

2012

## Second Annual Association of Nepal and Himalayan Studies Conference, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo MI

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# Conference Reports

## ***Second Annual Association of Nepal and Himalayan Studies Conference***

**Western Michigan University  
Kalamazoo, MI  
September 2012**

The Association of Nepal and Himalayan Studies convened its second annual conference in the Fetzer Center at Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo Michigan, from September 21st through 23rd, 2012. Hosted by the Diether H. Haenicke Institute for Global Education and Chaired by Mahendra Lawoti of Western Michigan University, the interdisciplinary conference brought scholars together from across the globe to engage in a broad range of topics pertaining to the Himalayan region. Key issues included healthcare and the environment, language and identity, migration and socioeconomic change, activism and public policy, tourism and preservation, performances and political realities. The conference thus sought a holistic intellectual approach to Himalayan studies, a field typically dispersed across an array of academic disciplines, including anthropology, religious studies, forestry and environmental sciences, geography, economics, political science, and the history of art and architecture.

The conference honored Cornell professors David Holmberg and Kathryn March with two panels organized by Sienna Craig (Dartmouth) and Arjun Guneratne (Macalester). The first, chaired by

Sienna Craig and with Mark Turin (Yale) as discussant, was entitled *Ethnographic Practice in the Study of Politics and Development*, with papers by Katherine Rankin (University of Toronto), Amanda Snellinger (Oxford), and Stacy Leigh Pigg (Simon Fraser University); the second panel, chaired by Mark Turin and with David Holmberg as discussant, entitled *Himalayan Religion*, included papers by Mukta S. Tamang (Tribhuvan University), Sienna Craig and Ngawang Tsering (Dartmouth), and Abraham Zablocki (Agnes Scott College). In addition, Holmberg delivered the conference's keynote address, entitled *Ritual Power, Symbolic Power, and Social Power in the Political Life of Nepal*.

The conference gave scholars from a diverse range of fields within Himalayan studies the opportunity to meet and discuss the many challenges they face in the field, many of which are remarkably similar despite the very different kinds of work in which they are engaged. A recurrent theme was the difficulty of assessing what the local people need (the need for "Listening to the People" was poignantly addressed by Krishna Roka, Penn State University, in a panel on *Foreign Aid, Economic Reforms, and Development*), and balancing those needs with demands placed on NGOs by their funders. Sustainability is a major challenge—after a school is built, bathrooms installed, or pills distributed, what happens when the NGO responsible for the project leaves? How can the positive impact

be sustained, and how can it be monitored? The conference offered a space to discuss past experiences of what has worked and what has not, and to explore possibilities for new ways of moving forwards.

As an art historian, I learned a tremendous amount from papers not directly concerned with art history or cultural heritage. I was particularly struck by the ways in which art, architecture, craft traditions, and cultural heritage figure in many of the decisions NGOs working in the Himalayan region must make. From Judith Justice (University of California, San Francisco) in a panel on *Sustainable/Sustaining Health and Health Care in Nepal*, I learned that the development initiative most valued in Nepal is the building of roads. This impacts urbanization and population flows, which may significantly change patterns of devotional practice, the popularity of pilgrimage sites, or decisions pertaining to the preservation, restoration, or obliteration of ancient monuments. From Melissa Belz (Kansas State University) in a panel on *People and Environment in the Greater Himalaya*, I learned that changes in forestry policy and a new demand for cash crops in Himachal Pradesh have fundamentally changed the ways in which the local people live, with the consequent deterioration of vernacular woodcarving traditions. In the final panel of the conference, Neel Kamal Chapagain (University of Wisconsin—Steven's Point) gave an impassioned call for cultural heritage

to be considered a critical factor in NGO initiatives.

Throughout the conference I was struck by the remarkably supportive community, the quickness of friendships across disciplinary divides, and the interest that participants took in papers and conversations not directly related to their own fields of study. The one regret often expressed was that having concurrent panels required participants to choose which panels to attend and which to miss—a difficult decision indeed, when everyone would have liked to attend them all.

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*For abstracts and further information about the conference, please see: <http://anhs-himalaya.org/hsc/2012/programs.html>.*

### **Himalayan Connections: Disciplines, Geographies, Trajectories**

**Yale University  
New Haven, CT  
March 2013**

Himalayan Connections: Disciplines, Geographies, Trajectories was held from March 9-10, 2013 at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut. The workshop was convened by Andrew Quintman (Religious Studies) and Sara Shneiderman (Anthropology), both Yale faculty members. It brought together a diverse group of researchers and practitioners to consider the interdisciplinary connections that might shape new approaches to Himalayan Studies; to recognize the diversity of perspectives that characterizes Himalayan scholarship; to consider the processes of change that affect

ideas about the Himalaya; and to initiate dialogue towards future collaboration.

The event began with a series of interrelated questions: How do we as scholars committed to the production of knowledge in and about the Himalayan region see the same spaces differently? How might dialogic and interdisciplinary approaches contribute to the de-centering necessary for new forms of scholarship? Is it possible to reformulate a contemporary Himalayan Studies that elaborates and improves upon past efforts? When does the spatial and temporal scale of study shift – why and what for? How can we best understand the issues that Himalayan peoples face?

‘The Himalaya’ has been invoked as an analytical category by a range of actors over time, from scientific, social scientific, humanities, and applied backgrounds. A ‘Himalayan’ framing has long served as a valuable heuristic for understanding the sweep of histories, societies, and environments that connect the region. Yet that same framing has recently emerged as a problem of scale: focusing on commonalities obscures difference, and thus diversity; focusing on difference obscures commonalities, and thus region-wide affinities. Does using ‘Himalaya’ as a broad regional signifier invoke an ecological or cultural determinism that de-emphasizes the specificity of political history? Or does it legitimately recognize the webs of ecological, economic and cultural connectivity that have bound together complex entities over time? New Himalayan scholarship, oriented toward connectivity and inclusion, empowered by new collaborations and analytical tools, might learn from its past legacy and ultimately

move beyond it. How can new voices thus be included to express greater diversity in Himalayan Studies?

Himalayan Connections considered the nature of these transformations through six themed panels: *Disciplinary Trajectories; Scales of Connectivity; Identities; Everyday Religion and the Environment; Visual and Literary Representations; and States and Borders*. Each panel consisted of 3 or 4 speakers and a discussant. Presenters were invited to respond to a set of framing questions, drawing upon the empirical content of their research in and about the Himalaya, as well as their personal reflections on the experience of conducting it over time. Guiding questions included: How has the study of the Himalaya been guided by disciplinary concerns; how have those concerns changed over time? How have the Himalaya been mapped across disciplines and over time? How has the notion of “Himalayan identity,” broadly defined, been understood across the disciplines? What do the Himalaya and its people teach us about the study of everyday or lived religion? What do we see when we look at the Himalaya? What kinds of strategies and techniques have people in the Himalaya used over time to represent themselves, their aspirations, beliefs, identities, etc.? How have different disciplines recognized, or not, the importance of political histories for understanding dynamics of change across the Himalaya? Is there value in considering an unbounded trans-regional Himalaya as a unit of analysis; what is gained or lost?

Responses to these questions were as diverse as the participants, who came from a broad range of disciplinary backgrounds, including Anthropology, Art History, Conservation Biology, Demography, Environmental Studies, Geography,