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The Relationship Between Humans and Nature in The Himalayas: A Collection of Poems

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South Asia, Nepal, Annapurna Rural Municipality, Sikles Village

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SIT Study Abroad

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Introduction

Throughout this research period I lived in the Gurung Village of Sikles in the Lower Annapurna Region of the Himalayan Mountain Range. Here, I grew in my understanding and learnings behind the village people's relationship with nature, what shapes it, how it is changing, and general attitudes towards it. The Gurung community is traditionally of the Bon religion, but with the impacts of our ever-connecting world, many have also incorporated Buddhism and Hinduism into their beliefs and practices as well. Therefore, many of their traditions include pockets of animism and traditional worship of nature, but many villagers have slowly converted to non-animistic religions and beliefs as well. Sikles is situated in the hills just below Annapurna II where conditions are mild enough to interact with the land heavily as a means of life and survival.

Oftentimes scholars who focus on the human-environment relationship can write about it in a very academic, inaccessible way that I find to take away from the importance and root of the topic at hand and drive distance between the reader and the subject. I find this approach to be very counterintuitive when sharing teachings of something so vital, natural, and core to our human existence. In an attempt to negate and challenge this outcome, I have chosen to write my findings, experiences, and the knowledge kindly shared with me in the form of poetry.

Methods

This is a research study based in ethnographic principles and methods of living and sharing in the community of which I was learning from. My primary methods in conducting this research were participant interviews, participant observation, and participant participation. Before conducting any formal interviews, private observation, or participation, I simply lived in the village and made observations that would help to form my questions and contextual understanding. Most importantly, this allowed me to make genuine based relationships with those around me opposed to simply extracting information or feeling as so. Once I felt as though I had a grasp of what I would like to gear my focus to as well as felt more comfortable asking members of the community questions, I started conducting interviews.

Every private observation and interview conversation started with me explaining who I was, why I was in Sikles, what my research would be used for, and oral consent from the participant. In the cases of participant participation, I was close friends with those who invited me to join them, and they all gave their oral consent for me to write about the activity we had just done. Throughout my time in Sikles, I conducted four formal interviews. Two of these included the village leader and an Annapurna Conservation Area Program leader, both lasting around 25 minutes. The other two formal interview participants were a Bon priest and a local village man, both interviews were translated by a local person fluent in Nepali and English. These interviews lasted roughly two hours each and are where I got the bulk of my information and understanding of my topic. Participant participation and observation are also where I collected a large amount of my data. These included attending Bon religion rituals, picking vegetables in the jungle with local friends I had made, and collecting wood with the staff at the hotel where I stayed. These participations also included lots of casual conversation and dialog

that contributed greatly to my overall understanding as well. Additionally, I conducted many informal interviews, mostly with local women, conversations were less structured but extremely influential in having a range of data opposed to just formal conversations with influential village men. Much of my data confirmation and understanding outside of the context of conversation came from interactions with local people, public observation, and hearing public conversations/gatherings (EG: people yelling across the village about the monsoons).

During interviews conducted, I asked about what religion they followed, rituals they performed personally, rituals performed in the village, what their day-to-day activities look like, childhood memories, how things have changed. My data collected from informal conversations, participant observation, and participation aided greatly in understanding general village perceptions and overall attitudes towards certain things e.g. rain, tiredness, ACAP. I did not find any ethical limitations in the conversations that were being had or topics being discussed as nothing was a sensitive topic and the participants often geared the conversation and spoke about what they wanted to. However, throughout the process I did regularly question the ethics of research as a whole and the observation of people's daily lives for what sometimes felt like my personal gain. Overall, I found that having a grasp of understanding with formal interviews early on was great for contextual information, but most of my data and analysis came from observation, casual conversation, and knowledge that came from just living in and getting to know the community that was kind enough to welcome me. The poetry written below is a mass collection of the stories told, experiences had, data collected, and emotions throughout this process.

First things first

The mountains before me

And the people within

Hold the words I write

I am simply a tiny vessel

For their teachings

And their words

welcome

shared body shared mind

i sit on the outside of the earth
the clay is cool on my sun lipped skin
as the dust hugs close to my legs
and blends with the exterior of my flesh
her skin and mine slowly press
to become one

i burn my hand on the inside of the earth
birthed from the inside of her heart
sculpted by us to heat my crops
as the burn melts my hand into copper
the pot can hear my wails
and our pain becomes ones

i cough from the smoke of her cut burning lungs
as the wood's dead breath fills her skin walls
and my chest reaped with her death
slowly stirs my voice
to have me speak just as
the rustling of the alder trees

the more i live with,
the more We become one
my eyes are lake kapuche
my feelings are the eastside avalanche
Our Beings morph as One
sharing in single existence

Hands

my hands have been shaped

by my stubborn home

as she sends me love

she gives me pain

my callouses thicken

from the trees chopped

so that i can heat my dinner

from my hands and her land

the dirt under my fingers

shows sign of planting season

when the earth is in a good mood

and her tears feed my crops

my skin grows hardened

from the glowing metal

shaped from her insides

to heat our grown food

my fingertips sliced

by the cut of the stone

that i trudge up this mountain

for my feet to have a home

my palms bruised white
from the clapping together

to sing your praises
so your power does not

choose to swallow
my hands whole

Religion

my life is my death
as They shower me
with the water that fills my crops
and in the same day send mud
running down Their hills
to destroy the lives of our like friends

Their power feeds me Their power starves me
as They give the gift of rich soil
the same day They send insects to feast
upon the crops of which my life depends
Their power dictates if there is food in my stomach

so i bow at Their feet and ask for Their blessings
i praise the rock and the tree in which They lay
i feed Them my greatest animal's blood
so i do not fall dead at the hands of Their life
my praises are my security

i hear of people across the ocean
wishing to worship my same god
while sitting in domed ceilings
and listening to the hum of the air conditioning
their god of luxury, my god of burden

i live in fear i live in safety
as i wear peace of her root around my neck
the Jantra given by the Sacred Tree

who has choice to bury me or birth me

depending on if my knees bow to root around my neck

I live with Them I live from Them

Their power houses my life

Their power houses my death

So I bend in praise and asking

That today life will power death

who's earth

i swat at the mind-numbing Flies
and hiss at the blood sucking Leaches
i curse the furious Winds
and i raise my soft fist to the Bumble Bee
until Her gentle voice whispers
innate truth

this Forest is not mine.
It belongs to no one
instead, they to It.
they bow to the swinging Trees
offer Her their greatest sacrifice
so She does not swallow them whole

they live with the Seasons
of Her ever changing moods,
planting Seeds right before
She chooses to cry
for a quarter of a sun
with no feeling end

trembling in fear
that the Mud of Her tears
could take their lives away
but all she lets them do
is sit inside their homes made of Her
and share in her sadness

when She smiles they smile
as they know their life
is safe in the hands of the Sun
as they can continue with Her work
and their bellies full
from the bounds of Her current plenty

when She aches they ache
Her moods growing in extreme
sends their heads to a tizzy
when She should be cold
and they could fry an egg on her skin
their confusion binded as one

they move as She moves
they react to Her reactions
they cry as She cries
they smile when She smiles
They are Her, She is Them
They are daughter, She is mother

tiger calls

Our feet tread lightly
as We thunder through the jungle
in search of her floor's fruits
that will feed their children
and fill their wallets

the feelings of friendship
linger in the sweet mountain air
as the calling of names and
singing of raaamroo raaamroo
meets us where our tongues cannot

the jungle must think humans
are quite delicious creatures
as branches keep giving Us hugs
and leaches little red kisses
and we are shisnu's new favorite snack

with every twelve steps
We breathe the fire of lions
when gasping to keep
the tigers from swallowing Us
from this green life of Ours

born from fear of our creator
Our wind spins into sounds of joy
as the exhale of AAUUUUOOOOWWWW
fills the air with freedom and laughter

from our fear birthed friendship

Our calls for the tigers are silenced
by the focus on the wet ground below
in making sure We don't tumble to a misstep
or miss a green fruit growing
to be plucked and dropped in Our bamboo baskets

their earth

we return with slow feet
that march to the drum
of the picked vegetables on our back
and heavy bodies draping
much closer to the dirt than before we set off

sangita's left leg leaves a trail
of the blood of the jungle and it's friends
but she does not seem to notice
with the excitement of her pickings
soon to be traded for human green

in Their hands

we walk the narrow path
as rain showers on our dirt casted hair
until we are met with Those who
speak of Their past pains of the green jungle

as They hold their umbrellas to reach the blue sky

They come from the opposite end of us
as They saunter to a party celebrating
the opening of a new hotel
the music blaring masks the noise
of our footsteps trotting home from being swallowed

we follow the same stones
that choose The Seven Men worthy
of entering the sacred forests above us
and beg for protection from the jungle
that is dripping down sangita's leg

the same stones tell us from birth
who is searching in the jungle for vegetables
Who is prancing to a party
Who is allowed to interact with the sacred
who will know the forest and Who will escape it.

west earth

I see a gold square
of deep, moist sunlight
glistening on the tree tops
of which I imagine
breathing into my lungs
and filling with Her words

I jump into the square
the sun tickles my sides
and provides me with still
that takes me to my core
just like my mother would
when I was a child in her arms

I swim in the square of yellow
And speak to the birds
With my mouth closed
As the crickets sing
The songs of home
And my ears listen to hear

HAJUR

I am pulled from my mind
Placed on the stones under my legs
Where I now hear the sounds
Of arms chopping wood and
Buffalo eating their hand picked grass

I wonder what they hear
The wood speak of while chopping
And then realize that
The pain from the blisters
Would prevent the thoughts
Beyond the wanting of rest

I can hear in their ax swings
That the necessity of pain
At the hands of survival
Takes always from much of the peace
That lives in the trees and
Speaks to us in the woods

It is easy to wrap something
in bounds of affection, idealization
when you can say goodbye
and return to your air conditioned
classroom with bagels and fruit
when the blisters pop on the trees

Interview

The green eyed white face
Comes hopping towards me
With a smile that has seen little pain
I greet her kindly and she sits on my step

I wonder what water they drink in America
Because none of her questions make but of any sense to me

How should I think about
“What nature means to me”
When I don’t have a choice
I live in the woods and they take care of me

I follow the traditions of those before
And my children will do the same

I cut wood because I need fire
I farm with my land because I need food
I build houses of stone because I need shelter
I don’t know if animals have souls, we don’t share language

Why does she put big questions
To simple truths

Disposition ; What is coming

i see a pink scarfed head
among the sea of green
that houses all our pure
She greets me warmly,
Her face of the sun

Her slim body stands among
the trees that sing of
living in unity with The Woman
as they slope into a hug
that meets us at our center

i ask whose forest this is
and Her eyes cloud white
with confusion and innocence.
i read Her face as it begs,
why would a human own land?

the white of Her eyes is the match
that struck the fire within colombus,
mixing with maroon of the human heart
to stain the forests bright red,
for many suns before and many to come

i see the sad little ants living
within their human sewn chains
of power and self proclamation
growing their frantic colonies

that the stars mock when the sun sleeps

their blackened skulls see the natural form
as a means to be stuffed and conquered
heads added to their golden staffs
as the circles of humans clapping
masks the hollow sound of dripping blood

if these are the countless pages
that burn inside of our history books,
leaving pureness to be slain
and the blood celebrated,
maybe i am too quick to assume

what is our nature

is it sap from the trees that feeds
those living in the green
or is the red blood on the leaves
only existing to happen again
come the next white eyed sun

The Woman and the forest of Nepal
still bathe in the natural of the green
but i hear the fear in Their mouths
that the red just over the mountains
could soon meet, Her white eyes

Change of

the monotone tiking of the grandfather clock
commands echo off the freshly planted cement walls
once made from our earth's ground and its streams
molded together to keep me my world separate from hers
the clock speaks of hours saved in endless repairs
and time that can now be spent at needed rest

the piercing tiking of the grandfather clock
sends ricochets of time from the waffled tin roof
born from the middle of our earth and blasted up
to work with the world we have now birthed
the clock speaks of efforts saved in endless repairs
and time that can now be spent at needed rest

the hungry tiking of the grandfather clock
tastes of tomatoes and carrots and cabbages
that came to this land only 20 suns ago
and fill the void of taste in my food
left by the hand grown rice being replaced
by the ease of a stale shipment from Pokhara

the hollow tiking of the grandfather clock
shrieks of the absent of fathers for their children
and reminds me of the woman left at home
to grow closer with the land and her teachings
as those of us who know her intimately
is slowly dwindling in rhythm with the clock

the violent tiking of the grandfather clock
throws knives at my mind with the pressing
of the hatchet that is soon to meet our woods
and stain her red with terror as my children
will only know of the trees that were
swept into the human made tornado of terror

the crashing sound of the grandfather clock
provides my mind with peace in understanding
our pain and our relief share the same tree
our nature is changing because of our nature
and any other act would simply be one
against it

perched

i sit perched on the hillside
as my pen bleeds the learnings
gracefully given upon me
by those walking in the dirt below

they carry the wood
that heats my dinner
and grinds into the paper
that holds my thoughts

about Them

am i holding a pen
or am I carrying a hatchet
does my pen bleed learnings
or does it too stain this forest red?

am I criticizing or am I contributing

change of the woods

our little legs carry us
from the stones of the village
to the land of open green
with dirt under our feet

we arrive to the enchanted
and quickly scamper in search
of berries and sticks and leaves
a treat for our next prey

these berries are hard to find
during the brisk chill
so we take to the top of the hill
where sometimes the lucky remain

our feet stop just at Yadro
the green of holiness and gods
who's leave may not be touched
unless we wish for sickness to reign

we grab the few berries we find
from the woods next door
and follow our feet
to catch our next pray

sounds of thrill fill the sky
as we set up our trap
and not but a thought later

see a finch fall for its nature

we climb back to the stones

bird and pride in hand

As my father's aching return

Slowly reminds of what lays before

6 suns have passed and

I have sprouted like the trees

that have now become my home

as my body exhales father's same aches

our land where freedom once laid

now holds me in the grip of her branches

held captive by her wood

as the means of my survival

the sound of the chopping wood

and my grunts share in one sharp moan

of pain and the wish for rest, sometimes

interrupted by the swinging trees

my feet now take me to sacred Yadro

where my seven fellow men and I

stamper mantras of praise and begging

to the tree and stone that house our lives

the lamb's blood dripping down my hands

is the same that will ensure our protection

so that the god who gives us life
does not take it away with one fellow swoop

these woods no longer look the same to me
the trees are now the basis of my survival
their trunks grow my pain
and all that my body can do is
ensure her life does not bring me death

Yadro

i arise from the inside of Lhesodhi Presodhi after
spending 300,000 suns below Their hot and suffocating
land that shaped me to be worshiped

i am surrounded by green and six other gods
who were created just like me, as we are
to serve as the protector for our slice of village

I see a large heard of creatures crossing
Their mountains for many rising suns
until the feet settle at mine

the creatures build homes from Their floor
sculpting walls of water and mud
to provide peace from Their power

they come wandering near my forest
as my soul speaks to theirs in saying
that I am the god of this land

that must remain to be untouched
unless coming to sing My praises
or ask for My protection

the creatures are very good to me
for 2,000 suns I have been fed
and in return death lessened

as once every sun I hear the footsteps
and smell the flesh of a slain lamb
and absorb the blessings of their Mantras

i see the hands tie white cloths
along the branches of my friend
To honor Their sacredness

my crystals hear the sounds of silence
for three days as the creatures rest and
all energy of the village is placed in my being

from these offerings and these blessings
I gift my creatures with a year of protection
And my friends serve the rest

In the time when They are ripe for seeds
the creatures descend to Gyaulie Taar
and exchange healthy crops for a goat's blood

every three suns the creatures ask for more protection
as their souls take them to the hill of Daprendar
and between villages a rooster is slain

when a woman suffers at the hands of Their fluke
and a child is unable to be convinced
she asks Pwan Manhugo to fix Their mistake

we are the gods of our creatures

I bless them and they me

Where we all take care in the land of Lhesodhi Presodhi

all one

our god is in the field
our heaven is in the grass
our human life is in the trees

of nature we are made
of nature we are of
of nature we will return

Annapurna II

i stare at the heart of rock
They are the giver of wind
that cools my spirit
and brings the clouds
to water our vegetables
and feed our village
with their airy voices

They collect our snowfall
bringing us the water
that fills in the river below
as the rush of the water
provides us with drink
and reminds of the
blessings given by

Our Mountain

Speak of Themselves

i come with my told
knowledge born from
those who claim to hold
their teachings in classroom

i ask who They follow
some answer Buddha
others Thulo Dunga
many the Hindu crowds

an aged woman
raises her hands
throws her head
and yells FREEDOM

do not put humans
in the box of assumption
or the book that fits
your natured agenda

Annapurna Conservation Area Project

I follow their word
In ending my hunting
The tradition following
All that come before me
As they tell us our tradition
Will bring the leopards
Following their word will
Save our lives

One early sun I am in
the forest that they planted
I put down my ax and
Raise my head to see
A leopard
Who smelled the fresh wood
And came to say hello

Who gives you authority
To put end to my 2000 sun ritual
And dictate what animal
I feed to my god
Only for your lack of knowledge
To bring the death
You've told me to avoid

How dare you
How dare you
How dare you

Shisnu

It strangles the grip of my ankles
And sends fire down my spine
As I imagine my skin melting
Into burnt flesh and swimming
Upon the jungle floor below me

The hands of the mountains
Grab the fire flower fist first
Rip it from the jungle floor and
Wear the pain on their back
Criss crossed over their chests

The pain turned upside down
Beaten into its own suffering
As it now serves as the home
For the vegetables picked
And a sign of a Gurung

Bangra

asilu

finger by finger

berry by berry

fruit to tongue

mouth to soul

eating from earth

circles of friendship

dance around us

maybe this is my religion

she says as her lips swim to meet her eyes

I thank these people

I thank this forest

I thank these words

for saying

what speaking cannot

the end

