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The Last Yak Song: A Recount of the Decline of Pastoral Herding in Lower Mustang

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The Last Yak Song

A RECOUNT OF THE DECLINE OF
PASTORAL HERDING IN LOWER MUSTANG

By Rachel Hellman



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ABSTRACT

This project is fundamentally one of documentation and rumination, a case study of a profound change taking place. I initially sought to exercise my creative voice, and to uncover the world of the yak, a dying world at that. As my time progressed in Lower Mustang, it became clear that given the breadth and depth of change in the area, a more extensive and detailed analysis was necessary to truly paint a picture of the ways in which yak herding, engrained so finely into the cultural and social tapestry of the landscape, is disappearing. In this paper, using primarily interviewee's own words, I will illustrate the current significance, in the context of both capital and culture, of the yak, and recount the multitude of ways in which climate change, outmigration, nefarious national policy, conservation efforts, and changing cultural values, are making pastoral livelihoods less and less feasible. Finally, I provide a sketch of *Khung Khanay Chard*, the annual yak blood drinking festival that took place in Naurikot during my time in Lower Mustang, and a fine example of the transformations stated above. I will also interplay the ways in which song, poem, and myth inherently emerge out of pastoralism, a juxtaposition, the yak immortalized within this story of the mortality of pastoralism.

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Introduction

“Men are not so much the keeper of herds, as herds are the keeper of men”
- HENRY DAVID THOREAU

DUSK

Early April. The ground is dusty and desert-like, spotted with tufts of coarse greyish-green grass, the sky is desert blue, dusk setting in. Snow begins to fall, lightly at first, but heavier with each moment. Pema and I have finally made it to the yak pastures of Kharka, a six hour walk up from Jomsom.

Every living being in this corner of the Himalayas defies expectation, proves resilience in the most extreme of environments, scraggly grass included. The people of Lower Mustang have weathered hands and kind eyes. They know how to build houses from mud, and they count their wealth by the number of logs stacked on their roofs. They sing songs as they tend to their fields, and their horses know how to stand in such a way that the famous wind of the valley does not knock them over, despite the sudden certainty that they *will* be knocked over.

Perhaps most exemplary of this steadfastness, this tenacity, or maybe adaptiveness, is the yak and the herder.

Kharka, where the yak grazing grounds are located, is across from Tilicho Peak, home of the famous Tilicho Lake, said to be the highest in the world. Across from the *kangri topo*, with their snowy peaks and defiant beauty, are the steep hills covered in the grass that seems to emerge out of dust. I covet the way the wind feels as it pushes me gently up, caresses the body, erodes at the land.

In this crevice of these hills, in a gentle smile of the land, stands the herder. In the darkness he is a silhouette, as much a part of the landscape as the tree beside him. He moves with a grace down the mountain, following a secret choreography, *dancing* with an ease and comfort that disguise the steep terrain and slick snow now coating the scene.

“Hi yah,” he yells, twisting a rock forward with his whip.

A scattering of hoofs. The sweet sound of bells punctuates the landscape, a welcome warmth. Suddenly, I become aware that the hills are dotted with yaks. They move with no

urgency, content to continue their spring grazing through the night. But it's dinner time, and the herder is hungry.

And so it continues this way; the herder calling out, sometimes shouting “chew, chew,” or “aaaugh,” or whistling, or kicking. The yaks, lazily grazing in one moment, suddenly jerk forward from the sound, a jingling of bells ensuing. Eventually, the pace quickens, the sky begins to darken. The dots are now clearly animals, with long hair that varies from buckwheat beige to midnight black. Their horns look like parentheses around their face, marking them as greater than the cow, stronger than the bull.

Before I left for Mustang, my *amala*¹ had told me excitedly what a yak looked like; white ones were the best, she insisted. “Once I saw one that was so beautiful, it looked artificial, oh yes,” she relayed. At the time I had smiled, endeared by the not-quite-right use of the English language. But now, it seemed fitting. *Artificial*. From the Latin word for handicraft, so unreal one forgets that it is nature, and not the artist, who has made the gift.



Chempol and Chempol's stone dwelling, for the time being, in Kharka

¹ *Amala* means mother in Tibetan.

That first night was spent in the semi-permanent stone dwelling that was the herder's home for the next few weeks, until it was time to move further into the mountains, even closer to the peaks for summer grazing. The evening snow promised green, lush grass for the yaks in the coming months.

We spent the evening helping to prepare our dinner of staple lentils and rice, brought up from Jomsom every few weeks by the owner of the yaks. A handful of pieces of dried meat from a yak who had died of starvation the past winter were added to the meal, the edible relics of a year so harsh we would hear about it again and again in the coming weeks. The herder was frank and kind, allowing us to share his food and fire

That first night outside the yak herder's home, I was kept awake by the barking of the herders' dog. He sat outside my tent, proclaiming me as someone who did not belong. His bark reminded me of my position as an outsider, my heavy inability to directly compensate or express my gratitude for stories shared over the fire. Were these stories reluctantly told? Did my presence frustrate my new hosts who barely had enough food for themselves?

Slowly the dog drifted away, perhaps deciding that I was someone who could be trusted, at least for now. I settled into my sleeping bag, grateful for the fullness of my belly and the imprint of the mountains under my eyelids. The barks were replaced by the low hum of the yak bells and the pitter patter of snow on the roof of the tent as I drifted to sleep.

PASTORALISM AND POETRY

Moliere, the French playwright once wrote, "singing has always been associated with shepherds, for it wouldn't seem natural for...businessmen to indulge their passions in song." The idea of the poetic shepherd has always captured the popular imagination; From the goat herders of Nuer, to the yodelers of Switzerland, song and pastoralism have long been married. Yodelers of the central alps would sing to call their herds or to communicate between alpine villages.

What was it, though, of someone's daily involvement with beast, of their wandering whereabouts, that lent itself *specifically* to song? These questions lingered in the back of my mind as I boarded the bus departing from Kathmandu. Would the herders I met in the mountains be inclined towards verse and rhythm? Or would such a question be met with a laugh?

I would soon learn that where one left the comfort of washed clothing and Wi-Fi, was also where one might find wisdom and word. The herders I met existed in a place tangential to time and space, but not quite parallel. Morning was sacred instead of summoned, night welcomed but not presumed. And daytime, cherished warmth, was when the movement of four feet instead of two determined whereabouts, where one's thoughts and voice were sometimes the only companions to be found. The word *ruminant*, has its roots in the Latin word *ruminari*, which means "chewing over again." In its present form, ruminant is both a noun describing an

ungulate mammal that chews the cud regurgitated from its rumen, such as a yak, but also, a contemplative person, a person given to meditation².

When I asked herders about their tendencies towards prose and song, I was surprised by the surety at which people declared yak herding a career that practically *required* the echo of one's own voice; "Of course I sing to my yaks," Sey Babou, a yak herder and owner from Jharkot asserted to me. "If herders sing a song, it's sort of like a mother singing to its child. Lots of people sing songs as they milk their yak, this helps the animal and the person. Each herder has their own song." Lhakpa Gurung, a herder in Tiri, asserts that "from the morning until the evening I sing songs to my yaks. In the morning when I wake up and milk the yaks I sing."

"Poetry brings us back to a preverbal world we once shared with other animals, where our sense of sound was highly emotive and connotative. It's one of the few modes of speech that give us access to other animals," says the poet Gary Snyder, quoted in Brad Kessler's novel *Goat Song*. "A deep sense of communion and communication with nature and with specific non-human beings...is poetry and song." (Kessler, 2009).

One evening, while with the family Lhakpa Gurung is herding for, I meet a kind woman named Ringsang Gurung from Dolpa who is staying for the night. In the hazy smoke of the room, a fire ablaze in the traditional clay stove, the heat painting our cheeks a pinched pink, I see her smile when I mention yak songs. She is quiet, but poised, her long black hair in a perfect braid down her back. "Do you know any songs about yaks?" I ask her, convinced there are words hiding in the upturned corners of her mouth, stories untold. "Yes," she proclaims, at first cautiously. The entire family coaxes her on, *sing*, they beg, *sing*, they chant. She is embarrassed, unsure, but eventually she does sing. Her voice floods the room, the high falsettos of the traditional song seep into me with the tea I sip, pour like syrup into our ears. After much applause and congratulation, I ask her what the song is about. "It tells of a future in which all the grazing lands are filled with grass, and the baby yaks are plentiful. The song is a wish and a dream."

I want to sing you this song.

² Sourced from the *Merriam-Webster* Dictionary

Footing

A BRIEF HISTORY AND SUMMARY OF PASTORAL HERDING

Origin of Yaks and Herding

“Many, many years ago the yak came down from Tibet,” Ramesh Kumar Bhattachan explained in his family bakery in Jomsom. For the Bhattachen tribe, one of the four clans of the Thakali people of which Ramesh is a part, the yak is the greatest deity. “At first the people in this area were very surprised. They saw a big animal and they didn’t know what to think of it.”

This assessment of the origin of the yak is not too far from the truth; “Yaks originated in high mountainous regions bordering the Himalayas, such as in Nepal and the Tibetan Autonomous Republic...Today, yaks are found in the mountainous highlands of central Asia at 2,500-6,000 meters above sea level” (Degen et al., 2007, p. 57). According to Wiener, Han, and Long (2003), there were 38,000 yaks in Nepal in 2000, but the number of yaks has been decreasing due to “government restrictions on livestock numbers and movement in Nepal’s national parks.”

Yaks are kept and herded by transhumant pastoralists, which Kreutzmann defines as “seasonal migrations of herds between summer pastures in the mountains and winter pastures in the lowlands” (2004, p. 58). Transhumance involves the regular movement of herds between fixed points to exploit seasonal availability of pastures. In hills, “the transhumant pastoralists follow a cyclical migratory pattern from cool highland valleys in summer to warmer lowland valleys in the winter” (Bhasin, 2011, p. 151).

Forms of Pastoral Herding

This case study takes place in Lower Mustang, a part of Gandaki Pradesh in Northern Nepal. Mustang is an ancient forbidden kingdom, bordered by the Tibetan plateau and shadowed by some of world's tallest peaks, including Annapurna and Dhaulagiri. The name "Mustang" is derived from the Tibetan word meaning, "Plain of Aspiration." Upper Mustang, the more remote and Northern area of the district, was only opened to foreigners in 1992. I spent my time in

Lower Mustang, which has been transformed by the development of roads and consumer goods in the past twenty-five years.

In Lower Mustang, absentee herd ownership, in which shepherds (usually members of a non-Thakali ethnic group) herd only yaks and do not own any animals themselves, is the most common form of pastoral herding (Degen et al., 2007, p. 58). According to Bhasin, in areas where livestock farmers own large flocks, have regular summer and winter pastures, and also engage in other agricultural activities such as growing grains or vegetables, owners hire professional shepherding arrangements out of economic necessity and convenience (2011, p. 150). A recent study of yak herding in Lower Mustang, states that the average annual total income of yak owners is about N.Rs 145,560 (U.S. \$2,079), a relatively high income compared to other occupations in the country. Further, Yak owners estimation of how much of their income was derived from their herds ranges widely between 10-90%, but averages about 50% (Degen et al., 2007, p. 57). Hired herders, in exchange, received a small yearly salary from their employer, and all necessary supplies including food and clothing.

Perhaps the reason for such a wide range of dependency among owners, is due to the continuing prevalence of common-pool herding in areas of Lower Mustang. In both Jharkot and Tiri, a traditional system in which individuals who own between 3-20 yaks communally share a hired herder is still in practice. In Tiri, a shared goat and sheep herder took turns staying in the various employees houses throughout the week, and was fed his daily meals from the allotted family. This allows individuals to engage and profit off of pastoralism, without the inherent risks involved in large herd management.

We were told by some interviewees that in the past, it was common to send sons, before the age of marriage, to be a herder for the family's livestock. Sucti Seshem, a former yak owner from Naurikot, told us "some people here put their own son as a herder before they are married, but after they are married they stay separately from the family, so it is not possible. We don't do this anymore because all of the children go to school outside now."

In more remote areas of the Himalayas, other societal and organizational structures of pastoral herding, transhumance herding, and nomadism dominate. "In the Himalayan mountain milieu," Bhasin explains, "we find a full range of mobile practices, in livestock keeping from main nomadism through transhumance to combined mountain agriculture" (2011, p. 151). Most informants who had migrated from Upper Dolpo to Lower Mustang, having sold their yaks, reported both owning and herding their own yaks in a familial nomadic arrangement. While this arrangement proves physically tolling for the owner, and limiting in regards to educational opportunities for children, it also mitigates the middle-person in maintaining the health of a herd, directly connecting the people with their animals. Herders call this more traditional system *tari* in their mother-tongue, while the system of paying a professional herder to manage a flock is called *tachi*.

"There are nomads like Changpa of Changthang in Ladakh, whose economy is based predominantly on animal husbandry; there are agro-pastoralist groups like Gaddis of Bharmour, Himachal Pradesh and Bhutias of Lachen and Lachung in Sikkim, who practice marginal

agriculture and raise herds of sheep and goats and yaks” (Bhasin, 2011, p. 150). Across time and space, varied and complex ways of moving with animals have continued to exist.

Division of Land and Movement Techniques

The prevailing norm of pastureland division in Lower Mustang is by region rather than by individual. When asked about herding boundaries, Chempol, a herder with yaks from near Jomsom said, “past the hill we cannot go because it is for the herders of Muktinath, and the herders of Muktinath cannot come here to graze.” However, herders within the jurisdiction of Jomsom grazed on the same grounds, using ear-markers and painted horns to designate which yak was theirs, and which yak belonged to their neighbor.

Transhumance arrangements of land division are mostly guided by indigenous rules, practices, and institutions. However, in many cases, indigenous institutions and their rules have been replaced by formal institutions (Gentle & Thwaites, 2016). Chempol also informed us that “we used to graze in the forest but now it is illegal, so the yaks can’t go there.” Confusion and annoyance with state-sanctioned boundaries of the forest was an ongoing topic of conversation among herders.

Movement from winter to summer pastures is dictated approximately by month, and also instinct. Yungdung Gurung, a herder originally from Tibet whose employer is based in Jomsom explained, “we divide the pastureland according to the month. When I see grasslands, I move locations.”

However, some owners had distinct preferences and styles of herding that they swear by. Bhupen Serchen, a yak owner from Jomsom, hunched over the table, eager, during our interview; “Were the other yaks as big as mine?” he asked of our time spent with the herders. “I have my herder move location more than any of the other owners,” he pronounces proudly, “whenever I have free time I am sure to visit and make sure things are going well.” It seemed as if his unique approach was paying off, as of all of the herds in Jomsom, his had the most survivors of the harsh winter.

Sey Babou Kaji Tapouri, an owner from Jharkot, also told us of his special technique to ensure the most births and the least deaths of yaks per year: “I once went to India and saw that herders had brought their yaks to right outside of their homes, not up in the mountains. No one around here had ever done that! We thought the yaks wouldn’t survive. But when I came back, I decided to give it a try, and have stuck with it. Now whenever my yaks have babies, I keep them outside of my house for the winter so that they won’t be eaten by snow leopards.” Sey Babou also chooses to let his yaks roam free most of the time, checking in on them personally once a day.

“Free is good. In the winter time it is good to let your yaks free. They are clever animals, but if you keep them stuck with a herder, they’ll become fools.”

AS SUNG BY RINGSANG GURUNG,
DOLPA YAK SONG

གཡག་ལྷ་
ཕ་ཡུལ་ཡིད་ལ་འཁོར་རི་འི།
འབྲི་མོ་ལྔ་སྟོང་ལྔ་སྟུ་གསུང་རོགས་གནང་དང་འང་།
འབྲི་མོ་ལྔ་སྟོང་ལྔ་སྟུ་གསུང་རོགས་གནང་།

Recalling the mother land in the mind, I
think of possessing and raising five
thousand, five hundred female yak.

འབྲི་མོ་ཡིད་ལ་འཁོར་རི་འི།
བེའུ་ལྔ་སྟུ་གསུང་རོགས་གནང་དང་འང་།
བེའུ་ལྔ་སྟོང་ལྔ་སྟུ་གསུང་རོགས་གནང་།

With the possession of 5,500 female yak, I
wish to have a calf to each.

བེའུ་ཡིད་ལ་འཁོར་རི་འི།
ཨོལ་དག་ཕྱ་ཆང་ཕྱ་ཆུང་གསུང་རོགས་གནང་དང་འང་།
ཨོལ་དག་ཕྱ་ཆང་ཕྱ་ཆུང་གསུང་རོགས་གནང་དང་།

To each of the calf, I think of knitting neck
ties³ for each of them.

འོ་མ་འཇོ་ནི་མ་ཆུང་།འོ་མའི་འོ་ཟོགས་འོ་མའི་བསྐངས་རོགས་ཡ་
ལ་གནང་དང་འང་།
འོ་མ་འོ་ཟོགས་འོ་མའི་བསྐངས་རོགས་གནང་དང་དང་།

I have never been as herdsman, I wish the
Three Jewels will safeguard our livestock.
I have no experience of milking, but I wish
the jar full of milk.

ཞོ་ནི་ཁྲོགས་ནི་མ་ཆུང་།
མར་དང་སྐར་ཆུ་བསྐངས་རོགས་ཡ་ལ་གནང་དང་འང་།
མར་དང་སྐར་ཆུ་བསྐངས་རོགས་ཡ་ལ་གནང་དང་།

I have no experience of creating curd and
making butter, But I wish to have lots of
dairies of all kinds.

མར་དང་ཡ་ལ་སྐར་ཆུ་བྱ།
རྩ་སེའི་ཡ་ལ་ཇོ་བོ་མཚན་ལ་འཕུལ་དང་འང་།
རྩ་སེའི་ཡ་ལ་ཇོ་བོ་མཚན་ལ་འཕུལ་དང་།

With that dairy, I wish to offer them to
Lhase Jopo Che!

³ A neck tie for a yack is known as *oldak* in mother
tongue

IN THE LAND OF CORNERS



Yungdrung Gurung watches his favorite yak in Samchi Dong, the corner.

We had been told by Chempol and Chempol, the two herders staying together with identical names, that there was another herder closer to the towering snow mountains, only an hour walk east. Pema, my co-researcher looked over at me and said, “three hours for you probably.” He wasn’t wrong, I could barely keep up with him as we made our way to the two Chempol’s abode our first day in the field.

So, we set off in search of the other herder. We follow the mountains as one follows waves, a never ceasing pattern of up and down, up and down for hours. At every crevice we become sure the next peak will reveal a stone building nestled in the landscape, just as the two Chempol’s shelter is, but instead we are met by more earthen land. It is very lonely, save for an eagle circling overhead. I begin to question Pema’s surety in his directions. “Pema, are you *sure* this is the right way? Maybe the herder left?” Pema responds by continuing forward even faster. I scurry to catch up.

Finally, we find a black pipe on the ground, like a snake, slithering through the mountainside, a sign of water, and therefore, a sign of life. Eventually it leads to a stone house, if

you can call it that. I am amazed by the simplicity, but also tenacity, of these non-permanent structures. They are simply stones stacked upwards, just high enough for a person to sit cross legged near a fire underneath, with tarp, or tin, or earth on the roof.

We find out later that the area this herder is in is called *Samchi Dong* which literally translates to “animal corner.” It is, in fact, a corner; nestled against the snow mountains hovering in front of us. Behind is objectively greener grass than where the two Chempols are stationed. It feels as if it is at the end of the landscape. But this also means the grass is fertile and plentiful for the yaks.

Eventually a herder comes criss-crossing down the mountains above with his yaks, a stylistically different version of the choreography I had witnessed that first glorious day. The herder looks confused, but amused, as we explain our interests and invites us “in” for tea. Yungdung Gurung, as we learn is his full name, is an older man. He has a smile dotted with missing teeth, and a quiet, but sincere-looking demeanor. Later, back in Jomsom, Pema confides that he thinks the herders act completely different from the villagers, “almost like aliens.” In some ways, this assessment seems true; Compared to the sing-songy way in which those in Jomsom talk, with facial expressions that punctuate their larger-than-life stories, and assemblages of sounds and hand movements to add, the herders appear reserved and forthright. They speak slower, they maintain eye contact, and they ponder before answering a question. What is it about living with ruminants, following the movement of another being, that cultivates slowness? What of aloneness bestows truth?

Yungdrung brews us *peu cha* (yak butter tea) with blackened hands. He stares at us inquisitively, most likely wondering what a young girl from America could possibly be doing in this corner. But Yungdrung tells us he is happy to have us here, he welcomes the company. The life of a herder in a corner is lonely, after all. The corner proved to be a place of solitude; “now because I am so far away I can only meet the other herders every five days, but tomorrow I am going into Jomsom because I am almost out of supplies. The owner of my yaks won’t bring me sugar even though I asked him to!” Pema looked at me in disbelief, and whispered, “wow, no sugar? What do you put in the tea then?” Later, we leave pictures we print in a small electronic shop of Yungdrung with his favorite yak in Jomsom, to be collected at his resupply, a small gesture of thanks for the tea and conversation.

Yungdrung tells us that the reason he has chosen this spot far from the others is that it will allow his yaks to grow strong for the blood festival they will be a part of in August. The owner of his yaks, Bhupen Serchen, the man who competitively asked how the other yaks are doing, is insistent on a constant schedule of movement.

“I don’t have any other skills, which is why I became a herder, but it was my own choice. I was a goat and sheep herder before I became a yak herder. Yaks are easier to care for than sheep, because for sheep you have to make sure each and every one is ok, but with yaks you can leave and take a tea break,” Yungdrung slowly explains. Yundrung is originally from near Dolpa, but it’s been twenty years since his family has moved to Lower Mustang.



Yundrung brews us peucha in a makeshift shaker made of an old soda bottle in his stone hut.

Most herders ended up in their current occupation for similar reasons. Nima Tsering, a herder from Tibet whose temporary dwelling was just above the two Chempols explained that he became a herder “when my father and mother got divorced.” Lhakpa Gurung, a goat herder in Tiri became a herder when “a bad flood destroyed my village (in Upper Mustang) and the whole town was lost. I was young, and searching for a job came here. At first I did agriculture here, but later switched to herding.” The herders we interviewed came from situations in which there was little to do but take whatever job was available to them. Many, like Chempol, came from broken families or situations of homelessness. Nima Tsering admitted, “no youth want to get such a job. Only old people and homeless people become herders. This is the best option if there is nothing else that you can do, but if I had another option or had training for another occupation I would stop being a herder.” While being a herder was hard, and mostly undesirable work, it also provides a means of income for those perceived to be at the lowest rung of Himalayan society.

It was almost universally agreed that being a yak herder was the best type of herder to be, because yaks require less maintenance than other ruminants. Lhakpa Gurung, the goat herder based in Tiri exclaimed, “obviously I love the yak the most. I love the yak because other than the mother yak, which I have to supervise, I can let the others roam. With other animals I have to watch more carefully.”

When we ask about the hardest part of being a herder, Yungdung laughs; “it’s too hard being a herder. No one wants to be it. The worst part is when the owner of the yaks comes up and scolds you. It depends on the understanding level of the owner, but the current one puts me responsible for if the yaks die due to snow.”

This tension between hired herder and yak owner was tangible both in the mountains, and back in the valley. According to Degan et al, most of the thirty yak owners in Lower Mustang are ethnically Thakali, a higher caste than that of most of the interviewed herders (Degen et al., 2007, p. 65). Herders constantly complained that the owner of their yaks demanded too much of them, and in turn did not provide enough supplies or time off. Yak owners, oppositely, insisted that herders were inherently drunkards and lazy, and that the task of managing their whereabouts was exhausting.

Bina Thakali, a hotel owner in Jomsom who had temporarily taken over yak ownership while her father was in Kathmandu explained to us frustratingly that “it’s hard to find good herders. They are mostly all drunkards, and whatever they say to me I have to tolerate.”

Later in our stay with the two Chempols, we learnt that the more outspoken one had a broken rib, having fallen while chasing a lost yak a few days ago. We asked, our mouths agape, if he had sought any medical help. “I have a fever, but if I walk around a bit it goes away. If I go down to see the doctor, I’m sure the owner of my yaks won’t be happy.” I gave Chempol all of the Tylenol I had left in my medical kit, and insisted he eventually seek help, as his fever was especially worrying. What other extremes had I not seen that these men had to endure?

* * * *

As the *peu cha* empties from my cup and our conversation comes to a natural pause, Yungdrung leads us outside. He points across the grassy lands where his yaks now graze to the snow mountains in front of us. “Soon I will move the yaks here,” he explains. This afternoon I went to see if the snow had melted on the other side of that hill. It has, so tomorrow I’ll bring them there.” We pause for a moment, the three of us glancing across the landscape to settle on the abstract place in the distance where the yaks would move. In my mind I picture a lush landscape of green grass, ripe and sweet. A yak in the distance makes a low grunt, and I am settled out of my daydream. I glance at Yungdrung who by now has already made his way back towards the yaks who are eager to graze more in the late afternoon, a postponed return to solitude.

YAKS ARE A PASSION

Peu cha was a way to bond with both herder and yak in an intimate way. The butter is the product of the labors of both beings; a gift cultivated over time, patience and trust as necessary of ingredients as yak milk and Tibetan salt.

“A symbiotic relationship with ruminants,” Jim Corbett, the quaker and author of *Goatwalking*, as quoted in *Goat Song*, writes, “opens an unguarded back gate to Eden...For the

farmer, food is necessarily the product of labor. For the herder, food is a gift, eternally regenerating itself" (Kessler, 2009).

Nima Tsering, the yak herder originally from Tibet who lived just above the two Chempols proudly shows us how he makes the tea in a long wooden cylinder, turning it up and down, up and down quickly with a stick. As the sun begins to set and the frigid cold of the evening sneaks inside the stone hut, I gladly cup the mug handed to me.

The three of us sit in silence, sipping at the golden liquid, taking each other's presence in. Nima Tsering sets his mug down, and smiles. "It's almost feeding time, would you like to see me give the yaks their grass?" I nod fervently, *of course* I want to watch the yaks be fed.



Nima Tsering's yaks eat their extra feed as dusk sets in.

Nima Tsering explains that the past winter had been incredibly rough, with so very many losses, that the owner of his yaks had decided it would be best to supplement the feed of the animals to prevent the possibility of any future losses. Yaks are characteristically timid, perhaps even sheepish, if the adjective is not too ironic. They meander in their grazing lands, content to munch on grass, or stand vibrating in place for warmth, eyes off in a distant place. If you walk up to a yak too quickly, they'll scutter away, suddenly feeble and very much aware. But as Nima Tsering stands on the roof of the makeshift grass shed, shifting the hay in a way ideal for

feeding, I see a side of yaks I have yet to see; They frolic into the pastured enclosure, prance in circles impatient for their evening meal. The cluster of baby yaks that had been born only weeks ago struggle to keep up with their mothers, who now urgently shuffled closer to Nima Tsering. The sun casts long shadows on the ruminants, their coats turn glossy in spots, they look like they are glowing.

Nima Tsering stands up from his post, a fistful of grass in each of his hands. He glances at us and smiles, *this* is something he is proud of, and he wants to make sure we are watching. Nima Tsering fans out his hand and suddenly it was raining hay. The yaks rejoice. Grunts are heard all around, as both yak and man take in the comfort of nourishment. Nima Tsering continues to shower the yaks in golden hay, the world made a momentary paradise.

Once the feeding is over and the yaks are still merrily munching, Nima Tsering walks over to us and explained with pride that “each and every yak (of over 50) has its own name. I am able to tell which one is which just by the way they look.” Nima Tsering glances at his flock, then back at us; “they love me because I feed them, it’s a real intimacy.”

“Do you love your yaks?” I ask, suddenly aware of how silly the question sounds.

“Of course I love my yaks! I have been raising yaks since when I lived in Tibet.”

Despite all of the adversities involved in yak herding, namely, extreme cold, loneliness, and mistreatment by yak owners, herders expressed a deep love of their animals, an intimacy unmatched by outsiders or owners even. Yungdung Gurung, the herder who lived in the *animal corner*, tells us with a smile that “when a new baby yak is born I put a bell on it and I am happy. I love the baby yaks. Whenever they are born I am so happy.” When I ask the two Chempols which of their yaks were their favorites, the quieter Chempol frowns in concentration. “Perhaps *Karchen* (moon), or maybe *Siktuk* (baby tiger).” Pema explodes in laughter as he explains that the more outspoken Chempol has settled on “*Nangdah*, which translates to *one whose eyes are different*, like yours. Foreigners always have big, crazy eyes.” Sadly, *Nangdah* had died that winter from starvation. Chempol quickly left the hut and re-emerged with *Nangdah*’s horns, which he had earnestly kept as a memento to his favorite animal.

Herders also expressed an appreciation for the lifestyle of herding, once again, despite the myriad of difficulties it presents. The more outspoken Chempol told us proudly, “I don’t get sick because the air here is so clear.” Lhakpa Gurung, the goat herder from Tiri, went so far as to say. “I love herding. Compared to any other job it is the best, it’s become habitual.” When he is bored Lhakpa sings with the other herders, he expressed gratitude for the simplicity roaming with ruminants brought to his life. Ramesh Shrestha, a new goat and sheep herder also based in Tiri, told us that “when I think about my old job as a cook, and my new job as a herder, I feel Nirvana. Being a cook is good in some ways, but I love animals and I love being a herder.” Ramesh had been offered a job as a herder while employed as a cook in Pokhara, and had made the move to Mustang after some consideration. “Humans are too hard to understand, but animals are not.”



Chempol holds up Nangdah's horns.

Yak owners, too, appreciated the power and prestige associated with owning yaks. Sey Babou, a yak owner and herder from Jharkot, told us as we walked to his yaks winter pastures that he feels “happy and proud to own yaks because I am the only one in town to have so many. When I go to visit my yaks in the mountains for two months they also stay outside of my tent and I am very happy.” Tashi Tsering, another yak owner from Jharakot who owns only ten yaks, and told us he makes no profit off of them, explained that “for me, having yaks is a passion. Later if I get more money from having them, I may take it as a business. But I am a lover of animals, but mostly, a lover of yaks.”

While most of the owners had acquired their yaks generationally, I encountered one family who had only recently purchased yaks in Jomsom. Dolpa Pom, who had migrated from Upper Mustang to Lower Mustang and ran a homestay, told me that her husband had always dreamt of owning yaks. “At first my husband was a jeep driver, but that industry became too competitive so we decided to sell his car and buy yaks instead.” When asked why yaks, she replied:

“My husband has wanted yaks for ten years now. He wanted to be with the yaks in the mountains, so when we had the opportunity, we bought seventy yaks. At first my husband was both the owner and herder. For three months he lived with the yaks and

brought us back lots of fresh milk and cheese, which was really nice. This winter was so bad that we lost half of the yaks, so now we only have forty-five yaks. My husband is in Kathmandu right now visiting my daughter who is in school there. Eventually we decided to hire a herder. Even though this winter was hard, we still have hope. I feel so proud when outside people come and here and learn that I have yaks.”

In Tibetan, “the word for yaks, *nor*, is also translated as wealth. The yak makes life possible for man in one of the world’s harshest environments” (Degen et al., 2007). For Dolpa Pom, as with many others who own them, there is a deep sense of pride that is attached to owning a symbol of wealth,. Nima Mentok, a proud man from Dolpa who sold all of his yaks and moved his family to Jomsom in hopes of better education for his children, admitted, “it is true, the person who has the most yaks is the richest. Yak *does* translate to wealth. We felt pride in having yaks.”

Perhaps most telling of this special connection, is the desire of many herders to eventually purchase their own yaks. Instead of yearning to eventually totally escape their socially speaking relatively undesirable occupation as herder, many told us they had dreams of saving enough money to have their own flock of yaks. Yungdung Gurung, the herder who stayed in the *animal corner*, told us his dream for the future is to “own my own yaks. I will take the first step to ownership by buying some goats and sheep, and then eventually sell them for yaks.” Ramesh Shrestha, too, planned to “eventually be an owner myself. In the future if I save enough money I will buy yak, goats, or sheep, depending on the amount.” One owner had an especially interesting arrangement with his herder when he still owned yaks; Shyam Lalchen explained that along with a salary, food, and clothes for his herder, he would also “give one yak mother and one yak baby per year. It’s a traditional arrangement called *bachouli*. Each year that the yaks have babies, we give the herder a pair.”

* * * *

As the yaks look up once again, content with their evening meal of grass, I notice a few baby yaks with colorful earrings and collars decorating their nimble, small, frames. I ask Nima Tsering if there is a reason that he puts these adornments on his baby yaks, perhaps it is to identify them? Nima Tsering shakes his head, no, that’s not why.

“I add earrings to the baby yaks just to make them look beautiful.”

“WE ARE NOTHING WITHOUT THE YAK”



Tashi Tsering proudly presenting ropes he has made from yak hair, next to a yak-woven blanket that frames the doorway of his home in Jharkot.

“The yak is important because each and every part of yak is used – it is more useful than any other animal.”⁴

“For example, for the tent we use the yak fur, for any types of clothing we use the yak fur, any ropes any sacks, any type of clothing that we wear. And even in the past in the home we used to make shoes from the yak. Each and everything.”⁵

⁴ Tashi Tsering, owner, Jharkot

⁵ Chempol, herder, Jomsom

“Yaks have very fine hair for cashmere, you can make warm and light jackets with it. You can make your house out of yak skin. With the horns you can make art, or a knife, an instrument, or even a belt design”⁶

“Even if you need something from the outside you can sell the products of the yak to buy what you need. We are nothing without the yak.”⁷

For the people of Lower Mustang, the sheer usefulness of the yak is the main reason it is cited as being so important and revered. Whenever I asked an individual about the reason why yaks, of all animals, were a part of culture, myth, and everyday life, the respondent’s eyes would light up, and they would begin citing a laundry list of possible goods that could be made from both alive and dead yaks. The amount was monumental, covering nearly every necessary (and unnecessary) item of daily life.⁸

Tashi Tsering, a yak owner in Jharkot proudly displayed a large, thick, yak-woven blanket that provided the doorway to his home. Nima Tsering showed me the lasso he had braided out of yak hair. The people of Lower Mustang are proud, and themselves amazed, by the seemingly endless uses of the yak.

Of course, the most obvious use of the yak is for food production. One yak is said to easily sustain a family in meat rations for a full year. As explained by Degan et al, “yaks are raised mainly for meat and 150–200 are slaughtered yearly in Lower Mustang, where the people prefer yak meat to sheep meat. Often a household will buy half a yak, dry the meat, and eat it over a period of six to seven months” (2007). Further, in a high altitude environment like Lower Mustang, pastoralism provides an adaption to such a harsh landscape by promoting the conversion of the low quality plant resources into “portable, high quality animal food” (Bhasin, 2011). Yak meat is also pretty tasty (if I may say so myself), and can easily be dried and cured to be stored for winter months. Rupika, a 19 year old woman whose parents own a hotel in Tini advised that “yak meat is better than any other meat. Yaks live up in the lakes where there is not dust and they eat only clean grass and herbs. My mother tells me that yak meat is very good for your health.”

Before the border with Tibet was permanently closed, yaks also provided a primary means of transportation and trade for both Tibetans and the people of the Himalayas. Tsampa Dukda, the *amchi*⁹ of Tiri who migrated from Dolpa, announced that “Dolpa without yaks is like a person without interests.” The main reason that Tsampa Dukda was so adamant about the usefulness of yaks was because of their historical significance as vehicles of trade for the people of Dolpa;

⁶ Geshe Sonam

⁷ Chempol, herder, Jomsom

⁸ Sometimes as I would lie awake at night, hoping to fall asleep, I would try to think of items that couldn’t be made by the yak, and was disappointed in my inability to come up with a substantial list!

⁹ An *amchi* is a practitioner of bon and/or Tibetan medicine.

“In the past the Dolpa people would use yaks to trade materials with Tibet. If we brought grain we could get two or more bags of salt. Business was done in the winter. Dolpa without the yak is nothing. The people would take grains or crops on the yaks and trade it for salt with the Tibetans. With the salt they traded, half would be kept for personal usage, and half would be sold in the valley for wheat, barley, or maybe even rice. If there was no yak, none of that would be possible.”

Of course, with the closing of the border, none of that is quite possible anymore. While trade is no longer a feasible use of the yak (or logical, with the increasing amount of road construction), it serves as a historical reminder of the ways in which the yak has shaped the landscape and social structure of the land.

COMMUNITY INTER-RELIANCE

As Pema and I head through Tini on our way to the herders of Kharka in the early morning, I hear a voice booming throughout the whitewashed town. I can't understand what the voice is saying, but its presence permeates every corner of the small village. Eventually, I find the source: an older man, who walking at a constant pace, shouts into each and every window of each and every home some very important message. “He’s announcing whose turn it is to receive water,” Pema explains. “Every day someone from each family helps irrigate the land of one community member, taking turns. In exchange for announcing who is receiving water that day is, the *ganbo* gets a small amount of money.” *How ingenious, a built in alarm clock and a labor saving agricultural practice.* Pema is amused by my amazement at the system. “It’s traditional,” he says, as if that explains why it works so well, in hindsight, perhaps it does. Rupika, the young woman whose parents own a hotel in Tini explains the system to me again upon our return to Tini a few days later; “turn by turn we have to put water in the fields. No one can do it alone. The yeller speaks loudly so we know whose turn it is, it’s an old system.” I question Rupika further if there are more systems like this in the town. “I think all of the villagers help each other. In Pokhara and Kathmandu, even though people live closer together than here, neighbors don’t know each other. Here, it is much better, we help each other.”

It is clear that in various villages in Lower Mustang, community-based agriculture, and the use and maintenance of common-pool resources, is a key and critical element of daily survival. Ostrem et al (1994) define “common resources” as allowing community members the ability to exclude other users from its use, and define “pooled-resources” as being consumed by the group of individuals or community classified as common-pool resources (CPRs). Mountainous communities in the Trans-Himalayan Region of Nepal rely on the availability and accessibility of CPRs, such as forest water and pastureland, for making a living. CPRs are the basis for agriculture and livestock rearing, which ultimately is the basis for making a living for the villagers (Poudel & Aase, n.d., p. 2). Without CPRs, daily life in Tini, and many other mountainous towns, would not be possible. With a greater dependence on common-pool

resources, comes a greater dependence on community. Community sharing of irrigation, like any distribution of CPRs, and also of difficult labor tasks requiring a group larger than the average family unit, is necessarily a communal task. Lax Gurung, a homestay owner in Kagbeni, tells me that “without agriculture, culture will not exist. Community agriculture is so important that every form of farm work has its own festival.” Families take turn helping to hoe and tend to each other’s fields, and barter tasks that require helping hands. “In the old system,” Lax continues, “people would trade tasks. They would say ‘I’ll do this this for you and you do this for me.’ But now with so many day laborers here from lower down, we pay instead.”

As a result of this communal reliance on both shared resources and shared labor, an intricate, and naturally formed, web of interdependence exists that is both delicate and resplendent; without a common water source, the fields cannot exist, without crops from the field, domestic animals cannot exist, without domestic animals, manure cannot exist, and without manure, food product cannot exist. This is one example of a circle of dependency that turns again and again each day, a well oiled wheel. At any moment, however, a spoke can be removed and threaten the turning of the whole system.

Yak herding fits squarely into this scheme of shared reliance, as much a part of the puzzle as the man calling whose turn it was for water on the streets of Tini. One morning while staying in the non-permanent dwellings of Kharka, Pema and I joined the two Chempols as they collected yak dung for the villagers in Tini and Jomsom. Yak dung is used as kindling for fire stoves in Mustang, and more importantly, as fertilizer for agriculture fields. We had seen a few families come throughout the day to collect dung themselves, and I was curious if Chempol and Chempol got paid for their labor. “The owner benefits from the yak, so we give the dung for free to the local people,” the more outspoken Chempol elucidated. “Everyone benefits from the yak. The local people even benefit from the yak wool. The owner sells any extra of the wool.” Villagers did, however, bring small gifts and supplies to the herders when they came to pick up the yak dung. While we were with the two Chempols, a father and son from Tini came to pick up sacks of dung, and brought a heaping bag of spinach heads grown in their fields as thanks for the dung, as well as a bottle of *arak*¹⁰.

At this point, Pema had caught on to my fascination with CPRs and inter-reliance. “It’s like a circle,” he prompted me excitedly. “The dung helps the lettuce grow which is given to the herders in exchange for more dung!” I smiled as we headed back to the shelter. That smile quickly faded as Pema explained to me that he had told the herders that *I* would cook lunch that day. I had told him the night earlier that I wanted to express my gratitude for their hospitality beyond the monetary reimbursement. I did not expect to be cooking *dal bhat*, a dish I had no idea how to make! We spent the walk back arguing and joking about if I would ruin our final meal with the herders. As I stirred potatoes and the gifted spinach, trying to calculate how long the rice should be left on the stove, the quieter Chempol returned smiling, a freshly woven basket slung across his forehead. He pointed at it, and in broken English said, “very good! Gift come from Tiri!”

¹⁰ *Arak* is a home brewed alcoholic spirit.

Yak dung, as with many animal feces, is also used as a natural fertilizer for crops. Sey Babou Kaji Tapouri, the yak herder and owner from Naurikot, while planting vegetables in the pen where his baby yaks had spent the winter, excitedly explained that “the yak babies come here for the winter and fertilize the ground. In the Spring we use the soil to plant carrots and cabbage, and then in the early Summer harvest the vegetables.”

Traditionally, yaks and other livestock are also managed in a common-pool arrangement that encourages inter-reliance and the sharing of resources. Lhakpa Gurung, a goat and sheep herder originally from Gorka who is employed in Tiri, is jointly employed by five families in a traditional arrangement. When I visit him in the evening, he is staying at a well off family’s home in the center of town. It is impossible to distinguish him from the other members of the family, who all sit around listening to music and sipping *peu cha* around a *chulo* stove¹¹. The family explains to me that each week Lhakpa Gurung stays with one of the five families that employs him, and that family is responsible for his supplies, lunch, and dinner for the day.

Similarly, Tashi Tsering, one of the yak owners from Naurikot, owns only ten yaks individually, but pools his funds with twelve other people in the village to share a herder. “We pay according to the number of yaks per month. Those who have more yaks pay a little more. This system was started by our ancestors many years ago and is still going on.” Tashi is passionate about yaks, and he firmly believes that the continuing existence of yak ownership and herding is contingent upon an endurance of this system. During our conversation, we were briefly interrupted as a band of villagers walked by to build a water pipe to the town. I asked if they were being compensated for their labor. “No,” Tashi told me, a look of confusion sweeping over his face, “one member of each family has to send someone to help. The water pipe will benefit everyone.

¹¹ A *chulo* is a traditional Nepali stove made out of mud

Flux

Yak tao rigi kenchā
Mi tao lumpi te

*If the hill has the black and white yak,
the jewel
Why then does the village have only
bad men?*

POEM TOLD BY SEY BABOU KAJI TAPOURI

CLIMATE CHANGE

On our way to visit Yungdung Gurung we pass a dead yak. Its body rots away, a pile of bones and fur, eye sockets hollow. The pungent smell of death still coats the air. I turn away, suddenly acutely aware of the mortality of the creatures that fascinate me.

We later learn that the yak we had passed was one of hundreds that died of starvation this past winter. Nima Tsering's herd was reduced from 75 yaks to 33 this year; Dolka Pom's from 70 to 45; Ratma Serchen's from 80 to 50 total. Everyone, from herder to owner is devastated by the losses. "I have been herding for forty-four years and this is the worst winter I have ever seen," Nima Tsering tells us. "There is less and less grasslands compared to past years, and instead heavier and heavier snowfall. If the cold doesn't kill the yaks, then starvation does." Nima Tsering gestures outside of his stone dwelling, "last year this pasture was filled with yaks, but now I am feeling so sad because it is empty." Yundung Gurung relays similar information, although he seems to have fared slightly better due to the birth of many baby yaks: "This winter was the toughest, I have had lots of the problems. Seven of the yaks got lost because of the snowfall. There was lots of heavy snowfall. If the yaks don't get enough food they will starve, or if they slip and fall they will die."



Sey Babou Kaji Tapouri searching for his yaks.

Fewer yaks also means less money for yak owners, and the possibility of having to give up the enterprise entirely in order to make up for losses. Dolka Pom, the wife of the man whose dream it was to own yaks, has only had her yaks for two years, but already the entire herd has been halved. “I still have hope that we can make it work and have a profit. Maybe in the future the birth of the baby yaks will make up for all of the deaths.” Ratna Serchen tells us, half jokingly,

“this year was kind of a disaster for me. I lost thirty yaks because of the snow. Usually the size of my herd increases, but this year it was not possible. The snow came up to my chest, but the younger yaks come only up to my knees; they can’t survive. I estimate I lost around N.Rs 10-12 lakh (USD 8,978 - 10,773) this year due to the snow. I learned that nature is stronger than me.”

It is clear that similar patterns of extreme weather have increased in consistency and severity in the last decade in Lower Mustang, wreaking havoc on all forms of livelihood, but especially agricultural occupations. Even without extreme snowfall, pastureland has been shrinking at unprecedented rates¹². Lhakpa Gurung, the goat and sheep herder based in Tiri, tells

¹² It is worth noting that the decrease in available grazing lands could be due to overgrazing, and not climate change.

us that the grazing are which he brings his animals to has become a “completely different landscape. In the past the grazing lands were completely filled with grass. Now it is rare to find such lush grounds, it's too hard to find good grazing lands. In the past, also, female goats were the same size as male goats, but not anymore.¹³”

These changes were confirmed by Yam Nath Polchard, the Divisional Forest Officer at the Mustang Forestry Office; “Climate change is certainly happening here, based on records we have kept. The trend of precipitation has changed. As of the past ten to fifteen years, the rate of precipitation has gone up, and has fluctuated more within a given year than ever before.” Officer Polchard feels certain, and worried, about the destruction that would be caused by the changing weather patterns in the area. “My biggest concern is how fragile the geography is here. You see the river here in Jomsom is even at high risk. It is a very fragile situation. If the precipitation gets much higher, the whole system will collapse.”

These extreme weather changes are also making it increasingly more difficult for villagers to be able to rely on subsistence agricultural practices to support themselves. Keran Pariyar, the Planned Protection officer at the Agricultural Development Center in Marpha tells us that “there are extremities of weather now. The summer is too hot, and the winters are too cold. Indirectly, this has caused an increase in insects that eat at crops in the area. Nothing is growing when it is supposed to. Locals tell me crops that are supposed to grow at certain times are not anymore, or are yielding smaller harvests.”

One of the most interesting, and telling, agricultural changes in Lower Mustang is the shift in villages in which apple farming is feasible. The people of Lower Mustang are proud of their apple farms. Let a conversation drift for too long, and suddenly you know the exact amount of trees in someone’s farm, or the type of alcohol they brew from their cider. Labeshree Bishwakrama, an Agricultural Technician in the Mustang Agricultural Office, tells us that “youth are coming back to Mustang to start apple farms. There is a big demand for apples from Mustang, and it makes good money.”

But one thing is clear: the further down the valley we move, into historical apple farming areas, the more trouble people seem to be having with apple farming, and the further up the valley we move, into areas that previously have not supported apple farming, the more people seem to be starting apple farms for the first time. Shyam Lalchen, a hotel owner and former yak herder from Marpha, a village perhaps best known for its apples farms and nationally-distributed apple brandy, tells us that apple farming has become less reliable: “I don’t know if it was due to climate change or not, but last year it was very hard for apple trees. There was a frost at night and all of the flowers fell off of the trees.” About a two hour bus ride up the valley, in an area in which apple farming is not as common, we are invited inside for tea one afternoon by Takla Gurung, a retired goat owner. He asks us if we know anything about apple farming because he is

¹³ Some recent scientific research has indicated that climate change, and a consequent decrease in available grazing land, can lead to a decrease in body mass of female ruminants (Toïgo, Gaillard, Van Laere, Hewison, & Morellet, 2006).

new to it. Officials in Jomsom have given him a bag of pesticides, and he doesn't know how to apply it to his trees.

This trend is confirmed by Suris Stapa-Pojister, a Program Director for the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP), who reports that, "climate change is directly affecting apple farming. In some areas rainfall is not as much as it used to be, and the average temperature is rising in the valley. The apple farms are moving up to where there is less rainfall." Labashree Bishwakrama also reveals that, "there is some climate effect on apple farming. Before you could grow apples lower down. But now, you have to grow apples higher up because there is less snowfall here (in Jomsom)."

In a place like Lower Mustang, in which the earth is what homes are made of and where food directly comes from, sudden change is not just damaging but cataclysmic.

Inrasing Shesem, a former yak owner from Naurikot who sold his yaks to cover the buildup of losses ensued after an especially tough winter, is exhausted by the change. "There is less grazing land than before, even for herbal medicine. There is nothing left for the yaks to eat, the yaks are so much thinner now than they were before. Agriculture is also harder now because of the weather changes. Even the people's interest in agriculture has diminished because it's so much less predictable."

Already, these extreme weather events are causing entire villages to collapse. Geshe Sonam, a Bon practitioner in Jomsom originally from Pangling, Lower Mustang tells of the devastating change in his home village with a look of urgency on his face:

"In 2011 there was no snow in Pangling. If there is no snow in the mountains, then there is no water to irrigate the agriculture. We've been living in the same place for generations, but we had no choice, we had to leave. We don't have any professional skills that allow us to work in Kathmandu or Pokhara, but we were dying in our own home. I am trying to get funding to build a dam from foreign countries, but the future does not look great."

Geshe Sonam finishes telling the story of Pangling, and folds his hands on his lap. He seems to be digesting what he just said, processing the severity of the situation. Geshe Sonam is usually a loud and inspired man, relaying his beliefs as much with his hands as with his mouth. When he preaches, the entire room listens and considers what he has to say. But now, he seems smaller than before. He seems like a man, not the immortal, knowledge-bearing, presence he has become in my mind.

CHANGES IN EATING HABITS

With less food able to be produced from local agricultural practices, villagers have had to turn to buying food from the valley and mass producers to supplement their own diet, or risk starvation. Some of the variation in diet is welcomed by locals; Pema Chensum, a homestay owner in Tiri, tells us of changes in her own food consumption when I ask her about how things

had changed in the village in the past twenty years; “What we eat has changed a lot in the past years. We used to have *tsampa*¹⁴ and soups, but now there is more variety. We used to only have rice during *Losar*¹⁵, but now we eat it every day.” Indeed, rice is much more common than it once was in Lower Mustang, no longer a treat. The herders of Kharka ate *dal bhat*¹⁶ for lunch and dinner every day, as did many locals. Inside the herder’s dwelling, I notice that the rice bags are imported from India and China, with flour also from outside, although many types of flour are produced in Lower Mustang.

This necessary shift in diet also means that yak products are on the decline. With less healthy yak mothers and babies born per year, most herders I spoke with chose to not milk their yaks, and save the nutrition for the babies who desperately need it. Aampread Thakali, an Animal Health Technician in Jomsom tells us that a big challenge in the area is the reliance on “products from outside of the district. Living here has become challenging in itself. This year a lot of livestock died from the snow, so we purchase their products from outside. Of course the local milk is better than what is bought from the outside, but there is less available.” When I ask Aampread Thakali about purchasing yak milk and cheese, he explains, “in the past all yak herders would make cheese and milk from their yaks that would then be brought down from the pasturelands to be sold, but nowadays they don’t because there is more of a changeover in herders, and the yaks are dying of starvation.”

Yak butter is not just a forgotten delicacy. It is also an important part of Bon and Buddhist culture and practice in Lower Mustang, necessary for many different *pujas*¹⁷ and prayer. “On days of worship yak butter is most needed,” Tsampa Dukda, the *amchi* of Tiri tells me. “Using goat cheese is like using iron, while using yak cheese is like using gold. In the holy book it does not say we can use any other type of butter. I think people nowadays are using cow and goat butter instead of yak butter because it is cheaper and more convenient. And perhaps they misunderstand the meaning behind yak butter.”

I ask Shyam why people had stopped eating locally produced food. “The food which we grow here is more expensive than what is brought from Pokhara. Because it is local, it is organic, and becomes more and more expensive.” The people I spoke with had much pride in the “organic” nature of their food. Pema’s *amala* always reminded me that she had grown the food in front of us before we ate a meal. Lax Gurung, a homestay owner in Kagbeni, tells me, “rather than taking medicine, we eat good food and don’t have to go to the doctor.” But young people also seemed to have a growing distaste for yak products, perhaps because of the introduction of outside dairy. Sey Babou reminisces, “many years ago we used to take milk from the yaks. Now Nepalis see yak milk and don’t want it.”

¹⁴ *Tsampa* is a Tibetan and Himalayan staple food of barley flour, often mixed with butter tea.

¹⁵ *Losar* is a new year festival celebrated by Tibetan Buddhists

¹⁶ *Dal bhat* is a traditional meal from the Indian subcontinent, popular in many areas of Nepal, Bangladesh and India. It consists of steamed rice and a cooked lentil soup called dal.

¹⁷ *Pujas* are religious ceremonies and prayers performed by Bon and Buddhist practitioners for a range of reasons.

* * * *

At the old entrance to the village of Jharkot are two clay statues of a man and woman that Sey Babou, my host, tells me guard the city. They stand on either side of an archway directly next to the old palace where the king would stay. When I first come to the sleepy town, the sculptures seem like little more than mounds of unmolded clay, facial features nearly unrecognizable. *So these guard the city*, I think to myself, more than a little disappointed. Sey Babou later explains that due to the extreme snowfall of the previous winter, the statues have been almost entirely destroyed.

The room I am staying in in Sey Babou's home is directly opposite the two sculptures, and on the second morning of my stay in Jharkot, I awake to the sound of voices and work outside of my window; there are a group of men rebuilding the sculpture! I watch in fascination as they take clay and create the shape of man and woman, genitalia exaggerated—these sculptures are supposed to ensure fertility.



Villagers repair the sculptures guarding Jharkot village in the early morning.

On the morning of my last day in Jharkot, I glance out my window to see the sculptures finished, painted in a deep red color that makes them seem regal, alive, protecting. I reflect on my luck on witnessing this process of recreation. Knowing that ancient processes of iteration and

reiteration are still in the works seems to reaffirm the creativity and resilience of the people of Lower Mustang.

After breakfast, I meander outside to brush my teeth at the communal water pump, and hear voices near the sculptures. *Is the final step in the process of recreation the man and woman coming alive?*, I think in disbelief. No, but equally interesting, I see monks and laywomen dressed for puja, reciting prayers in front of the sculpture and lighting butter lamps.

To my delight, I hang in the corner, watching an *ani*¹⁸ place small mounds of butter around the sculpture, and on the individuals around her, as tradition and text says she should. As the procession rounds the corner, about to pass me, I whisper to her in broken mother-tongue, “yak mar di,” asking if the butter is made of yak. I had been told time and time again how important it is that yak butter be used in religious events and special times. Before she has answered me, I know it is not. The butter in her bowl is still in the *Amul* wrapper it came in, cow milk from a company selling wholesale dairy to India and Nepal.

The *Ani* looks up at me, most likely surprised to hear a foreign woman speaking the language. She laughs, embarrassed. “Marey,” no, it is not yak butter.

“I FEEL LIKE ACAP DOESN’T CARE ABOUT YAK HERDERS”

During our conversation with Tashi Tsering I notice that Pema and Tashi keep on tugging on their ears whenever the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) came up. Was there a secret code I wasn’t aware of? Did the word ACAP make the inner ear really itch? When I ask Pema about it later that evening, he laughs. “You’re too clever,” he tells me. “The reason we were tugging at our ears is because in order for yak owners to be reimbursed for snow leopard attacks, they have to return the ear tag on the animals.”

“But if an animal is eaten by a snow leopard, how could you possibly get the ear tag?” I ask, amazed.

“Exactly,” Pema replies.

Launched in 1986, ACAP is the largest undertaking of the National Trust for Nature Conservation (NTNC), a non government organization, and was founded for just reasons (“Annapurna Conservation Area Project,” n.d.); With soaring numbers of visitors in the Annapurna area for trekking, immense pressure is exerted on forest resources. Suris Stapa Pojister, an official for the Jomsom ACAP office, clarifies that the organization’s main goals include, “working on resource management and development, as well as ensuring that tourism in the area is sustainable.” On the NTNC website, it states that “the multifaceted problems of ACA have been addressed through an integrated, community based conservation and development approach.” Further, “ACA is the first protected area that has allowed local residents to live

¹⁸ Nun

within the boundaries as well as own their private property and maintain their traditional rights and access to the use of natural resources” (“Annapurna Conservation Area Project,” n.d.).

While ACAP has been notably successful in their conservation efforts and community development efforts, I also talked with a plethora of people who are frustrated by the constant harm conservation efforts have on yak herding. Due to the immense protection effort of wild snow leopards, domesticated yaks face the constant threat of being eaten by wild snow leopards. “ACAP favors protection of the snow leopard over the yaks. I feel like ACAP doesn’t care about yak herders,” Inrasing Serchen, a former yak owner from Naurikot tells us. “Yaks have to be able to wander, so the losses come easily. The snow leopards learn where the herds are. In the past you could protect your yaks from snow leopards by hunting, but now that it’s illegal, we can’t do that anymore.”



Yaks in Khanjim, ear tags on display.

Suris Stapa-Pojister is well aware of the adverse effect snow leopard conservation efforts are having on pastoral herders. “Before you could not find snow leopards, but now you can because of our conservation efforts. The people complain that there are too many leopards now.” In response, ACAP has initiated a compensation system for yaks killed by snow leopard. “We give the owners compensation,” Suris explains. “There are some rules and regulations. If a wild animal attacks a domestic animal, like a yak, we give 20-30% of the total lost cost to the

villagers.” ACAP also provides free fox lights to herders, run by solar energy, to scare away snow leopards and other predators.

Herders were thankful for the lights, although they told us that they only worked for a while until the snow leopards got used to them and continued to attack their yaks. However, most of them felt that ACAP instituted unfair guidelines for compensation. Nima Tsering, one of the herders in Kharka tells me that, “ACAP needs proof like photos of dead yaks, but my phone has no camera so I can’t take pictures of the yaks that died from snow leopard attacks. The owner of my yaks was very upset that I had no proof, and ACAP wouldn’t pay him.” The more outspoken Chempol discloses that, “since the snow leopards have been protected there’s more and more of them, and we can’t even try to protect the yaks by killing the [predators].” When I ask about compensation, Chempol replies, “I gave up trying to take pictures of the yaks because they won’t compensate us anyways. Instead I make stew with the leftover pieces of the yak. The owner of my yaks tells me there’s nothing else we can do.” Further, Chempol explains that “ACAP officials come twice a year just to observe us and see if we are doing anything illegal like hunting Himalayan Blue sheep¹⁹.”

Suris is aware that conservation efforts have put the organization at odds with local people. He admits with a nervous chuckle, “one of the main problems we have is the conflict between humans and our snow leopards conservation efforts. It’s a big problem because we can’t give a big compensation for losses, we only have the budget to give a little amount.” Suris shrugs his shoulders and looks out the window of his office.

“THERE IS NO ONE LEFT”

I am in Jharkot during a particularly interesting time; Apart from getting to witness the rebuilding of the two guardian statues, I also have the opportunity to observe the annual archery festival taking place. Sey Babou, a yak owner/herder states that in the past each and every member of the family would attend the festival and, most men would compete in the archery competition. But now with fewer people living in Jharkot year-round, only one member of each family is required to attend.

As I sit reading a book in the second floor main room of the home, Sey Babou’s eldest son walks by to collect his bow and arrow. “The festival will happen this afternoon,” he asserts. The son, wearing a *chupa*²⁰ top and skinny jeans, glances out the window before heading out. It looks like rain. Later that afternoon, as the sky begins to pour, I hear a crowd gathering in the courtyard directly in front of Sey Babou’s home and I look out the window. Men are clad in traditional dress, and carry their bows jollily. The women wear stripes of turquoise down the parts of their hair, and accompany the men as they sing a traditional song in the now pouring

¹⁹ Himalayan Blue sheep include *bharal* and *naur*

²⁰ A *chupa* is a traditional Tibetan outfit.

rain. I later learn that as part of the ceremony, participants parade around the town on the third day of the festival. I am thankful to get to witness at least part of the festival from the dryness of this little window.

As I put down my book to get a better look, I remember that there is a member of each family in the square now, and the event is suddenly washed with a poignancy it did not carry before. The crowd could not be more than twenty people, it seemed to be *so few* given the size of the village. As if reading my mind, Sey Babou walks in behind me, a somber smile on his face. “This village used to be filled with children, they would play in that square.” He walks closer to the window, and explains, “each home would have eight, nine, even ten people. But the government is too corrupt and now there is no possibility here. All the young people have left to other countries for opportunity. It’s too sad.” I look again out at the crowd, which now seems to be even more woefully small. The pouring rain doesn’t help. I try to imagine what the festival was like in its heyday, with hundreds of people and high stake competitions.

The lack of youth, and outmigration of entire families, is devastating Lower Mustang. The youth I have had the luck of talking with in the area have expressed an insatiable desire to *get out*. If a young person is still in Jomsom, it is because they were a married woman, or had failed to acquire a permit. My co-researcher, Pema, had applied himself to go to school in Australia, but had been denied a visa because of a health concern. The promise of better education, better jobs, better homes, and better clothing is often cited as a reason for leaving the country. There is also a certain level of pride families hold in having family members abroad, a widely accepted success story. Sey Babou complains, “the families who have children abroad act too proud.” Rupika, the 19 year old woman from Tini, told me of her dreams to be a singer; “I want to learn music, but here it is not possible. There are no good music schools to get guitar lessons. I might leave.” When I ask Rupika if there are many youth left, she adamantly shakes her head no. “Here is not so good for studying. Many younger people leave so that they can study. Nowadays everyone goes abroad.” According to recent surveys, “above 53 per cent of the households (in Nepal) have at least one member living either within or outside the country” (Paudel, Tamang, & Shrestha, 2014).

For Sey Babou, youth outmigration is a topic that hits close to home. One evening, I ask him about the New York Yankees cap he wears every day. He explains that his eldest daughter is a babysitter in New York.

“Lots of youth go outside just to earn money. They spend more than fifteen years abroad, and they don’t send money for their parents. They only send a little bit of money for their parent’s funeral. It’s a sad story. In my village there are old people waiting for their sons to come home, but they won’t come home. For the youth, the mindset is that outside there must be a happier life, so they forget about their parents. Many parents die without ever seeing their children again.”

Sey Babou, along with other older village members, comprehend youth outmigration as the unraveling of familial obligations, and an abandoning of community values. An older woman in

Tini with a homestay, told us of her conundrum; “my daughter and sons moved away and are making lots of money, but won’t come back to take care of me, I am missing their love.”

Still, youth outmigration is not just a trend rooted in the frivolous desires and money-hungry mindset of young people. There is simply not enough opportunity in the area. Even Sey Babou admits that, “we don’t have enough jobs here, so people have to move out to pursue jobs.” Pema Chensum, a homestay owner in Tiri tells us, “there is simply no more income sources here.” Pema is passionate about this topic as well, “the people’s behavior has changed from the past to now. Before you could get an income from doing agriculture, but now you can’t, and people want easy money.” Pema has nine siblings, and she tells us, eyes wide, that “of the twenty-four members of my (extended) family, twenty have gone out of the country. Only four have remained. I imagine eventually there will be no more locals in Tini, and instead people from lower down will buy all of the houses here.” Indeed, it felt as if there were more “outsiders” than locals in many villages, as in-migration of day laborers and migrant workers increases. Tashi Tsering, a yak owner in Jharakot cites political corruption as one of the main reasons for outmigration; “The political situation here is fragile, youth don’t want to return.”

Even if families are still living in Upper Mustang, most send their children to school in Pokhara and Kathmandu. Shyam Lalchen, the former yak owner from Marpha tells, “nowadays, all of the children go to school. If the children are bigger they go to school in a city. There is not much youth here anymore.”

It’s not just youth that are moving out of Lower Mustang in large numbers, entire families are choosing to uproot and shift to Pokhara or Kathmandu. From more remote areas, such as Upper Mustang, or Dolpa, people are also moving, to Jomsom, and even further south. More than seven yak owning families, all from Dolpa, sold their yaks and moved to Jomsom in the past twenty five years. Aampread Thakali, the animal technician in Jomsom, said that he had moved his entire family from Tini to Pokhara. He was only back in Jomsom temporarily for work. “The reason is simple,” he explained. “Here in Jomsom, the weather is tough, but in Pokhara, the weather is good. Doing field work is hard. It’s been more than thirty years since I moved my family from Tini to Pokhara.”

The decrease in population in places like Jharkot also means a decrease in the historical, and necessary, labor pool for agriculture and livestock. Shucti Shesem, a former yak owner from Naurikot, whose own son is in India studying to be a monk, reveals that “the decrease of youth in the village has been a loss to everyone and everything. To do agriculture, to do business, to do herding, it’s all so much harder now.” One domain that has suffered as a result of youth outmigration, is, of course, yak herding and ownership. “Now youth don’t like doing the business of yaks,” Shucti continues. “Youth don’t want to be herders or owners because they want good jobs and to leave the village.” Tashi Tsering, a yak owner in Jharkot, adds, “in the future if the youth rear yaks, I am sure livestock will be a business but not a passion.”

Lax Gurung, the homestay owner from Kagbeni, spent four years herself getting a degree in tourism from a university in New Zealand, and she is concerned for the future. “We worry most about youth going abroad because in the future no one will take care of the buildings, and

our culture will disappear. Everyone is going. Natural resources will disappear, everything will disappear.” Lax leans forward in her chair, gripping her mug, she looks at me squarely. “We have a fear of losing our identity.”

Sey Babou’s youngest son applied to go to school in Australia, but his visa was denied. He now runs the family bakery. Sey Babou’s eldest son, the one who participated in the archery festival with the skinny jeans and *chupa*, wants to go to Canada. Sey Babou doesn’t want him to. When, on our way back from feeding his yaks, I ask him who will take over managing his yaks, he doesn’t answer.

CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS OF YAK HERDERS

Sey Babou dances down the mountain as Pema and I try to keep up. We had spent the afternoon feeding his yaks *tsampa*. I waded in the moments of that afternoon in my mind, determined to remember the way the yaks came running to Sey Babou as he approached them.

I had seen no herder form such an intimate relationship with their yaks.



Sey Babou feeds his yaks tsampa as a treat.

As we weave down the mountain, I try to mimic Sey Babou's choreography. His footwork seems so natural, the way he moves from one solid ground to the next, runs to an overlook, uses his binoculars to glance back at his yaks, points out a baby. It is quiet save for the wind. I am cold, but my core is warm from the walking. Soon we fall into a rhythm; step, step, step, stop. Glance, continue. Weave left, weave right. Step, step, step...

By the time we are back on flat ground I am deep within the dance, time is slipping. I smell smoke. The steps begin to slow, and I look up. At the foot of the hill are two women dressed in clothing typical of the valley regions of Nepal. They sit on cardboard in front of a small fire of twigs, knitting and laughing. They are friends with Sey Babou, as most people are, and invite him over to join them in their warming up. We squat in front of the fire, and I embrace this change of pace, the finale of our dance. I glance up and notice horses to the left, grazing slowly in the dying afternoon. Sey Babou clarifies that the two women have moved to Jharkot from the Rukum District of Central Western Nepal, and are horse herders. "There are many problems downside, so these women have come here for work." I nod, and move my fingers closer to the fire, intrigued by the situation. Sey Babou tell the women a long story in Nepali and they laugh, they respond loudly, shaking their knitting sticks in the air. "I'm telling them about a herder that I hired from Rukum who was very good," Sey Babou explains after I stare at him for too long, trying to grasp a part of the conversation. "It's too hard to find herders nowadays, so I paid him a good amount, better than the other herders. His name was Madang, they know him. One day, he told me that he had saved up enough to buy a home back in Rukum and quit! I was left with no one to watch my yaks, and haven't found anyone since. It makes me depressed just to think about." Despite the sour ending of the story, Sey Babou smiled in amusement.

That evening, I ask him to tell me more about the herders who had come from lower down. Sey Babou places his elbows on his knees, leaning forward to explain,

"In the past herders would come from higher up places, like Dolpa or Upper Mustang. They are the best herders, they really know what they are doing. But now, all of the people from higher up have sold their yaks or moved down lower places or abroad. It is easier for them to get visas to foreign countries because they speak Tibetan and are wealthier from selling their yaks. Or if they haven't sold their yaks, they do *yarsagumba*²¹ harvesting, which makes more money. It's too hard to find herders from there."

I am surprised at first to learn this, having spent my first week in Kharka with yak herders exclusively from Upper Mustang, Dolpa, and Tibet. But as I continue my research, I learn that this experience was an exception to the new norm, and that of all domesticated ruminants, yaks were the most likely to be cared for by people from upper areas. According to research conducted by Dr. Bhim Raj Suwul, net outmigration of Hill districts in Nepal in 2014, such as

²¹ *Yarsagumba* is a unique caterpillar fungus scientifically known as *Ophiocordyceps Sinensis* that is rampant in the Himalayas. Locally in Nepal, harvesters get the equivalent of about \$18 per gram due to increasing popularity in the medicinal qualities of the fungus. Harvesting has single handedly transformed local economies.

Rukum, is 44%, a dauntingly high number (2014). Recent research has covered this unprecedented shift, citing “Multiple drivers of changes, including social, economic, cultural and ecological, as well as agricultural technologies, are playing a vital role in land abandonment (in hilly areas)” (Paudel et al., 2014).

The more herders I meet, the more the shift in demographic becomes evident. Sey Babou continues, explaining that “there are more people from lower down in Jharkot now because they are too poor and don’t have any job opportunities where they are from, so they come to Mustang to do work. In the past the animals used to understand our mother-tongue language, but now they only understand Nepali. The new herders don’t sing them songs.”

To speak with migrant workers and to learn the story of their journey in their own words, Pema and I head to Susmita Kartimogar and Dilkiman’s home for tea the next day, after the horses have been returned to their respective homes from the grazing fields,. Compared to the homes of even the poor locals, the two herders’ space is bare and cold. There is no furniture or light, only a small fire in the corner, where dinner is cooking. A blanket is tied to the ceiling, and on the ground behind it sleeps a man under a heap of blankets. The two women look different in this context, no longer the cheerful sisters I had seen knitting at the foot of the hill. One woman nurses a baby on her lap. The two insist that I sit on the one stool they have, while they squat, a somber look on both of their faces. “We’re sisters, and we’ve been here for one year. We are only here for work,” Susmita explains. “We heard rumors in Rukum that in Mustang there is possibilities to get more money.” I ask if they plan on staying, and immediately, Susmita says no. “We want to go back home, we have family there. We send our salary home to our mom and dad, and just use a little here,” Susmita explains, pointing to their bare home as if to explain their living situation. “The climate is tough here, and we have to carry our babies on our back while we work. The locals taught us how to herd the domesticated animals.” Susmita clarifies that they only herd smaller domesticated animals: “Mostly the men become yak herders if they are brave enough because it is more dangerous than other types of herding.” On being asked if they feel accepted by the community, Dilkiman shifts her position. “We feel uncomfortable here because even though we’ve been here for a while we still don’t know the language so it’s hard.”

Ramesh Shrestha is a goat herder in Tiri in an equally dismal looking dwelling. Ramesh stays in one of the classrooms of an abandoned school in Tiri, where smoke fills the air as he cooks dinner. The owner of the goats Ramesh herds sits in the room while we talk, most definitely adding a level of bias to the conversation. Ramesh is from Kanchanpur in Western Nepal, and decided to become a herder after hearing about the position while working as a cook in Pokhara. “I watch 250 goats and am proud to be a herder,” he says, laughing. “I am the oldest son in my family, and whenever I get money I send it to my parents.” On being asked about whether Ramesh gets along with the rest of the village, he glances across the room at his employer, and then responds, “I am treated great here. I feel like I am part of the family.”

The sister of the owner of Ramesh’s goats is my homestay host in Tiri. Pema loves to talk. Our conversation shifts from food to fashion, from change to stability. She paces the room as we chat, cleaning and cooking, pausing her work every so often to break into soliloquy. She is

honest, sometimes brutally so. I know I can ask her the hard questions. When I question about the influx of lowland migrants, Pema stops her work to respond; “In this village there are thirteen families left, and more than half of them are from lower down. I think in the future the whole town will be shifted.” When I push further about the level of acceptance of the new community members, Pema stops work again and sits across from me at the table, she wants to gossip. “There is a village rule for people from lower down to not attend the rituals of the local people. If a person from lower down marries a local person they won’t be treated the same. The marriage ceremony calls for the family members to come to eat food in the community hall, but we won’t let them stay for the full ceremony.” Pema gets up and begins to prepare supplies for Ramesh, who will be leaving for a month to the summer pastures with the family goats.

When Ramesh arrives a half an hour later, he is belligerently drunk. Pema rolls her eyes, turns to Pema and I, and exasperatedly exclaims, “he prayed to a local lama saying he would stop drinking, but he still hasn’t.” At first, I am confused, Ramesh is a hindu name referring to an epithet of the god Vishnu. “Yes,” Pema (my co-researcher, not homestay host) confirms, “but he is a part of the community now, I guess.” The lines between local and outsider are fuzzy in the changing landscape of Lower Mustang, it seems.

As Pema (co-researcher) and I pack our bags and get ready to leave Pema’s homestay, I glance back in the main room. Pema (host) is placing a *katak*²² around Ramesh’s neck.

FAREWELL TO YAK

“When a yak dies of a natural cause and was very special, we save their head by putting it in salts. We write ‘om mani peme ho’ on the head and hang it in an important place.”²³

“Rearing yaks is a fragile enterprise. Anything can happen” Bhupen Serchen tells me when I ask about the future of yak herding. It’s been a rough year for everyone in the world of yaks.

When I first proposed the topic of yak herding, I expected to talk to a lot people who engaged with yaks regularly. What I didn’t expect, and what ended up being even more important to my understanding to change in the Himalayas, was talking with people who *used* to belong to the world of yaks. For every yak owner in Lower Mustang, there are two *former* yak owners. The two main reasons people cited for selling their yaks were to make up for losses after too many deaths from a rough winter, or because they were unable to find a reliable herder. The reasons for deciding to sell ranged in reason and severity, but the sentiment I am told remains the same: People didn’t want to sell their yaks, they felt they had to.

²² A *katak* is a silk prayer scarf, given for safe travels, well wishes, honor, and good luck by Tibetan Buddhist and Bon people.

²³ Sey Babou, yak owner and herder, Jharkot



A special dried yak head hangs on the stupa in Jharkot, om mani peme ho written across its horns.

“I feel lost having sold my yaks, but I am not sure why,” Cheulteul, an ex nomadic herder and yak owner from Dolpa confides in me. Along with six other families from her hometown, she uprooted, sold her yaks, and moved to Jomsom five years ago.

“I used to have eighty yaks. But where we used to live there was no school, so we decided all at once to sell our yaks and with the money earned move to Jomsom. Two or three families from my village in Dolpa had come to Jomsom before, and we had heard that there was better education here. My entire family has owned yaks for generations and generations back. I have two sons and four daughters; Two of my daughters go to school in Lubrak, but all the rest go to school in Kathmandu. Compared to Dolpa, it is much better here, we can stay in one place. Of course I miss my yaks, I remember my lovely yak babies sometimes and miss them so much.”

Nima Mentok, another former yak owner from Dolpa, tells that his family came to Jomsom “twenty years ago, that’s when the migration here started. At the time the Maoists were in Dolpa, but not in Mustang, and I felt afraid for the future of my children, so I decided to bring my family here.” Nima’s granddaughter, only two years old, smiles at me from across the table. I

draw her a smiley face from my notebook before asking who Nima sold his yaks to. “We didn’t,” he tells me, much to my surprise, “we set them free. It’s called *Chetar* in Tibetan. The purpose of doing Chetar is to make your life longer. If one man sets an animal free then they will have good Karma and be reborn in a better state.” Nima takes his granddaughter into another room for a nap. Upon return, Nima adds, “no one came with us from Dolpa when we left, but in the past five years lots of people from Dolpa have sold their yaks and moved. We felt pride in having yaks.”



Chempol, Nima Tsering, and Chempol pose with some of their favorite yaks after we gift them with katkas.

Pempa Gurung, another former yak herder from Dolpa seconds Nima’s assertion; “Overall, there must be no more than 150 yaks in Dolpa, but there used to be over 450 in the village.” Pempa tells us that the main reason he decided to move from Dolpa to Jomsom was because of poverty. He is illiterate, and wanted to create a better future for his daughters by moving here. Despite this, Pempa tells us that “compared to my present job tending to the fields, I prefer my past occupation as a yak herder. From the yaks you can have everything you need, and sell yak products for things you can’t immediately get. I can’t do that now.”

One of the main reason that natives of Lower Mustang decided to sell their yaks was to counteract the imputed losses of a bad winter. Inrasing Serchen, a former yak owner from Naurikot tells me that “whenever the snow falls more the yaks go up higher. It’s hard to save them. I decided to sell my yaks to cover the losses from a bad winter a few years ago.” Inrasing also confides that a hard blow of snow leopard attacks contributed to the difficulties leading to his decision to sell his yaks. Many of the current yak owners I spoke with feel that they will have to wait to see how many babies are born this spring before deciding what to do next. Any more extreme weather, and the carefully balanced seesaw of loss and profit that makes up livestock rearing could tip in the wrong direction.

Another major reason for individual’s decision to sell was because of the difficulties involved in finding a herder. Sucti Seshe, a former yak owner from Naurikot, laments “It’s hard to save baby yaks because there are no herders. I had to sell my yaks in order to survive. I searched for herders, but no one wants to. Some put their sons as herders before marriage, but not anymore.” Sucti was especially upset because one of his former yaks was eaten the day before at the yak blood drinking festival just down the road. “I miss having the yaks. Today one of my yaks was killed, it’s hard.” Shyam Lalchen, the former yak owner from Marpha sold all of his yaks three years ago. “Before you could make a good profit from yak rearing, but nowadays it doesn’t pay as well.” He continued, “after my herder quit, I spent seven months searching for a new herder before I decided to sell. Herders don’t want to stay. I was sad to sell, but I had no choice. Maybe one day there will be no yaks at all.”

WHY WE PRAISE THE YAK

As told by Ramesh Kumur Bartachen²⁴

“Many, many years ago the yak came down from Tibet to this area. When the yak came from Tibet, it stayed in a forest where our ancestors used to hunt.

One day, my ancestors went to hunt in the forest and were very surprised to see such a big animal. They had no idea what it was!

They tried to kill the yak with their swords and spears, but they weren’t able to. After, they came back to Marpha they shouted about the big animal they had seen. They were angry they weren’t able to kill the yak, and everyone agreed that the next day it had to be killed.

The following morning, everyone carried weapons, swords, and rocks, anything they could hold, but they still could not kill the yak. Suddenly, there was some trouble; the weather changed and everyone decided it would be best if they went back to the village.

The next day, the villagers dug a big hole to trap the yak in. Most animals could be killed if you dug a big enough hole. When the yak came, it fell into the hole and the villagers rejoiced. However, only moments later, it came out.

That night, one of the villagers had a conversation with God²⁵ in his dream. The God said to the villager that from then on they would take the form of the yak.

Now, for us, the yak symbolizes good weather and crops.

The reason we praise the yak is because it could not be defeated, it is resilient.”

²⁴ Ramesh is originally from Marpha, where the Bartachen tribe of the Thakali people originated. The Bartachen people’s main deity is the yak. He now owns a very successful bakery in Jomsom.

²⁵ While there is no one singular “God” in the Thakali religion, this is the exact wording Ramesh used.

Future

“When we kill a yak, we always do puja, because we are sorry to this animal. We say lots of prayers and light butter lamps. We say, we killed this yak, so it should be reborn as a human in its next life.”

- GESHE SONAM

CORRUPTION AND MISTRUST

The Nepal government knows the situation is looking bleak in its Himalayan regions. With a development project geared towards boosting agricultural production and small business initiatives rolled out seven years ago called the HIMALI (Himalayan) Project underway, it is clear that officials understand that climate change and outmigration are having adverse, and possible permanently detrimental effects on the livelihoods of people in the region it is most famous for, and are at least trying to make changes.

But is it too little, too late?

Most recipients had a strong mistrust, and distaste, for the Nepal National Government. Years of upheaval and neglect has led to a do-it-yourself culture that expects little good from the government and total inter-communal reliance. In fact, people spoke more of the ways in which the Nepali government made their life difficult rather than better. “In Nepal you have to spend N.Rs 100 to get N.Rs 10,” Tashi Tsering laments to me. “It’s too hard to get compensation for anything. The local government is slow. The government has come two or three times to sell livestock insurance to the locals, but they won’t give you any money. They try to find holes in anything.” Dolka Pom relayed similar information: “In Nepal there is so much favoritism and Nepotism that anything promised is impossible to get.”

Sey Babou goes a step further, explaining that “many years ago I had 150 sheep. 100 died during a particularly bad winter, and I was left with only 50. I applied for compensation through the Nepal government and instead received lots of trouble. They made me provide lots of documents. Later that year I went to Changtang, Tibet and spoke with a friend who had had 60 sheep die. The Chinese government had bought him 120 new sheep as a gift! The government there is very good.” While there is no way to verify Sey Babou’s story, the sentiment that the Nepali government is doing more harm than good is felt.

With so much distrust in the government, it is hard for local officials to enforce laws and taxes. Yam Nath Polchard, a Divisional Forest Officer confides that, “legally, locals have to pay the government to get a grazing permit. For goat and sheep the permit is cheap to purchase, but for yaks it is more expensive. But practically, no one purchases the permit.” When I ask why, Yam sheepishly admits, “people are not so willing to pay for permits. In other parts of Nepal the rules are strictly enforced, but here, people have been grazing for a long time, they don’t want to start paying now.” The discontinuity between the lived reality of locals, and the policies of the National government create canyons of mistrust that are hard to cross.



The breathtaking, but fragile, landscape of Lower Mustang.

One of the most telling, and hard hitting, examples of this situation is through the expressed dissatisfaction locals have for the government initiated Himalayan Project. Unprovoked, faces would redden as they bewailed the corruption of the project, or the ways in which promises were not kept. Perhaps the reason why the Himalayan Project hit so hard for the people of Lower Mustang, is because it at first inspired hope, which was later abused.

The Himalayan Project seeks “to reduce poverty in highland areas, by improving income, employment opportunities and the nutritional status of poor farm families and women in particular; and by increasing the productivity of the livestock subsector.” (“HIMALI Project,”

n.d.). The project is a joint effort by the Nepal Government and Asian Development Bank (ADB), and provides grants to approved applicants in 10 project districts. According to Aampread Thakali, an Animal Health Technician in Jomsom, and a manager of the local chapter of the Himalayan project, loans are given within the fields of livestock, agriculture, and industry. For approved applicants, the Nepal Government supplies 15% of a grant, while the ADB provides 66%, and the accepted individual is expected to provide 19%. Interested individuals in approved regions submit a proposal, which is sent to the main offices in Kathmandu where decisions are made. The main job at the district level is to simply collect the forms of interested people and give it to the main office.

Aampread speaks candidly, “we have gotten very bad feedback from local people. They say only the already rich and powerful people are getting the funding.” Tashi Tsering, a yak owner in Jharakot told me angrily of his frustrations with the Himalayan Project: “I am completely disappointed with the Himalayan project. They don’t give anything to poor people who work hard, they only give to the richest people.” Tashi was angry now, ranting, his hands waving, “I am so annoyed with the political system of favoritism ruining everything. It’s making the youth leave, there’s only five or six youth left in this town. In a few years I will die and there will not be enough time to teach the youth about culture. To be honest, I have a lot of anxiety about the future.”

That is not to say that there are not successes as a result of the Himalayan Project. On my last afternoon in Mustang, Pema and I decided to venture to a Himalayan Project sponsored cheese factory in Syang, a town not too far from Jomsom. By the time we arrive, the factory is closed, but two women who live across the street, Mina and Muna Thakali, invite us in for tea. We learn that they are the older and younger sisters of the owner of the factory. “It’s been very successful,” Mina tells us excitedly, “everyone in the area gets their cheese from here.” Muna chimes in, “my brother doesn’t even have enough to keep in the refrigerator it sells so fast.” Muna explains that cows are not local cows, however, as they are “too smelly and the cheese is too smelly.” I look at Pema, who I know loves the milk of his family’s native cow. Even when a project is designed to support locality, it somehow seems to benefit those lower down. When I ask the sisters what their view of the Himalayan Project is, Mina replies, “we have a positive view of the Himalayan project because our *dahi*²⁶ is enjoying a lot of success as a result of the cheese factory.”

Still confused as to how exactly decisions are made by the organization, I consult with Aampread Thakali one more time on my last day in Jomsom. He explains that, “just to submit the application form for the project costs N.Rs 40,000 (\$400).” I don’t believe him. I make him write the number again and again in my notebook. I check the calculator on my phone to make sure my conversion is correct. “Four hundred dollars?” I ask again, sure I must’ve heard incorrectly. “We were unlucky. There was only one proposal writer from Kathmandu who came to collect the forms,” he justifies. “If there was another person with him it would’ve been less, but on the basis of bargaining between the collector and interested person it could be a little less.

²⁶ *Dahi* means big brother in Nepali

The Himalayan Project chooses two local people to get trained in Pokhara for writing proposals, but both had work they couldn't miss when the official from Kathmandu came." Suddenly, I understand. In the spirit of total extortion, a Kathmandu official was pocketing money from interested applicants in Mustang. *Of course* the project favors the wealthy, as only so many in Mustang could give up N.Rs 40,000 just for an application fee. For some, that amount is more than their yearly income. I ask why people still apply if the application fee is so high. Aampread replies, frankly, "people still apply because even though it's expensive, it's an opportunity, they could potentially receive a lot of money." Of the one hundred people who have applied from Mustang in the past five years the project has been in place, only twenty-nine have been approved²⁷. As I shake my head in disbelief, Aampread smiles, "this is how our country works."

TRADITION AND MONETIZATION

"Taking blood from yaks is a little miserable, but it's part of our culture."²⁸

"I don't believe anyone should take blood from yaks because as a Buddhist, that is against our beliefs, that is for the Thakali."²⁹

"In Thakali, it depends if you are more Buddhist or Hindu whether you drink yak blood or not. It depends on your personal preference."³⁰

"If a yak doesn't have a disease it's good to drink their blood, but if a yak does have a disease it will be transferred from drinking it."³¹

"Yak blood can recover *any* illness!"³²

"Last year I didn't get to drink yak blood so my skin started itching."³³

"People who drink the blood of the yak are no less than the devil!"³⁴

²⁷ This is according to the internal figures Aampread Thakali has collected.

²⁸ Bhupen Serchen, yak owner, Jomsom

²⁹ Sey Babou, yak owner, Jomsom

³⁰ Nara Sangmo, hotel owner, Naurikot

³¹ Tenzin Rigdol, *amchi*, Jharkot

³² Somba Hardord Bisu Karma, festival participant, Rupon Dehi District

³³ Ashad Pun, festival participant, unknown origin

³⁴ Tsampa Dukda, *amchi*, Tiri

Khung Khanay Chard, literally “blood sucking festival” in English, is coming up in Naurikot and everyone in Lower Mustang has something to say about whether or not drinking yak blood does you any good, or makes you “the devil.” A handful of times per year, throughout villages in Lower Mustang, hundreds of people gather for 6-9 days to drink a cup of yak blood every morning in hopes of improving their overall health or curing a chronic condition.

When Pema and I arrive at the campgrounds for the first day of festivities, we are surprised to find a fully functioning mini village, with hundreds of people already gathered. Everyone from the very elderly to newborn children are in attendance. Most wear traditional clothing of more Southern areas of Nepal, and are busy in preparation for the coming week. Orange arched tents, housing around two to three families each, horizontally divide a clearing near the river. Festival goers walk around, gathering firewood, or preparing meals. The mood is pleasant and contagious, it is clear people are excited to be here. In the center of the two rows of tents, three young men begin setting up an archery target.

While most can’t pinpoint the exact start of the tradition, nearly all agree it is from “long, long, ago, from our ancestors,” as Norbat Bahadour Gauchen puts it, one of the festival organizers. Some even argue that bloodletting originated as a way to maintain yak health. Shukti Shesem, a former yak owner from Naurikot explains to me that “in the past there used to be a tradition of getting rid of the extra blood in yaks in Tibet, but people realized that instead of getting rid of the extra blood they must use it for medicine.” Even Geshe Sonam, the voice of wisdom and impartiality, thinks that “There is too much blood in the yak, not a healthy amount. Taking yak blood keeps the yak healthy and also benefits human beings.”

Per contra, Participants’ reasons for coming to the festival are relatively consistent. Most are looking to cure chronic health issues, or maintain their health for the future. Somba Hardord Bisu Karma, a festival participant from Rupon Dehi District, tells me proudly that he has attended the festival for four consecutive years. “Taking blood helps my body to carry heavy things,” he explains. “It also helps with achy parts all over my body. I used to have gastric problems, but they went away once I started drinking yak blood.” When I ask why yak blood, of all treatments, Somba, a short, but loud, man begins to become excited. He points his finger and exclaims, “I was *tired* of taking the medicine from the hospital doctor so I quit and came here. A friend from Magdi told me about the festival and I’ve come ever since.” Somba points to a nearby tent, “my whole family is here!”

Ashad Pun and Adisera Pun are eighty-four and eighty-six, respectively. Ashad complains to me, unannounced, “the yaks are thinner this year so their blood is not as tasty.” When I ask the elderly couple, who sit together in their tent, smiling, the reason for attending the festival, Ashad explains, “my wife has stomach issues and my body gets really itchy. Hospital medicine didn’t work for either of us, but drinking blood does. The festival is very fun!”

Some, like Gonya Bardor Shepali, a local of Beni and a man who opens our conversation by proclaiming “I have three wives”, and is convinced that “if you drink the yak blood you’ll never have to see a doctor.” When I ask why, Gonya explains that, “the yak itself is like an amchi, collecting herbs-” before Gonya can continue, one of his wives interrupts to scold Gonya;

“don’t go around telling everyone you have three wives!” She smiles at us, and then walks away. “Anyways,” Gonya continues, “lots of question me as to why I drink yak blood, but they don’t know what herbs to eat, the yak does.” Gonya makes a harumph sound, content with his own hypothesizing.



Female participant brings her freshly filled cup of yak blood away from yak, back right, she has just acquired the proclaimed health potion from.

While searching for a more scientific, or perhaps medicine-based reasoning, for the value of yak blood, I talk with Tenzin Rigdol, an acclaimed *amchi* based in Jharkot. “From the yak blood hemoglobin in the heart of the yak there is a protein which is essentially herbal,” Tenzin explains. “The people who suffer from heart disease or lung problems need herbal medicine from yaks,” Tenzin continues, pausing to make sure I understand. “Compared to other animals, the yak is very pure, it eats only pure grasses and herbs high up in the mountains. There is power in the yak heart that helps people with heart diseases.”

Not all, however, have such positive experiences drinking yak blood at the festival. Nara Sangmo, our host in Naurikot, cringes when we ask about her own experience with drinking yak blood. “I don’t remember exactly when I had the blood, but I got very bad diarrhea. I was thin

and everyone told me I would be better if I had some.” During one of our interviews, we are interrupted by a young woman asking if we had medicine for headaches. She had drunk blood that morning, and now had a headache that wouldn’t go away.

As the morning progresses, preparations begin for the start of the drinking, which are far more complex, and well organized, than I could’ve initially imagined. Participants form groups of ten, with one individual agreeing to be the group leader. The group leader collects N.Rs 250 from each participant in their group, and presents the money to an organizer who stands towards the front of the tent area. Having received the money, the organizer hands the group leader ten cups, which are then distributed to the rest of the group. For the rest of the morning, groups quickly line up single file when they are called forward, cups clutched in their hands, their ticket for health.

Norbat Bahadou Gauchen, one of the organizers, and a brother of two yak owners, explains that there are thirteen members total who make up the Yak Herding Association who run the Naurikot *Khung Khanay Chard*. Each day, one member has to bring down their yaks for blood, and kill one yak for meat. “Everything, all supplies and tents are bought by the association. The tents are rented to the participants. Even water and electricity is paid for by the association.” Norbat predicts that 300 people will buy blood today alone, and that most owners make between N.Rs 40,000 to N.Rs 50,000 (USD \$400 - \$500) from one day of selling yak blood. He thinks today’s owner will make double that amount.

The groups have lined up with their cups. There is nervous energy pulsing through the air, the first yaks are about to be brought forward. Yaks are selected one at a time from their grazing area beside the camp, chosen for size and strength. As the yak is pushed and pulled forward by organizers, participants quickly line up, their cups out and ready. Two organizers quickly tie together the yaks legs, temporarily immobilizing them. Hair is pulled from an area on their neck, and quickly an organizer uses a blade to make a small incision at a vein point. Blood comes out in a stream, like a faucet. The yaks sometimes begins to tumble at this point, and are pushed back up by the organizers. It is frankly, hard to watch.

Participants quickly bring their cup forward to the incision in the yak’s neck and fill up. They run forward, out of the way, and drink as quickly as they can the red liquid, sometimes holding their nose to mask the taste. Some even begin dancing, convinced that movement allows digestion of the blood to occur at a faster pace. Throughout the morning, the periphery of the camp is dotted with participants dancing and running in hopes of allowing blood to travel through their body at a faster pace.

But the festival didn’t always use to be this way; “This used to just be a ritual,” Shucti Seshem explains, “but I turned it into a business. The villagers used to take the blood of the yak for free, but now we use the excessive blood as a way to make money.” Shucti was obviously proud of his entrepreneurship, he had gone out of his way to let us know that he had monetized the operation. Norbat admitted that there was a hefty bounty for owners who decided to have their yaks partake in the festivities. “The festival is a big part of the local economy,” he explains, “in the past the festival used to take place in the Daulagiri base camp, but we moved to this spot

fifteen years ago. The main reason was because it is easier for consumers to get to, and they can take pictures with the yaks then.”



Female participant proudly presents her emptied cup of blood, her teeth still red, unsuspecting grazing yaks in the background.

But not everyone is happy about the monetization of tradition; Yungdung Gurung, one of the herders based near Jomsom, looked uncomfortable when we ask him about the yak blood festival, “I don’t allow for the taking of blood for all of the yaks, I tell the owner of my yaks to only take the biggest and bravest ones. For the owner, its obvious that it’s good to bring yaks to the festival because the owner makes money off of it.” Even Shucti Seshem, who claims to be the individual who monetized the entire operation, seems to show some remorse for his actions later in the evening when I speak to him again at a *puja*.

More generally, people in Lower Mustang are disheartened, but simultaneously beholden to the growing role of capitalism in their daily lives. Tsampa Dukda, the *amchi* of Tiri, asserts to us that, “compared to the past, there are a lot more facilities here, but the feeling of humanity is less.” This is something that the *amchi* seems particularly disillusioned by. As he cuts roots which he will dry and store for use in herbal medications, he discloses that “Tiri has gone from heaven to hell. In the past, poorer people would go to richer people to get extra seeds in their

fields, but now, if a poorer person goes to a richer person and asks for extra seeds, the richer person will demand money, and even tack on interest.” Tsampa stops cutting the roots for a moment and looks up, “compared to the past, people are richer, but they are not as kind,”

Pema Chensum, the talkative homestay owner in Tiri had similar sentiments to share; “Now money is bigger than anything. Money is not God, but here, it is no less than God.” As with before, Pema is hurriedly rushing around her house as she talks with me. While pouring tea, she complains, “now even in the village people don’t depend on agriculture because they know they won’t make as much money on agriculture as they will doing business.” Geshe Sonam reveals, angrily, that “nowadays people value wealth more than culture and language. They don’t care for their traditions.”

As I stand in the foothills of Naurikot, a man jumping up and down next to me in an effort to digest the drink, blood stains still rimming his mouth, I can’t help but wonder who this festival is really benefitting, and what it is really celebrating. Is more harm or good caused by drinking the blood of animals that have nearly starved to death this past winter? What happens when a tradition shifts to an enterprise? And what exactly, would be the future of the yak and the herder within the context of a shifting cultural value structure and landscape?

CONCLUSION

"We post-industrialists are now seeing the need to restructure our society to recapture the wisdom that pastoralists have always had," writes the author and veterinarian David M. Sherman. "If left to their own devices," Sherman writes, "traditional pastoralists can live harmoniously within their environment and the resources they've learned to understand and respect over millennia" (2019). During my time in Lower Mustang, it became clear to me that there is a wisdom involved in yak herding, an innate understanding of land and our relationship to it that emerges when one cares for an animal on the move.

This valuable way of living, this blueprint, is under threat.

My findings indicate that yak herding in Lower Mustang has been in a steady decline for several years now, due to a host of issues, the most pressing being: climate change, outmigration, abrasive national policy, blind conservation efforts, capitalistic pursuits, and a growing indifference to cultural tradition. Many, however, have ingeniously altered the art of herding to fit to our changing world; From creative herding techniques, to a call for youth involvement, and even the monetization of a tradition, people in Lower Mustang have proven their resilience. But they too, worry for the future of the yak. Will these efforts be enough? Will the yak, renown for its ability to live where the air is thin, where the resources are few, live on?

Towards the end of this project, I learned from the book *Goat Song*, by Brad Kessler, that the word ‘tragedy’ has its roots in a Greek word meaning ‘goat-song’ (2009). The original tragedies were at Athens’ annual festival to the god Dionysus, where some believe goats were sacrificed. The Greek word *tragoida*, can be divided into *trag*, meaning “billy-goat,” and *oida*,

meaning “song.” While goats may lack the grandeur of the yak, they share a common pastoral past, bridged by time and place.

I did not intend for this piece to be a tragedy. But one cannot help but be disheartened by the plight of the herder, the bridge of a song.

I did not intend for this piece to be a tragedy, but it is our collective disremembrance of our once harmonious existence with the landscape, our quiet suppression of a culture, of a way of living, that surprises one with its melancholy.

I did not intend for this piece to be a tragedy, but perhaps that’s what it is, a yak song.

Appendix



Author pictured, enjoying the company of some yaks.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Lower Mustang is an incredibly rich location to conduct research, especially pertaining to changes in agriculture, consumption, culture, and migration. As an area in between remoteness and connectivity, its inhabitants straddle many identities. One of the most striking changes is the influx of migrants from Southern Nepal into towns where the native population is disappearing due to outmigration. While my paper touches on this, I think there is much to be found of the changing cultural landscape of villages in which the balance of “insiders” and “outsiders” is rapidly shifting. Similarly, looking into how traditions and festivals are maintained, and shifted, in the face of outmigration would prove incredibly interesting. Another topic that was briefly mentioned in my project, and deserves more attention, is the changing boundaries of where apple

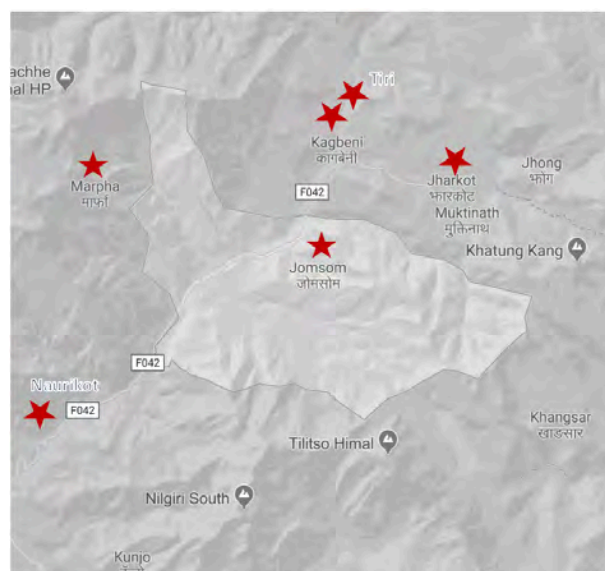
farming is feasible; looking into this phenomenon would act as a terrific way towards understanding how climate change, and market shifts, are influencing livelihoods in Lower Mustang. On that note, a case study of some of the villages most affected by extreme weather shifts, such as Pangling, where a drought nearly wiped out the entire population, would be extremely fruitful. A more in-depth investigation of ACAP's relationship with locals, and how conservation efforts often wreak havoc on the lives of people who have lived in harmony with the landscape for hundreds of years, is needed as well. Finally, the village of Jharkot holds a special place in my heart, and would be an incredible location to spend some time to begin to understand the complexities of community inter-reliance, tradition, tourism (it's very close to Muktinath, the pilgrimage site), and climate change, plus Sey Babou's son, who runs the "German" bakery in town, makes a mean apple pie.

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METHODOLOGY

The work behind this project primarily consists of formal interview, casual conversation, and participant observation. All three elements of data acquisition were equally important in their ability to counterbalance and verify each other. I primarily interviewed yak owners and herders, but also a wide breadth of other community members, including, but not limited to, *amchis*, government officials, hotel owners, and elders. I prepared questions for interviews, but generally let conversations lead in their natural direction, which proved most fruitful. When I could, I joined in on yak herding activities. I divided my time between the mountainous habitations of herders, and the valley, where all else lived, over the course of the twenty days I spent in Lower Mustang.

MAPS



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