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Pathways: A Concept, Field Site and Methodological Approach to Study Remoteness and Connectivity

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The idea of center and periphery has been highly influential in shaping mental maps of how the world is spatially structured. For certain geographical configurations, however, neither periphery, nor center—nor any point along the axes between them—provides a useful description. Taking the village of Walung in eastern Nepal as a vantage point, I propose the notion of pathways as a concept and field site, and suggest co-itinerant ethnography as a methodological approach to the study of remoteness and connectivity. Pathways, I argue, are a key to understanding a particular set of seemingly remote places at the edge of nation-states.

Keywords: Himalaya, Tibet, Nepal, borderlands, trade, connections, exchange, remoteness.

Introduction

What is the Himalayan experience of global history? Is it conditioned by inaccessibility and isolation? Is it defined by the proximity to the fragile borders of kingdoms, empires and 'rising' Asian economies? Or is it shaped by exchange with the outside world?

Consider this image: three children are sitting on the doorstep of a wooden house. They wear woolen hats, new and thick Tibetan winter coats and warm felt boots. They seem happy and enjoy themselves playing with a Waterman ink box and eating tangerines.

This photograph was taken at the end of November 1957 in Walung, eastern Nepal. Situated in the Kanchenjunga area near the Tibetan border, Walung was—and still is—what one would call a remote place. The village lies at an altitude of about 3200 meters in the upper Tamor valley; in the 1950s it took at least ten days to walk to the nearest road head, and more than two weeks to reach Darjeeling in West Bengal, India. Fresh tangerines and Waterman ink may not be what one expects to find in a remote Himalayan mountain village of the mid 1950s.

Did the photographer, the anthropologist Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, bring the ink and fruit to charm the children and gain the sympathy of the adults? Maybe. We know little about the context in which the image was taken. What we know, however, is that Walung was a wealthier and more cosmopolitan

place than many a village in the Alps or the Appalachian mountains at that time.

The use and consumption of things from far away were very common. Just as wool and yak tails were channeled through this mountain village on their way from Tibet to Europe and America, high-quality ink by a New York manufacturer reached the Himalayas together with fresh tangerines from Nepal's lower hills.

Dor Bahadur Bista writes about his visit to Walung in 1958:

> Many successful and rich traders are in residence here. [They] travel extensively in Tibet as far as Lhasa and in India to Delhi, Bombay and Calcutta. They are well-informed about the outside world (...) Possession of transistor radios, with which they tune in to music and daily news broadcasts, is not at all uncommon. (Bista 1967: 174)

This observation and Haimendorf's photograph point to the larger issue at stake: the relation between remoteness and connectivity. This relation, I argue, is crucial for an understanding of the Himalayan entanglements with global history.

Common conceptions of the Himalayas render them as frontier, as refuge, or as borderland, and tend to see remoteness as the primary factor that defines local conditions. This, however, fails to capture what I consider to be an important dimension of the Himalayan experience of being connected with the wider world. Remote does not necessarily mean "out-of-the-way" (Tsing 2005: 122). More important than distance from an urban center is the positionality of a particular place in relation to routes of exchange. In the high mountain of Asia, exchange, movement, and ambition usually congregate along certain lines or *pathways*, as I propose to call them.

I use the term pathways to describe a configuration that is at once geographical and social. A pathway is thus not just another word for trade route. While trade is often an important dimension of life along a pathway, it is all but one mode of exchange. Life along a pathway is shaped by things, stories, rumors, and people passing through—by motion, or by flows, if you will. However, a pathway is neither just another word for flow. While shaped by motion, pathways are also conditioned by terrain, infrastructure and environmental factors like climate and weather. Connections across the Himalayas follow valleys and passes; they are transformed by roads and border posts; and they are affected by landslides and snow.

While geopolitics, trade regimes, and global markets are volatile and create shifting opportunities, a pathway is em-

bedded in a particular landscape and topography, which makes it relatively resilient. At times, it may be dormant, at other times more vibrant. Yet, afforded by terrain and made by movement, pathways have the capacity to survive centuries and resurface as crucial sites of socio-economic exchange at different historical conjunctures. As sites of bundled lines of exchange, they structure orientations, ambitions, and social relations. They continue to shape the Himalayan experience of remoteness and connectivity until the present day.

I argue that the notion of pathways is good to think with for three reasons. First, it sheds light on partial continuities and the different temporalities of change whereas teleological assumptions engrained in center-periphery thinking tend to foreground a singular big transformation from tradition to modernity. Second, the concept renders visible socio-spatial relations within borderlands as well as interrelations between them. And third, the notion of pathways evokes a field site and suggests a methodological approach to the study of remoteness and connectivity.

The little village of Walung serves as vantage point for the following exploration into the notion of pathways.[1] I will start with a brief historical introduction to situate the present case in a wider context, followed by a review of the ways in which remote Himalayan places like Walung were and still are being imagined. I will identify what I consider to be the shortcomings of these imaginaries and propose pathways as concept, field site, and methodological approach to further the study of the Himalayas and possibly other seemingly remote areas around the globe.

Walung

While details on Walung's history remain scant, there is a general agreement among Walungnga that once upon a time seven families came from Tibet and established the village. They probably arrived in the 17th or 18th century. According to Sprigg (1995: 91) and Subba (2008: 160), Walung is mentioned in Sikkim chronicles as the western frontier of Greater Sikkim during the rule of the first Chogyal Phuntsog Namgyal (1642-1670). However, the chronicles were written long after the fact and it is not clear if Walung was already inhabited. Dor Bahadur Bista notes that the village "is said to be about two hundred years old," (Bista 1967: 175); estimates I heard from Walungnga ranged between 150 and 400 years.

Regardless of these uncertainties, it is safe to say that Walung was founded amidst a larger process of immigration of Tibetan populations to the southern flanks of the central and eastern Himalayas that started maybe around

the 16th and continued well into the 20th century (Oppitz 1968, 1974; Sacherer 1981; Huber and Blackburn 2012).

As the upper Tamor valley is not suitable for subsistence farming, we can assume that the founding families chose the site for its strategic location near one of the easiest passages across the Himalayas rather than the valley's fertility. The Tipta Pass above Walung is usually open year round and offers the shortest link between Shigatse in Tibet and the Indian Subcontinent.

In the course of the eastward expansion of the Gorkha Kingdom in the late 18th century, Walung became part of Nepal and has remained so ever since. The King of Nepal bestowed the hereditary title of *goba* (headman) upon one of the seven founding families. Following the common pattern of indirect rule, he refrained from interference with Walung's affairs in return for a fixed annual tribute. As the state had little authority in the region anyway, this was considered a beneficial arrangement for all parties involved (Steinmann 1991).

British botanist Joseph Dalton Hooker visited Walung on his botanical expedition in 1848 and experienced this autonomy directly. He writes:

> Equally dependent on Nepal and Tibet, [the people of Walung] very naturally hold themselves independent of both; and I found that my roving commission from the Nepal Rajah was not respected, and the guard of Ghorkas held very cheap. (Hooker 1854: 206)

Hooker was not just irritated by the lack of respect with which he was treated. He was also not quite sure what to make of Walung's economic situation. On the one hand, he was impressed by the size of the village and its large and elaborately painted mansions. He remarks that the village headman "is said to pay a tax of 6000 rupees (600 pounds) to the Rajah of Nepal," but then quickly adds that "this is no doubt a great exaggeration."[2] On the other hand, he notes the lack of agricultural resources:

> They grow scanty crops of wheat, barley, turnips, and radishes; and at their winter quarters, as at Loongtoong, the better classes cultivate fine crops of buck-wheat, millet, spinach, etc.; though seldom enough for their support, as in spring they are obliged to buy rice from the inhabitants of the lower regions. (ibid.: 205)

Walung livelihoods were almost entirely based on trade and trade-related activities. People from lower altitudes used to come to the village to exchange grain for Tibetan salt. Like many other settlements in the higher valleys of northern Nepal, Walung was 'food-deficient' in the sense that it relied on grain from outside. While this situation is seen as unproblematic for urban centers—London was as food deficient as Walung in the 1850s—it was and still is highly incongruent with the common perception of the periphery as rural and agricultural.

Despite the large houses and the rumors of substantial fortunes derived from trade, Hooker chose to read the absence of agriculture as a sign of poverty. He concludes that the people of Walung "levy a small tax on all imports, and trade a little on their own account, but are generally poor and very indolent" (ibid.: 205f).

Hooker's account sketches out well the positionality that Tibetan-speaking villages along Nepal's northern borders occupied at least until the 1960s. It not only depicts the economic niche Walungnga profited from, but it is also a testimony to the misunderstandings and ambiguous relations between Himalayan frontiers and centers of power. On the one hand, Himalayan trade in salt, grain, wool

and other goods was a lucrative and steady business that guaranteed relative wealth, and the occasional services of the Tibetan speaking minorities as brokers, spies, and translators were highly valued by the state. On the other hand, the Himalayan population was looked down upon as unruly, indolent and, according to Nepal's Civil Code of 1854, as enslavable, alcohol drinking and beef-eating Bhotias (Höfer 1979: 45f).

Imperial Gaze, Ethnographic Salvage, Development Rhetoric

The perception of the frontier and its inhabitants as unruly, dirty, and lazy characterizes what could be called an imperial gaze: the uncivilized frontiers as seen from the civilized center—be it London, Paris, Beijing, Moscow, Lhasa or Kathmandu. This imperial gaze informs one way in which the Himalayan borderlands were, and arguably sometimes still are, imagined—although today 'civilized' tends to be phrased as 'modern' and 'uncivilized' as 'backward' or 'developing'.

Travel and exploration writing, such as Hooker's Himalayan Journals (1854) cited above, was instrumental for this gaze, as Marie Louise Pratt argues (1992). However, this does not mean that travelers and explorers themselves understood their endeavors as part of an imperial project. On the contrary, Pratt shows that they often understood their work as 'anti-conquest': as benign and purely scientific enterprise in opposition to imperial ambitions—regardless of the fact that their expeditions were often in the service of imperial and commercial interests (ibid. p. 36-85). As a rhetoric form, Pratt argues, the anti-conquest was linked to a crisis of legitimacy of imperial expansion. In this context, the civilizing mission, this "greatest non-reciprocal non-exchange" as Pratt puts it (ibid., p. 85), became the moral and political foundation of the ways in which 'imperial eyes' conceived of the role and position of remote areas in relation to civilized centers.

As an antithesis to imperial gaze and civilizing mission, a second perspective has long been shaping imaginations of the periphery. Intrinsically linked to anthropology at least since Boas, this perspective renders 'traditional cultures' as being threatened by modern civilization. In a way, this perspective turns the imperial gaze on its head. The image of unruly or backward frontiers is replaced by a perception of the remote as refuge of authentic tradition. Within this perspective, the task at hand is to safeguard or at least describe these traditions before it is too late. Gruber (1970) sympathetically called this mission "ethnographic salvage," a concept that has since fallen out
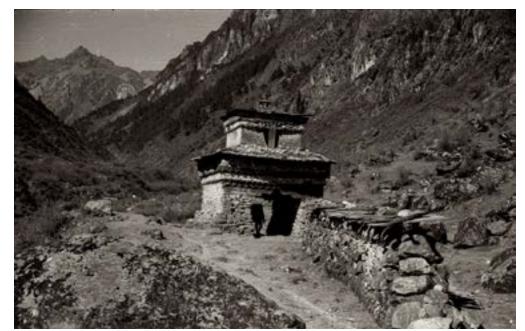
of favor among a majority of anthropologists but arguably still shapes popular phantasies of pristine, remote places that offer a glimpse of lifestyles long gone elsewhere. Today, imaginaries of the remote authentic refuge are an important resource for tourism and provide the basis for projects of 'safeguarding heritage' around the globe (see, for example UNESCO 2003; Shepherd 2006, Kolås 2008, Comaroff & Comaroff 2009; Bondaz, Isnart & Leblon 2012; Saxer 2012).

Haimendorf's introduction to his 1981 volume *Asian Highland Societies in Anthropological Perspective* illustrates this perspective well:

The anthropological studies contained in this volume seem to support the view that highland societies tend to exemplify life-styles no longer in existence in areas favoring material progress and more rapid social and political changes. (…) [M]ountains can act as barriers preserving cultures which without such physical protection might have been submerged by civilizations of very different character. (Fürer-Haimendorf 1981: ix)

Haimendorf, the author of the seminal monograph *Himalayan Traders*, surely would have been the first to acknowledge the importance of trade in these highland

societies. Yet, despite the fact that material progress is arguably a concern of any successful trader, he argues that "highland societies" remain firmly positioned outside "areas favoring material progress." And, despite the transforming powers of frequent border conflicts, the vagaries of trade, and waves of refugees and immigrants, highland societies are rendered as shielded off from "rapid social and political change."

Many classical studies of Himalayan life start out with long descriptions of livelihoods centered on agriculture and pastoralism. This is even true for monographs like *Himalayan Traders* (Fürer-Haimendorf 1975) or *Trans-Himalayan Traders* (Fisher 1986), which carry the idea of connectivity in their title. In the majority of literature on the Himalayas, remoteness—and with it rural and agricultural aspects of life—tend to be emphasized over connectivity.

There are several good reasons for this. First, the emphasis on remoteness is linked to a specific historical moment. The demarcation of the borderline between Nepal and the People's Republic of China and the radical reforms inside Tibet in the 1960s greatly affected Himalayan livelihoods in northern Nepal. Herders lost access to their traditional winter pastures in Tibet, border crossing became more regulated, and the traditional trading partners on the Tibetan side were replaced by state monopolies. As trade declined, reliance on the scarce agricultural resources increased, and much of the entrepreneurial energy was redirected, for example towards the emerging mountaineering and tourism industry (Fürer-Haimendorf 1978; Goldstein and Messerschmidt 1980; Humphrey 1985; Fisher 1990). In brief, the world that the first generation of Himalayan anthropologists witnessed in the 1960s and 1970s was shaped by this epochal transformation and the struggle to adapt to the new and emerging circumstances. The loss of tradition was omnipresent, and in many places being out-of-the-way was a palpable reality resulting from the (partial) border closure in the early 1960s.

Second, the Tibetan notion of *beyul*, the hidden valley that affords shelter in times of destruction or threats to religious practice, resonates with the idea of the mountains as refuge and realm of "life-styles no longer in existence" elsewhere, as Haimendorf put it. Indeed, the Himalayas have a long history of serving as refuge for all sorts of people, including hermit monks and prosecuted believers, but also fugitives and bonded peasants unwilling to bear the heavy taxes or corvée obligations they were subjected to. The rise of the Mughal empire in India, the establishment of Gelug power in Tibet, or the arrival of the People's Liberation Army in Lhasa all sent waves of refugees to

the Himalayan valleys. Some stayed and became 'native'; some moved on. Refuge in this sense, however, rather ties in with the zones refuge from state oppression that James Scott (2009) describes as hallmark of 'Zomia' than with the image of timeless realms of tradition.

A third reason for the emphasis on aspects of remoteness over connectivity lies in the traditional method of anthropology to choose a village and stay put until one starts to understand what is going on. This approach tends to foreground religious festivals, the agricultural cycle of the year, or the twists of kinship and marriage. However, such an approach is arguably less suited to the study of trade and mobility.

Both imperial gaze and the more positive renderings of Himalayan life as refuge or archive of lifestyle long gone elsewhere share the notion of the Himalayas as remote and thus, by implication, rural periphery. Himalayan ways of life are understood as based on sedentary agriculture, *supported* by pastoralism and *supplemented*, if necessary, by trade. In his study of the Langtang valley, Francis Lim makes this point with utmost clarity:

> Rather than saying that the Langtangpa and other similar peoples are 'natural traders,' it would be more accurate to describe the situation as 'enforced trading,' for they almost have no choice but to trade in order to survive. (Lim 2008: 63)

While the correlation between food deficiency and the need for exchange with the outside world is beyond doubt, speaking of 'enforced trading' claims a problematic causality. By the same token one could argue that poor Wall Street only has so many banks because there is no space to grow potatoes in Lower Manhattan. Such logic is putting the cart before the horse. Wealth is not necessarily linked to agriculture—neither in New York nor in Walung. On the contrary: in the Himalayas, wealth is rather associated with trade and business than with agriculture and trading communities in the remote and barren higher valleys of the Himalayas were often better positioned to profit from this trade than subsistence-oriented small-holders in the mid-hills (cf. Fürer-Heimendorff 1975; Goldstein 1975; Vinding 1998; van Spengen 2000).

Liisa Malkki calls the inclination to see culture as preeminently rooted in place and soil a "sedentarist metaphysics" (Malkki 1992). In the case at hand, this is particularly evident in the current discussion of the food deficit that plagues many Himalayan valleys, especially in western Nepal. A 2011 Oxfam report, for example, explains:

Poor farmers in the remote mountainous regions (...) have been using the same seeds for generations. Due to frequent droughts, poor harvests, and a lack of know-how, the quality of these seeds has declined. Oxfam is training farmers in new farming techniques, distributing improved drought-resistant seeds, and paying community members to build seed and grain banks. (Kilpatrick 2011)

While this is certainly a laudable agenda, we note that once again poverty is diagnosed as a condition of remoteness, and remoteness is automatically associated with rural, agricultural life. In this perspective, the structural reliance of Himalayan villages on exchange with the outside world remains out of sight.

Borders, Circulation, and Mobility

The perspective of empires looking towards their peripheries, the endeavor to safeguard and document cultural forms before it is too late, as well as development rhetoric exemplified by the Oxfam report above, share the same emphasis on culture rooted in place and soil, and they take remoteness as analytical starting point: the rugged highlands are considered backward, authentic, or unruly because—for better or worse—they are isolated and far away from developed, urban centers and state control.

However, current research on circulation and mobility shows that connectivity with the outside world is often an essential feature of livelihood strategies in remote areas. They frequently find themselves at the crossroads of intensive exchange of natural resources, labor, capital and manufactured goods. Migrants, smugglers, and saints pass through. Geologists, tourists, NGOs, reporters and missionaries come here to look for resources, opportunities, and target groups. Himalayan livelihoods are guided as much by connectivity as by remoteness.

In this context, another perspective has begun to shape the ways in which places like Walung are being imagined: the idea of borderlands. Since movement across Himalayan passes is no longer conditioned simply by weather or the threat of armed robbers, but by permits, papers, stamps, the mood of the military or the considerations of local Chinese officials for their careers, the proximity to national boundaries—the sensitive skin of the nation's geobody (Winichakul 1994)—conditions many aspects of life in the Himalayas. The 'Himalayan impasse'[3] that followed the closure of the 1960s, but also the more complex interplay between border regimes, identities, and mobility, feature prominently in recent studies on northern Nepal (van

Spengen 2000; Bauer 2004; Childs 2004; Rogers 2009; Shneiderman 2010, 2013; Harris 2013).

A new set of issues takes center stage and ties in with the questions raised in the wider border studies literature. These include the quality and scope of cross-border relations in general (Martínez 1994) and their changes over time; the triangle of power relations between state, regional elite, and local people in the borderland (Baud and Schendel 1997); and questions of legality and legitimacy in transnational exchange (Schendel and Abraham 2005). This new angle has not only widened our understanding of the scope of stakes involved, but also fostered a critical reflection of the notion of remoteness beyond center-periphery thinking (Ardener 2012, Harms et al. 2014). Putting the margins at the very center of inquiry, such work transcends the conventional container of the nation-state as well as the established boundaries of area studies (van Schendel 2002; Wimmer and Schiller 2002). It reveals that remoteness is not only a relational condition, but in many places also a relatively recent one.

In addition, current work on infrastructure—roads, railways, dams and border posts—has added new layers of analysis to the study of the greater Himalayas (Campbell 2010; Rest 2012; Demenge 2013; Harris 2013; Lord 2014). The notion of brokering (Rothman 2011) or the idea of contact zones (Pratt 1991, 1992) where "cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other" (Pratt 1991: 34) have thereby replaced the image of bounded cultures and communities. Flow, network, and space (or space-making) are the conceptual tools that undergird many of these efforts.

In brief, evading "territorial traps" and the pitfalls of a "sedentarist metaphysics," recent literature on the Himalayas critically engages with the trope of the remote Himalayan village and emphasizes the role of mobility, borders, and connections. My idea of pathways directly ties in with these efforts.

However, the seminal concepts of space, network and flow are not ideally suited to my endeavor. They conjure a world that is almost entirely made by socio-political and economic relations but give little concern to forests, mountains, passes.[4] For the present case, however, the latter are too important to ignore. Terrain and topography are crucial factors in 'bundling' the lines of exchange along pathways. The high mountains may not bring about specific cultural forms in the way ecological determinism suggested; the mountains may also be far less of a barrier against the outside world than the idea of refuge evokes. Terrain does not determine culture, religion, identity,

Figure 5. Yak coming back from Tibet.

(Saxer, 2012)

Figure 6. Children in Walung, waiting for presents.

(Saxer, 2012)

ambitions, or politics. However, the high mountains and valleys do one thing for sure: they determine where people walk.

The routes they choose, and most of the routes along which roads are now being built, are conditioned by terrain. This embeddedness of pathways in landscape and topography hardly changes over time. States rise and fall, borderlines shift, people leave while others move in, opportunities for trade come and go, customs regimes, goods in demand, and the means of transport are in flux—the physical settings of pathways, however, remain.

This leads us to the first of the three reasons that pathways are good to think with: they shed light on the texture of the different temporalities involved.

Continuity and Change

Consider, as an example, once more Haimendorf's photographs from 1957 and compare them with my own taken almost exactly 55 years later in November 2012: the similarities are striking. On first sight, it is almost as if the political, economic, and social transformations of the past fifty-five years had not left any traces.

A closer look reveals that Walung is smaller now than it used to be. In 1962, a flash flood eroded the high riverbank on which the village is located, and over the following years almost half of the houses were taken away by landslides. However, the remaining large two-story houses, the wooden roofs, the gate that marks the northern entry to the village, and the spacious cobblestone forecourts where the yak caravans coming down from Tibet are unloaded— all of this has hardly changed at all.

It is important to note that the village was not abandoned and what we see are not the remains of a glorious past. In Walung, the border closure of the early 1960s was not as big a rupture as elsewhere. While it is true that the wealthier Walung families moved out—they bought land in Kathmandu, built houses, and expanded their mercantile activities to new ventures and markets—the families that remained in Walung gradually took the place of those who left. They moved into the large mansions of the emigrated elite, and with the gradual opening of the border from the mid 1960s onwards new trading opportunities arose. In the late 1960s and 1970s, for example, the rampage of the Cultural Revolution in Tibet met with an emerging market for Tibetan antiques in West. Many of them were brought through Walung. More recently, the booming trade in medicinal plants has become a mainstay. Although less embedded in a wider agro-pastoral system, and probably still smaller in scale, trade has remained a crucial aspect of Walung livelihoods.

Poorer families from Tibet and the surrounding villages arrived, and step by step established themselves as entrepreneurs. Firewood collectors became yak herders, yak herders became traders, and traders started sending their children to study in Darjeeling and Kalimpong—to the same renowned Indian boarding schools in which the former elite used to enroll their children. And, just as those who left in the 1960s, this new generation of traders has accumulated capital and started venturing out themselves —to Kathmandu, to South Korea, and to America.

Thus, the images of 1957 and 2012 are not similar because the Himalayan range would shield remote Walung off against change introduced from outside; they are rather an effect of mobility and continuing outside influence. The houses, the gate and cobblestone forecourts are not relics of an old time long gone, but an outcome of continuing exchange along a pathway. The striking similarity stems from the fact that they depict the scene and setting of a repeating event that has remained at the core of everyday life in this trading village: a caravan comes back from Tibet, goods are offloaded and stored in the ground floor of the house, children are told to step back and mind the yak. Full of anticipation they stand in the doorways, eagerly waiting for the presents their fathers bring.

The pathway along which Walung is situated continues to shape ambitions and livelihoods; and it continues to create wealth. People move in, move up, and some finally move out. Should the road that has been planed for years finally be built, the yak and cobblestone forecourts may disappear, houses may be rebuilt, and trucks may no longer stop here in the way the yak caravans do. Over the past fifty years, markets, traded goods, and border regimes underwent several radical transformations. Neither salt and grain, nor Tibetan antiques are the mainstay of trade through Walung any longer; and nobody knows whether the current demand for medicinal herbs and the border regime allowing to trade them will last.

The vagaries of trade and state intervention, however, stand against a pronounced continuity. The pass that remains open throughout most of the winter, and the entrepreneurial ambitions based on stories of the past are not easily tamed by border regimes. Pathways bundle connections and with them the energy and aspirations of many. These elements of continuity have so far enabled the village to weather the storms of change and chances are high that the future of the village will remain tied to the fate of the pathway that passes through.

Neither a cultural analysis rooted in place, nor teleological assumptions engrained in visions of development, nor an approach that is mainly concerned with the fluid nature of movement and border space can capture this texture of continuity and change. As a constellation afforded by terrain and continuously remade by movement and exchange, the notion of pathways helps keep these different temporalities in view.

Experience and Socio-spatial Relations

The second reason why I argue that pathways are good to think with lies in the perspective on socio-spacial relations they facilitate. Rather than simply moving *across* borders and borderlands, people repeatedly move *along* pathways. In the Himalayas, pathways usually lie orthogonal to borderlines. Focusing on pathways instead of borders (or borderlands roughly parallel to borderlines) amounts to a rotation of gaze by 90 degrees. This rotation (rather than inversion) of perspective brings into view new dimensions of analysis: 1) the relation between a pathway and its 'hinterland' and 2) the interdependence and competition between different pathways and border regions.

In the heyday of trans-Himalayan caravan trade before the mid 20th century, an entire mountain economy supported and facilitated the system of exchange. Cross-breeding yak and cows into sturdy hybrids (*dzo*), herding the animals used for transportation, portering, making saddles and saddle bags, collecting firewood or medicinal herbs for sale, or simply running a teahouse or a shop along a pathway were all activities intrinsically linked with caravan trade. They tied a wider area into the economic system fostered by a pathway.

In this sense, pathways create their own 'hinterlands' and thereby structure Himalayan borderlands. 'Hinterlands' often orient themselves rather towards a pathway than a larger urban center of a state. In a certain sense, the nodes that form along major pathways become centers themselves, and a center-periphery dynamic between these nodes and the hinterlands is again at play here, although on a smaller scale. The relations of the Upper Arun region to Walung, but also of parts of Mugu to Humla, areas of Dolpo to Jumla, or Manang to Mustang are examples of such linkages between 'hinterlands' and major pathways in the Himalayas.

The continuing reality of this dynamic is well illustrated by the story of a young couple I got to know in Walung. The husband's family used to work as herders for one of the richer Walung trader families; they spent most of the year with yak and *dzo* on the high pastures west of the village. Step by step, the family managed to acquire animals themselves and finally they moved into one of the empty houses in Walung. They sold most of their animals and started trading. The bride is from a village further south, closer to the district headquarter and the road, but further away from the pathway. Her family were pastoralists themselves and she met her husband in one of the high-altitude summer camps. "We led the same lives," the couple recalled. For her, marrying into a family that had already managed to establish itself in Walung was clearly considered upward mobility—a first step to a better life. Rather than trying to move to Taplejung or Kathmandu, the young family turned to Walung in order to make use of the pathway leading through.

Although pathways are often remarkably resilient configurations, their importance and attractiveness varies greatly over time. Obvious reasons for this include major political shifts, changing market demands or new transportation infrastructures. Moreover, pathways tend to stand in competition to each other. The rise of one is often associated with the fall of another.

The pathway on which Walung is situated, for example, has recently lost out against the pathway following the Arun River further west. Better road access on the Chinese side and a road currently under construction on the Nepal side in relation to the Arun 3 hydropower project, made the border settlement of Kimathanka the all-important trade hub in the region. Stories of Chinese businessmen walking around in Kimathanka with 'bags of cash' make rounds. Rumors about armed robbers abound. NGOs complain that the Upper Arun valley has become a major route for wildlife trafficking. Formerly a 'hinterland' of Walung in many respects, Kimathanka has in a certain way inherited its position—both in terms of trade volume and as a target of ambitions. Walung traders hope that once the road up the Tamor valley (in relation to another hydropower project) is complete, Walung will regain its competitiveness and former stature.

A similar competition between pathways is currently underway in Humla, western Nepal. A new road through Limi stands in competition with the officially sanctioned road project in the Karnali valley, which has been under construction for more than eighteen years, but without producing the results people had hoped for. Both roads follow old trade routes and their competition is a crucial theme in contemporary local politics (Saxer 2013).

The competition between pathways also takes place on a larger scale and over greater distances. When trade through Kalimpong and the Chumbi Valley was 'opened' in 1904 by the British invasion of Tibet commonly known as the Younghusband Expedition, it affected also the pathways through Nepal. After 1904, Kalimpong became the main hub of trade between Lhasa and the Indian subcontinent and the Nepali traders lost most of their privileges in Tibet (Uprety 1980). For a long time, Nepal had sought to prevent this from happening. In a certain sense, all three Nepal-Tibet wars between 1789 and 1856 can be seen as attempts to avert the center of gravity of trans-Himalayan trade from moving east. Later, in the early 1950s, the US ban on Tibetan wool that followed Tibet's annexation by the People's Republic of China went hand in hand with a short-lived revival of the importance of pathways through eastern Nepal. The image of children sharing tangerines and playing with a Waterman ink box was taken in the midst of this boom.

However, competition between pathways also has a different face today. The growing efforts, since the 1980s, to regulate trade in contraband goods, including flora and fauna threatened by extinction, were focused on the most important pathways. As a result of increasing state control

along these routes, much of this trade moved to more remote pathways, i.e. through Humla, Gorkha, and the Arun and Tamor Valleys. In this sense, remoteness has also become an asset for a place like Walung; the higher profits in this business compensated for the lower trade volumes in other goods. However, the risks involved are considerable, the potential losses are high, and several traders involved have faced long prison sentences for smuggling items like rhino horns, tiger bones, or Tibetan antelope pelts.

Geopolitics and border regimes forged in a global arena have given new meanings to the condition of remoteness. The association with contraband goods and illegal trade is a development nobody actively sought. Furthermore, the traders I met were perfectly aware that a boom is usually followed by a bust and the advantage of illegibility is temporal.

In summary, the notion of pathways opens new perspectives on the asymmetries and socio-spatial relations we find not only across an international border, but also between areas of uneven wealth and opportunity within a borderland as well as the entanglements and competition between different areas and the pathways that structure them.

Pathways as Field Site and as a Methodological Approach

The notion of pathways resonates with what Mary Louise Pratt calls "contact zones" (Pratt 1991, 1992), Anna Tsing describes as "zones of awkward engagement" (2005: xi), and Willem van Schendel terms "spaces of engagement" (2005). However, in a context in which exchange and ambition are channeled along certain lines afforded by terrain, the spaces and zones have a distinct protracted shape with no clear beginning or end. The movements of people and goods often originate far away before they are bundled along a pathway. Thus, a pathway does not denote a particular bounded space; it rather offers a way to understand how Himalayan borderlands are internally structured and how they relate to each other. Rather than a space, the notion of pathway describes a socio-spacial constellation that aggregates heterogenous elements: people with their ambitions, infrastructures, state concerns, landscape and topography, etc.

Pathways thereby define a particular direction of mobility, namely not just through space or across a border, but *along* a route. Or, in other word, while the notion of space evokes random directionality, a pathway imparts particular directions and orientations—namely, in the Himalayan case at hand, up and down, north and south. Encounters take place along these lines and rather than 'in space.' Pathways

are better captured in the image of bundles of lines rather than space. Armies, traders, tourists and pilgrims follow them as much as the recitations of a shaman's journey. And, as Eric Mueggler shows in his beautiful book *The Paper Road* (2011), even the botanical expeditions of European botanists and their local assistants were to a large extent shaped by the pathways described in Dongba scriptures, these text-like maps recited by Naxi shamans and stuck on coffins to guide the dead (p106).

The directionality pathways foster and the lines of movement they bundle may conjure up the frequently used image of arrows that cross international borders. However, this graphical representation of flows as arrows, which often serves the purpose of illustrating the movement of illegal trade and migration, and which van Schendel has aptly called an "arrow disease" (van Schendel 2005: 44f), is not what the notion of pathways is about. I think of a pathway as a stretched-out *chronotope* in Bakhtin's sense—a socially relevant constellation in which "time takes on flesh and becomes visible for human contemplation" and likewise, "space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time and history" (Bakhtin 1981: 84).

This take on pathways ties in with Tim Ingold's critique of the abstract notion of space (Ingold 2008). The people who follow pathways do so in a mode of movement that Ingold calls "wayfaring." A wayfarer, he argues, "has to sustain himself, both perceptually and materially, through an active engagement with the country that opens up along his path" (ibid.: 35, also Ingold 2010). It is this engagement that makes pathways more than abstract connections between dots of a network; they are the very sites where much of the social, economic and also spiritual life takes place. In this sense, pathways are made and remade by collective, repeated wayfaring—by iteration. Things—like the tangerines and ink box—"are instantiated in the world as their paths of movement, not as objects located in space. They are their stories," as Ingold puts it (Ingold 2011: 162).

Thus, while concerned with socio-spatial relations, it makes more sense to think of a pathway as a lived environment rather than a space or an arrow. This environment with its people, plants, animals, roads, and border posts, with its layered histories and different temporalities ranging from the slow processes of geological formation and climate change to the vagaries of politics, trade and the weather, defines pathways not just as a conceptual lens but also as an extended field site.

Moreover, as field site, pathways also evoke a particular methodological approach to their study, which is *co-itinerant* rather than *multi-sited*. Multi-sited ethnography, which

Figure 7. Walung in 2012.

(Saxer, 2012)

Figure 8. Northern gate to the village of Walung.

(Saxer, 2012)

resulted from the need to break out of the confines of the local in order to study phenomena that cannot be accounted for by focusing on a single location (Marcus 1998), is the logical choice when studying networks. However, it is rather less suited to the study of pathways. Gaining an adequate insight into life *along* a pathway requires a methodological approach that follows actors and goods; it requires a form of participant co-itinerancy or participant 'wayfaring'. This, of course, is what researchers in the Himalayas have been doing all along in order to access their (singular or multiple) field sites. Rather than suggesting a radical

new method, then, co-itinerant ethnography is a term to emphasize the analytical value of time spent on the road and the encounters it fosters.

The question remains whether pathways—as concept as well as field site and methodological approach—has any value beyond the Himalayas. As the concept of bundled lines of exchange is linked to a certain kind of terrain it is clearly not universally applicable. When connectivity is primarily defined by existing infrastructure and not by terrain, for example, the classical image of a network may provide a better starting point, and a multi-sited approach

may be the better choice. However, in sparsely populated, rough terrain the concept of pathways may prove to be productive outside the greater Himalayas. Several recent publications on the Sahara, for example, reveal strikingly similar constellations of remoteness, connectivity, and routes (Lydon 2009; Scheele 2010, 2012, 2013; Andersson 2014). Moreover, parts of Amazonia and some of the venerable passages through Central Asia known as Silk Roads—old and new—feature similar dynamics. All of these areas continue to make headlines at once as refuges for 'insurgents', as routes for 'trafficking', as realms of authentic tradition, as poor and backward (and thus targets for development), and as potential sites for natural resource extraction.

The concept of pathways is not meant to provide a comprehensive new theoretical framework. Not every place is shaped by the dynamics of pathways, nor are all livelihood strategies in a pathway setting linked to mobility and exchange. However, what I hope the notion of pathways can accomplish is to serve as a conceptual lens to hold in view the uneven temporalities, socio-spatial asymmetries, and systems of exchange within as well as between seemingly remote areas in the Himalayas and elsewhere. And, as a field site and methodological approach, it may add a new angle to the understanding of the experience and position of such areas in the wider world.

Endnotes

1. Research on Walung was carried out between 2012 and 2015 in the context of my project 'Neighbouring China' on the effects of China's rise on the people living directly along its borders. I conducted interviews in Kathmandu and Walung, which I visited with Nyima Dorjee Bhotia in November 2012. Nyima and I are working on an in-depth study on the recent history of Walung under the title 'Moving in, moving out, moving up', which is part of my ERC Starting Grant Project 'Remoteness & Connectivity: Highland Asia in the World' (see <www.highlandasia.net/projects/walung.html>).

2. According to Khatri, cit. in Steinmann (1988, p. 34-35), the Nepal Government received 1,026 rupees per annum.

3. 'Himalayan Impasse' was the title of a conference on this topic, organized by Thierry Dodin and held in Bonn in January 2013.

4. A growing interest in the ontologies of border space may change this in the future (see, for example, Green 2012).

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