

January 2016

Afterword | Charting Himalayan Histories

Sara Shneiderman
University of British Columbia

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya>

Recommended Citation

Shneiderman, Sara. 2016. Afterword | Charting Himalayan Histories. *HIMALAYA* 35(2).
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol35/iss2/31>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

This Research Article is brought to you for free and open access by the DigitalCommons@Macalester College at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.

Afterword | Charting Himalayan Histories

Sara Shneiderman

The editors of this special issue begin with the injunction that, “historians must engage innovatively with Himalayan sources while keeping apace of developments in their disciplines; they must also effectively communicate their findings to non-historian scholars of the region so as to further advance the field.” From my anthropologist’s perspective, this volume has gone far beyond achieving its stated objective. As a collective, the authors bring us deep into historical worlds across multiple Himalayan places and times in an accessible manner, enriching the historical foundation for transregional Himalayan research as a whole. Each piece also stands on its own terms as a significant contribution to a particular body of scholarship defined by location and period.

In 1993 Pratyoush Onta wrote that, “In a curious division of labour, while the field of anthropology of Nepal has been dominated by Western researchers, most historians of Nepal have been Nepalis. If the anthropological research agenda has been set largely by the personal, national, institutional and theoretical dispositions of the foreign researchers, one could say that, in the case of history, Nepali researchers have focussed almost exclusively on the life of the Nepali nation-state” (1993: 1).

If this special issue of *HIMALAYA* is any indication, in the 20 years that have passed since Onta noted this imbalance, there has been significant development in historical research in the region. The work showcased in this journal issue includes original contributions by both Western and South Asian historians, and an expansion of Himalayan history beyond the domain of the Nepali state—both through a substantive historical engagement with Himalayan polities beyond Nepal, and through engagement with social histories that at once decenter the state and shed new light on its processes. Let me discuss each of these exciting developments in turn.

State formation is a central concern for some of the authors here, notably Sanjog Rupakheti in his analysis of the inner workings of the 19th century Gorkhali state. Unlike past authors who focused on the role of ritual and land tenure regulation in shaping state power, Rupakheti instead turns to judicial regimes to provide new insights into how the central Gorkhali state sought to limit abuses of power by regional elites as it consolidated rule. Here we see a surprisingly nuanced form of state power, which takes an activist interest in local affairs with the intention of cultivating loyalty among diverse subjects, many of whom suffer at the hands of regional power-holders. This image complicates the polarized received narratives of a glorious nation established through military might, on the one hand, and a Nepali state built upon oppressive centralized power that uses sociocultural tactics only to subjugate local populations, on the other. Instead, Rupakheti reveals a self-reflexive juridical state that recognizes the need to support, not only suppress, local demands in a complex, multi-layered diplomatic environment.

Emma Martin depicts a similarly complex and multi-layered diplomatic environment by following the material life of the *khatak*, or Tibetan prayer scarf, as an object of diplomatic “grammar” that often faced translational difficulty between Tibetan and British officials. As such, Martin’s piece can also be read as a story of state formation, both of the Tibetan state before 1959, and of the British colonial administration. By tracing the ways in which the *khatak* is circulated and received by different actors as a multivalent—but always signifying—object, Martin demonstrates how Tibetan and British authorities in fact co-produced each other’s public image through the exchange of material objects. These public images were strongly rooted in localized understandings of cultural practice; Martin shows how the British approach to the *khatak* was shaped

by their earlier experience of the Indo-Persian categories of *nazr* and *mizaaj pursi*, two different kinds of gifts. The internal debate among British officers about how to treat the *khatak* reveals an attention to local detail reminiscent of Rupakheti's account of the Gorkhali state, which, taken together, offer new insights into how empires understood the diverse representational practices of Himalayan cultural communities.

Such representational practices and their political engagement through the domain of what is often called 'civil society' is a theme well-addressed by both Alice Travers and Leah Koskimaki, in what they refer to as "pre-1951 Tibet" and "late colonial Uttarakhand" respectively. It's worth pausing for a moment to consider that both authors focus on roughly the same time period, the first half of the 20th century, but use different periodizing terms that emphasize power dynamics within the broader Himalayan region. For Tibet, 1951 heralded the onset of greater Chinese intervention, while in India the colonial era ended in 1947 with the constitution promulgated in 1950. In both contexts, the authors show how in this time period, newly vocal 'middle classes' began to regularize educational systems, and link political aspiration to them.

Drawing upon print media sources, Koskimaki shows how the category of 'youth' came to be understood as a powerful political bloc in Uttarakhand, in a manner that resonates with recent ethnographic research in Nepal (Snelinger 2009, 2013) and indeed in Uttarakhand (Dyson 2014). In this way, Koskimaki roots what has often been understood as a relatively recent concept in a rich historical context, demonstrating that Himalayan history has much to offer to other disciplines. One of Koskimaki's footnotes is particularly enticing when read in conjunction with Rupakheti's article in this collection: she quotes Shekhar Pathak, who suggests that, "Company rule ... was less cruel and oppressive than Gurkha rule" (Koskimaki, this volume, footnote 18). One wonders, then, how the juridical Gorkhali state that Rupakheti introduces to the reader operated in Kumaun during its period of rule across the western Himalaya, and whether the same principles of local rule that Rupakheti describes from materials largely focused on eastern Nepal also pertained to the west.

Like Koskimaki, Travers complicates established categories. Contrary to narratives from both Chinese and English language sources that depict pre-1951 Tibet as a feudal society made up of only lords and serfs, where the only educational institutions were monastic, she shows how a network of private educational institutions in fact engendered what she calls the "continuity in values between the

government and the civil society." The documentary histories of these private schools demonstrate the existence of a broad category of "educated middle classes" in urban pre-1951 Tibet. However, just as Koskimaki's educated youth sought to sow the seeds of progress in villages beyond the urban pale, so did the educated middle class teachers described by Travers seek to create the "potential for social mobility" by teaching across social categories through the "monitorial system." Here, teachers employed class "captains" to create smaller group learning environments, a system which Travers traces to colonial India.

Such educational connections between India and Tibet may have enabled the Himalayan cosmopolitanism that Jayeeta Sharma describes in colonial Darjeeling. Indeed, Travers explains how one school in the Chumbi Valley supported by the Kalimpong mission served Nepalese and Lepcha as well as Tibetan children. This suggests that not only were the "transcultural" flows of labor mobility important in constituting Darjeeling as "a vibrant mountain hub for vernacular modernity and local cosmopolitanism," as Jayeeta Sharma writes in her contribution, but that the borderland context in which Darjeeling itself was located also played a part in this process. J. Sharma argues that Darjeeling must be seen as an urban site of connectivity rather than a romantic and timeless hill-station. However, the recognition of this fact also entails the recognition that Darjeeling's cosmopolitanism was racialized, gendered, and classed. We cannot argue for local cosmopolitanism in a laudatory sense, suggests J. Sharma, without recognizing the many ways in which it was built upon subaltern labor. Men and women engaged in distinct patterns of labor, just as members of different ethnic communities took on specific tasks according to an ethnicized notion of capability that had its roots in the colonial era, but continues today. Whether through the embodied labor of the Sherpa mountaineers whom Sharma describes, or that of the Thangmi musical performers about whom I write (Shneiderman 2015), Darjeeling's diverse and dynamic cosmopolitanism has always been undergirded by ideologies of difference that continue to have significant political implications (Middleton 2015).

Just as Travers reflects on the connections between Tibetan students and colonial India, J. Sharma pushes westward to speak of the contributions of Kashmiri traders to Darjeeling's eastern Himalayan cosmopolitanism. These links, often mentioned in passing, compel me to wonder whether the Himalayan cosmopolitanism that J. Sharma describes should be understood as a singular transregional phenomenon, or rather as a distinct set of cosmopolitanisms in specific locations. In other words, what are the connec-

tions between both state forms and civil society dynamics as they emerged across the Himalayan region, in Uttarakhand, Darjeeling, Tibet and Nepal, as described by authors in this special issue, not to mention in Sikkim (cf. Mullard 2011), Bhutan, and other Himalayan sites?

Looking comparatively across time as well, I conclude by coming to the historically earliest piece in this collection: Mahesh Sharma's discussion of patriarchy in the western Himalayan Kangra Valley, and its links with the infrastructure of waterways. Through an analysis of oral literature, M. Sharma shows how bodily and territorial concepts are linked, in a manner reminiscent of Tibetan tropes of pinning down the demonness (Gyatso 1987, Ramble 2008). M. Sharma also extends outwards from the Himalayas to look comparatively at wife-walling-up narratives in European literatures. How would a comparative perspective of discrete oral literatures found across the Himalayas expand such analysis, allowing us to trace patterns of convergence and divergence around themes such as the gendered nature of state formation?

In common with other scholars working in the Himalaya, historians face the challenge of taking a transregional approach to a world area that is parceled into different academic 'Area Studies' domains. South Asian historiography accommodates the Indian Himalaya, China historians engage with dynamics expanding across the Tibetan plateau in a manner that intersects with Tibetological readings grounded in religious history, while Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim have largely sustained their own nationalist traditions. However, the historian's reliance on the archive poses particular methodological challenges in crossing such boundaries. A truly transregional Himalayan history would require work in multiple languages (Nepali, Tibetan, Chinese, Hindi, English—among others) and in multiple national, regional, and personal collections. While the articles published here largely restrict their analysis to sources in a single language other than English, the framework of this issue places them in conversation in a manner that makes it possible to imagine new sites of inquiry across their shared borders. The work presented here will be crucial to developing the interdisciplinary study of Himalayan history. The next question is how to take this promise forward, and how best to pursue the many new avenues of analysis that these papers have opened up to challenge the constraints of traditional Area Studies.

Sara Shneiderman (PhD, Anthropology, Cornell University), is Assistant Professor in Anthropology and the Institute of Asian Research at the University of British Columbia. She is the author of *Rituals of Ethnicity: Thangmi Identities Between Nepal and India* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), and several articles on ethnicity, migration, religion, gender, Maoism, affirmative action, and state restructuring across the Himalayas and South Asia.

References

- Dyson, Jane. 2014. *Working Childhoods: Youth, Agency and the Environment in India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gyatso, Janet. 1987. "Down with the Demonness: Reflections on a Feminine Ground in Tibet." In *Feminine Ground: Essays on Women and Tibet*. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion. 33-51.
- Middleton, Townsend. 2015. *The Demands of Recognition: State Anthropology and Ethnopolitics in Darjeeling*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.
- Mullard, Saul. 2011. *Opening the Hidden Land: State Formation and the Construction of Sikkimese History*. Leiden: Brill.
- Onta, Pratyoush. 1993. "Whatever happened to the 'golden age'?" *Himal* 6(4): 29-31.
- Ramble, Charles. 2008. *The Navel of the Demonness: Tibetan Buddhism and Civil Religion in Highland Nepal*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Shneiderman, Sara. 2015. *Rituals of Ethnicity: Thangmi Identities Between Nepal and India*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Snellinger, Amanda. 2009. "Yuba, Hamro Pusta" ("Youth, Our Generation"): Youth and generational politics in Nepali political culture. *Studies in Nepali History and Society* 14(1): 39-66.
- Snellinger, Amanda. 2013. "Shaping a Liveable Present and Future: Review of Youth Studies in Nepal." *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* 42: 75-103.