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Conference Reports

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Conference Reports

2015 Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association (AAA)

Denver, Colorado

18-22 November 2015

The 114th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) was held November 18-22, 2015 at the Colorado Convention Center in Denver, Colorado. Framed by the theme “Familiar/Strange,” the conference attracted over 6,300 registrants including scholars, students, activists, and other interest groups for five days of panels, workshops, films, lectures, poster sessions, plenaries, awards, receptions, and parties. All four anthropological fields—archaeology, biological anthropology, cultural anthropology, and linguistic anthropology—were represented. Nepal and Himalayan Studies has deep roots in the field of anthropology and many members of ANHS as well as other Himalaya scholars attended the conference. The late fall weather conditions of Colorado’s Front Range Rocky Mountains also felt characteristic of the Himalaya, treating participants to ever-shifting cycles of snow, sun, rain, wind, and blue skies.

There were many rich and emotional conversations about the 2015 earthquakes in Nepal during the conference. The centerpiece of these discussions was a “Continued Conversation about Anthropological

Engagement and the Nepal Earthquake.” Convened by Lauren Leve, Carole McGranahan, Mallika Shakya, Pasang Sherpa, Gaurav KC, and Sara Shneiderman, the event was a productive and open engagement for over fifty participants to share individual as well as collective experiences, hopes, objectives, and anxieties following the earthquakes. The venue was a valuable moment for anthropologists to articulate how (and why) social scientists can make practical and effective interventions in post-disaster contexts. At the conclusion of the session, participants reaffirmed the need to advance knowledge about the Nepal earthquakes beyond the academy and committed to teach across wider public spheres outside the classroom. This “open conversation” was subsequently revisited at the 4th Himalayan Studies Conference at the University of Texas-Austin in February 2016 and continues to motivate closer connections between academia and activism for Nepal and Himalayan Studies.

Many other panels, roundtables, and knowledge sessions at the AAA meeting addressed the interests of ANHS. Topics ranged from theoretical histories of Himalayan Studies to ethnographic fieldwork in Nepal, India, Tibet, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Some of the panels most relevant to ANHS include, but are not limited to: “The Properties of Territory, Terrain, and Place”; “Theory in (Himalayan) Anthropology Since the Eighties”;

“Crisis as Methods, Crisis as Lives I-II: Contemporary Neoliberal China and India in the ‘Asian Age’”; “Producing and (Re)Configuring the Asian Diaspora: Identity, Globalization, and Cross-Cultural Narratives”; and “The Expediency of Roads.” Also of interest to scholars of Nepal and the Himalaya were dozens of sessions on (post)colonialism, development, gender, globalization, infrastructure, nationalism, neoliberalism, NGOs, race and racism, refugees, religion, the state, science-technology studies (STS), and subalternity, among other topics. Several films focused on Nepal, Tibet, and the wider Himalaya, including *Tashi’s Turbine*, *Kashmir*, and *Dzongsar Clay*, which won the best undergraduate film award.

Numerous meetings and conversations also addressed pressing issues at the intersection of international politics, popular culture, structural violence, and anthropological inquiry. Although boycotts of Israeli academic institutions, violence in Ferguson, Missouri, and land rights for American Native communities may not at first glance look like typical topics for ANHS, the issues of marginalization, subjectivity, and representation are indeed central topics of research for many scholars of Nepal and the Himalaya. Participation in these sorts of conversations at the AAA meeting and other academic conferences both deepens and broadens the scope and impact of ANHS scholarship and activism.

Social engagements outside of the convention halls also brought Nepal and Himalaya scholars together from near and far. A strong contingent of the ANHS community was present at the festive *Savage Minds* reception, as the anthropology-ethnography blog featured numerous ANHS members as guest contributors in the aftermath of the 2015 earthquakes. Other ad-hoc meetings included luncheons with visiting scholars from Tribhuvan and Kathmandu Universities as well as a surprise convergence of a half-dozen scholars with long-term engagements in Nepal's Rasuwa District. Numerous universities with strong legacies in Nepal and Himalayan Studies also hosted receptions, including Berkeley, Brown, Colorado, Harvard, Michigan, and Yale.

Finally, while there was strong representation from scholars on Nepal and the Himalaya at the 2015 AAA meeting, this author hopes for even greater ANHS engagement at AAA conferences in the years ahead. Research and perspectives from Nepal and the Himalaya will continue to make valuable contributions to anthropological inquiry, particularly in the dynamic contexts of post-disaster development and post-conflict governance, the politics of identity and subjectivity, and the shifting terrains of capitalism and globalization in the twenty-first century. By drawing on experiences and insights from a multitude of Himalayan locations, ANHS members and other scholars of Nepal and the Himalaya are well positioned to expand interdisciplinary and cross-regional dialogue within the AAA and beyond.

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104th Annual Conference of the College Art Association

Washington, DC

3-6 February 2016

The 104th Annual Conference of the College Art Association was held in Washington DC, February 3-6, 2016. The conference featured a wide array of panels on contemporary and traditional art across different geographies. Among the various panels at the conference, two were dedicated to Himalayan art history. Organized and chaired by Nachiket Chanchani (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor), the first panel, "Looking Askance at Himalayan Art," was set up as a scholarly panel, while the second, "Conservation Challenges in India and the Himalayas: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow," was a roundtable conversation. The presentations covered a variety of topics, but the common theme was an emphasis on developing a clearer understanding of Himalayan art in terms of both its history and geography.

In his introduction to the panel "Looking Askance at Himalayan Art," Chanchani noted that Himalayan art is gaining popularity worldwide and many museums in the West are preparing Himalayan art exhibits. However, he cautioned that despite its growing popularity, the history of Himalayan art and the circumstances of its formation remain considerably under-scrutinized and under-problematized. In the presentations that followed, critical questions the presenters addressed included: What exactly is 'Himalayan art'? How does one go about to best understand it? Does a geographically based classification system serve better than dynastic, ethnic, linguistic, religious, or stylistic classifications?

Lastly, what does 'Himalayan art' have to offer to the rest of the world?

The panel began with Robert Linrothe (Northwestern University), who used his work in the western Himalayan region to question the utility of the term 'Himalayan art' or more specifically 'Buddhist art.' Using examples of art from pre- and post-Gupta periods, Linrothe demonstrated the influence of human settlements on art. Eric Huntington (Princeton University) shared his research on the Buddhist cosmos with a discussion of depictions of the cosmos in the literature, art, and rituals of Nepal and Tibet. Neeraja Poddar (Philadelphia Museum of Art) examined an eighteenth century *Bhagwat Puran*, a manuscript that illustrates the story of the popular Hindu god Krishna, to determine the influence of Hinduism on Himalayan art. Through an analysis of manuscripts coupled with an examination of socio-religious trends, Poddar demonstrated the diverse religious and cultural history that has inspired Himalayan art. She also clarified that Himalayan art is not just restricted to Buddhist themes and images, as assumed by many Westerners, and illustrated that facets of Hindu religion, too, are reflected in Himalayan art. Dina Bandgel (Virginia Commonwealth University, Qatar) drew on her extensive work on contemporary and traditional Nepali art and artisans to discuss the ways in which art history and culture rooted in specific geographies are nurtured and shaped by dynastic, ethnic, linguistic, and religious sources.

The second panel, "Conservation Challenges in India and the Himalayas: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow," was designed to focus primarily on the question of what it means to conserve the ancient

edifices in the Himalayan region and the challenges that are involved in doing so. Michael Miester (University of Pennsylvania) shared his extensive work on edifices and temples constructed in ancient India and raised the question, “When thinking about conservation challenges in India and the Himalaya, what is it that we want to conserve? Is it the physical or the cultural conservation?” He argued that the conservation of monuments has sometimes inadvertently alienated communities living in their vicinity and that the time has now come to develop more inclusive approaches. Deborah Klimburg-Salter (University of Vienna and Harvard University) reflected on the Taliban’s destruction of Afghanistan’s Buddhist heritage in the concrete form of a rock-cut Buddha carved into a mountainside at Bamiyan and concluded that the “blowing up of the Bamiyan Buddha was not only an architectural destruction, it also damaged the culture of the community.” She went on to note, “With the loss of monuments, it is the language, culture, knowledge, and also wisdom that is lost.” She urged the audience to think about the geopolitical realities of the Himalayan region and wider world and asked how we could support not only the monuments but also their communities. Clare Harris’ (University of Oxford) research on the use of photography for reconstructing post-colonial Tibet offered an alternative approach to thinking about the reconstruction and restoration of damaged art and culture. According to Harris, “photography is a part of the history, and history inspires change.” Lastly, Corine Wegner (Smithsonian Institution), who leads a dedicated group of archeologists, engineers, and artists to protect

cultural heritage, shared her ongoing preservation work in Nepal since the 2015 earthquakes. In addition, she also talked about her group’s work on the protection of Syria’s cultural heritage. The most striking part of Wegner’s talk was the realization of the amount of risks incurred in the process of preserving cultural heritage sites, especially in war torn countries.

In this discussion of the conservation of Himalayan art, the economic and geopolitical realities of the Himalayan region was a prominent theme, as was the question of whether governments or scholars have more responsibility to protect Himalayan art and its history. While it is clear that governments, especially in democratic states, have a legal responsibility to preserve sites of historical, cultural, or artistic significance, it also became evident that scholars bear the responsibility of conducting meaningful research to inform the public and spread awareness.

Together, all the presentations formed a dynamic mosaic that reflected the intersections of a variety of topics that spanned the history of Himalayan art, both ancient and modern. Scholars highlighted that the subfield of Himalayan art is under-scrutinized, and that effort needs to be made to review and reevaluate much of the works of Himalayan art. This is critical especially in light of the 2015 earthquakes in Nepal that caused massive destruction. The conservation of Himalayan art requires a collaborative effort from different stakeholders, including the community, tourists, artists/artisans, academic scholars, NGOs/INGOs, and government agencies. However, the panelists unanimously agreed that

it is incumbent upon the scholars to generate scholarship that reflects the reality of Himalayan art and its value to the rest of the world.

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