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Olivia Aubriot, Tristan Truslé and Stéphane Gros

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EDITOR'S NOTE

In collaboration with : Jagannath Adhikari [photographer]Olivia Aubriot [photographer]Tristan Bruslé [photographer]Ben Campbell [photographer]Nilamber Chhetri [photographer]Kathrin Fischer [photographer]Thibault Fontanari [photographer]Stéphane Gros [photographer]Wen-Yao Lee [photographer]Katsuo Nawa [photographer]Callum Pearce [photographer]Stacy Leigh Pigg [photographer]Valentina Punzi [photographer]Ornella Puschiasis [photographer]Philippe Ramirez [photographer]Tom Robertson [photographer]Joëlle Smadja [photographer]Brigitte Steinmann [photographer]Sanggay Tashi [photographer] Nolwenn Vouiller [photographer]

Introduction

1 There are many ways to travel. People of the Himalayas often travel out of necessity rather than for leisure: on foot, as in the past, but now increasingly by motorised means. Their motivations can be diverse and the distances covered change according to the mode of travel. The Himalayan mountains still impose constraints that new infrastructure can only partially overcome.

2 The Himalayan range – despite its high peaks, the tumultuous flow of its rivers, or its extreme climate – has never been an impenetrable barrier to the movement of people. The photographs and their captions collected here highlight the importance of mobility and circulatory regimes, of paths, roads or trails in the social life of communities, in various historical and political contexts. Movement is indeed constitutive of the Himalayan region, where the increasing delocalisation of social life (Escobar 2008) does not prevent cultures and identities from being deeply anchored in landscapes and culturally valued sites (Smadja ed 2009).

3 'Circulation' refers to the movement of men and ideas, of knowledge and techniques, of goods and capital, but should not be opposed to immobility, as the two phenomena are complementary, even if they can lead to inequalities and produce forms of exclusion (Adey et al 2013). Circulation operates on different scales and across diverse networks and can be considered a major force of change in societies (Stein 1977, Markovits et al 2003), as it involves actors from all walks of life, from the state to the common man and woman, to wild animals or other non-human beings. Trails, pathways or roads that traverse the Himalayas have a growing impact on the distance and time between things and humans, the mutual constitution of social relations, forms of knowledge and the material environment.

4 The photographs and their accompanying texts, each by a different author,[1] represent and describe the ways in which people travel across the Himalayan range and the various experiences linked to these movements, whether individual or collective, and how they punctuate social life according to the seasons, economic exchanges or the labour market. Taken together, these illustrated stories show how modes of circulation and forms of mobility contribute to structuring Himalayan societies and reflect a diversity of cultural and material practices, imaginaries and the presence of the divine world. They also show that journeys are passages to elsewhere, which reveal cultural anchorage points and identity boundaries and that movement transforms space – often the most visible aspect - but also societies.

5 New routes have either replaced historical pathways crossing the Himalayas or created new corridors and have become agents of change. Building roads has more than ever become a government motto synonymous with connection, development and wealth, symbolising the current neo-liberal ideology of mobility as a sign of adaptability, autonomy and agency. There is a common belief that roadless territories cannot embrace globalisation and that tarmac is the visible sign that elected governments are looking after local communities who will benefit from new connections with the outer world. Everyone needs a road.

6 The photographs are snapshots of movement, of its impossibility, of its promises or the constraints it often faces, and they reveal the state of society at a given moment, determined by the photographer's gaze and the very message the image is meant to convey. There is no common storyline between these photographs: each opens a small window onto complex experiences of circulation, of presence on or along pathways and their varied temporalities. Responding to our call to consider the particular social dynamic of circulations and to explore how they relate to cultural practices, imaginaries and materialities, the contributors propose and reflect on an image of their choice that demonstrates what ties people to particular places and to each other, but also to other worlds often still in the making.

Transport and trade

7 To this day, human porters are common in the Himalayas, especially in the absence of passable roads in the remotest areas. In the management of daily tasks in rural communities, women are often in charge of carrying water, firewood and fodder, while men are more involved in the transport of commercial goods and thus carry loads for money. Human porterage can play a part in relationships of domination between those for whom the goods are carried and the porters: for example, in the case of the photograph commented on by Tom Robertson (fig 1) where the car, on its way to Kathmandu and destined for the Rana aristocracy, moves forwards thanks to the mere strength of the porters' arms and legs; or of course when porterage is at the service of the tourist industry and leisure activities of foreign – and an increasing number of national – travellers. The name Sherpa to designate a porter has indeed become part of the everyday language, even though porters in the Everest region now belong more often to other ethnicities (Rai, Tamang), as in the case of Joëlle Smadja's photograph (fig 2). In the same region, it is nowadays possible to set up temporary makeshift 'villages' at high altitude for mountaineers, with tents and other equipment, even portable showers, being carried up by men or yaks (Ornella Puschiasis, fig 9).

8 For the communities that inhabit and move over these mountains, high peaks are often honoured from a respectful distance and passes allow for exchange and communication. Because of the altitude, their passage can only be seasonal, after snowmelt. In some valleys, winter is a period of isolation for villagers and any travel becomes impossible – a state of seclusion that the motorable road promises to remedy (Stéphane Gros, fig 3). However, some mountain trails have been crucial for trans-Himalayan trade, which contributed to the circulation of goods often far beyond trading communities, fuelling a globalised market. Many families depended on this cross-border trade and had to adapt to changes in transport modes as well as to the political uncertainties that affected their good fortune (Katsuo Nawa, fig 4).

9 Images of long caravans of yaks or mules are common representations of movement in the Himalayas,[2] but these modes of transport increasingly compete with motorised means of locomotion and are relegated to the mountainous peripheries. However, herds led by shepherds continue to cross passes and valleys, as in the case of Himalayan goats that are led to urban markets in Nepal (Jagannath Adhikari, fig 5). Even if movement in the Himalayas generally follows the constraints of landforms along streams and rivers that flow down from the mountains to their foothills, rivers themselves can be communication routes outside the monsoon season, with riverine communities making use of monoxyle canoes to cross them (Brigitte Steinmann, fig 6). Where crossing by boat is impossible, communities rely on other skills and techniques to overcome the obstacle, as demonstrated by the long rattan bridges in Arunachal Pradesh, where the state has not yet made its mark on development (Philippe Ramirez, fig 7).

Human and non-human boundaries

10 Rivers sometimes constitute porous boundaries where the domains of humans and animals, of the domestic and the wild, are distinguished or even kept at a distance by protection projects (Nolwen Vouiller, fig 8). Such limits or boundaries are now often

imposed by environmental policies that aim to protect ‘natural’ species or spaces. For local communities, these spaces –whether anthropised or inaccessible – embody a variety of values. High mountain peaks are charged with sacredness for the local population but are increasingly appropriated by Himalayan mountaineers (Ornella Puschiasis, fig 9). Ancestral links often bind communities to the space they inhabit and to the deities they honour (Wen-yao Lee, fig 10), and pilgrimage practices bear witness to the importance certain mountains or ‘hidden valleys’ (*beyul*) acquire in the religions practised by Himalayan communities.

11 Religious traditions impose a particular reading of the landscape because they constrain certain practices: a distinction of great symbolic significance is that of the pure and the impure, often opposed to the violent rituality of sacrificial practices. The consumption of meat and the impurity of the act of killing, as Joëlle Smadja (fig 2) reminds us here, condition the interactions between certain communities, the location of slaughterhouses and therefore the marketing of meat carried on people’s backs. Other values or moral obligations inform the way in which collective projects are carried out. Thus, for inhabitants of the Shimshal valley in the Karakorum, an economy of giving on a village scale allows for the building of paths, bridges or other infrastructures which are then dedicated to the memory of the community’s deceased, as Thibault Fontanari highlights (fig 11). Elsewhere, links to places are established through the world of spirits, which can be malicious: the latter therefore have to be avoided and diverted by means of markings on houses (Callum Pearce, fig 12).

New infrastructure

12 Traditional building techniques, which are very dependent on the natural resources available in the immediate environment, obviously limit the impact of communities on their environment. Today, the impact the state has on mobility and circulation is increasingly visible. Infrastructure projects are ripping through Himalayan forests (Nilamber Chhetri, fig 13), responding to local demand for transport accessibility and possible economic opportunities. Elsewhere, the sedentarisation of nomads and the need to obtain a driver’s licence to integrate a new economy are evidence of the constraints imposed on mobility (Sanggay Tashi, fig 14). However, there is little to hinder the steady tropism of the road because the latter is so intimately associated with the idea of modernity and hopes of improving living conditions. Routes and roads are sites for trade and exchange, for departure and arrival, and also often sites of expectations, competition and conflict.

13 In the Tarai plain, peri-urbanisation flourishes along roads (Olivia Aubriot, fig 20) as they channel new flows of economic life and contribute to restructuring landscapes. Pathways and roads become lively and attractive places and feed the imagination of riverine communities, which is increasingly shaped by the newly built infrastructure and the changes it entails (Stacy Pigg, fig 15). Roads also become spaces of protest, as Ben Campbell reports (fig 16), whether the disputes relate to the road itself (its relevance, quality, (in)ability to fulfil expectations) or whether the road becomes a means of action and an exemplary site where political action can be deployed. However, as causes of disorder, roads can prove rather unsettling and a source of fear, engendering accidental deaths and malevolent spirits that need to be appeased through

appropriate rituals as Valentina Punzi witnessed in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands (fig 17).

14 The transformative power of roads is often overestimated but, when roads are regarded as processes (Anand, Gupta and Appel 2018), they undoubtedly not only transform landscapes, create unexpected disruptions in the geomorphology of the mountains, but also produce well-documented social effects, whether positive or negative, on people and places. Besides the geopolitics of road-making as such, what seems particularly remarkable are the lived realities of what is (dis)connected, and how and what it means for local communities.

Returns and accessibility

15 Finally, as the Himalayas are increasingly integrated into global labour and refugee flows, Kathrin Fischer (fig 18) reminds us that the opportunities for mobility through labour migration are not equally distributed. Access to mobility is indeed a selective process in that not everyone is able to go abroad, nor does everyone wish to leave their hometown. Immobility can be imposed by an unfavourable socio-economic climate, which particularly affects Dalit communities who often end up in less sought-after forms of labour migration in India, compared to more remunerative work in the Persian Gulf (Tristan Bruslé, fig 19). Immobility can also be chosen within the household as part of sharing economic activities and responsibilities. Some family members go abroad to earn money for the household, while others take care of domestic tasks. Multilocality, which induces a high frequency of comings and goings, has long been a common feature of Himalayan households: it used to be based on the ecological complementarity between regions at different altitudes; it is now based on the availability and accessibility of work in different parts of the world. Olivia Aubriot's photograph (fig 20) illustrates this phenomenon of complementarity between distant spaces: once migration abroad has taken place, it can allow people to leave the mountains to settle in the plains in search of a better life.

16 Overall, these photographs and their texts tell stories of circulation pathways that connect sites across which new values are formed and transmitted, and carry people away across time, space and embodied differences of culture and language. As the number of communication pathways and passages grows cutting across various boundaries and geographical constraints, frontiers and territories are redefined, and new cultural and moral geographies emerge.

Fig 1: A country where people carry cars

On the trail into Kathmandu in December 1952, Paul Rose, director of the US Operations Mission (USOM) in newly opened Nepal, stepped into a scene that brought into sharp focus his vision of development for Nepal: a group of men struggling to get an automobile up and over the 7,000-foot-pass into Kathmandu. The men were not driving or pushing the car; they were carrying it. Rose counted 90 barefoot, ill-clad porters: sixty shouldering the bamboo poles supporting the vehicle, and thirty pulling from above with a rope. It was a scene similar to the one Harold L Dusenberry witnessed and documented in this photograph taken the same year. Before a road was completed from the Gangetic plains into Kathmandu in 1955, most goods and even people were carried into Nepal's capital city. For Rose, as the director of what would become the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the situation appeared to reveal Nepal's core problems. Here was a country that, so it seemed, was literally lacking the wheel. Ordinary life involved little or no technology. But the man-carrying-car spectacle also revealed another crucial fact: the country's vast political and economic disparities. While a tiny elite could purchase vehicles to carry themselves and their goods, the majority hauled the loads of others. Their plight deeply moved Rose. He wrote that he wanted US programmes in Nepal to be a 'prescription for revolutions'. Roads were part of this prescription: Rose wanted roads, he wrote in 1952, 'so the burdens of agriculture and industry may roll on wheels rather than continue to crush the backs and spirits of the people'.

Photograph: Harold L Dusenberry, December 1952. Source: Madan Puruskar Library, Patan, Nepal. Text by Tom Robertson (Kathmandu University).

Fig 2: On the paths of the 'pure' and the 'impure'

In Khumbu, the region around Mount Everest and Sagarmatha National Park, the slaughter of animals is no longer tolerated. In this region where the majority of the population is Sherpa, the notion of *beyul* – a sacred place where Buddhists would be protected in times of trouble and where one must refrain from killing any living thing – was introduced by monks from Nyingma monasteries when they arrived here in the early 20th century. This concept was taken up by the National Park administration when, in the 1990s, local culture and religion were used to ensure better nature protection. Thus, the Park offers tourists an immersion in a Buddhist land of great spirituality, where the idea of a 'pristine nature', almost untouched, protected by the Sherpa population, is reinforced by the notion of *beyul*. That is why, in this region where 'purity' dominates, the presence of the slaughterhouse has become unacceptable. Initially built in Namche Bazar, at the heart of the Khumbu where it remained until 1998, the slaughterhouse was moved more than 20 km southwards to be relegated to Rai and Tamang country. Once the animals have been slaughtered, the Rai and Tamang transport the meat northwards, as in this photograph, to Sherpa country where it is eaten by tourists and... by the Sherpa themselves.

Photograph: Joëlle Smadja, November 2017, Solukhumbu district, Nepal

Fig 3: The last caravan

The Dulong River Valley, in the north-western corner of Yunnan province bordering Myanmar, has long been very remote and difficult to access. Following its incorporation into the People's Republic of China in the early 1950s, the existing mountain trail was improved to allow mules to transport food and equipment to the valley's inhabitants, the Drung (Dulong), one of the smallest minorities in China. This communication route became the main artery linking Drung communities to the outside world. The state-subsidised caravan, 500 mules strong at its peak in the 1980s, was responsible for transporting most of the consumer goods and various reliefs that the government provided to these disadvantaged and destitute slash-and-burn farmers, in order to promote economic development. Each summer the caravan, leaving from Gongshan on the banks of the Salween River, crossed the Gaoligong Mountains, a three-day journey over the pass at an altitude of 3,800 m. With the first snow, the valley was once again isolated for six months. The year 1999 marked the end of what had become the last state-sponsored caravan in China with the opening of a 96-km motorable road. The Drung were the only minority in China whose main settlement area had not yet been connected by road. Since then, a seven-kilometre tunnel through the mountains ensures access to the Drung valley in all seasons, reducing the distance from Gongshan to Kongdang, in the centre of the valley, to 76 kilometres.

Photograph: Stéphane Gros (CNRS), October 1999, mountain pass from Gongshan to the Dulong Valley, Yunnan province, People's Republic of China

Fig 4: A trader heading to Purang in Tibet

The trader on the horse (centre) is heading to Purang (a town in Tibet, also known as Taklakot) with his employee and mules, and can be seen on the last climb to the border pass with Tibet Autonomous Region, China. He is a Rang from Chhangru, a village in the Byans valley. The Rang are the indigenous population of several valleys in the upper reaches of the Mahakali River system, who have kept their own culture and language distinct from both that of Tibetans in the north and caste Hindus in the south. Most of their villages are in Uttarakhand, India, while villages east of the main flow of the Mahakali River , including Chhangru, are in Nepal. Many Byans villagers traditionally conducted trans-Himalayan trade, with Purang being their main trading post in Tibet. In 1962, trans-Himalayan trade by Rang people from Indian Byans over the Lipulekh Pass stopped due to the Sino-Indian border conflict. However, some Nepali Rangs carried on trading over the Tinkar Pass. Certainly, the nature of trade and the mode of transportation have constantly changed. The main livestock used for trade changed from goat and sheep to mules, and many households that could not afford to keep mules withdrew from trade. In 1994, Tibetan rock salt was no longer a key commodity, while Tibetan wool was still of great importance. The social world of Rangs in Nepali Byans has also extended far beyond the Mahakali River basin and even South Asia. Indeed, a brother of the trader in the photograph was already in the United States when the picture was taken, being one of the first Nepali Rangs to live semi-permanently in the US after receiving a higher education there.

Photograph: Katsuo Nawa (Institute for Advanced Studies on Asia), 29 August 1994, near the Tinkar Pass, Nepal

Fig 5: Mountain goats on the road to Pokhara

Mustangis, mostly the Lobas (people of upper Mustang), bring down Himalayan goats to Pokhara at the start of winter. These goats are regarded as ritually pure and essential for the sacrifices performed during the 8th and 9th days of the Dashain festival. It is believed that Himalayan goats are nutritionally superior as they feed on *jaributi* (herbs) that grow at high altitude in the Himalayan region, and therefore eating their meat provides good immunity against diseases that may affect people during the winter. The seasonal movement of animals relies on mutual agreements between herders, generally the owners of the herd, and the local communities along the trail. Designated households let the animals graze in their fields to fertilise the earth with manure and, in exchange, herders are given food and food grain. These agreements coexisted with other forms of exchange and social relations. Herders would bring *jaributi* and other high-mountain products, such as *jimbu* (*Allium hypsistum*), *silajit* (bitumen) and woollen mats, which were exchanged for food grain. These traditional practices, which are still common, would therefore ensure people's and animals' safety and security and improve livelihoods in different ecologies, creating a kind of symbiosis. In recent times, traders from the lower hills have also travelled to Mustang to purchase at a cheap rate goat herds which they now often bring down by truck because a motorable road has been built between Pokhara and Mustang.

Photograph: Jagannath Adhikari (Curtin University of Technology, Australia), October 2015, Kalapani-Late, Mustang, Nepal

Fig 6: A perilous yet ordinary crossing of the Sunkosi

On a beautiful day in the month of Baisakh before the arrival of a slightly late monsoon, Sun Maya, from the Tamang Mukthan clan, is going to her *maiti ghar*, her mother's house, to offer her father and paternal uncles from the Bal clan the food necessary to perform their sister's and then her paternal aunt's (*aru*) funeral celebration (*gewa*). This aunt is also Sun Maya's mother-in-law (by marriage between matrilateral cross-cousins). The anthropologist has risked the lives of the crew by crouching in the middle of the boat, carved out of a hollowed-out log (*dhunga*) and piloted by a 'regular boat man', Sarkiman Majhi. Sun Maya tightly grasps the straps that hold her bamboo basket (*doko*) in place. The slightest movement would overturn the boat!

Photograph: Brigitte Steinmann (Lille University), 22 May 1981 (31 Baisakh month BS 2079), Sunkosi River, Temal Parsel Danda, Kabhre Palanchok, Nepal

Fig 7: Suspension bridge over the Siyom River

The Siyom is one of the right bank tributaries of the Brahmaputra, called Siang in Arunachal. The bridge is about 200-m long, the deck is made of rattan and bamboo and the masts at both ends of wood. The people of Kabu as well as most of the settlements on either side of the Siyom River call themselves Galo and belong to the large Adi linguistic and cultural group. Traditionally, Adi village communities had sovereign rights over the paths and bridges crossing their territory and were responsible for their maintenance. Suspension bridges of this type were for a long time the only way to cross the tributaries of the Siang. The Siang itself was crossed by long rafts that were pushed off from the riverbank. The water spirits, the Nipong, made river crossings particularly fearsome, for they tried to grab hold of intruders. Travel between villages, and more generally circulation on the southern slopes of the eastern Himalayas, was facilitated by an extensive network of structures which, in addition to bridges and rafts, included ladders for steep passages or slabs to cross marshy terrain. In this part of the Himalayas, the circulation of goods between Tibet and the Indo-Gangetic plain was less a matter of long-distance caravans than of nearby exchanges, almost from village to village: animal hides and chillies were bartered for rock salt, woollen articles, Tibetan crockery... Certain metal items from Tibet, such as cauldrons, swords or bells, could be used as money.

Photograph: Philippe Ramirez (CNRS), January 2005, Kabu village, West Siang district, Arunachal Pradesh, India

Fig 8: Elephants as go-betweens

Located in the heart of the 'buffer zone' surrounding Bardiya National Park (BNP) in the western Nepalese Tarai, the Khauraha River (a segment of the Karnali) plays the role of mediator between humans, park animals, village animals and the invisible. The Khauraha and its landscaped bank called *banbhoj sthal* in Nepali ('forest picnic area') represent an interface and act as an ambivalent natural boundary that connects and separates. People here know that crossing this river is a form of commitment and a risky and transgressive decision. One does not cross or even approach the river at any old time, in any season without a reason to do so. This may be for people to collect fruit, wood, to cut grass or even to poach and for village animals to find better forage, to wash, to drink or for park animals to access crops, easy prey, to expand their territory, etc. In the picture, three young mahouts are returning to the *hattisar* (elephant stable) at the end of the afternoon, after having cut *khariya* grass (*Saccharum spontaneum*) for the pachyderms' meal. Humans and elephants make their way four times a day across the Khauraha whose depth and current, here almost at their maximum, fluctuate according to the season. The presence of the *hattisar* that houses a dozen captive elephants on the banks of the river does not fail to attract the Park's solitary male elephants which cross the river at nightfall in the hope of finding a partner to mate with and, at the same time often inflict heavy damage on the village population (destruction of crops, houses, attacks on humans).

Photograph: Nolwen Vouiller (Université de Liège/EHESS), August 2021, Karnali River, Bardiya National Park, Nepal

Fig 9: Mushrooming tents at the foot of Mount Everest

New spaces of circulation have emerged at the foot of the highest Himalayan peaks: it is at the edge of the rocky Khumbu glacier that hundreds of climbers settle for more than a month each year with the purpose of ascending the high peaks, such as Mount Everest at 8,848 m and Lhotse at 8,516 m. At the Everest Base Camp, this profusion of orange tents contrasts with the mineral landscape of this area situated at an altitude of more than 5,360 m. Above the camp hang Tibetan prayer flags that have been strung up by Nepalese organisers who work for an expedition agency, to place themselves under the protection of goddess Chomolungma (the Tibetan name for Everest) of this sacred summit. More than sixty years after the 'conquest of the roof of the world' by Tenzing Norgay Sherpa and Sir Edmund Hillary on 29 May 1953, this image embodies the enormous developments made in sports tourism thanks to the opening up of new high-altitude routes with the use of ice axes and crampons. This base camp now resembles a 'luxury camp': most foreign climbers go through a local certified agency which, in addition to training a team of guides and porters to reach the summit, organises tent accommodation, sanitary facilities and meals. Wealthy clients sleeping under these orange domes benefit at this altitude from an inordinate degree of comfort: electricity, hot showers, a wifi connection and a catering service. This temporary landscape of mushroom-like tents on a busy route has led to serious management problems: pollution, traffic jams and incivilities at the foot of Everest are now making the headlines in Nepal.

Photograph: Ornella Puschiasis (INALCO), 21 May 2016, Everest Base Camp, Nepal

Fig 10: 'Circling the mountain' (*wujiu*) among Wenquan Pumi

On *wani*, the fifth day of the fifth month in the local traditional calendar, Pumi (Premi, Tronmu) villagers in the Wenquan area make a customary hike along the mountain ridge above their settlement to burn incense (*sondon*) for mountain deities and to pray for plenty of rainfall to ensure a good harvest. A series of shrines (*sondondon*), in the form of small stone heaps under a pine tree or finely constructed cairns of various sizes, are located along the mountain ridge. At each shrine, in addition to burning incense with pine needles, cypress leaves, grain flour and self-brewed alcohol, villagers also bring calamus – seasonal *wani* flowers – and wild rhododendron flowers as offerings and as decorations for shrines. In the trees surrounding a shrine, people hang five-coloured flags printed with the mantra 'Om mani padme hum' in Tibetan script as decorations and to spread the mantra's blessing through the wind. Tired from a steep hike before reaching this shrine, we sat down for a rest after giving the offerings and enjoyed the splendid view from the hilltop. Two regional mountain deities are visible. The highest is the Lioness Gemu of Yongning (Hlidi Guemu or Talong singen Guemu). Further away and east of Gemu is Punan of Wujiao (Wejiu Punan). Circling the mountain used to be a ritual involving the entire local community. However, in recent years, fewer and fewer villagers have come to visit the mountain shrines on *wani*.

Photograph: Wen-Yao Lee (University of Kansas), 12 June 2013, Wenquan, Yongning Township, Yunnan Province, People's Republic of China

Fig 11: The ways of the gift

A group of men, laden with beams, sets off for the Zardgarben pastures, which culminate at an altitude of 4,050 m, to build a refuge in honour of a respected elder, Khayal Baig. The hut will house Pakistani and international sportsmen, including footballers, eager to test their physical ability in high-altitude conditions. As with other local infrastructures, this construction is being built by the people of Shimshal thanks to a donation system called *nomus*: one family provides the material and financial resources for all the other families who, in turn, are responsible for mobilising their labour force to build a structure named after a person the donor family cherishes dearly. Indeed, in the Shimshal Valley, since at least the beginning of the 20th century, refuges, irrigation canals, bridges, paths and roads are all collective achievements through which locals can address wishes and prayers to eponymous persons. The inhabitants take part in these constructions out of personal and family interest, out of a moral obligation to the community, because of their attachment to the deceased and out of concern to please God and save their souls. Indeed, for these Ismaili Muslims, actions carried out in the name of the Ismaili community nourish the soul, the invisible part of the being. By contributing to building projects for the community, they take God as witness and progress along the spiritual path.

Photograph: Thibault Fontanari (UC Louvain), 25 July 2016, Shimshal Valley, Karakoram, north-eastern Pakistan

Fig 12: Ghost roads in Ladakh

In Ladakh, Buddhist houses are typically distinguished by red markings or stones used to divert the harmful *tsen* or *tsan* spirits (Tibetan *btsan*). These markings – made with red ochre called *tsak* (T *btsag*) or with pointed red stones known as *tsendo* (T *btsan rdo*) – are meant to act as waymarkers for the *tsen*, diverting them around and away from human houses; for at night *tsen* wander along their own roads, *tsen lam* (T *btsan lam*), spreading illness and misfortune wherever they linger. To meet one after dark poses great danger, especially if you see a *tsen* from behind – for where its back should be there is only a gaping hole that causes madness or death to the viewer. If you meet a stranger on the road at night, as customary advice has it, you should always look straight on and never turn back. The presence of *tsak* markings or a *tsendo* is meant to indicate the potential presence of one of these roads, which are normally invisible to people and can only be discovered through divination or consultation with a spirit medium. Yet almost every Buddhist house is marked with *tsak* or *tsendo*, and the roads of the *tsen* seem to correspond exactly to human roads and paths that pass through villages. Any stranger met at night may be a *tsen*; the dangers of human movement blur indistinguishably into the threat of spirits and, by night, ordinary paths and familiar places take on a hostile aspect.

Photograph: Callum Pearce (Leiden University), 2014, Rangdum village, Kargil district, Ladakh, India

Fig 13: Road in the mist

The photograph visually captures the construction process of the 200-km long (120-mi-long) National Highway 717A that traverses the rich, lush vegetation cover of the Labha and Kaffer region in Kalimpong, West Bengal. There has been a massive clearing of forests along this stretch and work progress is being challenged by the bad weather during the rainy season in the hills. The photograph captures how construction work on the road is fraught with danger when the region is covered in mist, with recurrent problems due to landfall, leeches, etc. Navigating through the misty alpine forests, the road assumes a mystical form both in appearance and by echoing popular narratives as it promises a new avenue of mobility for Kalimpong and Sikkim, thus traversing the dangers of the already derelict National Highway 10. This new road project is part of the *Bharatmala Pariyojna* funded by the Government of India's Ministry of Road Transport and Highways. This road starts at Bagrakote in West Bengal and ends in Gangtok. In the State of West Bengal, the road passes through Bagrakote-Labha, Algarah and Pedong, crossing into the State of Sikkim at the Reshi border, and then continues to Rhenock, Rorathang, Pakyong and Ranipool to reach Gangtok.

Photograph: Nilamber Chhetri (Indian Institute of Technology Mandi), 5 July 2021 (2.03pm), near Kaffer, Kalimpong, West Bengal, India

Fig 14: Horse or motorbike?

Ben De Gyel is sitting astride a horse, his youngest son riding on his back, and they are on their way to take their yaks to the summer pastures at the top of the mountains in Chen Tsa Tang in the Amdo region of north-eastern Tibet, China, where this Tibetan nomadic community lives. For hundreds of years, families in Chen Tsa Tang and other similar Tibetan nomadic communities relied on herding yaks, sheep, horses and goats to ensure their subsistence livelihood. Locals used to pitch their turtle-shaped black yak-hair tents wherever they chose to live and loaded their belongings on their yaks and horses whenever they moved on to different pastures according to seasonal changes. However, over the last few decades, the combined effects of state-development projects, educational demands and labour migration have fundamentally transformed the lives of Tibetan nomads in Chen Tsa Tang. Grasslands are now divided into individual plots for each family and are fenced off. As a result, locals no longer make seasonal moves to access pastures. When Ben De Gyel was a child, horses and yaks were the primary modes of transportation. Nowadays, motorcycles and cars have replaced horses and yaks. Ben De Gyel rides his horse only for transportation purposes when moving up the mountain in springtime. At any other time he rides his motorcycle.

Photograph: Sanggay Tashi (University of Colorado Boulder), 15 June 2019, Chen Tsa Tang township, Chen Tsa County, Ma lho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province, People's Republic of China

Fig 15: Dozer imaginations

At shops all along the road between Charikot and Singati in the Dolakha district of Nepal one sees plastic toy bulldozers for sale. Children can be seen tugging on a parent's arm, begging for a new toy. And – as depicted in this scene – children immerse themselves in dozer fantasy play on the verges of roads where real dozers are at work. Futures are doubly made in these moments. Even as dozers make roads, roads that speed up flows of cash and commodities into rural areas, children imagine themselves as makers of roads. They play in the piles of gravel ubiquitous here, as people rebuild in the wake of the devastating April 2015 earthquake. The sight of this play stood out to me when I toured the road to northern Dolakha district with anthropologist Shyam Kunwar. I had formed my strongest impressions of rural hill Nepal in the mid-1980s, when I lived in a village in Bhojpur district for two years to carry out dissertation research. Neither motorable roads nor plastic toys were part of children's lived experience. Visiting rural northern Dolakha district thirty years later, I found myself caught between recognition of the familiar and surprise at the new. I found two changes most viscerally jarring. Where were the cows, the oxen, the water buffalo, and why so few goats? What does it take for all these plastic toys to be for sale in these places? These mundane objects contain within them the traces of a global political economy. I saw these trucks as tokens marking the relation between labour migration from rural areas and the contraction of small agriculture in places like Dolakha. In October 2019, while I was planning the outline of the *Batoghato* graphic novel, the illustrators accompanied us on a short trip along the road that became the central character of the graphic novel. I knew I wanted to include images of toy dozers throughout the story, so Shushank took many reference photos. This drawing is based on one of them.

Drawing by Shushank Kalapremi Shrestha. Text by Stacy Leigh Pigg (Simon Fraser University). Based on photograph, October 2019, Dolakha district, Nepal

Fig 16: Halting movement

Scene of neighbourhood protest against traffic behaviour, on an unmetalled informal road along the Likhu Khola Valley, running between Shivapuri and Bidur, Nuwakot District. In recent years, several bus companies travelling to Trisuli Bazaar had begun using this route to avoid the delays caused by congestion at the Thankot exit from the Kathmandu Valley. Following the ten years of civil war (1996–2006), road blockades had become quite a frequent practice in the period of the post-conflict struggles in Nepal, with the halting of movement being a very effective means to bring attention to political issues, often not connected to roads as such. In this case, the local population and businesses located along this road were concerned with the increase in traffic and reckless driving, worried that risks of accidents were not adequately considered. Roads can become sites of protest, and *bandas* (closures) of roads are common in South Asia, where halting the circulation of goods and people has become a regular way of making demands.

Photograph: Ben Campbell (University of Durham), 23 March 2018, Likhu Khola Valley, Nepal

Fig 17: Ghosts on the Jiu-Mian Highway

Among the Baima people of the Sino-Tibetan borderlands, ransom rituals are performed by ritual specialists with the aim of bringing back a soul after its sudden departure from the owner's body. This separation can happen as a result of fear or other emotional distress. The ritual specialist treats the owner of the lost soul as a patient and involves her in the healing process in the presence of family members and other bystanders. The items prepared for the ritual include a scarecrow-like figure made of tree branches and placed near the entrance to the house. At the end of the ritual, the figure is dressed in the soul owner's clothes and cast outside the house onto the roadside. This figure is essential and serves to attract evil spirits and mislead them into assaulting it, while the soul owner stays safely inside the house. This photograph captures the conclusive moment of a ransom ritual that was performed to heal a woman experiencing headaches and absent-mindedness. The ritual specialist has identified these symptoms as a clear indication that the woman has lost her soul after having witnessed a deadly accident on the doorstep of her home, near one of the construction sites of the Jiu-Mian Highway. In the photograph, an assistant to the ritual specialist and a family member of the patient are bringing the dressed scarecrow-like figure to the roadside to throw it into the bushes. In the background stands the construction site. During the highway construction project (2017–2021), a number of casualties and accidents happened on this section of the road that crosses Baima villages in Pingwu County, which instilled fear of the new road in local people. Accordingly, ransom rituals have addressed this new source of anxiety that has become part of the Baima mindscape.

Photograph: Valentia Punzi (University of Tartu), 22 August 2018, Yiwadaire village, Pingwu County, Mianyang City, Sichuan Province, People's Republic of China

Fig 18: Migration: trends and exceptions

In these two men's home village – a Himalayan village in western Nepal – outmigration is the norm. Almost every household has at least one member abroad or a returnee.
The man on the left is a Bishwakarma, proudly demonstrating the *kukri* knife he forged himself. Unlike the majority of the villagers, he has never migrated abroad for work but has stayed nearby, living from the fruits of his caste's traditional craftsmanship and seasonal herding journeys with flocks of goats and sheep. The man on the right is a high-caste Chhetri, who migrated to several Gulf countries and struggled a lot to pay back the loans he had taken out. He recounts how his lack of formal education, his meagre financial means and his misfortune with corrupt companies abroad made him search for alternative livelihood options. At the age of 45, he is now too old for physically strenuous work in the Gulf countries. He supplemented the electrical skills he acquired abroad with a training course in electronics so that he can now earn money by offering his services to fellow villagers. Both these men broke with the prevailing patterns of migration in the village: the Bishwakarma man by not migrating abroad at all; the Chhetri man due to the fact that his migration experience diverged widely from the stereotype of high-caste privilege. By juxtaposing these two pictures, I aim to highlight the creative ways in which villagers build livelihoods in conversation – yet not always in synchrony – with trends of mobility and circulation.

Photograph: Kathrin Fischer (University of Oxford), 2 March 2019 and 6 March 2019, Myagdi District Nepal

Fig 19: Stuck in Sunsari

Labour migration is not for everyone! Access to paid work abroad depends on a person's socio-economic status. This is especially true for people who belong to Dalit groups in the Tarai plain. These young men from the Musahar (also known as Rishidev) community, who belong to one of the most exploited and poorest communities in Nepal, live on government-owned land and have no land of their own. In the hamlet where they live, which is made up of about 50 houses, only a few men have managed to get work in the Persian Gulf or in Southeast Asia, India being the main nearby destination but offering low pay. Others, like those in the photograph, hope to go to Qatar or Malaysia one day but, because they have no land to mortgage, local moneylenders and banks are unwilling to lend them the capital they need. Moreover, they are afraid 'that financial investment company brokers will double-cross them', which happened to one of their neighbours. So, in order to ensure their family's livelihood, they work as daily wage workers on village farms. They feel trapped in the village, not knowing how to assume their future position as head of the family in charge of the household.

Photograph: Tristan Bruslé (CNRS), 14 March 2014, Hattimuda, Sunsari, Nepal

Fig 20: 'Khane, basne': eating and sitting

For more than four decades, mountain farmers migrated to the plains of Nepal to cultivate land. The 2000s marked a turning point: these settlements in the Himalayan foothills are now mainly to be found in peri-urban areas where land is so expensive that only a small plot of land can be bought to build a house. The number of houses on the outskirts of villages and roads is multiplying, gradually taking over agricultural and rice-growing areas. Among the new settlers, these men in the picture, sitting comfortably on the terrace, explained that they came to the plains to '*khane*, *basne*', 'eat and sit', in contrast to the harshness of life back in the mountains or during labour migrations. Indeed, the particularity of these settlements is that they are now established once a sufficient amount of money has been accumulated during labour migrations abroad (mainly to the United Arab Emirates). Thus, in addition to the north-south movement characteristic of the now long-standing mountain-plain migrations, there is an initial move to distant foreign countries (via labour migration) in view of settling in the plains later on. Newcomers are no longer dependent on agriculture or other manual work, and their migrating here (geographic mobility) goes hand in hand with socio-economic mobility because they expect to find an activity in the secondary or tertiary sector to allow them to eat while sitting comfortably.

Photograph: Olivia Aubriot (CNRS), October 2014, Ranibaghiya, Rupandehi district, Nepal

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NOTES

1. The majority of the photographs in this essay are from an exhibition that took place at the time of the conference *Himalayan Journeys: Circulations and Transformations*, organised by the CNRS's *Centre d'études himalayennes* (CEH) from 22 to 24 June 2022. This exhibition follows its own journey and was hosted at the *Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales* (INALCO) in October 2022 and will be hosted at the Condorcet Campus library *Humathèque Condorcet* in Aubervilliers from 28 November 2022 to 4 January 2023.

2. For example, the Nepalese film *Himalaya: Caravan*, directed by Eric Valli (1999), follows the adventures of a young boy leading his first yak caravan.

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