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Shifting Grounds: Movement and Continuity in Mustang, Nepal

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Shifting Grounds: Movement and Continuity in Mustang, Nepal

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the socio-cultural and economic transformations in the Mustang region of Nepal. Drawing from fieldwork conducted over a month, this study examines how traditional economic activities, particularly yak herding, are being replaced by tourism and agriculture due to shifting socio-economic conditions and global influences. The concept of 'adaptive traditionality' is introduced to describe how the community in Mustang actively engages with both internal pressures and external changes to reshape their socio-cultural landscape. This adaptability is evident in the transition from nomadic pastoralism to more sedentary agricultural practices and tourism, which not only reflects a survival tactic but also a strategic choice to maintain community cohesion and identity. The thesis also delves into generational shifts within Mustang, highlighting how younger generations navigate between home and foreign opportunities. This mobility is seen as a form of cultural exchange that does not signify a detachment from tradition but rather a complex negotiation of identity, where traditional values are both challenged and reinforced. Additionally, the impact of geopolitical shifts, particularly the influence of Chinese infrastructure projects and border controls, is analyzed to understand how these factors reshape economic practices and community dynamics in Mustang. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining semi-structured interviews, informal dialogues, and participant observation, to provide a nuanced understanding of how economic realities directly and indirectly affect lifestyles in Mustang. This research fills a gap in the existing literature by linking macro-level changes such as infrastructure development and migration patterns to micro-level transformations within community structures in Mustang. It highlights the importance of viewing these adaptations through the perspectives of the local inhabitants, who are not passive recipients of change but active participants.

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PREFACE

> The extent to which one feels at home depends
> on where one is situated, with whom one
> walks *khora*, literally and figuratively.
>
> - Sienna R. Craig

I was engaged in researching and writing this thesis from April 2023 to April 2024. During my previous work researching on the University of Richmond campus, I noticed that I avoid stepping outside my comfort zone. Using my opportunity to study abroad in Nepal during the Spring of my Junior year, I began an ethnography for which I had little prior experience. Starting in February of 2023, I began to learn Tibetan in the capital city of Kathmandu from community members who spent their early years in Tibet before being exiled to Nepal. Their language was key in creating relationships with this refugee community in Boudha, a neighborhood in Kathmandu. I was fortunate to begin this language exploration some months before my field research, since the language spoken in the Himalayan community of Mustang (moo-stahng) was similar enough that I could introduce myself and ask for hot tea. Very different from the language challenge, the fitness requirements for my journey into the Himalayas was extremely humbling. Walking up small hills with my guide and friend Wangyal was no small feat at fifteen thousand feet. Our treks were so difficult for me it was funny watching Wangyal walk to the nearest ridge to scout while I laid flat on my back trying to catch my breath.

Yet, falling off our dirt bike into an alpine river on the way to evade the Chinese border police was nothing compared to sitting down and writing these words. A cliché, but I have now learned that all types of struggling is part of the process. My mistakes and challenges have facilitated my ability to speak about the community with accuracy and full immersion. The respect and knowledge I have gained throughout this thesis pushed me low enough to question my understanding of the fundamental aspects of anthropology to the height of seeing my experience within each new ethnography, creating a lens that is now unique to me. I am profoundly privileged to have visited their community and even more privileged to write about it, recognizing that my presence was an exception granted through their generosity and openness.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe the successful completion of this thesis to all the people who generously offered their guidance, hospitality, insights, and motivation during my time in Nepal. I am deeply grateful to Wangyal, whose significant contributions have helped shaped this project. Your unwavering enthusiasm, valuable input, and lighthearted humor have truly enriched this research journey. You taught me to stop trekking with my head down and reminded me to look up, for which I am eternally thankful. This work is a testament to our collective effort and shared accomplishments. Thank you to Palgen, whose guesthouse was a museum as much as it was a home. Your unwavering faith in my ability to come back with a Ph.D. filled me with the confidence I needed for the rest of my research journey. I want to sincerely thank Dr. Sienna Craig, who authored a book I could only wish to emulate. Your guidance and inspiring writings have truly made a difference in my work. Thank you to Dr. Chris Upton, who took the time to help me during the busy end of the semester. Most importantly, thank you for inspiring me to study anthropology in the first place. Without your influence, I would never have gone abroad to immerse myself and challenge how much I actually knew about anthropology.

I am grateful to Dr. French for her indispensable guidance throughout my thesis. Her thoughtful analysis and critical feedback were crucial during the writing process. Beyond academic support, Dr. French provided stability and encouragement during a personally challenging time, helping me navigate both my research and personal hurdles with great empathy. Her commitment to fostering a supportive scholarly environment has not only been instrumental in the completion of this work but has also significantly shaped my development as a researcher and individual.

I am endlessly grateful to the families I had the pleasure of staying with. Sonam, thank you for taking me with you to deliver onions. Thank you to the School of International Training staff

who shaped a home in Boudha that allowed me to learn and thrive. The period leading up to narrative collection was equally influential in shaping the outcome of this journey. Through your book recommendations, I discovered a genuine passion and emerged as a transformed person, distinct from the individual who first arrived in Nepal. I extend my profound appreciation to Yungdung and Sonam Lama. Their guidance and support were instrumental in introducing me to the area and helping me find my footing in Mustang. Lastly, my heartfelt gratitude goes to the numerous nomads, herders, villagers, blood drinkers, mothers, and relatives who contributed their voices to this paper. Your openness in sharing your stories touched me and I will treasure my short visit in your homes for years to come.

INTRODUCTION

> In fact, I would expand this idea to say that the practice of anthropology can also be khora, in that it is a literal and figurative circling around the sacred center of human connection, over time and across space.
>
> - Sienna R. Craig

Mustang, historically recognized as the Kingdom of Lo, has been a vital conduit between the Tibetan Plateau and the Indian subcontinent. Positioned on ancient salt routes in the Himalayas, this area facilitated the exchange of essential commodities such as salt, grains, and textiles, profoundly influencing the socio-economic landscape of the region.[1] The trade routes through Mustang served as more than commercial pathways; they were arteries for cultural exchange that significantly shaped the region's identity. As traders moved along these routes, they transported not only goods but also ideas, art, and religious practices, fostering a vibrant interchange between the distinct cultures of Nepal and Tibet.[2] This intermingling has resulted in a unique socio-cultural background, blending Tibetan Buddhist traditions with local Nepalese governance. The historical and cultural landscape of Mustang is also tied with Tibetan Buddhism. The region is dotted with ancient monasteries that serve not only as places of worship but also as centers for community gatherings and cultural preservation.[3]

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[1] Murton, "Bordering Spaces, Practising Borders," April 3, 2017.
[2] Murton.
[3] Childs et al., "Depopulating the Himalayan Highlands."

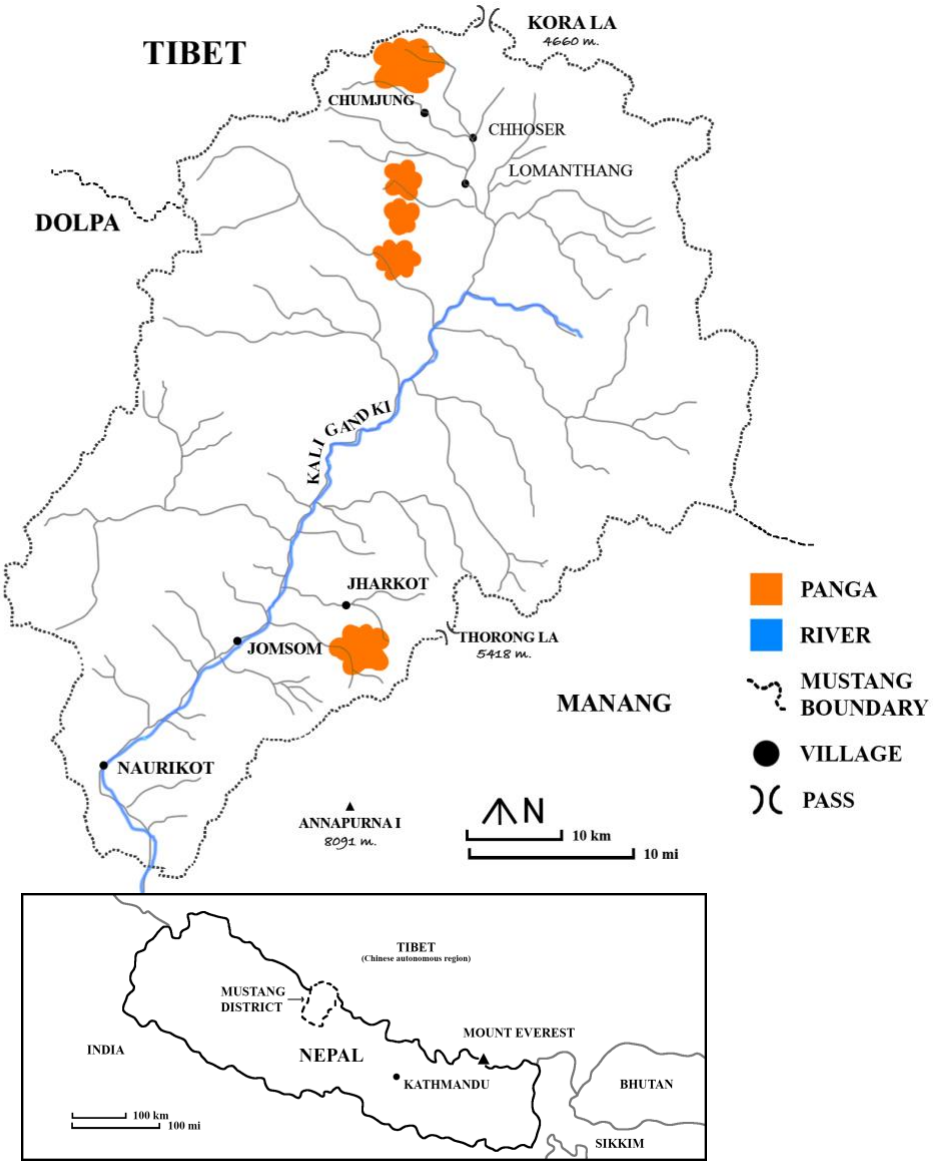

Figure 1. Map of Mustang, Nepal

Throughout its history, Mustang has navigated complex regional politics. As a semi-autonomous kingdom, it maintained strong ties to the influential Sakya monastic centers in southern Tibet, reinforcing its religious and cultural connections across the border.[4] The incorporation of Mustang into the Nepali state in the 18th century did not significantly alter its

[4] Murton, "Bordering Spaces, Practising Borders," April 3, 2017.

identity, which continued to thrive under various governance regimes. The mid-20th century marked a significant shift when Mustang became a refuge for Tibetan exiles and a base for anti-Chinese guerrilla movements, leading to its geopolitical isolation and the imposition of travel restrictions that lasted until the 1990s.

Recent years have seen significant geopolitical shifts and infrastructural developments in Mustang, impacting the region's traditional way of life. The implementation of new roads and border controls, particularly the fencing at the Himalayan pass of Kora La, controlled by Chinese authorities, has created physical barriers that affect the daily movements and cultural practices of the nomadic people.[5] The border between Mustang and Tibet, once a fluid and frequently crossed boundary, has been transformed by stringent controls that restrict local movements. This has disrupted traditional practices like transhumance and trade, once lifelines for these highland communities. The border is now a closely monitored boundary, where even proximity can lead to detentions by Chinese authorities, impacting not only economic activities but also the cultural and familial ties between the people of Mustang and Tibet.[6]

The development of infrastructure, such as the road from Chhoser village to the Nepal-China border, has paradoxically connected and divided the region. These improvements facilitate access and potential economic opportunities but introduce new challenges.[7] The economic dependence on China has intensified, with local markets adjusting to the asymmetrical flow of goods and capital. Trade fairs, once cultural exchanges, now predominantly feature Chinese

[5] Murton, “Facing the Fence.”
[6] Murton.
[7] Mulmi, *All Roads Lead North*.

goods and operate under strict regulations, indicating a shift towards more regulated economic interactions.[8]

The existing literature on the Mustang region covers both socio-economic and geopolitical changes impacting this area, from migration patterns and cultural shifts to the development of infrastructure and changes in government. However, there is a noticeable gap in the literature of how these factors influence the traditional economic activities within the communities, particularly yak herding, and their replacement with new economic pursuits like tourism. While works cover the decline of traditional yak herding, they do not extensively explore how this decline interplays with shifts in community identity and social cohesion or how it leads to the adoption of new economic roles. They fall short of connecting these macro changes with the micro-level transformations within community structures. My research aims to fill this void by analyzing how the transition from yak herding to tourism and other agricultural pursuits not only represents a shift in economic bases but also reshapes the cultural landscape and community cohesion of Mustang. This approach will provide a more nuanced understanding of the direct and indirect effects of current economic realities on lifestyles.

In undertaking this research, I have continually reflected on my position as both an outsider and a participant within the communities of Mustang. As a white anthropology student from a Western university, my presence in Mustang was not without its implications. My interactions, while informative, were certainly influenced by my identity as a foreigner. This acknowledgment is crucial as it shapes the lens through which I view and interpret the narratives shared with me. My academic background and personal experiences color my understanding and representations

[8] Mulmi.

of Mustang's cultural and socio-economic landscapes. Recognizing this, I have striven to approach my research with humility and an openness to learn from those who live these realities every day. It is their voices I sought to amplify. The challenges of fieldwork, from language barriers to navigating the altitude, were as much a part of my learning process as the formal interviews and community engagements. These experiences have not only deepened my appreciation for Mustang's cultural heritage but have also sharpened reflexivity. This journey has been about understanding the space between what I know and what I have yet to learn, recognizing the boundaries of my own knowledge and the expansive potential of truly listening.

In exploring the evolving dynamics of Mustang, this thesis delves into the interplay of community practices and the global influences that shape the lives of its inhabitants. Living within the foothills of the Himalayas, the people of Mustang exhibit a contemporary form of modernity that is uniquely their own, reflecting both new economic realities and retention of community values. As environmental changes and economic pressures make yak herding increasingly untenable, younger generations are drawn to urban centers or overseas, not simply in pursuit of opportunities but as part of a broader pattern of mobility that reflects powerful agency and connection. Despite these shifts, communal practices, though changing, continue to anchor social life, manifesting in rituals and social practices that both preserve and reinvent collective identity. This research highlights the importance of understanding these transformations through the perspectives of those who experience them, showcasing how Mustang's inhabitants negotiate identity amidst constant change.

In this thesis, I argue that the cultural landscape of Mustang is dynamically engaging with external and internal pressures in ways that redefine both resilience and continuity. The concept

of 'adaptive traditionality'—the idea that community practices evolve in response to contemporary influences while maintaining core values—is crucial to understanding how Mustang navigates its future. This adaptability is evident in several key areas. Firstly, the community's shift from yak herding to tourism and other agricultural pursuits represents not just a survival tactic but a redefinition of their relationship with the land and each other. This transition illustrates a deliberate transformation of economic bases that supports sustained community cohesion and economic viability. The evolving patterns of migration in Mustang—from traditional nomadic pastoralism to seeking opportunities in urban centers or abroad—change movement and lifestyle, resonating deeply with the concept of *khora*, Tibetan for circumambulation. This migration goes beyond economic survival; it represents a transformative process where community members repurpose and adapt their traditional practices in novel contexts. These shifts in home and occupation are not just changes; they are the active construction of new paths that weave together the past and the future in the present moment. *Khora* acts as a lens of movement and potentiality within the community of Mustang. It highlights how individuals hold multiple identities and ways of knowing themselves, interwoven through the physical and metaphorical paths they traverse. Movement through *khora* has a centering effect, where through the very act of migration and mobility, individuals find a sense of stillness and belonging, reaffirming their connections to home, even from a distance.

Secondly, I argue that identity in Mustang is significantly shaped by lifestyle choices, particularly through the contrast between semi-nomadic and stationary ways of life, as well as generational shifts and the implications of statelessness. The semi-nomadic lifestyle, with its seasonal migrations and close ties to the land, contributes to a dynamic identity closely linked to environmental and community practices. In contrast, a stationary lifestyle leads to different

interactions with the community and place, affecting perceptions of belonging. Generational changes also play a critical role, as they determine how traditions are either preserved or modified in response to modernization. Statelessness introduces additional complexity, influencing how individuals and communities define their roles within broader socio-political frameworks. These factors actively influence the development and maintenance of community identity.

Lastly, the mobility of the younger generation, often navigating between traditional Mustangy culture and global cultural flows, serves as a powerful form of cultural exchange. This mobility does not signify a detachment from traditions but rather a complex negotiation of identity, where traditional values are both challenged and reinforced in various contexts. By examining these patterns of movement and the associated mobilities over time and space, this thesis underscores the nuanced ways Mustang's community members maintain connections to each other and their livelihoods. Their ongoing adaptations are proactive engagements that highlight agency in shaping their socio-cultural landscape.

METHODOLOGY

This research employed a mixed-methods strategy, combining semi-structured interviews, informal dialogues, and direct participation to achieve a holistic approach. Each technique played a role, enhancing the balance of the overall gathering process. The methods supported each other, offering cross-validation and adding layers to the insights obtained. The main subjects of this study were the herders and villagers, who are central to the community's dynamics. To capture a comprehensive view of the community, the study also engaged with various other local

stakeholders, including residents returning for holidays, government representatives, seasonal workers, and local artists.

The interviews were semi-structured to allow adaptability, enabling exploration of topics that emerged during conversations. Although a base set of questions guided the discussions, the flow largely depended on the responses from the interviewees, which enriched the diversity of perspectives captured. Alongside the interviews, I engaged in daily community activities as opportunities arose, implementing a participant observation method. This firsthand involvement offered deeper insights into the day-to-day challenges and the practices of herding and village life in Mustang. Data gathering was conducted over eighteen days, divided between the mountainous areas inhabited by yak herders and the more populated valley areas. The time in Upper Mustang was maximized to ten days, in adherence to permit regulations, with eight days spent in Lower Mustang, distributed across Jomsom, Jharkot village, Jharkot *panga*, and Naurikot. In Upper Mustang, my days were divided among Lomanthang, Lomanthang *panga*, Chumjung *panga*, Chumjung village, and Chhoser. This allocation broadened the contextual backdrop for interpreting the socioeconomic implications of yak herding in Mustang.

After the research period was complete, a manual thematic analysis approach was used to code for themes. Please note that this analysis was completed by a single coder and by hand in a short period of time, therefore, it does not fully embody what thematic analysis typically entails. Rather, this method was employed as a practical tool to dissect and better understand the concepts surfaced in the interviews. The first phase of the analysis process entailed familiarizing myself with the data, which included transcribing data where necessary, repeatedly reading the data, and jotting down initial thoughts. This stage was critical for gaining a comprehensive understanding of the data's context and content. In the second phase, I generated initial codes by

identifying intriguing features in the data and systematically coding them across the entire dataset. Data relevant to each code was then collected, aiding in organizing the data into meaningful clusters. Following this, I gathered all the data relevant to each potential theme, enabling the development of a more nuanced understanding of the data's core messages. In the fourth phase, I reviewed the themes, ensuring they were coherent and accurately represented the coded extracts and the entire dataset. This stage involved creating a thematic map that visually represented the relationships between themes and subthemes. The fifth phase was devoted to defining and naming themes. This was an iterative process that involved continuous refinement of each theme's specifics, as well as shaping the overall story that the analysis conveyed. The objective here was to generate clear definitions and names for each theme. Finally, the sixth phase involved producing the report. I selected compelling examples, conducting a final analysis of these selected extracts, and relating the analysis back to literature. Upon returning to campus in the fall of 2023, the focus shifted towards a literature review and the subsequent writing phase of the research. This period was dedicated to bridging the gaps identified during the initial data analysis.

LIMITATIONS

This study comes with several limitations that should be acknowledged. One of the most significant limitations was the time constraint. The data collection for this study was conducted over a relatively brief span of less than twenty days. With a subject matter as intricate as this one, a more prolonged period of study would have offered a deeper immersion into the community and a more comprehensive understanding. Despite efforts to overcome language barriers through interpretation and translation through my co-researcher, it is possible that certain nuances may have been lost in the process. Also, being an outsider to the community, there may have been

cultural subtleties and unspoken norms that were not fully grasped or observed during the study. One key difference was the way land and borders were constructed. When asking about home, "this area," or other mental conceptualizations of land, I allowed the participant to choose the meaning. Accordingly, questions and answers were not standardized, rather they depended on specific constructs of meaning that were contextually and individually specific. The inverse could also be a limitation; their answer about land goes through my assumptions during analysis. This ethnography will stay as true to the direct translations from Wangyal as possible.

The timing of the study also presented challenges in terms of seasonality. Yak herding practices vary across seasons due to changes in climatic conditions and the availability of pastureland. The limited timeframe of this study may not fully capture these seasonal variations.

Another point to consider is the potential participant selection bias. Participation in the study was carried through word of mouth, and many of the individuals I spoke to, specifically in Lomanthang, were family or friends of my guide. While other community members were included, their representation may not be proportionate. This could potentially skew the perspectives presented. The scope of the study also limits the generalizability of the findings. While the insights provide a detailed account of the practices and identity of people in Mustang, they do not apply to other regions due to differences in geographical, socio-economic, and cultural contexts. Due to the focus of the study, certain aspects such as the role of women in yak herding, impacts of climate change on herding practices, and the detailed economic implications of yak herding might not have been thoroughly explored.

Another important limitation of this study involves the issue of anonymity and potential reporting bias. As the data collection was primarily based on in-person interviews, maintaining complete anonymity for the participants was challenging. Given the nature of direct interaction,

there was an inherent potential for participants to alter their responses due to social desirability bias, meaning they might have provided responses they believed I wanted to hear, rather than their genuine thoughts and experiences. In instances where individuals did not explicitly give permission for their names to be used, pseudonyms were employed as a measure to protect their identities. This does not, however, eliminate the possibility that participants could be identifiable within the community based on the details of their responses. This could potentially influence the participants' level of candor during the interviews, particularly when discussing sensitive or contentious issues. It is important to consider these factors when interpreting the findings of the study, as they could have a potential impact on the depth, authenticity, and accuracy of the data collected. Despite these challenges, every effort was made to create a space for honesty and openness during the interviews, and to handle the collected data with the utmost care and respect for the participants' privacy.

CHAPTER ONE

ECONOMIC SHIFTS AND CULTURAL CONTINUITY IN JHARKOT

Jharkot is located on a canyon ridge, where the river bends eastward for six miles. As soon as I entered Lower Mustang, Yungdrung, a local contact who had worked with the School for International Training, started calling me hourly during my bus journey to Jomsom. Twelve hours later, I arrived and met with Yungdrung and his friend Wangyal over hot water. They quickly told me that for yak herding, I needed to be in Jharkot, not Jomsom. After discussing this with them, we decided that Jharkot, one of the highest elevation villages in Lower Mustang, would be our first destination. The next morning, Wangyal and I took a small taxi to Jharkot. We carefully navigated around large rocks and debris along the riverbed, switching off and on the gravel road depending on the amount of rocks. Unlike the modern concrete structures in Jomsom, the buildings in Jharkot are made of painted rammed earth, similar to older houses in Jomsom. Situated on cliffs about 1200 feet high, the absence of rushing water from the river below allows dust to kick up, often creating a warm haze. We drove past narrow alleys lined with traditional flat-roofed mud-brick houses with wooden windows and doors. Tibetan prayer flags, or *lung tas*, flutter above, adding vibrant colors to the earthen tones that dominate the landscape. The air is faintly scented with juniper incense, used in daily rituals to purify the surroundings.

Upon arriving in Jharkot, the contrast with Jomsom's lively atmosphere was immediately noticeable. Palgen, the owner of the Himali Hotel, spoke about the effects of migration with a noticeable seriousness, saying, "The young generation prefers to go to the city or foreign countries." He pointed out that this trend has significantly reduced the number of people engaged

in yak herding, which was once a key component of the local economy. This shift away from traditional herding has been described as driven by both economic factors and climate changes affecting the viability of pastures.[9] The hotel itself, adorned with remnants of these pastoral traditions, was proof of these changes. Following Yungdrung's advice and his warning about Palgen's tendency to be overly talkative, entering the Himali Hotel was a surprisingly quieter world. Here, the usual bustle of tourism gave way to a more somber atmosphere as the community faced its changing socio-economic landscape. During a tea session at the hotel, deep conversations emerged with locals who came in sporadically, highlighting the community's challenges and changes. Palgen introduced me to other community members like Tek Bahadur Gurung and Khudup, who told stories of labor scarcity. Tek, for instance, had personally transitioned from yak herding to apple farming, a less labor-intensive pursuit that promised future sustainability.

In Jharkot, the shift from yak herding to agriculture is not merely a response to economic necessity but also reflects a deeper change in how the community interacts with and perceives its environment. This transformation echoes broader discussions on the shifting dynamics between humans and nature, particularly in regions facing significant ecological changes. In such contexts, Kirsten Hastrup's concept of 'nature's end' becomes a metaphor for a radical shift in lifestyle and cultural practices, signaling a move from a dependence on traditional, nature-bound occupations to more sustainable, though culturally different, forms of livelihood.[10] This conceptual shift in Jharkot mirrors a global narrative where communities increasingly recognize the profound impact of human activities on the environment. The local response to

[9] Lama, "Yak Herding Is Vanishing in Upper Mustang. So Are the Yaks."
[10] Hastrup, "The End of Nature?"

environmental degradation and economic pressures illustrates a larger trend where traditional practices are not simply abandoned but are transformed to adapt to new realities. The transition in Jharkot from yak herding to apple farming represents not just an economic shift but a redefinition of cultural identity and interaction with the land.

Figure 2. Horses returning to the oldest part of Jharkot

Tek opted to hire a man from the South of Nepal as a full-time herder, who had no previous background in animal rearing but was physically able to guide the yaks. Khudup also noted a significant shift in the community's herding practices, “no more milking, just check new-born babies.” This change marked a move away from traditional economic and familial activities, primarily because the non-Tibetan herders now employed are not trained in milking *dris*, or female yaks. His adoption of new agricultural methods speaks to a broader trend within the community—a shift from traditional yak herding, which his family had done before, to apple

farming as he stated, "Before a family had [many] yaks, they would do easy to produce milk products. No time now because of farming and apple," illustrating the community's shift in economic focus to ensure sustainability, underscoring the broader trend of labor adaptations within the community.[11]

"Land is useless without people," Palgen remarked, a sentiment that echoed through the village, capturing his worry about the fading traditions and the uncertain future of his community. These changes were not merely economic but were deeply intertwined with the identity and continuity of cultural practices that have defined Jharkot for generations. The tea session continued with Khudup, another elder, describing how the community's younger members are increasingly drawn to urban centers, lured by the prospects of higher education and different lifestyles. Palgen was my first touchpoint to the yak herders in Jharkot, has witnessed significant changes over the years. A native of Jharkot, he once left for Kathmandu in 1988 and spent around 5-6 years in the capital before returning to manage his father-in-law's 70-year-old hotel. Despite his love for his village and its people, he acknowledges the daunting challenges they face, notably the sharp decline in yak herding. In his father's time between 1950 and 1980, they owned 150 yaks, making yak herding a prosperous business. However, over the years, the number of yaks has decreased drastically due to several factors: the younger generation's migration to urban areas or abroad, the scarcity of local herders, and the older generation resorting to selling yaks for meat as it became less economically viable to maintain them.

Given these challenges, Palgen believes this may be the last generation to engage in yak herding in Jharkot. Shifting his focus to sustainability and adaptability, he plans to permanently

[11] Degen et al., "Transhumant Pastoralism in Yak Production in the Lower Mustang District of Nepal."

run the hotel, diversifying its offerings to include products like apricot jam, plum juice, and dried apples. This initiative is supported by a grant of 2.5 lakh Nepali Rupees (approximately two thousand USD) from the Nepali government. Despite the decline in traditional yak herding, Palgen remains optimistic about his future, concentrating on his hotel business and his family, including his wife, mother, and two children who currently reside in Pokhara. His children, aged 13 and 12, haver dreams of moving to Europe, aspiring for a higher standard of living—a common desire among the younger generation in Nepal. Additionally, Palgen is exploring alternative agricultural opportunities such as the cultivation of wild green onion, known locally as *zim bu*, and the red-colored alcanet root, recognizing that poultry and agro-farming could be more viable alternatives to the labor-intensive yak herding. In Jharkot, while the land is plentiful, its value hinges on the presence of people to cultivate and care for it, echoing Palgen's earlier sentiment about the importance of human presence to render the land useful.

Continuing our conversation, I inquired about the whereabouts of the yak herders. Palgen corrected me, explaining that now there was only one herder for the entire village. There were not enough yaks anymore to have multiple groups of herders, he explained to me. This was a significant shift; all yak owners in Jharkot had pooled their resources to hire a single man from the south to manage what remained of the herds. All of the yak owners I spoke with were ethnically Tibetan and had inherited the trade from their parents. Remarkably, they were the first generation in their families not to herd themselves. Instead, one managed his father's tourist hotel, while the others had turned to primarily farming apples. This shift illustrated a broader trend seen in the region, where traditional herding was giving way to other forms of livelihood. For instance, Manang, a village to the south of Jharkot, was renowned for its apples. The local tourist market, concentrated around this fact, featured inns with names incorporating apple-

related puns. As I had driven up through lower Mustang, I noticed the density of apple orchards decline amid the sand and dirt. Occasionally, however, I would see a lush patch of trees and flowers, typically encased within small rock walls, marking the orchard boundaries. In Jharkot, perched on the ridge of the great canyon, new green patches adorned the earthen landscape we looked out across.

As our discussion about finding the yak herder continued, Palgen occasionally checked in with Tek and Khudup, who were seated across from us in his yard. Amidst the conversation, Palgen was busy fixing some broken toilets he had purchased; for now, he had draped cloth and yak fur over the lids to serve as makeshift chairs. The group reached a consensus that our herder was located a ridge away, pointing southeast towards the large white peak of Thorang La, home to the highest elevation pass in the world. Following our discussions with Palgen, Tek, and Khudup, the rest of my time in the village was spent observing and visiting local religious sites. The visible work began in the evenings, marking a transition from the silence of day to bustling roads filled with animals. The livestock were herded back to their homes, with the hired herders making sure the pooled herd split off to their respective owners. Between the horses and sheep, villagers moved about briskly, attending to their various tasks. Most woman carried both babies in their arms and sacks on their backs. Two young boys followed the horse herder, darting back and forth brandishing a *ho to*—a local weapon for warding off wild animals or in this case, rearing them.

The next morning, we found ourselves in a meeting hall where traveling monks had congregated for a *puja*, an offering ceremony that began at 8 am and was set to continue until the following day. Wangyal shared insights into the religious practices, noting that the presence of a

high llama could significantly shorten the ceremony due to the potent power of their lip movements and breath, which added a profound spiritual weight to the rituals. Throughout the *puja*, monks and nuns swayed back and forth, reciting prayers that served as a spiritual shield for the community. A local man with long hair tied back with a bandana and wearing a blue surgical mask moved among the rows, distributing *pu cha*, the Tibetan butter tea, which is a staple in such gatherings. As we sat observing the ceremony, we watched the large doors open and close as people drifted in and out of the hall, some bringing food and tea, others engaging in quiet conversation, while some paused to admire the framed pictures decorating the walls. Despite the snow falling outside, a warm ambiance filled the space, enhanced by the rich, buttery flavor of the tea that lingered on our lips. To prepare for our visit to the solitary yak herder, we packed extra food and a tent, anticipating that his living quarters might not accommodate all of us. Our supplies included spring vegetables, raw chicken, black tea, sugar, and rice for the herder. Palgen also prepared boiled eggs and *pa le*, Tibetan flatbread, for us to eat. The following morning, we began our trek to the ridge. Along the way, we stopped to speak with two horse herders. The horses occupied the flatter lands above Jharkot, which were scattered with small grasses. We continued our journey through the rocky fringes of the area, observing goats as they climbed between rocks to graze.

Upon reaching the ridge and finding no herder, we proceeded to traverse several more ridges, gradually making our way up the mountain. My slower pace eventually led Wangyal to scout ahead for about an hour to locate the herder. He finally signaled to me from afar, and we both walked towards a small house where the herder was staying. The nomadic pasture of

Jharkot, known as *panga* or *riga*, a term for expansive landscapes encompassing mountains and rivers, sat below us as a vast, vertical grazing land that sustained the roaming herds in the area.[12]

Figure 3. A *ghur*, or nomadic house in the Jharkot *panga*

A solitary *ghur* – a small, rustic house – provided shelter for the herder until seasonally shifting for more grass. Once we got to the house, Wangyal suggested that we make tea, assuring us that it would be acceptable since he was a local of the north and the herder was not. We set up camp at the edge of this sprawling pasture, waiting for the herder's return, all the while taking in the serene beauty of the land with the jagged peak rising dramatically behind the herder's house. A corral made of wire fencing sat meters away from his residence, designed to keep the young animals safely contained within its boundaries. This strategy ensured that the mother animals would stay close to the area the herder desired, providing protection and maintaining control.

[12] Sonam and Yungdrung, "Knowledge as Landscape."

Soon, light snow began to fall, and the wind picked up. The snowflakes dusted through the gaps between the rocks as we waited for the herder's return. Eventually the herd and herder gradually made their way back to the house. Their outlines transformed into silhouettes as the light faded. The male yak separated himself, settling in the furthest bottom corner of the small valley adjacent to the house. Meanwhile, the females attempted to dodge their frightened calves as the herder began the task of collecting them and placing them inside the fence. Despite their stocky appearance, the calves were incredibly fast, forcing the herder to sprint and lunge to grab their hind legs or tails. He then quickly came in and told us his story.

Karma Buda Magar, originally from Rukum, has been herding yaks for one year. He started this job due to problems in his hometown and found work in the current area. Karma misses his hometown a lot, especially his old friends and his wife and children. He has seven children; six live in his village, and one resides in Jharkot. Karma has a diverse occupational background, having served in the Maoist army for nine years. He told us he fought for rights and was happy during that time. However, he faced challenges while being away from his family. For Karma, home is his family, and he considers any place he lives to be his home. He likes the villagers in his current area and finds them friendly. He enjoys the land and the view of the snow mountains, which is different from his hometown. Although he is comfortable now, he is uncertain about the future. Karma plans to return to his village in about eight months, provided the yak owner's son takes his place. Before herding yaks, Karma herded goats and sheep for 21 years in his village. He finds herding yaks easier, as he does not have to milk them.

He shared how he enjoys walking around the mountains of Jharkot, noting that the hills remind him of his village in Rukum. This connection to the landscape has helped him integrate

into the local community, where his work as a yak herder is highly appreciated. He has successfully ensured the survival of all newborn yaks under his care. When local meetings occur, Karma communicates his views through the yak owner, who represents him, demonstrating his active but indirect participation in community affairs. He also has the flexibility to take vacations and visit his home village, which helps maintain his ties to his origins. His growing bond with Jharkot's land and people underscores the importance of environmental and social acceptance for the psychological well-being of migrants.[13] This acceptance has been crucial for Karma as he navigates the complexities of his new life, illustrating the broader impacts of migration on personal and community health.

Figure 4. Karma with his *dris* and yaks, behind him the peak of Khatung Kang

[13] Adams et al., "It Takes More than a Village."

The next morning, after breaking down our tent, we started our descent from the mountain. To the right of the yak herder's hill, we noticed many small black and white dots moving about with a man yelling at them. When Wangyal thought the man was not too busy, we approached him to talk about his goats. This man was Nar Bhadhur Sunar. Previously a construction worker, he transitioned to goat herding eight months ago, a change spurred by the need for stable, year-round employment, highlighting a common economic adaptation in the region where traditional livelihoods are often disrupted by seasonal variations and the increasing impacts of climate change.[14] As we sat on a grassy overlook, we watched his goats graze below us. Nar's migration from Rukum to these expansive rangelands was driven by both economic necessity and personal safety concerns; back in his home village, threats from wildlife were a constant danger. "I am very happy, no more forest, in the village there's a tiger that kills people... but it’s easy here," he explained, clearly appreciating the relative safety of his new surroundings. Despite the physical distance, Nar remains closely connected to his family. His wife lives on the rangeland under a three-year contract, and his sons are dispersed—one in Malaysia and another in Rukum. Their communication via phone calls helps bridge this gap. Nar's daily routine involves feeding the goats before releasing them to graze, always vigilant to protect them from predators such as wolves, dogs, and eagles. "I watch closely when grazing," he advised, emphasizing the constant attention herders must devote to their flocks. Our conversation was briefly interrupted as we paused to corral some of the goats that had started to stray. Despite being socially accepted—"They accept me, it's been four years"—he faced barriers to full civic participation. "No, no right to vote," he disclosed with a mix of resignation and frustration, revealing his exclusion from political processes and decision-making in the community, a

[14] Adams et al.

reminder of the challenges migrants face in achieving full integration. As we concluded our visit, Nar expressed his hope to eventually return to Rukum after his contract ends, underscoring his strong connection to his place of origin. When I asked where home was for him, he answered "in Rukrum, this is the working place."

In Arjun Appadurai's work, "Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization," he introduces the concept of "ethnoscapes," one of five -scapes that describe the fluid and interconnected landscapes of global cultural flows. Ethnoscapes refer to the shifting landscapes of people—migrants, refugees, tourists, and others—within the global context. This dimension of cultural flow captures the dynamics of moving groups and individuals across previously rigid boundaries, thus disrupting the traditional notions of rootedness, community, and territory [15]. Applying the concept of ethnoscapes to the context of out-migration and nomadism movement in Mustang presents a theoretical framework to understand the complexities of these phenomena. The patterns of mobility, whether it be the traditional herding practices or migration for education and employment, can be viewed as forming part of Mustang's unique ethnoscape. In the ethnoscape of Mustang, migration and nomadism are not merely movements from one physical location to another; they are part of a complex web of economic, social, and cultural factors that shape and are shaped by the global flows of people, ideas, and resources. This perspective allows us to go beyond a simplistic dichotomy of tradition and modernity, recognizing instead the multiple ways in which global and local, traditional and modern intersect in the lived experiences of the people of Mustang.

[15] Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 48–51.

Out-migration, like Nar's son in Malaysia for instance, can be seen as a manifestation of broader economic and cultural changes in the global context, influenced by the allure of economic opportunities, education, and different lifestyles in urban centers or foreign countries. At the same time, these movements reconfigure the social and cultural fabric of Mustang, impacting family structures, community relationships, and local economies, as well as the sense of identity and belonging. The out-migration, or *chee do,* of young people from Mustang is a phenomenon that has significantly impacted the region. Khudup shared that his three daughters have moved to Kathmandu for education. In the past, people from Jharkot would go to the government school and after completing secondary school go straight to work in the fields. Now there is "lots of change," because most children prefer to "do studies in city [and] foreign countries." He prefers his daughters to stay in school, as he believes education is essential for their future in this new age. Palgen, the hotel owner from Jharkot where the talks with Khudrup and others took place, spoke about the complex interplay between generational expectations, economic challenges, and the opportunity urban and foreign lands that drive young people away from traditional occupations like yak herding.

Palgen experienced his own out-migration and return. His was drawn back by a love for his village and its people. However, he also notes the challenges that come with preserving traditional ways of life in the face of modernization. He mentions that the younger generation often views staying in the village as a sign of failure or dullness, corroborated by Wangyal, preferring instead to pursue opportunities in cities or abroad. This dynamic is reflected in his own family, with his two children expressing desires to move to Europe, influenced by their friends' seemingly higher standard of living and "good jacket[s]." He explains that many of the younger generation prefer city life over herding, causing a decrease in yak numbers. This

decrease is exacerbated by the difficulty in finding herders and the fact that older herders often sell their yaks for meat as they age. Palgen points to the changing economic realities of herding, with the costs of maintaining yaks becoming prohibitive. He mentions that even non-profit organizations prefer to fund cheaper alternatives like goat or sheep herding.

Figure 5. Ridge across from Jharkot village

Migration and local employment in Jharkot are dynamically engaging with both external and internal pressures, leading to significant transformations in resilience and continuity. Through the lens of 'adaptive traditionality,' community practices are evolving in response to these pressures while striving to maintain their core values. Palgen's narrative and those of local herders and community members explain the push towards sustainable economic activities like

tourism and agriculture. This transition not only represents a survival tactic but also signifies a deeper redefinition of the community's relationship with their land and each other, reflecting a deliberate transformation of economic bases to support sustained community cohesion and economic viability. The patterns of migration observed in Mustang—from traditional nomadic pastoralism to seeking opportunities in urban centers or abroad—illustrate a significant change in movement and lifestyle. This migration is not just about seeking economic betterment; it embodies a transformative process where community members creatively adapt their traditional practices in new contexts. These shifts in home and occupation are active constructions of new paths.

CHAPTER TWO

BELONGING TO THE BORDERLAND

In the lower regions of Mustang, such as Jomsom and Jharkot, the cultural history has been built by past generations tethered to the land. The stories shared by herder owners and villagers often revolve around their familial ties to the terrain; their grandparents were born and raised here, providing a deep historical context to the rapid transformations now occurring. The advent of roads and shifting agricultural trends, like the increasing focus on apple cultivation, are recounted in narratives deeply rooted in a landscape that has hosted generations of their families. During my stay in Jharkot, I intersected with a separate but relevant research endeavor headed by Yungdrung, focusing on climate change's impact on the Himalayas. This project highlighted the acute observations of locals who have witnessed three decades of stark environmental shifts—alterations that have disrupted traditional grazing patterns and exacerbated flooding, reshaping the daily lives and economic practices of the community.

As I explored how Mustang dealt with environmental challenges, I found a common theme: rapid changes brought on by climate disturbances. The Himalayas are particularly susceptible to climate change, which has severe effects on the region. Mustang, positioned near frozen alpine lakes, is frequently hit by floods that rush down its rivers, burying villages in sediment.

The reality of climate change in the Himalayas, with rapid melting of ice and increased flooding, echoes global environmental crises that affect indigenous and remote communities around the world. Similar to the Inughuit in the far north, the communities in Mustang are facing

vulnerabilities that challenge their traditional ways of life.[16] These environmental shifts do not just represent a physical transformation; they signify a deeper reshaping of social structures and identities within these communities. As landscapes are altered, so too are the cultural and social fabrics that have long depended on these environmental constants.

This geographic and environmental situation creates distinct pressures for Upper and Lower Mustang, which experience these impacts differently due to variations in elevation and accessibility. Lower Mustang, with its lower altitude, attracts migrant workers from southern Nepal and sees higher tourism due to more affordable protected area permits for foreigners. This influx of outsiders introduces new dynamics into the traditional fabric of the community, often straining the cultural continuity and challenging the locals' connection to their heritage. In one telling interaction, when I inquired about an absentee herder who was not originally from Mustang, the response was poignant: "They say bone and skin (sha) from mother." This metaphor highlights the enduring, though strained, cultural ties that bind these younger individuals to their homeland, reflecting a broader narrative within the community. Wangyal's remark that staying is often viewed as indicative of a lack of ambition—"if people stay it’s considered no good dull man"—further illustrates the internal conflicts between tradition and the pursuit of perceived opportunities elsewhere.

Karma, the singular yak herder in Jharkot, and his story serves as an example of the interplay of these factors. Having moved from a different region, his journey of adaptation is both economic and social. Initially feeling like an outsider, his experience and skills with livestock have not only helped him navigate his responsibilities but have also facilitated his

[16] Hastrup, “The End of Nature?”

integration into the local community. Over time, Karma has come to view Jharkot as his home, representing the dynamic process of migrant adaptation where individuals not only reshape their identities to align with new communities but also strive to maintain connections with their origins. This ongoing narrative of migration and adjustment resonates deeply with the concept of *khora*, illustrating how the movement and shifts within Mustang are not merely about economic survival but are integral to the evolving identity and continuity of its people.

The distinction of environmental and cultural dynamics between Lower and Upper Mustang are two of the three key differences I picked up on as I moved between the regions. The stark elevation differences between Lower and Upper Mustang not only influence their climate and accessibility but also their ethnic compositions and interactions with broader political realities. Upper Mustang, with Lomanthang as its capital, lies in close proximity to the Nepal-China border, placing it directly under the influence of international politics and border security measures. Like the environmental floods that sweep down from the high mountains, the effects of policies and military presence at the border have a cascading impact on the communities closest to it. This proximity to the border brings a unique set of challenges and influences that are less pronounced in the lower regions. In the northernmost villages and *pangas* of Upper Mustang, the constant presence of border patrols and the enforcement of cross-border trade regulations are everyday realities that shape daily life and economic activities. The political tensions and policies enacted at the national or international level trickle down, affecting everything from migration patterns to economic opportunities. These policies often restrict the movement of people and goods, which can stifle economic development or alter traditional economic practices, much like the geographical barriers that shape the climate and land use in these areas.

The military presence can intensify a sense of surveillance and control, impacting the community's sense of autonomy and freedom. For individuals ethnically Tibetan, these dynamics are not abstract political events but tangible daily experiences that influence their sense of identity and belonging. The political landscape, much like the physical one, is a critical element of their environment, influencing how they navigate both their internal community relations and their interactions with external forces. This integration of geopolitical context into the everyday lives of Upper Mustang's residents illustrates another layer of 'adaptive traditionality.' Just as they adapt to environmental changes and economic shifts, the communities in Upper Mustang also navigate the complex terrain of changing political influences, demonstrating resilience and continuity in the face of external pressures.

Figure 6. Nomadic tent in the Chumjung *panga*

The visible changes began as soon as Wangyal and I joined some locals in a Jeep, leaving the valleys of Lower Mustang behind, the topography gradually transformed into a rugged,

mountainous terrain. The way that snaked between Marpha and Naurikot, two Lower Mustang villages, was lush with pine trees casting their shadow over emerald green foliage and the reflective river bed shimmering under the upplight of the sun. During the journey, my guide and others in the jeep stopped several small villages, each with unique charm and character. Samar village, with its red hill tumbling down the west side, Chhusang boasting a colossal orange wall facing the riverbank, and Tiri village, with the gravel on the side of the road resembling a coin pusher arcade game. The hills exhibited an undercurrent of white with vibrant deposits of yellows and reds, creating silhouettes of ridges and peaks when engulfed by cloud shadows.

Along the way, we passed a man on the roadside spinning wool into a fine spool while attentively monitoring his flock of goats and sheep grazing nearby. The jagged mountains indicated the young Himalayan range, with some cloaked only in trees along the ridge line. In contrast, others showcased multicolored stitching between rock and soil, exposed by the ceaseless wind erosion. Approaching Lomanthang, I was met with the town's ancient walls and elaborate ruins emerging from the surrounding barren landscape. The walled city of Lomanthang had a distinctive architectural style, where every house shares one wall with the massive outer wall and two walls with its neighbors. Shared borders cultivate a tightly-knit community, Wangyal explained, where the shared space reinforced a strong communal bond. As we navigated the labyrinth of streets and alleys, we stopped to look at the details of the buildings and the smooth, sun-baked mud walls.

In the kitchen lit only by a metal oven, the Mona Lisa Guesthouse in Lomanthang was my new home for a few days, a perfect hub in between two major nomadic communities of Upper Mustang. As the aroma of *dal bhat,* a dish of rice with lentils, curried potato, and bitter greens, simmered in the background, Yangchen Dolker Gurung walked in, quickly addressed my

host and her baby. Yangchen, a relative of Wangyal who had returned from the United States, appeared only a few minutes after Wangyal called her from our host's phone. He heard from the monks drinking tea across from our bench that she had been working here, and asked our stand-in *amala*, or mother, if she had her phone number. Although cousins, it was news to him that Yangchen was even in Lomanthang or Nepal, but he immediately joked with her that she had not come over sooner when she arrived. Yangchan walked fast and after addressing everyone in the kitchen sat next to me, saying I must be the researcher, and that we must eat first. After she received her first cup of tea and I my second, she suggested we should begin now, looking at me through the steam of her *pu cha.*

Like most of my 'interviews,' my structured list of questions made little sense for everyone I met. Yangchen was different to most I had spoken to since she was young, a recent college graduate, and spoke fluent English. She had recently experienced time abroad in pursuit of education, the topic of conversation for many parents and grandparents in the community. Yangchen's journey had taken her from the early years of education in Kathmandu to the pursuit of higher studies in the United States. She spoke of a trend, almost a rite of passage, where many from her community ventured abroad. The United States represented a land of opportunity, less risky and more promising for women, as her father had advised. After completing her studies at Columbia University, majoring in Business Management and Public Policy, she found employment but always felt a sense of temporariness, a life lived in limbo.

The decision to return to Nepal was less about leaving something behind and more about embracing what had always been there. "It was always there, that I'd come back," she said, her voice steady. For Yangchen, coming back meant being close to her family, being anchored in a

place that feels “homely.” This sense of coming back was not just a physical return but a reaffirmation of her identity. In Lomanthang, she found a home that was both familiar and transformed. She described a sense of odd homeliness, a connection amplified by her grandfather's presence and the memories of her childhood visits. Her work with the Jigme Foundation, an initiative funded by the late king, was more than a job; it was a mission to preserve the culture and heritage of Upper Mustang. From education to health care, from the preservation of the wall art to the infrastructure of monastic schools, her work spanned the breadth of communal needs, binding her more closely to the land and its people.

Figure 7. The rooves of the inner wall of Lomanthang

Her Tibetan heritage was a significant part of her identity. Yangchen spoke of the 8th century, a time when Mustang was part of Tibet, and the first king of Mustang was a chieftain

from Tibet, underlining the deep historical and cultural ties that the region shared with Tibet. This connection was not just a matter of historical record; it was a living part of her heritage, influencing the customs, language, and traditions that were integral to her identity. Despite these strong Tibetan ties, Yangchen also expressed she was a citizen of Nepal, which linked her to this country. This dual heritage highlighted the complex interplay of history and politics in shaping identities. Mustang, once a part of the Tibetan empire, had become a part of Nepal recently. This blend of Tibetan and Nepali elements was evident in Yangchen's sense of self, reflecting a history of migration, political shifts, and cultural integration. Ultimately, Yangchen described herself as "Mustangy," not quite Nepali and not quite Tibetan, belonging to land on the border of the two. This articulation of a 'Mustangy' identity serves as a vivid illustration of Barth's contention that ethnic identities are maintained not through the isolation of a group's cultural features but through the ongoing processes of boundary maintenance.[17] Yangchen's identity, influenced by both Nepali and Tibetan heritages, underscores the dynamic nature of ethnic boundaries, which are continuously shaped and reshaped through social interaction and personal choices. In this context, the concept of being 'Mustangy' represents a negotiation and a reaffirmation of ethnic boundaries that accommodate a hybrid cultural identity, effectively challenging the notion of fixed ethnic categorizations.

Despite the unification of Nepal, Lomanthang managed to maintain its hereditary rulers, preserving the title of Raja with some traditional rights, allowances, and honorary positions. This tradition has remained untouched and passed down through the same dynasty in Mustang for 21 generations. The city is home to the Loba people, who are Mustang's original inhabitants. These individuals, often referred to ethnically as Bhote, are primarily farmers, shepherds, or merchants

[17] Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*.

in high Himalayan areas. Their homes, constructed out of stone with uniformly smooth roofs.[18] The societal structure is comparable to the Hindu caste system. At the base of this structure are the occupational castes, which include Ghara, Shemba, and Emeta, who are blacksmiths, butchers, and musicians, respectively.[19] The rigid structuring of societal roles within Lomanthang can be analyzed through Barth's framework, which suggests that ethnic groups define themselves not merely through intrinsic cultural symbols but through the boundaries that delineate them from others.[20] The distinct roles assigned to each caste not only delineate economic activities but also enforce social boundaries that dictate interaction and social mobility. By maintaining strict social roles, Lomanthang effectively perpetuates a clear definition of community identity, which Barth would argue is crucial for the persistence of these distinct social categories within the broader Nepali state. Above those are the highland nomads, known as drokpa.[21] The middle class is composed of the Phalwa, who often prefer to identify as Gurung. The nobility and royal family, known as Kudak or Bista, reside at the top of this hierarchy.[22]

This hierarchical structure extends beyond residential arrangements. Ghara, often considered as 'outside the wall' and thus of the lowest class, occupy the settlements near the local stream outside the city wall.[23] Historical cultural influences have also played a role in shaping the social structure of Lomanthang, particularly in terms of resource management. In essence, the social structure within and outside the walls of Lomanthang reflects a hierarchical system that, while influenced by historical and cultural elements, continues to impact the livelihood and daily

[18] Pyakurel and Bhatta, "The Interface of Ethnicity, Modernity and Caste," 14–15.
[19] Pyakurel and Bhatta, 15.
[20] Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*.
[21] Lubeck-Schricker, "Health on the Move," 10.
[22] Pyakurel and Bhatta, "The Interface of Ethnicity, Modernity and Caste."
[23] Pyakurel and Bhatta, 15.

interactions of its inhabitants. While trekking back to the walled city of Lomanthang from Chumjung, I found myself on a trail that meandered down towards the river, blanketed beneath the looming shadow of the large white mountain *Karpo* that cradles Lomanthang. This settlement, nestled below the city's heart, prompted my guide, Wangyal, to share the tale of its unique societal dynamics. In the early days of Lomanthang, the robust city walls provided ample protection for the royal family and the city's residents. However, as the town expanded, the population swelled and tourism increased in the 1990s due to the area opening up to foreigners. These walls transformed from a symbol of security to a restrictive boundary as there was not enough land to share. Only several expanding families could secure land bordering the walls, thus continuing to dwell on the elevated terrain.

Figure 8. The Caves of Chhoser, previously occupied by the original peoples of Mustang

Conversely, everyone else had to relocate down towards the river. Wangyal delved into implementing the caste system, a government-mandated framework that effectively relegated those residing near the river to a lower social stratum. Intriguingly, he revealed that the people of Upper Mustang, influenced by their ethnic and geographical proximity to Tibet, a region where surnames are uncommon, had no surnames before the government's decree. When conducting interviews, the majority of individuals did not share their surname. Those from the nomadic area never did. For instance, as a Gurung, he is recognized as a hill person. Yet, the term Gurung encompasses so many regional variations that he often finds himself explaining his specific lineage when people ask. Despite the caste system's influence in Lomanthang, Wangyal conveyed that the current generation does not adhere to it as strictly. The system primarily influences matrimony, with some families still expecting their offspring to marry within their caste, even through love marriages.

From the beginnings of herding and salt trading to out-migration, the meaning of movement has undergone significant shifts. In the present-day context of Mustang, examining the dynamics of border control and its implications is vital. With China exerting more control over the Mustang-Tibet border than Nepal in terms of trans-border mobility and constrained trade practices, the balance of power appears to have shifted.[24] Chinese infrastructure investments and development projects in Mustang, especially those tied to trans-border political economies, actively shape the borderland populations and govern the landscapes through the territorial processes of capitalism and consumption.[25] Mustang's communities, deeply embedded in the trans-Himalayan borderland, are governed by both Nepal and China.[26] Despite the

[24] Mulmi, "Understanding the Modern Nepal-China Border."
[25] Murton, "Roads to China and Infrastructural Relations in Nepal."
[26] Murton, "Bordering Spaces, Practising Borders," April 3, 2017.

majority of Mustang's population holding Nepali citizenship, mostly concentrated in the lower and denser parts of the region, the northern part is culturally and linguistically Tibetan. As cross-border trade and traffic increase, Kathmandu's newly established bureaucratic institutions continually reaffirm Mustang communities as subjects of the Nepali state. The people of Mustang maintain their unique cultural identity while being influenced by multiple states. These dynamics underscore that borderland populations, as exemplified by Mustang, oscillate based on cultural, social, economic, and political practices.[27] With Mustang's location along Nepal's northern border with China, the ongoing transformations in border regimes and transportation networks suggest that Mustang is more central to Nepal than ever before. The external pressures from China's geopolitical ambitions and infrastructure investments represent a significant force in reshaping the ethnic boundaries and economic practices in Mustang.[28] Barth's theory helps explain how Mustang communities navigate these pressures not by passively succumbing to external cultural domination but by actively engaging and selectively integrating new opportunities to reinforce their own community boundaries. This selective integration enables the Mustang people to retain a unique cultural identity while adapting to new economic realities, illustrating Barth's notion that boundary maintenance is an active process shaped by both internal decisions and external forces. In response to the new political–economic dynamics generated by Chinese investments in roads, energy projects, and trade markets between Mustang and Tibet, Kathmandu has renewed its interest in the Mustang borderlands, mainly in the context of international business and state-making opportunities.

[27] Murton, 8–16.
[28] Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*.

In broader terms, road developments and border openings in Tibet–Mustang represent practices of landscape governance and processes of territorialization that are increasingly pervasive along the extended China–Nepal border.[29] The flow of new commercial goods and consumer practices across vast borderland spaces illustrate how both containment and mobility define the complex and modern experience of bordering at the intersection of international boundaries, infrastructure development, and capital transformations.[30]

Throughout the 20th century and into the 21st, Nepal's border management, particularly with India, has been a source of continual tension and negotiation. Issues ranging from blockades and smuggling to more profound disputes over territory have frequently surfaced, reflecting the delicate balance of Nepal's foreign relations.[31] These tensions have been further complicated by territorial claims.[32] In recent years, Nepal's dynamic relations with China have played a crucial role in shaping the country's border dynamics. The evolving geopolitical ambitions of China and the historical influence of Buddhism have influenced Nepal's stance, leading to a realignment of its foreign policy and border management strategies.[33] This realignment has been critical in Nepal's attempts to balance its relationships with both of its powerful neighbors, each exerting significant influence over the region's politics and Nepal's strategic decisions.[34] Today, the history of Nepal's borders reflects a nation constantly navigating new dynamics of regional power politics. Caught between two giants, Nepal's border history is about restricting territories and maintaining sovereignty.

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[29] "The Road to Lo Manthang."
[30] Murton, "Bordering Spaces, Practising Borders," April 3, 2017, 12.
[31] Baral, "Border Disputes and Its Impact on Bilateral Relation."
[32] Bhusal, "Evolution of Cartographic Aggression by India."
[33] Mulmi, "Understanding the Modern Nepal-China Border."
[34] Khanal, "Geo-Strategic Imperative of North-Western Border."

As Wangyal and I left the walls and began our journey northwest, the wetlands surrounding Lomanthang disappeared, and the landscape gradually shifted to the rugged terrain of the yak *panga*. Walking up towards the snow line, the cold wind increased in intensity with every step I took. The same rock formations and small bushes that I had seen in Lower Mustang dominated the landscape here, yet they conveyed a greater sense of desolation and remoteness. As I passed the third ridge, I finally saw the first tents in the distance, hoping they had come two ridges before. Unlike the *panga* of Jharkot, there were no range animals in sight, only the barren landscape that stretched out before me.

Figure 9. Wangyal with baby goats in the Lomanthang *panga*

Sanjung is a grandmother living in Lomanthang *panga*. She resides in a house, a notable distinction as it is the only permanent structure in their nomadic land. We began talking about her life and experiences over cups of tea, providing insight into a lifestyle increasingly threatened by socio-economic changes. Sanjung had resided in her current location for 15 years. Before this, she lived near the Tibet border, deciding to relocate to Lomanthang for better access to food and medicine. In her former location, there were 20 families; only three, including hers, migrated to Nepal, while the rest remained in Tibet. After making this decision, the border became concrete, and neither side was allowed to relocate. She shares her home with her husband, son, and grandchild. Her husband is a yak herder, and her son, after a brief stint in school, has followed in his father's footsteps. Sanjung expresses contentment with her son's decision to stay close to home and contribute to the family's livelihood. Their house, a suggestion from relatives to address heat issues associated with tent living, is an outlier among the yak wool tents of their community. Sanjung acknowledges the expense of building a house as a significant barrier for others. The family follows a seasonal migration pattern: six months in their current location, the most extended duration, followed by three months each in the *sa pa te* pasture during autumn and the *ra ta mo* pasture during winter. Due to the differing amount of yaks each family has, and the additional needs of goats and sheep, Sanjung stays in the summer pasture while the others leave. She shares her perspectives on citizenship, noting that it has limited benefits in her context, but it can be helpful for local voting and receiving old-age benefits. Official documents often fail to fully acknowledge the tentative nature of the intimate terrain of belonging.[35] Her view of "home" is tied to place more than people, signifying a deep connection to her surroundings. Sanjung's life reflects change, as she owns a tent from China for the other

[35] Craig, *The Ends of Kinship*, 119.

two pastures, contrasting to traditional yak wool tents, yet she continues the conventional practice of yak herding.

The dichotomy between semi-nomadic and stationary lifestyles shapes the sense of belonging and identity among the Tibetan and Himalayan communities here. The narrative of Sanjung, living in a house amidst the nomadic terrain, exemplifies the balance between mobility and rootedness. Her lifestyle is both stationary and migratory, an example of how nomadism adapts to socio-economic changes. Generational dynamics within these communities further illuminate the ongoing transformation. Sanjung's son, choosing to follow the yak herding tradition after his educational opportunities, represents the individual and recently overlooked nuance of the future of yak herding.

The concept of statelessness and the dual influence of Nepal and China in these borderlands complicates traditional notions of belonging, highlighting the fluidity and complexity of identity in Mustang. The impact of Chinese investments and shifting border control dynamics in Mustang signifies a significant transformation in the region's socio-economic landscape. These external forces alter physical terrains and redefine cultural and economic interactions within the community.

CHAPTER THREE

YOUTH MIGRATION AND IDENTITY IN UPPER MUSTANG

In Upper Mustang, the notion of home was both challenged and reaffirmed by the youth and their families. Parents in Upper Mustang spoke about outmigration with a dual sense of inevitability and loss. They recounted how the younger generation, though steeped in the customs and stories of their elders, were increasingly drawn to the opportunities in the south of Nepal or abroad. The attraction of urban centers and foreign countries reflects not only the aspirations of the young people but also agency. This mobility, rather than signaling a detachment, revealed a nuanced negotiation of identity. Young people, like Yangchen Dolker Gurung, articulated a profound connection to Mustang that coexisted with their global experiences. Having studied abroad, Yangchen returned with a perspective that was both enriched and rooted, embodying the fluid exchange between Mustangy culture and the wider world. This dynamic, as she described, was less about leaving and more about extending the cultural fabric of Mustang across geographies.

The ongoing adaptations of these communities are not mere responses to external pressures but are proactive engagements that redefine resilience and continuity. The concept of 'adaptive traditionality' is communicated through these stories—where traditional values are not abandoned but are reinterpreted and reinforced in diverse contexts. The stories of individuals like Yangchen resonate deeply with the themes of *khora*, portraying how movement and stillness are interwoven into the very fabric of Mustang's cultural identity. These stories show how the mobility of the younger generation acts as a link between traditional and global cultures, promoting a cultural exchange that is reinforcing.

Figure 10. Yak-wool tent with white *lung tas* in the Lomanthang *panga*

One story that particularly illustrates this theme is that of Karma Wangyal, an uncle of Wangyal, whose experiences reflect the complex forces influencing Mustang's younger generation. As we sat in a dimly lit corner of a bustling guesthouse in Lomanthang, Karma reflected on his life and the evolving cultural landscape of Mustang. He described the economic transitions, "When Tibet was free, farming was supplemented by keeping sheep and goats because it wasn't enough. Then they salt traded. They would go to Tibet, get salt and wool, and trade for rice. But when Tibet was captured, salt trading stopped. Now, we sell spices and trade with Pokhara and Butwal, only rice, which doesn't grow here." He also discussed the impact of tourism that began in 1992 when Nepal opened to tourists, becoming a significant source of income. "Before that, we used to take bags and sell things to tourists camping. Then I decided to make a shop so as not to disturb them." This shift reflects not only economic changes but also deep cultural and personal adjustments. Karma highlighted the contrasts between generations, "My time and the present are totally opposite. Should young people come back to work here? If

they're educated, they should know where to best utilize their skills. Some students said our culture is finished. But absolute change is impossible."

Karma's story reflects a broader narrative prevalent among the youth in Upper Mustang. While they are deeply rooted in their heritage, there is a strong pull towards opportunities that lie beyond their mountainous home. This dual existence is not just about economic survival but also about maintaining a connection to their roots while exploring new possibilities. The concept of 'adaptive traditionality' that Karma and the youth he speaks about is crucial to understanding how Mustang navigates its future. It highlights how traditional values are not abandoned but are reinterpreted and reinforced in diverse contexts. After our discussion with Karma, Wangyal and I continued through village, talking with other local men who represented a diverse cross-section of Lomanthang's community. I had the opportunity to converse with Jigme, the grandson of the late king of Mustang. In the dining room of the Royal Resort, which he runs, we discussed the cultural shifts in Upper Mustang. Jigme has been living in Mustang for seven years after spending significant time in the US where he completed a master's degree in finance. His return was driven by the need to help manage the family hotel, an unplanned career shift from finance to hospitality, indicative of the adaptability often required in Mustang due to its evolving economic landscape. Jigme detailed how infrastructure changes like the introduction of roads in 2015 have altered traditional nomadic lifestyles. Previously, the region was accessible only by horses, and the communities were largely self-sufficient. The opening of Mustang to tourism in 1994 transformed it into a tourist hub, changing economic dynamics and lifestyle options for the local population. He expressed a strong connection to Mustang, anchoring his identity in the heritage and history of his family, which he views with pride. Despite these deep roots, Jigme is acutely aware of the challenges facing the region, such as the lack of employment opportunities

due to its remote location and harsh living conditions, which drive the younger generation to seek opportunities elsewhere. This out-migration has led to a population decline and cultural dilution, which Jigme describes as a "dying culture." Economic and geopolitical factors also complicate the situation. Discussions about potential uranium mining in the area illustrate the tension between development and preservation. Such development could necessitate displacing communities. Jigme's management of the hotel, and his decision to stay in Mustang despite the challenges, exemplify the concept of 'adaptive traditionality'. His story reflects the broader narrative of how Mustang's communities are not merely reacting to external changes but are actively engaging with them to forge a sustainable future. Jigme's experience provides insight into how the mobility of the younger generation, including his own return to Mustang, serves as a form of cultural exchange that does not mean a detachment from traditions but a negotiation of identity where traditional values are both challenged and reinforced.

After an extended stay in Lomanthang village, like in Jharkot, locals pointed Wangyal and I toward the yak pastures again. As we left the walls and began our journey southwest, the wetlands that surrounded Lomanthang disappeared, and the landscape gradually shifted to the rugged terrain of the yak *panga*. Walking up towards the snow line, the cold wind increased in intensity. The landscape was dominated by the same rock formations and small bushes that I had seen in Lower Mustang, but with a greater sense of remoteness. As we passed a third ridge, reminiscent of the underestimated directions from Jharkot, I finally saw the first tents in the distance, hoping they can two ridges before.

Figure 11. Setting up a temporary tent for Sonam's *puja*

We met Lhakpa Ringzen in the first tent we came across, one of several in a small settlement. Lhakpa's life reflects the semi-nomadic traditions of his ancestors, but it's also marked by significant changes. The interview took place inside his tent, a space that was warm from the hearth. Lhakpa talked about his life, which is closely tied to the natural cycles and the needs of his livestock. He shared how deeply his family is connected to the land of Mustang, a connection that goes back generations. The closure of borders with Tibet and new governmental policies have forced changes in their traditional grazing routes and affected their economic strategies. The lifestyle of seasonal migration has traditionally shaped a distinct identity for the Tibetan and Himalayan communities in Mustang. Lhakpa values this deep connection to the land, but he recognizes the challenges faced by the younger generation, who are drawn to urban

centers and foreign countries for better educational and economic opportunities. His daughter was currently living with them but had plans to return to school he noted, expressing both loss and inevitability at these changes. Lhakpa discussed the complex identity negotiations within Mustang's younger generation. While many still engage in traditional practices like yak herding, there is a clear trend towards more stationary lives, which may even lead to permanent urban living. This shift is not about abandoning traditions but adapting them. He accepts that his children might choose careers different from yak herding, potentially in distant cities or countries.

Lhakpa's daughter, Sonam, was on holiday from college in Kathmandu and home with her family. On my last day in the Lomanthang *panga*, I walked with Sonam and her cousin, Kande, in between the tents delivering onions to neighbors. As we walked, Sonam discussed the challenges and choices that define her generation's experience. She spoke about her family's connection to the land, yet also detailed how the younger members of her community are increasingly exposed to and influenced by global cultures. This exposure is not simply a matter of foreign goods like the Chinese candies we snacked on but extends to broader educational and economic opportunities beyond Mustang's borders. This mobility was put on pause during the COVID-19 pandemic, and she walked me to the only ridge with the correct angle to receive service. The year on Zoom gave her time to reconnect with her family but was isolating from the friends she left in Kathmandu. She described this dual existence as a balancing act between maintaining traditional values and embracing new possibilities that the wider world offers. She was uncertain about returning to the *panga* after her degree, but noted that her friends, all Tibetan and from various Himalayan communities, were not in the *panga* but in Kathmandu.

CONCLUSION

Figure 12. Namki and her Chinese tent in the Chumjung *panga*

The transition from historic salt trades to modern tourism and diversified agriculture highlights a community in transition, yet focused on preservation amid contemporary challenges. This exploration of Mustang moves through layers of traditional practices and global influences, revealing a story of resilience and adaptation. In this thesis, I introduce the concept of 'adaptive traditionality,' where the people of Mustang are not merely reacting to external pressures, but actively engaging in reshaping their socio-cultural environment. This adaptability is evident in the community's shift from yak herding to tourism and agriculture, chosen not only for economic survival but also as deliberate strategies to maintain community cohesion and identity. The

economic benefits of these choices are enhanced by a profound respect for the land and the community's historical connections to it, which continue to shape their sense of place and belonging. The mobility of Mustang's younger generation, as discussed in the chapters, highlights a transformative process. This mobility is characterized not just by geographical movement but by a cultural negotiation that maintains strong ties to tradition while embracing global influences. The stories of individuals like Yangchen Dolker Gurung, who returned from the United States, embody this negotiation. They bring back global perspectives that enrich their local communities, as she does by heading art preservation initiatives, suggesting that the future of Mustang will likely intertwine the local with the global.

Reflecting on the different dynamics within Mustang, the concept of 'adaptive traditionality' captures the essence of how individuals navigate their connections to both their heritage and the wider world. Dr. Sienna Craig introduces her work in Mustang as an exploration of "how people live in and through multiple places, about what it means to leave, to remain behind, and possibly to return".[36] The experiences of those who venture out, like Yangchen, and those who choose to stay or return, weave together a fabric of communal resilience that is responsive to both global influences and local traditions. Through this lens, Mustang contains both movement and stasis, each choice enriching the community's collective identity and ensuring its continuity.

[36] Craig, *The Ends of Kinship*.

GLOSSARY

1. lama – teacher of Tibetan Buddhism
2. pu cha – Tibetan butter tea
3. khora – walking around or circumambulating a sacred place or object
4. yak – male ‘yak’
5. dri or dhee or dimu – female ‘yak’
6. puja – worship ritual, spoken prayer
7. amala – mother
8. dal bhat – lentil curry
9. sa pa te – Lomanthang autumn pasture
10. ra ta mo – Lomanthang winter pasture
11. drokpa or dokpa – Tibetan nomads
12. panga – pastoral hills
13. riga – larger pastoral hills with mountains and rivers
14. ghur – nomad house
15. Loba or bhote – indigenous people of Mustang
16. lung tas – literally “wind horse,” Tibetan prayer flags
17. ho to – small whip
18. zim bu – wild green onion
19. pa le – Tibetan flat bread
20. chee do – out-migration
21. rü – bone, patrilineal
22. trak – blood, matrilineal

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