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THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING LADAKHI: AFFECT AND ARTIFICE IN KARGIL

Ladakh often tends to be associated predominantly with its Tibetan Buddhist inhabitants in the wider public imagination both in India and abroad. It comes as a surprise to many that half the population of this region is Muslim, the majority belonging to the Twelver Shi'i sect and living in Kargil district. This article will discuss the importance of being Ladakhi for Kargili Shias through an ethnographic account of a journey I shared with a group of cultural activists from Leh to Kargil. A view of the landscape, natural and cultural, through their eyes provided a different, more eclectic portrayal of the region that counters several historical depictions in the accounts of colonial explorers and travellers. I argue that the invocation and projection of Kargil's Ladakhiness by these cultural activists has an element of artifice built into it. Yet this packaging of regional "culture" signals an emergent cultural consciousness that spills beyond the politics of identity to an emotionally and intellectually charged process of self-definition that is underway. Riddled with debates as to what constitutes "regional culture," the journey also lends insight into some aspects of contemporary cultural politics within Kargil.

On summer evenings, between four and five o'clock, vehicles filled with tourists pull into Kargil town. They arrive either from Leh, Srinagar (Kashmir Valley) or Padum (Zaskar) to halt for the night on their way to these places in either direction. Kargil is situated at a crossroads of sorts, nearly equidistant from these popular tourist destinations. One such evening, I sat watching the sun set from the terrace of hotel Caravan Sarai overlooking Kargil town. As the dust-blown, tired tourist group was being allocated their rooms, I overheard a young Kargili man hanging around the hotel asking the tour guide from Leh accompanying a group from Srinagar where they were headed the next morning. The guide replied, "We are going to Ladakh with a brief halt in Mulbekh on the way".¹ Laughing, but also serious, the Kargili retorted, "You are already in Ladakh. Say you are going to Leh". Such innocuous banter often reveals deeper sentiments that structure belonging

and regional politics in contemporary Ladakh.

Due to religious affinity and the attention brought to it by the Kargil War (1999) between India and Pakistan, Kargil tends to be associated with the Kashmir Valley in the wider public imagination in India. Sectarian differences are glossed over between the Shi'a majority Kargilis and the predominantly Sunni inhabitants of the valley. Kargili Muslims are thus often subsumed under a general pan-Kashmiri (Sunni) Muslim umbrella. This conflation was problematic for Kargilis, particularly prior to the 1999 war. Since the partition of the subcontinent in 1947-48, Kashmir, divided between India and Pakistan, has remained disputed territory, with both nation-states claiming the whole. India's sovereign stakes in this region were further challenged with the rise of separatist movements in the valley in the late 1980s that either demanded autonomy from both India and Pakistan or wanted to cede to the latter. Violent confrontations with separatist movements, allegedly supported by Pakistan, and some associated with a hard-line Islamist stance, rendered the sense of national belonging of all Muslims in Kashmir suspect in the eyes of the Indian state. As a result, until the 1999 war proved their patriotism to India, people from Kargil often experienced the suspicion and discrimination

1. Mulbekh is famous for the standing statue of Maitreya, referred to as *Chamba*, engraved into a rock twenty to twenty-five feet high. Although not dated with certainty, Luczanits (2005: 67-68) contends that based on stylistic comparisons and the dating of the Alchi monastery, the *Chamba* may have been built in the 11th century. Besides Mulbekh, similar statues can be found at two other sites in Kargil district, little known for they lie off the mainstream tourist route.

with which Muslims from Kashmir tend to be treated in other parts of the country (Aggarwal 2004). This occurred despite a consistent condemnation by Kargilis (including the small Sunni Muslim population) of separatist movements in the Valley, a distinct ethnic composition, and a regional cultural ethos that is trans-Himalayan and Ladakhi. Despite conversion to Islam, the Muslims of Kargil continue to share cultural affinities with the wider trans-Himalayan region that stretches from Baltistan in the west to the Tibetan plateau in the east: they speak a dialect of classical Tibetan, dress in *gonchas* (woollen tunics), share dietary habits in which barley constitutes the staple, drink butter tea, construct flat-roofed mud-brick houses, and celebrate the same seasonal festivals, albeit modified to incorporate religious injunctions. However, Kargil has tended to be relatively invisible or neglected in popular and scholarly representations of Ladakh too. In India and abroad, Ladakh has for long been associated with Leh and its predominantly Tibetan Buddhist inhabitants. Few are aware that half the population of Ladakh is Muslim, of whom the majority are Twelver Shi'a, and live in Kargil.

This article will discuss the importance of being recognised as Ladakhis for people in Kargil, focussing particularly on the Shi'a Muslims. The title of this article unwittingly echoes that of a piece by Martijn van Beek, "The Importance of Being Tribal or: The Impossibility of Being Ladakhis", in which he argues that the classification of Scheduled Tribes in Ladakh in 1989 led "to an erasure of Ladakhis – at least in administrative practice" (van Beek 1997: 22). I show here that being recognised as Ladakhi continues to hold salience in Kargil, despite and alongside the habitation of statist categorizations that enable socio-political and economic claim-making. However, instead of analysing this from the perspective of high politics, this article will turn to the cultural aspects of belonging and identity projection. I will focus on the activities of a group of people in Kargil whom I term "cultural activists". Though from diverse professions they share and articulate a desire to foreground and project what they construe as Kargil's Ladakhi identity, which takes into account a *longue durée* of history to include both the Buddhist past and Islamic present of the region. Cultural activism is not their sole preoccupation; they hold jobs in government, schools, or elsewhere, but also find the time to write poetry, make music, read books and enjoy imagining all sorts of creative projects. I suggest here that the invocation of Kargil's Ladakhiness by them is imbued with deep affect; yet there is also an element of artifice that goes into this projection and experience.

It is important to note, however, that this artifice is not built on amnesia or dissimulation of other aspects of their identity, particularly their religious identity. Cultural politics in everyday life in Kargil offers a stark contrast to the strategies deployed by the Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA) in the late 1980s to represent an "authentic" Ladakhi identity in which Muslims had no place. The eclipsing of the specific needs of Ladakh due to the conflict in the Kashmir

Valley added to a longer history of perceived neglect of the region. This instigated a struggle for Union Territory status for Ladakh, which would place it directly under the purview of the central government in Delhi, by political leaders in Leh. Led by the LBA, the attention of the central government was sought by couching this appeal in a communal framework, a strategy that gained currency within the wider political field in India in the 1980s with the rise of the Hindu right (van Beek 1996). In 1989, the LBA called for a boycott of all Muslims in Ladakh, sowing the seeds of growing polarization between Buddhists and Muslims in the region. Political leaders in Leh displayed conscious amnesia of the very arbitrariness of a Ladakhi identity essentialized to the region's Buddhist inhabitants on the ground, where religious, ethnic, or sub-regional markers continued to be variously foregrounded depending on context and interaction (van Beek 2001). The work of cultural activists in Kargil can be read as attempts to rectify this elision of Muslims from representations of Ladakh as a region.

In Kargil, religious and regional identity, despite a rising sectarian consciousness and the communalisation of Ladakh, easily meld together and are not experienced as being problematic or irreconcilable at a subjective level in everyday life. A discussion on the relationship between what is construed as "regional" as opposed to "religious" culture arises either when religious injunctions are placed on certain regional cultural practices considered un-Islamic; when regional/pan-Ladakh cultural practices are associated with Leh and its Buddhist inhabitants; or when outsiders refuse to recognise Islamic religious identity or imagery as part of the region's culture.

The first section of the article will briefly review the place Kargil holds in textual, especially historical representations of Ladakh. Against this background, the next ethnographic section will describe a journey I undertook with a group of Kargili cultural activists from Leh to Kargil. The juxtaposition of this journey with the previous section will lend insight into how popular and scholarly representations are internalised, appropriated and enter into the conceptualisations and projections of "regional culture" by local cultural activists in Kargil, and by extension Kargil's Ladakhi identity. The journey will also offer a glimpse into cultural politics within Kargil. Based on this the final section will turn to an analysis of an emergent cultural consciousness in Kargil.

TEXTUAL REPRESENTATIONS

For colonial explorers, expeditions and lay travellers alike, historically Ladakh was a substitute for Tibet that remained impermeable to them. It offered the closest approximation to the romanticized Tibetan Buddhist way of life; monasteries, monks, lunar landscapes and cheery, smiling inhabitants living in harmony with nature encapsulate Ladakh in image and text. Much of the Kargil area, which had converted to Islam by the eighteenth century, did not offer what the traveller's eye sought to see. Thus the region between the Zoji-

la pass till Mulbekh en route to Leh scarcely finds a mention in descriptions of the journey in either direction, except for the mention of Kargil town as a necessary halt to re-stock food and rest horses and men (Filippi 1915). It is hard to glean much on Kargil even in the literature on trade between Ladakh, Tibet and Central Asia, except for the mention of transport work undertaken by the people of the Drass-Kargil belt, between Leh and Srinagar (Rizvi 1999, Warikoo 1990). Archival reports of the British Joint Commissioner to Ladakh on trade are concerned mostly with issues of carriage, taxes, levies and trade-routes, and no distinct mention can be found of Kargil or its people.² The rare descriptions of Kargil to be found in travel accounts tend to paint a rather sorry image. Extremely valuable, especially for a detailed description of the lie of the land, Moorcroft's account provides a few precious glimpses into the Suru valley and some other villages of the Kargil area, where he passed through some time between 1819-1825. However, his impressions also appear to be tainted by constant comparison with what he expected to find in a "Tibetan area". In his depiction of the Suru valley, he wrote:

From Sankho we ascended the Nakpo chu along its right bank, a little more than a mile, to the village and lands of Stak-pa... The tilled lands were extensive, and laid out in slopes, but not supported by walls, and in general the cultivation was unusually slovenly for Tibet (Moorcroft & Trebeck 1841 Vol. II: 32).

Further, explaining the penury of the people of Drass, having to provide compulsory labour for travellers and merchants, Moorcroft, nonetheless appears to pass judgment:

This system of oppression has not only impoverished the people; it has demoralized them, and they are the most dishonest race in Ladakh... This is not the character of Tibetans in general, especially of those who follow the faith of Buddha. The people of Dras are Mohammedans, and my intercourse with the Shiah Mohammedans has found the upper classes intolerant and the lower dissolute and unprincipled (ibid: 43- 44).

To give another example, Captain Knight writes of his journey to "Pashkoom":

Returning through the village, I found the natives hard at work collecting their crops of wheat and barley, and stowing them away,

2. Reports and Diaries of Dr. Henry Cayley, Jt. Commissioner, Ladakh, between 1868 – 1873; Foreign & Political (National Archives, Delhi).

generally upon the flat tops of their houses. They seemed altogether a peaceful, primitive race; but, although their ground appears in first-rate order, they themselves are uncultivated and dirty in the extreme. The ladies, I am sorry to say, are even rather worse in this matter than the gentlemen (Knight 1992 [1863]: 151).

Dainelli is even more explicit than Moorcroft and Knight:

...there is in Ladakh – though it is naturally poor, has a poor soil, a severe climate, lies at a high altitude, and is not very productive – a relatively high standard of comfort throughout the whole of the population, a general well-being, and an equality of economic conditions which excludes envy and also arrogance, and diffuses a sort of satisfaction and a measure of happiness over individual lives" (Dainelli 1933: 247-8)

"Perhaps, once upon a time, the Baltis were also like this [like the Buddhists, happy and contented], but they are certainly so no longer; now they are wretched and gloomy, colourless and taciturn, since they adopted, together with Islam, social conditions which are so different that they may be said to be quite the opposite of those in Ladakh" (ibid. 1933: 248).

A more recent account by John da Silva demonstrates that impressions have scarcely changed. Having left for Leh early in the morning after a mere night halt in Kargil, he writes:

After Kargil the road bends south and as the sun has not yet risen over the mountains we travelled the next twenty-five miles in shadow. The dwellings by the roadside had an untidy and furtive appearance and the few women we saw turned away, covering their faces. Our last glimpse was of a tiny mosque with a golden dome in the darkened fields before we emerged into sunlight at Mulbekh and saw a Buddhist monastery high on the hill to our left... It seemed that we emerged metaphorically as well as actually, out of darkness into light' (da Silva 1987: 49).

In the past it was not just travellers and explorers who were "prisoners of Shangri-la", but academics too (Lopez 1998). A distinct Tibeto-centric tilt could be discerned in Ladakh studies (van Beek 2003: 291; Aggarwal 1997), even though early ethnographic work showed significant differences

between Tibet and Ladakh (van Beek & Pirie 2008).³ An exception to this is the pioneering work by Nicola Grist on Kargil, who rightly pointed out, “Quite unintentionally the impression has been given that “real” Ladakhis are Buddhists and that Muslims and Muslim practice are imposters in their own land” (Grist 1995: 59, 1998).⁴ In fact, Buddhists in Leh generically refer to all Shi’a Muslims in Ladakh as Balti, which is a euphemism for outsiders and Muslims as *chipa* (etymologically derived from the opposite of *nangpa*, denoting insiders).

Few Kargilis may be aware of the way Kargil has been depicted in historical textual representations of Ladakh. However, those who have been exposed to the world of contemporary scholarship and conferences ever since Ladakh was first opened to outsiders in 1974 resent the neglect of Kargil in Ladakh Studies. Since the 1990s, a group of Kargili cultural activists have been striving to project Kargil to the outside world, in which foregrounding its Ladakhiness holds an important place. This is driven by both emotional and political concerns, as well as the pragmatic desire to encourage tourism in the region. Though initially spearheaded by a few individuals belonging to some elite and politically powerful families of Kargil town and local poets, the consciousness of “our identity and culture” often expressed as *gnati skad* (our language) has become more widespread. While a direct expression of linguistic identity, this phrase has become an overarching metaphor for *regional* cultural identity in Kargil.

Early cultural activism can perhaps be traced to the work of Balti activists in Kargil for the inclusion of Balti, a dialect of classical Tibetan, in the Sixth Schedule of Languages in the Constitution of Jammu & Kashmir state. Rendered a numerical minority in Ladakh after the closure of the border with Baltistan in 1948, the Baltis have actively sought to maintain a distinct cultural and ethnic identity through the preservation of their dialect. Amongst other initiatives, a group of Balti cultural activists came together with young men from the well-known Munshi family⁵ to set up KASCO (Kargil Social and Cultural Organisation) in 1997 (Aggarwal 2004: 202).⁶ They would meet informally to set

3. Ironically the overshadowing of Ladakh by Tibet has tended to essentialize Tibetan Buddhism itself with its regional variants being overshadowed. This, Gutshow (2004:10) contends, has led to a misrepresentation of Himalayan Buddhism. Two works – Gutschow (2004) and Pirie (2007) – have sought to challenge the monolithic representation of Buddhism that derives from a Tibeto-centric orientation in its application to Ladakh. The conflation of Buddhism with Tibetan culture in the context of Tibet itself has been deemed problematic, for not only does it reify Tibetan Buddhism, it also hides “the empirical diversity of indeterminate social life” (Moran 2004: 46).

4. In the same issue of the Tibet Journal (1995), also see articles by Pascale Dollfus and Smriti Srinivas.

5. The Munshis are a prominent political and wealthy family in Kargil town. Originally from Kashmir, their ancestors settled in the region to fill various posts in the Dogra administration.

6. Though mostly comprised of Balti activists, the initial name of the organisation was changed to include all of Kargil in response to the allegation of some that Balti culture does not subsume the culture of Kargil.

traditional Balti poetry to pop music and produce new lyrics. Later a small troupe was established to perform on various occasions, including state functions.

Performances by troupes dressed in traditional costumes fit endorsed modes of cultural display in India and qualify for state patronage through State Cultural Academies. Based on her work among the Miao ethnic minority in Southwest China, Louisa Schein (1994: 202) rightly argues that although the representation of minority cultures in song and dance troupes may freeze them as essences of the “old” and the “primitive,” this also prompts deliberate acts of preservation. This makes cultural revival a complex interplay between local initiative and state sponsorship. Something similar is underway in Kargil. Over the past few years as consciousness of identity has grown, different ethnic groups in the region – Balti, Dard, Purigpa, Brogpa – have founded their own troupes. They compete to be invited to state functions such as the celebration of Independence Day or *Vijay Diwas* (annual celebration of India’s victory in the Kargil war). Corroborating Schein’s argument, these cultural troupes reflect a socialisation into legitimate national categories, which are productive of a particular collective, albeit internally competitive, posturing. Yet they also manifest a broader concern with the desire to preserve “culture” as expressive of the sentiment of regional belonging. In other words, their *raison d’être* is not merely instrumental. The affect imbued in the aspirations and activities of cultural activists in Kargil goes beyond the “interiorized self or subjectivity” to “unfold regimes of expressivity” (Greg & Seigworth 2010: 8, 12). However, it is not prior to mediation by wider discourses on what constitutes “culture”—academic, statist, and popular—that cultural activists pick up in their interactions with the world at large. From this critical perspective the binary between affect and artifice (cultural production and performance) breaks down.⁷

Besides being a forum for young people to engage in creative activities, organisations like KASCO were also a response to clerics’ deeming of “music and dance” as being *harām* (prohibited in Islam). Cultural activists stress the importance of preserving and reviving aspects of Kargil’s cultural heritage perceived to be threatened by religious injunctions or dying a natural death with the popularity of newer forms of entertainment and lifestyles associated with modernity. Activists lament, for instance, the loss of a repertoire of Purigi folksongs or traditional Balti poetry, or that few people now wear the *goncha* (traditional woollen tunic) except on special occasions such as weddings. Cultural activism thus goes beyond the issue of language preservation and has come to include a host of features seen to be emblematic of “traditional” Ladakhi or regional culture. This is productive of an eclectic packaging of culture illustrative of

7. I draw here upon Mazzarella’s critique of the binary set up by some theorists (e.g. Brian Massumi) between affect and the semiotic (Mazzarella 2009).

the artifice that goes into the projection of Ladakhi identity. However, we shall see in the journey I describe below that the concern with the preservation and projection of regional culture is also imbued with a deep pride and pleasure in Ladakh, its landscape, culture and history.

JOURNEYING FROM LEH TO KARGIL

In the summer of 2009, I had the opportunity to travel from Leh to Kargil with a few Kargili cultural activists. The motley group comprised of two brothers from the well-known Munshi family, a Balti journalist, an official from the J&K Cultural Academy and an old Buddhist intellectual from the mixed Buddhist-Muslim village of Achinathang, whom everyone affectionately calls *meme-le* (grandfather).⁸ The journey turned out to be a cultural odyssey of sorts. It started with listening to a new Ladakhi pop album that one of the Munshi brothers had purchased in the Leh bazaar. As a founding member of KASCO, he had been encouraging the preservation of Balti language in Kargil by setting it to pop music so that the younger generation would listen to it. My companions were eager to catch up on the music produced in Leh for ideas for their own creative endeavours, but also because they simply enjoyed it. Music as an expression of vernacular traditions has seen a revival not only in Leh and Kargil, but also across the border in Baltistan.⁹

As the early morning thawed, the music quickly faded into the backdrop. An animated discussion on the historical boundaries of Purig began to rage between the Balti journalist and *meme-le*. A part of Kargil district today or what is considered central Kargil was called *Purig* historically.¹⁰ *Meme-le* suggested that Purig ends at the Namika-la pass that descends to Lamayuru *gonpa* when travelling from Kargil to Leh, marking the transition from Muslim majority areas to Buddhist Ladakh. The Balti journalist contended that Purig extends much beyond Lamayuru, stretching all the way to Khaltse, which is well within Leh district. This, he argued, could be proven by the fact that people in Khaltse too celebrated *Mamani*, alleging that it was a “Purig custom”.¹¹ I had heard from other intellectuals in Kargil that *Mamani* is held during the coldest period of the winter between 21st

December and 21st January, known as *Chile Kalan*; special food is cooked (usually a goat is slaughtered) and shared with relatives and friends. These feasts are held to mark the peaceful passage of winter. This festival was cited to me by several people in Kargil as an example of “regional culture” or a remnant of Kargil’s Buddhist past. It particularly came up in discussions with those who theoretically endorsed clerical injunctions against “song and dance” to give an example of a regional cultural tradition that continues to thrive, that “culture” was not dead because of Islam. Regardless of the veracity of facts regarding the boundary of Purig put forth in the discussion, extending the territory of Purig beyond Lamayuru served to disrupt any association that might be made between the boundary of Purig or Kargil with the point where the landscape transitions from being dominated by *gonpas* rather than mosques. This conversation on the boundaries of Purig could be seen as another instance of the way territory is sought to be claimed and marked by cultural ownership.

The debate on Purig led into the contentious issue in Kargil on the status of Purigi as an authentic language. Purigi is the lingua franca of Kargil district and is understood by all ethnic groups including the Dards who are Shina speakers. Lying somewhere between Balti and Ladakhi,¹² over the years Purigi has liberally absorbed Urdu vocabulary as people in Kargil gained fluency in Urdu as part of their education in government schools. Purigi is derided by Baltis as being a “bastard language”, a “language of the bazaar”. Staking claim to Balti as the “original” and “authentic” language of Kargil and Baltistan, the Baltis, ever so proud of Balti *adab* (refinement and sophistication), refuse to accord Purigi any literary or classical merit. While this perception of Purigi has been widely internalised in Kargil, some argue to the contrary. Master Hussain from Silmo village in the Batalik area, for instance, vehemently contends that it is Purigi which is the “real” language of the region, and not Balti. He argues that the proof of the *qadim* (ancient) status of the dialect lies in the repertoire of nearly five hundred Purigi folksongs that he himself knows of. However, both Balti and Purigpa activists agree that Balti is closest to written classical Tibetan unlike Ladakhi, the dialect spoken in Leh, which is said to have absorbed influences from the Lhasa dialect in pronunciation and grammar. The issue of dialect is much discussed in Kargil for it is linked to that of script. Purigi and Balti are now written in Urdu script as the Tibetan script, or *Bod-yig*, has been appropriated, they allege, by Buddhist conservatives in Leh as a marker of Buddhist identity. Some cultural activists in Kargil argue for the revival and re-adoption of *Bod-yig* and lament that religious conservatism on the part of both Buddhists and Muslims has prevented this. On our journey

8. A deep thank you to the friends mentioned here in particular, but everyone else in Kargil too for their help and friendship.

9. See Magnusson (2011) on the role pop ghazals play in asserting “non-Islamic local cultural traditions” by the Baltistan movement in Baltistan, Pakistan.

10. Until Dogra reign in the seventeenth century, Leh, Purig and Baltistan were divided into small sovereign kingdoms under the rule of local *rajjas* or *gyalpos*. The *Purigpa* (people of Purig) and the Baltis are said to be the mixed descendants of the early settlers in the region—the Mongols from Tibet and the Dards from Gilgit—who started intermarrying after the cessation of warfare between them from the 10th century onwards. Some intellectuals in Kargil conjecture that Purig may have derived from *Bot-rigs* (people from Tibet), who came and settled in this region.

11. According to Aggarwal (2004: 85), *Mamani* is of Brogpa origin and travelled to Purig and Ladakh via Gilgit and Baltistan; it is held to honour ancestors.

12. Balti, Ladakhi, and Purigi have been classified as archaic dialects of an earlier stage of the Tibetan language that predates *Choskat* (classical Tibetan, language of religious books). Even though their pronunciation does not always correspond to the written equivalent, these dialects are said to be the closest to classical orthography (Zeisler 2005: 53).

that day, however, there was no staunch Purigpa activist to defend the Purigi dialect and my companions concluded that Balti and Ladakhi are the “original languages” of Ladakh.

Two and a half hours into the journey, we reached Khaltse; a brief halt for tea and we continued on to Achinatang to drop *meme-le*.¹³ As we entered the village, my Kargili friends posed for photographs in front of *chortens* and admired the beauty of the apricot laden trees. Before heading to *meme-le*'s new house in the upper reaches of the village, my friends requested to see his old house. They wanted to show me what they considered a fine example of traditional Ladakhi architecture. Constructed from mud-bricks and stone, the house was a few stories high with carved wooden windows. Pointing to the ibex horns above the main entrance, they led me on a tour of its dark interiors explaining the seasonal usage of the different rooms in the past. They lamented that now people in Kargil are constructing cement buildings with hardly anyone bothering to incorporate styles and principles of the traditional architectural heritage of the region. Further, both non-governmental and state conservation agencies, they complained, focus only on Leh with little attention being paid to the remains of Ladakhi material heritage extant in Kargil.¹⁴

Once at *meme-le*'s new cement house, built as a home-stay guesthouse for tourists, his grandchildren clad in jeans and t-shirts offered us sweet tea with fresh apricots and cake. While *meme-le*'s deep maroon *goncha* marked the contrast between generations, the snacks combined local village produce with market fare. As we sipped our tea, *meme-le* brought out a set of old texts in Tibetan script, carefully wrapped in cloth to donate to the Munshi museum. Opened in 2005, the Munshi Aziz Bhatt Museum for Silk Route and Central Asian Trade is an endeavour of Gulzar and Ajaz Munshi to collect, preserve and display objects circulated along the trade routes between Ladakh and Yarkand and other material relics of everyday life that are no longer easily found or used. Named after their grandfather, the museum displays a variety of artefacts -- horse-saddles, tapestries, utensils, coins, old manuscripts and photographs, costumes and jewellery. Though not stated as such, the museum implicitly contributes to the recognition sought for Kargil beyond its current Kashmiri or “Islamic” image in the eye of the common traveller and situates the region in the *longue durée* of history.¹⁵

Having collected these relics of “culture” (as my friends put it) from Achinatang, we continued to our next destination, another mixed Buddhist-Muslim village called Hanuthang. Located atop a steep mountain, the entrance to the village

is marked by what my travel companions termed a “natural *stupa*”: a tall rock in the shape of a *stupa*, marked by a gently fluttering *tarchok* (prayer flag on a pole). Pausing to take in its full view before starting our climb up to the village, I was urged to take pictures of this nature-culture marvel. More photo opportunities were excitedly seized upon along the way as we came across a Brogpa woman in her traditional floral headdress.¹⁶ Each of my friends wanted an individual photo with her. While I clicked away, one of them conducted their own mini-fieldwork exercise asking her what language she spoke and the difference in dialect between *Hanuskat* and *Lehskat*.

As we walked up the steep pathway, enjoying apricots fresh off the trees, the Balti journalist explained the purpose of our visit to this village. We were going to locate a family that had been separated during the partition of the subcontinent. Someone from Baltistan had contacted him to locate a relative in Hanuthang; we were going, as he said, “to try and put each side in touch with the other”. One of the Munshi brothers pondered aloud that this story would make for a wonderful film on the pathos of partition in this region, conjuring up a title: “Ashraf looks for Amina”. Once we found the home we were searching for, driven by curiosity, children from neighbouring households streamed in. My friends excitedly pointed to two of them, admiring their blue eyes and fair skin. One of them turned to me to explain, “They are of the ‘original central Asian and Aryan stock’”. Another remarked, “These faces could easily be on the cover of a National Geographic”. Again I was told to pull out my camera and take photos of each of the children. The offering of *Lipton* (sweet tea) and biscuits was turned down with a request for traditional fare – *khulak* (ground and roasted barley) and salty butter tea. Making an astute observation, one of the activists pointed to the *khulak* urn, which turned out to be fabricated from the remains of a hollowed out shell from the Kargil war. The bright floral Tibetan motifs now decorating it disguised the original identity of the object. The cultural history of the village thus mingled with the more recent past. After taking photographs of the entire family to send to their relatives in Pakistan, we left Hanuthang and crossed to the left bank of the Indus to the village of Sanjak.

All along the route to Sanjak, intense pride and pleasure in the landscape was evident among my fellow travellers. However, a few kilometres after Sanjak, pleasure transformed into outrage when one of them noticed that some boulders with ancient petroglyphs along the banks of the Indus had been damaged and carried away, despite the still-intact government notice-board indicating their “protected monument” status. After interrogating a few labourers

13. See Aggarwal (2004) for an ethnography of Achinatang.

14. For restoration work undertaken in old Leh town, see Alexander (2005).

15. The Ministry of Culture & Tourism, Jammu & Kashmir state has supported the Central Asian Museum in Leh, which too exhibits the ties that Ladakh forged with Tibet, Central Asia and the Kashmir Valley through trade.

16. I was often told by people in Kargil that if I really wanted to see authentic and traditional Ladakhi culture, I should visit the Brogpa villages. Often referred to as the “original Aryans”, Kargilis were echoing the mystique surrounding the Brogpas in the imagination of tourists. See Friese (2001) for a witty travel account of searching for the “pure Aryan” in the villages of Dha and Hanu in Leh district.

working farther up the road to no avail, my friends decided to lodge an F.I.R (First Information Report) on the destruction of regional heritage with the police station in Chigtan, a few kilometres away.

As we drove along the River Chigtan the earlier excitement that had dissipated near the missing petroglyphs returned at the sight of two elderly women wearing *skulchaks* (women's *gonchas*) and traditional turquoise jewellery. One of the activists exclaimed, "See we have already seen culture twice over here", and another added, "We really must come back to make a film here." Chigtan had been repeatedly cited to me by several people in Kargil as one of the few places in the district where people were still keeping their regional culture intact. When I asked what they meant by this, they would say, "People in Chigtan still live in traditional houses" or "People in Chigtan still wear traditional clothes" and "A few old people in Chigtan can still recite the Kesar saga". The purpose of our visit to Chigtan was to photograph an old mosque in which Tibetan-style motifs of dragons on the supporting wooden pillars were still intact. These, my friends explained, were important evidence of Buddhist influence even on mosque architecture in the region. This was an example, as one of them put it, of the "composite culture" of Ladakh.¹⁷

Tinged with an anthropological zeal, the excitement over history and culture did not abate, even as the day gave way to the quiet of twilight and the mountains changed hues with the evening light. As we approached the villages of Wakha-Mulbekh, one of my companions related the story of two brothers, Gyal Bumde and Chos Bumde, descendants of the Mongol king Nyi Thistan who ruled Mulbekh in the thirteenth century. They are said to have fled to Kashmir in their youth from a cruel stepmother and converted to Islam under the influence of the reign of the Mughal emperor Humayun. Years later, upon their return to Wakha-Mulbekh, the brothers asked to be buried upon their death. However, the Buddhist population of the area were ignorant of the burial ritual; so legend has it that on their deaths, the bodies of Chos and Gyal Bumde were placed in *chortens*. These *chortens* stand intact even today in the village of Wakha. As if to provide further testimony to the co-mingling of the region's Buddhist past with its Islamic present, a *chorten* next to a mosque in Wakha appeared in silhouette against the darkening cobalt blue sky. This was the last landmark of ecstasy that had marked our cultural odyssey that day. Soon the silence of the hour engulfed us, as we each got lost in our thoughts for the remaining journey to Kargil town.

17. "Composite culture" in the subcontinent usually refers to Indo-Persian traditions in North India (see Alam 1999 for a historiography of the phrase). In the wider Ladakh region, it refers to the coming together of Indian, Persian (Kashmiri) and Tibetan influences.

CONCLUSION: PRODUCING AND CONSUMING "CULTURE"

I relate this extended travel vignette to illustrate the increasing consciousness in Kargil of various aspects of "culture" as an "objectified social fact" (Ginsburg 1997: 139). The debate on dialect, the desired monumentalization of everyday spaces as heritage, or the awareness that blue eyes and a turquoise studded *perak* (*head-dress*) would make good National Geographic photographs, all illustrate that cultural activists in Kargil have picked up on the way the world wants to view the "culture" of Ladakh. However, they are not ignorant, defensive, or dismissive of the artifice through which they are seeking to reclaim their Ladakhi identity, through the projection of certain and selective aspects of what they construe as regional or Ladakhi culture.¹⁸

Although "culture" is sought to be packaged in Kargil for pragmatic purposes such as tourism, its value goes beyond this. "Culture" talk, projection, preservation and politics are a mode of self-reflection, of being Kargili such that their identity is not subsumed by Leh or Kashmir, by Islam or its pre-Buddhist past, but recognized on its own terms. The different stages of the journey with cultural activists that I describe above, brought into view ethnic, linguistic, and material aspects of the *longue durée* of the region's cultural history: from petroglyphs to *chortens*, traditional home architecture to mosques, and floral headdresses to used ammunition shells, challenging any monolithic representation of the region, whether by insiders or outsiders.

The reactions, sentiments, discussions, and stories along the journey also show us how the producers of "culture"—the cultural activists who are at the forefront of representing the region's "culture" to the outside world—are simultaneously consumers of their own "culture." In his discussion of consumption in capitalist societies, Miller (1987: 17) argues that consumption is a process in which a community "reappropriates its own external form" and "assimilates its own culture and uses it to develop itself as a social subject". This argument can be applied to understand consumption outside its strictly capitalist context. When Kargilis extol their culture, not just for the benefit of outsiders, but as a source of pleasure for themselves, a similar process is underway. The consumption of culture as an "objectified social fact" regardless of disagreements and debates over its definition and conceptions enables them to forge and articulate a sense of self.

While this emergent cultural consciousness in Kargil is instigated by a politics of recognition—of reclaiming a Ladakhi identity—interest in cultural matters is not limited to display, performance, projection, and representation. The evident pleasure and pride in their own natural and cultural landscape and a keen interest in history amongst the cultural activists I travelled with attests to what might

18. I borrow this concept of cultural packaging and artifice from Schein's (1999) work on the Miao in China.

be seen as a reflection of the intellectual life of Kargil that would be impoverished if confined to the labels of cultural commodification or identity politics. The artifice that goes into projecting the importance of being Ladakhi in Kargil is deeply affective.

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