Competing perceptions of landscape in the Limi Valley: politics, ecology and pastoralism

Perceptions antagoniques du paysage dans la vallée de Limi : politique, écologie et pastoralisme

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Introduction

1 Humla district in north-western Nepal, Karnali province, has been made part of the transboundary region of the ICIMOD Kailash Sacred Landscape Conservation and Development Initiative since 2009, which aims to preserve the biological and cultural diversity in the mountainous landscape spanning India, Nepal and Chinese Tibet. Within it, the Limi Valley and its pasturelands stretching over 500 km² of land (Hovden 2016: 3) have come into the spotlight since 2013 thanks to the work of conservation biologists who documented the return of the wild yak, extinct in Nepal since the early 2000s. That same year, executive members of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Nepal recommended placing Limi within the framework of ‘a [UNESCO] World Heritage Site, Conservation Area, Protected Forest, or a Biosphere Reserve’ – a suggestion they reiterated in a recent ICIMOD publication (2022: 3). In August 2021, key stakeholders from the government, WWF and ICIMOD gathered to discuss possibilities for the management of natural resources in Limi. Only one local representative, a Kathmandu-based Limey,1 was present; Paljor Tsering Lama,2 the locally respected spokesperson for all three villages in Limi, was not. During the meeting, some participants emphasised the need to document traditional knowledge and practices, while all agreed on the necessity to find ‘an appropriate governance and management modality for the Limi Valley within the existing legislative framework of the country’ (ICIMOD: 4).

2 Yet it seems that none of these suggestions stemmed from needs expressed by the Limey with regard to the landscape, nor from their wish to conserve it, nor did they
seem to take up local people’s perceptions of and relationship to the landscape. Despite abundant literature evidencing the social and ecological shortcomings of top-down approaches to nature conservation (e.g., Peluso 1993, Neuman 1996, 1998, Spence 1999, Agarwal 2009, Nandigama 2009, Dowie 2009, Shah 2010, Ahlborg and Nightingale 2012, Cameron et al. 2016, Thing 2019, Gurung 2020, Chakraborty and Sherpa 2021), history is bound to repeat itself if locals’ ontologies, epistemologies and cosmologies do not shape initiatives aimed at fostering biodiversity. Stating the importance of ‘traditional natural resource management systems’ and their instrumental authority as being ‘several centuries old’ and therefore ‘sustainable and cost-effective measures for biodiversity conservation in the country’, seems to invite local perspectives insofar as they fit within a legal-political and cosmological framework deemed (the most) legitimate (Chakraborty and Sherpa 2021: 10). In this paper, I offer an anthropological insight into local epistemologies and heuristics in relation to landscape, especially through the angle of pastoralism. In Limi, these particularly stem from lay forms of religious framing and practices – or ‘civil religion’, as Ramble (2008) has it.

With this paper, I follow up on some authors’ (e.g., Agrawal 1995, Shah 2010, Asara et al. 2015, Gurung 2020, Chakraborty and Sherpa 2021) concern about the absence of locals’ own perspectives and interests within national and international environmental projects, such as conservation. Having their ecologies recognised, better understood and made an integral part of projects aimed at nurturing biodiversity is foundational to the success of initiatives aimed at curtailing the ecological and social crises affecting our globalised world. I argue that this endeavour, in the case of the Limi, needs to include local religious considerations, the practice of which is particularly visible in pastoral activities. Yet the inclusion of religious perspectives in ecological considerations is nothing new. In the 1990s, Callicott had already warned that ‘purely secular programs... aimed at achieving environmental conservation may remain ineffective unless the environmental ethics latent in traditional worldviews animate and reinforce them’ (Callicott 1994: 234). Hence, this paper aims to contribute to conversations on the ways of collaboratively achieving ecologically and socially sound projects in Limi. In so doing, I take up Smyer Yü’s call for ‘a science of religion and ecology that not only studies the micro cases of eco-religious practices of a given society but also bears ethical responsibilities for identifying the mechanisms of sustainable living embodied in them’ (Smyer Yü 2017: 124). I do this by presenting the dynamic and complex relationship of the Limi to their landscape, which – I argue – is intimately tied to pastoral practice as an intimate way of inhabiting and knowing the landscape. However, precisely because it is dynamic and complex, I argue that this relationship of ‘ecological embeddedness’ (Whiteman and Cooper 2000) is dwindling along with the slow decline of pastoralism and the changes in the way the Limi relate to and interact with an animated landscape. The Limi case additionally showcases how ‘interstitial zones’ (Gupta 1992: 18), rather than being mere margins at the edge of nation states, are in fact sites of competing ontologies and creative alternatives (Makley 2003: 598).

Before I begin, let me offer a few words on the terms I employ throughout this article. I opt for the term landscape rather than environment to avoid the externalisation and reification the latter implies, which does not render the local inhabitants’ ontological take on the matter. For the same reason, I also prefer the term landscape to that of land, in line with Ingold’s (1986, 2000) distinction, the latter being defined as a bounded entity under human control and subject to being managed, while the former exceeds...
boundaries and is instead made of connections, relations and networks. I do not speak
of ‘environmental protection’ because I believe such projects can achieve more than
merely protect, especially if protecting implies segregating human from non-human
species. Lastly, though I draw from the literature on indigenous cosmologies, I prefer
the term ‘local people’ in the case of the Limey, since they themselves do not, to this
day and to my knowledge, resort to the term ‘indigenous’ (Np  adivasi janjati) in
referring to themselves.

The Limi Valley, located in Humla district in Karnali province, Nepal, shares a border
with the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and contains three villages: Til, Haltze and
Dzang (see figures 1 and 2). These are populated by roughly 1,070 inhabitants (Hovden
2016: 90–92), most of whom are in Haltze. Limi’s villages are located between 3,700 and
3,900 metres above sea level and the highest pasturelands are at around 5,000 meters. A
Tibetan dialect locally referred to as Limiekey (W Limi skad) is spoken there and
communities practise a syncretic mixture of Mahāyāna Buddhism of the Drikung Kagyu
branch with Bön (pre-Buddhist) influences and local Animism. In the late 1950s to
early 1960s, following the annexation of Tibet by the People’s Republic of China, a
border was traced which cut off Limey herders from their pasturelands in Tibet.
Following this massive loss of space and their de facto integration into Nepali territory,
most herding families sold off their flocks of sheep and goats, only keeping a few yaks
(Bos grunniens, W g.yag) for meat and transportation, dio (W ‘bri, their female
counterparts) for dairy and offspring, and/or horses. These are driven to the high-
altitude grazing lands between April and October, and back to the valley in the winter.
Nowadays, most households rely on seasonal migration for work as wage labour in
Purang (Np Taklakot) in the Tibet Autonomous Region (Yeh 2019, Hovden 2016, Saxer
2013). All families still grow barley and a few vegetables in newly built greenhouses,
with women spearheading agricultural activities. In 2021, there were still eight groups
of transhumant pastoralists in Limi, a number that is in slow decline since the closing
of the border and consequent loss of access to their ancestral winter pasturelands in

Since 2017, I have conducted research over a sixteen-month period in Nepal: in Humla
district for eleven months – nine of which were spent living among pastoralists in their
high-altitude pasturelands. I interviewed a total of thirty-five Limey herders and ex-
herders (17 women and 17 men, between the ages of 18 and 80, or older), as well as
various other inhabitants of Limi and neighbouring villages.
Fig 1: Humla district in regional context

Digital cartography by Mark Henderson.

Fig 2: Limi in Humla District

Digital cartography by Mark Henderson. Data from USGS and Open Street Map.
The herd of *dio* has left for the day, taken far from the camp where their offspring remain tethered, waiting to be released so they can finally stretch their legs and start their morning games, the vast plain all for themselves. A young yak has however remained in the corral, his head heavily rested on the ground. Ay’ Yeshi, seeing it, asks Yankee and I to warm up some soup with fresh whey for him while she goes to inspect him. She comes back, adds vitamins she bought in Purang to the warm soup, and goes to feed it to the bovine who seems desperately weak. With the two male herders back, an intense discussion follows. Ay’ Yeshi suspects the *yaru* was hit by a rock which broke its spine. It is agreed that someone should put an end to his suffering. No one asks Ow Tshewang because he is a monk and therefore has made a vow not to kill. Meh Dhundup first refuses to do it, he claims he is old and has vowed to not kill any more. But there is no one else to do it so he ends up agreeing. Back in our tent, Ay’ Yeshi offers him the nettle momos Yankee and I have prepared for lunch, as well as some local barley beer, and they both discuss where to cut up the carcass. Meh Dhundup believes it should not be done under Yulsa Tagjung Karbu’s watch (the snow-capped holy peak towering over the plain, Tashi Tang) but in the tent, otherwise it would rain heavily. That’s what happened last year after a snow leopard attacked a *dio* and they had to kill the agonizing animal in the open. Ay’ Yeshi says that last time she assisted in cutting up an animal with others on these sacred grounds, it didn’t rain. I ask if it is sinful (*dikpa*, *W. sdiґ pa*) to kill an agonizing animal. They say it is a smaller sin than if it is in good health. I then ask if it is more sinful to let it agonize rather than kill it. The answer is positive, but only for non-human animals. ‘Even if a dying human is begging to be killed, it is not allowed to kill him’, Ow Dhundup says. They then leave to cut up the animal on a stone construction, near the river. For a full-grown *dio*, they would have lit up a butter lamp right after the deed; for a *yaru*, it can be done later – Ay’ Yeshi explains to us. For now, some incense (made of butter, *tsampa*—roasted barley flour—and a smoking coal) will suffice to honour him. (diary notes, 15 May 2019)

This vignette was adapted from my fieldwork diary. With it, I wish to convey that the way the Limey relate to livestock goes beyond solely materialistic considerations and is also to be understood cosmologically. I follow Mike Hulme (2017: 242) in defining cosmology as ‘how people understand the ordering of the natural world, the animate and inanimate agencies at work and the appropriate duties and responsibilities of humans’. The Limey cosmology translates into a material geography testifying to the efforts humans put into co-inhabiting the landscape alongside local deities and a myriad of other spiritual entities. These material manifestations of cosmology take the form of altars, temples, prayer flags and meditation shelters erected for the purpose of propitiating these co-inhabitants and ensuring peaceful coexistence. Certain sacred plains, rocks, springs and peaks constitute the spiritual entities’ abodes when not the deities themselves (see Coggins and Zeren 2014: 207, Blondeau and Steinkellner 1998: 432–435, Allison 2015: 493). Bad weather, attacks by predators or sickness (affecting human and livestock alike) are also interpreted as manifestations of the wrath of these deities when respect is not paid to them (Allison 2004: 533, Tan 2018: 40, Belleza 2011). Burning plastic (the smell is unpleasant to them), killing or butchering an animal on holy ground, polluting a fresh water source with bodily substances, or harvesting more resources than is necessary to one’s survival all show a lack of respect towards the deities and must be avoided. Human beings are thus required to be compliant and discreet guests in an animated landscape which they do not control. Limi’s inhabitants fear and respect the other-worldly co-inhabitants of the land, with the latter’s destructive and creative manifestations of power (Diemberger et al 2015: 247, Allison
2004: 535–537). Indeed, since 2004, the collapse of a glacier has regularly caused landslides, destroying many houses and fields in the village of Haltze (see Hovden 2006: 4). On pasturelands, when asleep inside a tent, one is sometimes woken by the cries of predators (wolves and snow leopards) prowling around the herds, their occasional attacks being interpreted as a misfortune brought upon the sinning herder by angered deities. Some of my interlocutors also explained to me that thunder is the roar of dragons (thunder, duk'key, literally translates as ‘dragon sound’ in Limiekey) and lightning is their saliva.

In this context, religion is by definition the institution that reduces uncertainty and protects in accordance with an institution’s function as defined by North, namely to ‘create order and reduce uncertainty’ (1991: 97). Locally adapted Buddhist precepts mingle with pre-Buddhist Bön and Animist knowledge and practices, which partake in making mountainscapes inhabitable and inhabited. Among the strategies aimed at appeasing the deities and spirits that populate the mountains, there is the ritual of offerings and prayers to the various spiritual entities of the mountains after each new settlement in a different grazing area, for instance. The acts of spiritual entities are both a source of awe, of potential danger for humans, but also of blessing and protection if they are appropriately propitiated. Thereby, one of the pasturelands used by Limey herders is called Nying, ‘heart’ in Tibetan, named after a heart-shaped stone which is a site of worship for the Limey. This stone heart is marked by a hole because it belonged to a devil that king and semi-god Gesar of Ling killed with his bow and arrow. The Limey say that the grass in Nying is red-coloured and extremely nutritious. Though the connection was not explicitly made by my interlocutors, one could postulate that the perceived redness of the grass comes from the red of the blood shed by the devil and is seen to endow nourishing properties in the grass and, by extension, be beneficial for grazers. A fresh water source nearby, called Rheymoe Katchu, owes its name to the same devil. Ow Konchok explained: ‘It means “devil’s mouth water” [saliva]. The particularity of that water is that it never freezes, even in the winter when all the other sources are frozen.’ Both examples point to the fact that some spiritual entities can nurture as well as harm humans, and that landscape and spiritual entities are intertwined to the point of forming a single entity. The eco-spiritual context I have briefly described shapes the ethics the Limey practise towards this animated landscape.

**Ecological ethics of care**

The Limey practise what I call ecological ethics of care towards the landscape, which relates to Karine Gagné’s concept of ‘ethics of care’ (2019: 6–10) and Kalyanakrishnan Sivaramakrishnan’s ‘ethics of nature’ (2015). Sivaramakrishnan defines this concept as ‘a set of abiding concerns and guiding principles that humans ponder, articulate, and deploy in their interactions with the non-human world’ (2015: 1263). While in Gagné’s definition, ‘The notion of care refers to a mode of practical engagement informed by a sense of obligation and responsibility toward the more-than-human’ (2019: 7). The syncretic Mahāyāna Buddhist practices of the Limey shape ecological ethics that build upon principles such as restraint, reciprocity, non-harm, mindfulness and compassion (see Ives 2017: 46). Regarding Limey ecological ethics of care, there are at least two overlapping Buddhist concepts that are particularly relevant in the case of herders. The first concept is that of ‘interbeing’ (Hanh 1999: 50–58, Grim 2001: xxxvii), more
commonly referred to as dependent origination: the fact that nothing exists independently of others; in other words, our existence is intrinsically tied to that of other beings. From the awareness of this fact ensues our second concept: the ethical principle of reciprocity (see Gagné 2018: 134), as the practice of mutually beneficial kindness and compassion. These principles govern all life forms and influence each being’s karma (actions) over the course of one’s life, the sum of which determines one’s future rebirth (within samsāra, the cycle of reincarnations). In a way, they also apply to seasons: the way ecosystems cyclically restore themselves from one year to the next depends on the human and animal actions within them. If herders take good care of natural resources, spiritual entities and animals, they will prosper and be nurtured by them in return. Tucker and Grim make a similar remark when they write that ‘such knowledge [is] integrated in symbolic language and practical norms, such as prohibitions, taboos, and limitations on ecosystems’ usage. All this [is] based in an understanding of nature as the source of nurturance and kinship’ (2017: 8). Combining a materialistic understanding with a spiritual one, knowledge and practice of the principles of interbeing and reciprocity merge. Indeed, local knowledge consists in knowing these principles and practising them consistently in order to yield the best results – in this life and in the afterlife. Smyer Yü, invoking contributions from other scholars, summarises that ‘traditional ecological knowledge in this sense is concerned with what Fikret Berkes calls “a knowledge-practice-belief complex” (Berkes 1999: 13) and what Grim characterises as “the interbeing of cosmology and community” (Grim 2001: xxxvii)’ (Smyer Yü 2017: 126). Knowledge of and compliance with these principles pertain to a savoir-vivre within a shared landscape.

10 Herders practise ecological ethics of care when they nourish the earth by fertilising it with their animals’ manure and ashes, by making sure they do not overgraze an area or by refraining from polluting water springs. In turn, the earth nourishes humans through the bovines that humans rear. The benefit the latter yield is not direct; it is instead mediated through bovines, highlighting a human-bovine-landscape interdependence. In exchange for ensuring livestock care, protection (from the cold, predators and hunger), comfort, health, the best grazing areas and the extension of all of these to their progeny, herders receive in return all the benefits derived from livestock: meat, hair, skin, dairy products, warmth, manure, fuel, work force, new generations of animals and economic safety. In a way, it boils down to what Veteto, referring to Nabhan (1997), Fairhead and Leach (1996), ironically summarises as: ‘social scientists and conservation biologists have come to the somewhat revolutionary realisation that it is often the case that the longer and more stable a human community has lived in an area, the better it can buffer and promote biodiversity’ (Veteto 2010: 2). These practices have a low ecological footprint, to say the least. There are ample examples showing that many of the materials used for tents, cooking utensils, clothes, washing powder, altars and shrines are made of animal hair and skin, branches of shrubs, mud, soil, rocks, wood and sand. Dung is collected from pasturelands to provide cooking fuel, thus preventing an over-fertilisation of the soil and the development of invasive species of plants. Some robust and potentially invasive species, such as stinging nettles, are collected for food, thus limiting their spread. No tree or shrub is cut when still alive, as per village rules, except for one week every year, in the autumn when their blossoming and growing period is over. Hunting and fishing are strictly prohibited. Auspicious dates are set at the beginning of every season (according to the Tibetan lunar calendar) to determine when herders have to move on to another
settlement, thereby preventing overgrazing. Raising livestock means that the Limey do not rely on hunting wildlife to sustain themselves, thereby preventing the depletion of animals whose populations are limited. Neither gasoline, petrol, electricity nor gas is used by herders, who travel on foot or horseback most of the time. Ashes and dung are often sent back to the village to fertilise fields, thereby preventing the over-fertilisation of pasturelands.

Nevertheless, let us not be hasty to label Limey herders nature-loving Buddhists and environmentalists, a depiction that has long been criticised in the literature on Buddhism and the environment (eg Harris 1991, 1995, 1997, Atisha 1991, Huber 1991, 1997, Schmithausen 1991, 1997, Cantwell 2001). These ecological ethics of care are not to be equated with Western environmentalism. Nor should Buddhist teachings on interdependence and reciprocity be taken at face value when considering their practical application (see Gagné 2018: 9–10): moral principles differ from ethical practice and from actions in general, since ethics are not the only criteria the Limey take into consideration. Indeed, the market economy in neighbouring China supplies a vast array of consumer goods wrapped in plastic, glass and aluminium and industrially processed products replete with chemicals. These constitute the main (and growing) source of pollution in Limi. Yet herders, not being salaried, only have marginal access to these goods through what their relatives, when employed in the city, give them. They do not resort to motorised means of transportation as others do to bring back consumer goods (through the few collectively owned trucks bought in China), but still use yaks, dzo (bull-doe hybrids) and horses as a means of transportation. In other words, not being integrated in the monetarised economy keeps their daily life free of most sources of pollution. This is not the result of deliberate rejection. Like their fellow villagers, they throw into the river whatever plastic they come to possess, though only after re-using or repairing it several times. They also put up prayer flags or attach them to their animals’ fur to protect them from harm – prayer flags that are made of synthetic material and end up being swept away over the landscape. Ellen (1986) and Huber (1991: 67) argue that small-scale societies cause less environmental damage precisely because they are small scale; and that people’s dependence on their environment brings them to limit the damage they cause to it. While I agree to some extent, I still believe that this does not fully do justice to how the Limey care for their landscape. These ethics of care may not fit neatly into an environmentalist understanding of sustainable practices, yet they do foster practices that tend towards restraint in the use of resources, respect for human and non-human life, and the consideration of other beings’ needs and preferences, even when these beings are invisible or do not convey the message in human language.

Ellen’s comment that people’s dependence on their environment limits the damage they cause, in spite of its negative approach, is congruent with my argument that herders’ constant contact with other fellow ‘earth beings’ (de la Cadena 2015), whether visible or not, contributes to fostering their awareness of the interdependence of all living and non-living entities. This brings them to practise the ecological ethics of care I have described, and which may resonate to some extent with environmentalists’ own principles. Working as a herder in the Limi mountains nurtures one’s awareness of the fact that humans depend on other cohabitants of the land that can in turn benefit from human presence: it helps bring one to the awareness of ‘an ethically and spirituality interdependent relationship for all parties involved’ (Smyer Yü 2017: 123), or in other words, an ‘ecological embeddedness’ (Cooper and Whiteman 2000). It is by taking good
care of these multi-natured others that humans nurture themselves because benefits are returned through a system of reciprocity, of mutuality in this life and in the afterlife. Hence, pastoralism in Limi predisposes herders to nurture care and respect for other-than-human lives, and a mutually beneficial art of coexistence.

However, because this cosmological understanding of human-livestock-deities-landscape coexistence is dynamic, it evolves along with political and economic processes (see Gagné 2018: 8). The latter have dramatically changed over the last thirty years, with consequences on the Limey relationship to human and non-human others, to which I now turn.

Bordered and fragmented pastoral commons: ontological and ecological consequences of the making of nation states

Anthropological writings on Limi began in the 1970s. Authors mentioned that, up until the 1990s, year-round nomadism allowed agro-pastoral communities to rear sizeable flocks, and Goldstein even mentions 10,000 animals in 1977, (Goldstein 1981, 1974, 1980 Goldstein and Messerschmidt 1980, Jest 1981). These animals (mainly sheep, goats, yaks, dio and horses), in addition to providing all the products necessary for the communities’ livelihoods, enabled the transport of merchandise between Tibet and the agricultural valleys on the Nepali side (southern part of Humla). Limey traders would buy salt in Tibet, sell phurus (bowls made of a now endangered variety of maple tree wood found in north-western India) and wool, and barter these products against a great variety of grains produced in the southern part of the region, as well as goods produced in India. The Limey refer to the Humli further south of Limi as rongba, meaning ‘inhabitants of lower lands’. The people with whom they are often in contact come from two villages: Yakpa and Laga. One of my Limey interlocutors, a herder until 2018, summarised the history of Limey trade with the rongba as follows:

About 40 years ago, the rongba used to come here with their sheep and goats loaded with grain – brown rice, simi daal, finger millet, buckwheat etc. and exchange these with the Limey for salt, butter, tchurbi that the Limey got from Tibet first, then from the Dwokpa. The Limey also used to bring those products by loading them onto the backs of sheep and goats. When they had surplus grain from the rongba, they would trade them with the Dwokpa. (2 July 2019)

This nomadic caravan-trade system started to fall apart in 1959–1961 after the Sino-Nepalese Treaty was signed, which formalised the demarcation and closing of the border (Hovden 2016: 5, 72, Bahadur Bista 1978: 196, 200, Von Furer-Haimendorf 1978: 340). The final blow came in the early 1990s when the border was also closed to Limey herders. Up until then, they had still had the right to use their pastures located in China in exchange for a tax (tsa rin). From then on, the number of herders and animals in Limi has been constantly on the decline. While my respondents often mentioned having had flocks of between one hundred and eight hundred sheep and ten to fifty bovines per household some thirty years ago, according to my own data, in 2018 animal-owning Limey had an average of seventeen bovines per household, with that number dropping to eight in 2019. Two families owned roughly seventy goats each, which they sold respectively in 2018 and 2020. The last flock of sheep was sold about eight years ago, with most Limey having sold theirs some twenty years ago. Today,
most households still own a few bovines, which they pool together and entrust to a
relative to rear during the summer months. Therefore, while most Limey are still
animal owners, very few are still herders. The remaining herders raise dio and their
calves and keep a few yaks for transportation, especially in Til (the only village in Limi
with no road access), and for meat. Herders’ household members provide for the rest of
their needs usually by working in the construction sector in Purang where they also
purchase food supplies.

Consequently, Limey ancestral pasturelands are now sparsely populated and more and
more rongba herders try to settle there with their herds during the summer. Hence,
new local regulatory measures have been tentatively set up, not to regulate access to
and use of a scarce resource (as they were in the past), but to (re)claim ownership of
the land. For instance, in 2019 and 2020, some village-mandated Limey attempted to
collect a grazing tax from herders who came to the Limey pasturelands from the
villages of Yakpa and Laga further south. These attempts were largely unsuccessful,
some rongba interjecting that, ‘This is Nepal, and we are Nepali. This land also belongs
to us!’ This reveals the ongoing tug-of-war between a perception of territory as part
and parcel of identity based on historical presence and a perception of belonging to a
nation state and, as such, being the prerogative of all of its citizens.

The rongba, whose numbers are on the rise, have recently increased the size of their
herds and thus, their grassland requirements. As one elderly Yakpa herder expressed
it, ‘Twenty years ago, we were just a handful to have enough animals to justify coming
to thong (summer grazing settlements). Nowadays, every single household has animals,
all of which come to thong’. In 2021, the Limey replaced the grazing tax with an
outright ban, and evictions of recalcitrant rongba and their herds took place repeatedly
over the course of the summer. I interpret these restrictions as a symptom of the
Limey’s fear of having their whole territory taken away from them, which in itself ties
in with a changing relationship to territory as land, in the sense of a bounded entity
under human control, as discussed in the introduction. One historical event in the
1960s marks particularly well this shift from a shared territory, whose rightful
owners are deities, to a land administered by humans. At the time, representatives of the
Chinese government summoned Limey representatives to Purang where they were
offered a chest full of silver coins for their integration into the PRC. The Drigkung
protector deity Apchi Chökyi Droma (W phyi Chos kyi sGrol ma) was invoked on the
matter through a prediction ritual and advised the Limey to decline the offer (Hovden
2016: 72). Their declining thus meant that they let the deity decide their fate for them.
Consequently, the following decades saw the demarcation and progressive closing of
the border, dividing what were previously conceived of as commons collectively used
by Dwokpa, Limey, Nyingba and other Tibetan-speaking rongba, their livestock, wildlife
and an array of spiritual entities between the two countries. Hence, this gradual
ontological shift began with the collection of a grazing tax by Purangba administrators
between the 1960s and 1990s, signalling that the land was no longer in common but
loaned to the Limey, not by the main protective deity Apchi but by humans. And from
the 1990s onwards, the process of dispossession and eviction was completed, with the
remaining territory managed by humans (the Limey) imposing grazing taxes on other
humans (the rongba).

However, most contemporary Limey pastoralists still consider their landscape as a
commons – defined not so much as a common resource pool that belongs to all, but as a
territory shared and shaped by multiple sentient entities with overlapping and conflicting interests. Rose’s study of the Australian aboriginal conception of land as ‘country’ bears some similarities with this. She writes, ‘Country is a place that gives and receives life. Not just imagined or represented, it is lived in and lived with’ and ‘Country is multi-dimensional – it consists of people, animals, plants, Dreamings; underground, earth, soils, minerals and waters, surface water, and air’ (Rose: 1996: 7–8). In a similar way, landscapes are what makes the Limy who they are, having sustained the lives of humans and livestock since their ancestors first settled there. They also host a variety of spiritual entities which, when well propitiated, afford protection to humans and livestock but can also harm them if disrespected (see Blondeau and Steinkellner 1996, Ramble 2008, Allison 2015, Gergan 2015, Sulek 2016, Tan 2018, Gagné 2018). Landscapes are also the repository of Limy history, from mythical to trivial, distant to recent. They are ‘co-constructed by multiple species through complex webs of ecologies, economies and histories’ (Fuentes and Baynes-Rock 2017: 3) – ‘species’ here including spiritual entities as well (see Tan 2016, Gergan 2015), agents in their own right in the Limy context.

Hence, Haywood’s claim in 1999 that ‘Humans form an integral and critical part of biodiversity’, has particular relevance for these herders. Their knowledge and practices pertain to the skills of embeddedness described above. Parallels can be drawn between these and the science of ecology, not with the aim of validating Limy herders’ knowledge and practices according to a scientific equivalent but of establishing a dialogue in view of potential collaborations. To begin with, some authors have warned that the fragmentation of landscapes incurred by the border demarcation bears an ecological impact:

[...] actions that fragment landscapes [...] are accompanying ecological and economic costs that often remain unaccounted for. [...] Spatial isolation in grazing ecosystems limits the ability of people and animals to exploit a fundamentally important resource: heterogeneity in vegetation. Access to heterogeneous vegetation on intact landscapes increases options for wildlife, pastoralists, and their livestock on these landscapes. (Ash et al 2008: 783)

In addition, recent soil biology research shows that, in an optimally managed pastoral ecosystem, mobile grazing, especially over vast tracts of land, promotes biodiversity (Endicott 2012: 93, LaCanne and Lundgren 2018, Barnes and Teague 2017) and can contribute to soil carbon sequestration (Beede et al 2018, Apfelbaum et al 2016, Byck et al 2016, Cyle et al 2015). In moving over the landscape, herds shape it, just as their human counterparts do by adapting their lifeway to their herds’ needs (Marchina 2019: 24), to seasonal changes and to topographic characteristics – that is, from the perspective of landscape-human-bovine interdependencies and entanglements. Then there is the role of spiritual entities in shaping the landscape: they impose certain rules and behaviour that restrict access to some areas (especially mountain peaks) or forbid any kind of pollution (W drib) to natural springs (as the abode of lu, W klu). The dates for changing settlements are set by the Buddhist calendar, as well as by animal and grassland requirements. This calendar affects the way vegetation develops by imposing resting periods, creating fallow land, fertilising the soil to varying degrees, as well as influencing the way landscapes form, from the use of natural materials for building sheds, to setting up campsites and diverting the course of a stream etc. Lastly, vegetation also plays a part in this co-construction: the season for harvesting holen (Np Kotuki, Latin Picrorhiza kurroa) and peymo (Np porea) – two medicinal plants highly
valued on the Chinese market and found in Limi – attracts many Humli. Their presence and passage affect the mobility, presence and security of wildlife and other humans, as well as vegetation, water and soil compositions through exogenic organic and chemical matter, burning, camping, thus whole landscapes through the construction of sheds in local materials, to cite just a few causes. Other plants through their presence, abundance, accessibility, movements and intra- and inter-species communication also affect other sentient beings' presence or absence and, with them, the whole ecosystem.

Similarly, the disappearance of sheep and goats from the Limi mountains may have had an adverse effect on both wild predators and ungulates. My interlocutors often mentioned having noticed a decrease in wild predators and often linked it to the disappearance of their flocks, which used to provide prey for snow leopards and wolves. These predators might therefore have had to rely almost exclusively on wild grazers. Additionally, the rongba seem to be increasingly engaged in hunting, since they can no longer buy goats and sheep from the Limey for meat while in the mountains to collect the highly valued medicinal herbs. Though bovines might appear to be an option, some herb gatherers are Hindu and thus do not consume bovine meat, while others would not know what to do with such a large quantity of meat.

From a Limey perspective, all living beings, whether endowed with a soul (sem’djen, W sems can, understood in Limi as ‘endowed with a soul or mind’) or not, are sentient and, as such, have a right to exist and thrive. It is because they are all seen to exist rightfully as cohabitants of the landscapes, to which they are no less entitled than humans are:

– Meh Pemba, there are a lot of marmots here. What do they eat?
– Yes, there are. They eat grass.
– Since they eat the grass that your animals could eat, don’t you want to chase them away?
– No! Poor things! [mindjey, W snying tje: literally pity or compassion] They also need to eat!

What is more, disrupting the order of things, their equilibrium, is met with the wrath of spirits and deities, which is manifested through bad weather, natural disasters or diseases and, in the worst case, the death of humans or livestock. During one of my visits in 2019, for instance, some Limey were upset about the presence of some rongba collecting large quantities of the highly valued medicinal plants above Haltze. My interlocutor Ippi Wangmo said, ‘We will suffer a landslide again! We tried to chase them away but they keep coming back to commit sins (dikpa W sdi gp)’.

In sum, commonly shared landscapes bring together a variety of beings, human and non-human alike, such as plants, mountain peaks, spirits (eg lu in streams or fire places), devils, demons or ghosts, and deities, under key principles such as reciprocity and the awareness of interdependency (Cantwell 2001, Tan 2016, 2018, Smyer Yű 2017, Gagné 2018). The process of fragmentation into two distinct nation states not only led to a massive loss of space – space previously occupied by Limey domestic animals and their herders, and which enabled the sustenance of the agro-pastoral livelihood that structured the whole of the local economy. It also led to the loss of Limi’s non-human populations – livestock, wildlife and spiritual entities. Along with those, part of the Limey identity was amputated: landscapes charged with histories inscribed in their physical features, personal and collective memories, and signs of the presence of
deities. Religious, cultural, historical and mythical dimensions associated with this territory (see Basso 1996, Thornton 2008) have lost their material existence. They almost only remain immaterially in a few Limey memories, songs, myths and tales, as well as in the art in monasteries that evokes these lost lands. In other words, the Limey world has not only shrunk geographically or economically but it has also been truncated, cut off from a constitutive part of itself. Some herders express a sense of grief tempered by resignation through the evocation of the difference in the high spiritual and grazing qualities (which go hand in hand) of the land that was lost compared to those of the land that remains, since it is believed that the higher the altitude, the holier the place. This brief conversation with a Limey herder who used to bring his flock to pasturelands that have now become Chinese territory, raises the concept of *kipu* (*Wskyid po*), which can be translated as contentment or happiness, often associating spiritual auspiciousness with worldly satisfaction (see Lim 2008):

- Is there any difference between Dwokpa herders and Limey herders?
- No. The working style is the same except for their culture and traditions in clothing and celebrating festivals. But their pastureland is more *kipu* than ours.

Here, *kipu* has the double meaning of blessed and of pleasant to live and work in.

Another herder rendered the link between pleasure, contentment or comfort, and sacredness more explicit.15

- What is the most beautiful thong [pastureland and settlement]?
- Chakpalung. It’s a flat plain: easy to walk through, no rolling stones, no river to cross, and we can see Kaang Rinpoche (Mount Kailash) every day.16

In drawing a geopolitical border across a landscape inhabited by the Limey, together with many other inhabitants, another ontology is superimposed on and supplants the Limey ontology: one that sees land as property, as a private or state-owned pool of resources, as uncharted ground on which human projects unfold (see Plumwood 2002: 109, Kirksey and Helmreich 2010) and as a resource frontier (Tsing 2003, Moore 2000, 2003) fuelling capitalist expansion.17

**Conclusion**

In the Limi Valley, behind the picturesque scene of what might appear as peaceful grazing lands and wilderness unfold competing claims over the ontological significance of this territory and the right to act upon them (see Blaser 2009: 11). These seemingly empty frontier spaces (Tsing 2005) in fact hold stories of a world-making nature (Blaser 2014: 54) or cosmologies that are at odds with a nation state’s perspective of bordered national territory, a capitalist perspective of a resource frontier and a conservationist perspective of wilderness requiring protection (Peluso 1992, Cronon 1996, Neumann 1998, West 2006, Ybarra 2018, Gurung 2020). Authors have repeatedly warned against the imposition of external worldviews and agendas, even in well-intentioned initiatives such as environmental conservation or climate change mitigation projects (Chakraborty and Sherpa 2021). These agendas often share a view of pastoralism as disruptive and imply the need for pastoralists to settle (Fratkin 1997). Pastoralists are regarded as being difficult to manage because they are extremely mobile (see Shahrani 1978, Salzman 2002: 259, Meir 1988) and are non-Nepali-speakers, as maintaining an inefficient, non-market-based livelihood (thus not contributing to GDP) (see Fratkin
1997, Fratkin and Mearns 2003) and as a threat to wild flora and fauna (livestock being seen as competing with wild grazers and attacks on the former causing herder-predator conflicts). I have argued that in these sweeping narratives there is a persistent lack of acknowledging ‘mutual adaptation’ (Dwyer and Istomin 2008), mutual benefits and reciprocity (Gagné 2018: 137) between landscape, livestock, deities and humans through herders’ practice of religiously informed ecological ethics of care. I have argued that the assumption found in conservation narratives whereby human absence entails richer ecosystems (also criticised by some biologists such as Rosane 2021) is short-sighted. Territory in Limi, as for many other territories throughout the world, is conceived of as a relationship and an identity (Carroll 2015, Coulthard 2010, Ybarra 2018), both comprising a variety of actors, among which humans are but one part.

Hence, understanding local ontologies and having local people determine the fate of these territories represent both an opportunity to challenge and to revisit conventional approaches to nature conservation and resource management (Coggins and Zeren 2014: 207, Asara et al 2015: 376) and a chance to achieve goals that may be compatible. This being said, it is good to remember that Limey ‘geopiety is not a panacea for sustainable ecological development’ (Coggins and Zeren 2011: 213). This is especially because it is not immutable but shaped by the political and economic context. The latter has changed the Limey people’s relationship to their landscape, which has become a land under the influence of the Nepalese nation state and a resource frontier under the influence of the Chinese market economy. Conservation initiatives should support the system of governance and ontology (Gurung 2020: 53, Agrawal 1995: 29) of the local people, while paying close attention to not reinforce the power imbalances and the politics at stake.

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NOTES

1. As my interlocutors explained, Limi is derived from *ley* (Wiley *sle*), a land surrounded by two rivers, and *mey* (*W mi*), person or people. The ancient settlement of Limi, Tsamtso (also called Gumbayok), was indeed located between two rivers. Hence, the term its inhabitants use to refer to themselves (Limey) takes on its etymology, which already includes inhabitants. The inhabitants of Limi are often referred to in the literature as Limiwas, according to Tibetan logic. However, my interlocutors repeatedly confirmed referring to themselves as Limey, not Limiwas. Hence, I adopt their preferred self-appellation in my writing.

2. Affectionately referred to as achang Pe’ or aw Pe’, literally uncle Pe’ or brother Pe’.

3. There are other possible transliterations for these village names, such as Halji, Walze or Halje, and Zhang or Jang. I chose those that seem to be closest to how they sound in the locally spoken Tibetan dialect, Limiekey.

4. I have transcribed local terms as they sound in English and have provided in brackets their Wylie transliteration (abbreviated W) when available. Additionally, whenever deemed relevant, I have provided Nepali transliterations (abbreviated Np). Most village names in Humla and neighbouring regions have both a Tibetan and a Nepalese version. Also, unlike most occurrences of the term in the literature, I have chosen to capitalise Animism, for the same reason brought forward by Leslie Sponsel: ‘Animism is capitalized as it is the custom for other religious traditions... With its considerable spatial and temporal range, Animism arguably qualifies as the great, major, or world religion, instead of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, or Judaism. Animism is by far the oldest religion of humanity’ (2012: 9–10).
5. See Fratkin (1997: 247) on these patterns of settlement. Purang, as pronounced by the Limey, is sometimes spelt Burang, hence the different spelling here.

6. Ay is a respectful way of referring to a woman old enough to be one’s elder sister; aa, to a woman old enough to be one’s mother; ippi, to a woman old enough to be one’s grandmother; aw, to a man old enough to be one’s elder brother; ow, to a man old enough to be one’s father; and meh, to a man old enough to be one’s grandfather. I have kept this linguistic norm, as referring to people by their name alone would be perceived as rude.

7. Yet this does not prevent hunting altogether. There have been instances of some Limey hunting, though this has been socially reprimanded. Many generations ago, the Limey as a community took a vow not to kill wildlife, which is still respected today. However, neighbouring populations still hunt because they can no longer purchase meat from the Limey, when the former come to harvest medicinal plants in the mountains.

8. Inhabitants of Humla.

9. Simi daal: A variety of lentil to make dhal, a typically South-Asian side dish which, with rice, accompanies nearly all meals; tchurbi: a sort of hard, sun-dried cheese. The Dwokpa, also sometimes spelt Drogpa (W. ’brog pa), are nomads of Tibet.

10. A consensus about the exact year seems to be lacking between authors who cite either 1959 or 1961 as the date for the demarcation of the border between the PRC and Nepal. However, the process took until 1963.

11. Though the overall population of all three villages has not declined. Quite the contrary, as indicated by the increase based on Goldstein’s count in 1974 to the numbers published by the National Census for the years 1991, 2011 and 2021 (see Hovden 2016: 90–96, for a discussion of demographics in Limi and the challenges of how to circumscribe its population).

12. My guess is that the richest Limey herders have sold their herds and bought land or a house in Kathmandu, where they have settled permanently. The rongba did not have large herds and still heavily rely on agriculture for their livelihood, compared to the Limey who now predominantly rely on wage labour and trade in Purang, allowing some of them to accumulate sufficient wealth to leave Limi or to send the next generation to schools outside Limi. The 2011 National Census indicates a 2.25% annual growth rate in Humla between 2001 and 2011, one of the highest in the whole country (National Census 2014: 24), with population density having more than doubled over the last 30 years (ibid: 35).

13. In the wake of Gergan, I define sentient as referring to ‘the indigenous belief in the quality of all life to think, feel, and act’ (Gergan 2015: 263). Therefore, these include spiritual entities from a Limey perspective.


15. In line with Gergan’s definition, I use ‘sacred’ as ‘the characteristic of a specific space, place, object, human, or nonhuman, to elicit awe and reverence’ (Gergan 2015: 263).

16. Mount Kailash is a holy mountain for four world religions.

17. Moore speaks rather of ‘commodity frontier’, conceptualising the frontier not so much as a political space but as an economic space the purpose of which is to supply
centres of capitalist expansion (usually cities). With border cities like Purang, the PRC transforms remote edges into engines that fuel the accumulation of capital.

ABSTRACTS

A common response to the current global ecological crisis is the conservation of areas still somewhat spared from anthropogenic damage, in spite of an abundant literature evidencing the social and ecological shortcomings of top-down approaches to nature conservation. As part of the Kailash Sacred Landscape Initiative, the Limi Valley of north-western Nepal is currently under consideration for the establishment of one such area. This paper warns about an understanding of conservation as a segregation of humans and nature, which is at odds with local perceptions of landscape as relational. Through the perspective of pastoral practices in the Limi Valley, I show how the Limey – the people of this Valley – conceive of humans as enmeshed within a network of interacting beings under the guiding principles of ecological ethics of care. This conception is framed by religion (a syncretic mixture of Mahayana Buddhism, Bon religion and Animism), as well as by skills of ecological and spiritual embeddedness which are central to pastoral practice. I also warn against the fallacy of considering locals’ relationship to the environment, informed by Buddhism, as intrinsically more prone to eco-friendly practices. I show how this relationship is dynamic and evolving, and influenced by the economic and political context of the last thirty years. This has led to the progressive obsolescence of pastoralism as the main means of livelihood, with consequences for the local inhabitants’ relationship to landscape and to other-than-human species.

Une réponse courante à la crise écologique mondiale actuelle est la protection de zones encore quelque peu épargnées par les dommages anthropogéniques, et ce même si une abondante littérature met en évidence les lacunes sociales et écologiques des tentatives d'imposition de zones protégées. Dans le cadre de la Kailash Sacred Landscape Initiative, la création d'une telle zone est actuellement envisagée dans la vallée de Limi, dans le nord-ouest du Népal. Cet article met en garde contre une conception de la préservation de la nature qui consiste en une ségrégation entre les humains et la nature, en contradiction avec les perceptions locales du paysage comme relationnelles. À travers la perspective des pratiques pastorales dans la vallée de Limi, je montre comment les Limey - les habitants de cette vallée - conçoivent les humains comme faisant partie d'un réseau d'êtres en interaction selon les principes directeurs d'une éthique écologique du soin. Cette conception est encadrée par la religion (un mélange syncrétique de bouddhisme Mahayana, de religion Bon et d'animisme), ainsi que par des compétences d'intégration écologique et spirituelle au cœur de la pratique pastorale. Je mets également en garde contre l'erreur consistant à considérer que la relation des locaux à l'environnement, informée par le bouddhisme, est intrinsèquement plus encline aux pratiques écologiques. Je montre comment cette relation est dynamique et évolutive, et influencée par le contexte économique et politique des trente dernières années. Elle a conduit à l'obsolescence progressive du pastoralisme comme principal moyen de subsistance, avec des conséquences sur la relation des habitants locaux au paysage et aux espèces non-humaines.
INDEX

**Mots-clés:** pastoralisme, conservation, écologie, religion, Népal, multispécisme
**Keywords:** pastoralism, conservation, ecology, religion, Nepal, multispecies

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