. Rather, it was a relational being, Ma Zhen (this issue) argues. The policies of the provincial government have resulted in the commodification of water, challenging its centrality in Dai religious traditions, which

earlier made it an integral and constitutive element of being Dai. Sun Rui (this issue) compares how small-scale and large-scale flower growers relate to their crop. Referencing Hartigan (2019), she states that for small-scale growers in Yunnan, flowers as ‘vegetative life forms are sentient, intelligent, communicative, agential and social beings instead of merely “species-as-décor”’. This mutuality involves not only flower growers but also other participants in the commodity chain of fresh-cut flowers, yet a similar relationship to flowers is not experienced by capital-intensive, large-scale flower growers.

Reimagining socio-spatial transformation

- 13 The two angles of enquiry that are shared among the papers included in this collection create new insights into how the changing framing and interpretation of human and non-human relationships is linked to state making, development initiatives and the expansion of commercial ventures. As spaces are reconfigured, relationships among species are redefined, transforming the societies of the Himalayas. The production of spaces is the outcome of localised processes, as much as it is due to their being subsumed into broader regional and global frameworks. This holds for the production of UNESCO world heritage (Tara Bate, this issue), the acquisition of water by an ever more present Chinese state (Ma Zhen, this issue) and the production of ethnic claims to territory (Sangay Tamang, this issue). It also holds for the flowers produced in Yunnan and for the extensive trajectories they follow for them to be sold to consumers throughout China (Sun Rui, this issue). In each and every one of these cases, unravelling the changing ways in which humans are included in their environment and co-constitute it can provide essential insights into the new significances that species and societies in the Himalayas acquire.⁴

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NOTES

1. The graduate seminar 'Storying the sustainable intelligence of the Earth in the new Himalaya: Symbiotic indigeneity and transboundary commons' was made possible by a grant awarded to the Thematic Working Group (TWG) on 'Trans-Himalayan Environmental Humanities' by the Himalayan University Consortium (HUC) of the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD). The seminar was co-organised by the TWG, HUC and the National Centre for Borderlands Ethnic Studies in Southwest China (NaCBES) at Yunnan University, in partnership with the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology (Leiden University); the University of Warwick and the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology. We are particularly indebted to Dr Chi H Truong (Shachi), Programme Coordinator and HUC Secretariat Lead, and to Professor He Ming, leader of the First-Class Discipline Construction for Ethnology, Director of NaCBES (Yunnan University). We are also very grateful to Bhawana

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2. The multidisciplinary experts contributing to the graduate seminar included Willem van Schendel (professor emeritus, Amsterdam University), John Grim (co-director, Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology), Mandy Sadan (associate professor, School for Cross Faculty Studies – Global Sustainable Development, University of Warwick and senior research fellow, Oxford School of Global and Area Studies), Emily O’Gorman (senior lecturer, Environmental History, Department of Geography and Planning, Macquarie University, Australia), Charisma Lepcha (assistant professor of anthropology, Sikkim University) and Jelle Wouters (senior lecturer and programme leader of the BA in Political Science and Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, Royal Thimphu College).

3. This is in line with what ICIMOD refers to as the Hindu-Kush Himalayan region (HKH). <https://www.icimod.org/> (accessed 19 May 2022)

4. I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers of the EHBR for their valuable comments and suggestions.

ABSTRACTS

Himalayan environments have changed, and are changing, due to the ways in which people have interpreted, sourced, and utilised them. Scholarly analysis of the transformations induced, be it in deforestation, dam building or glacial melt, foreground how man is shaping the world in the Anthropocene. Alternatively, multispecies studies have shown how people invariably depend on, and are being shaped, by the dedicated environments in which they find themselves. Rather than people existing independent of these, their lives are the product of ‘co-becoming’ (Country et al 2016: 1) or ‘becoming-with’ (Haraway 2008: 12) a variety of spaces and species. In relation to the Himalayas, the two angles of enquiry outlined above have so far seldom been combined. In an attempt to engage with this lacuna, the contributions to this special issue scrutinise the changing framing and interpretation of human and non-human relationships, and the way these find expression in everyday life. At the same time, the contributions explore how large-scale interventions instigated by state making, development initiatives and the expansion of commercial ventures have transformed, and continue to transform, mountain spaces and species, generating new societal contexts in which these acquire new meanings.

L'environnement himalayen a changé, et continue de changer, en raison de la façon dont les gens l'ont interprété et l'ont utilisé. L'analyse scientifique des transformations induites, que ce soit dans la déforestation, la construction de barrages ou la fonte des glaciers, met en évidence la façon dont l'homme a façonné le monde dans l'Anthropocène. D'autre part, les études multi-espèces ont montré comment les gens dépendent invariablement des environnements spécifiques dans lesquels ils se trouvent et sont façonnés par eux. Plutôt que d'exister indépendamment de ces environnements, les gens vivent le produit de leur 'co-becoming' (Country et al 2016 : 1) ou de leur 'becoming-with' (Haraway 2008 : 12) dans une variété d'espaces et d'espèces. En ce qui concerne l'Himalaya, les deux angles d'enquête décrits ci-dessus ont jusqu'à présent rarement été combinés. Pour tenter de combler cette lacune, les contributions de ce numéro spécial examinent l'évolution du cadre d'interprétation des relations humaines et non

humaines, ainsi que la manière dont elles s'expriment dans la vie quotidienne. Dans le même temps, les contributions explorent comment les interventions à grande échelle initiées par l'État, les initiatives de développement et l'expansion des entreprises commerciales ont transformé, et continuent de transformer, les espaces et les espèces de montagne, générant de nouveaux contextes sociétaux dans lesquels ils acquièrent de nouvelles significations.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Anthropocène, relations multi-espèces, co-becoming, environnement, développement

Keywords: Anthropocene, multispecies relationships, co-becoming, environments, development

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