

The Changing Tibetan Buddhist Landscape of Upper Mustang, Nepal

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Photographs by the Author

Introduction

Cultural boundaries follow contours of the human soul. Political borders are jagged and mathematical; drawn with pens as sharp as bayonets. Both are impermanent. The remote Tibetan Buddhist landscape of Upper Mustang, Nepal offers a fine opportunity to

explore these geographic edges. The region and its capital – Lo Manthang – are sanctuaries of Tibetan culture just miles from what the Chinese now call Xizang. Upper Mustang has only been open to the outside world for about twenty years. But that statement, like most things about this arid, far-away place, is not what it seems.

Upper Mustang

In the summer of 2013, my wife and I did a two-week, 130-mile trek north of the Annapurnas in a region called Upper Mustang (Figure 1). This remote, biodiverse terrain, is part of the Annapurna Conservation Area and steps were being taken to protect its cultural and ecological

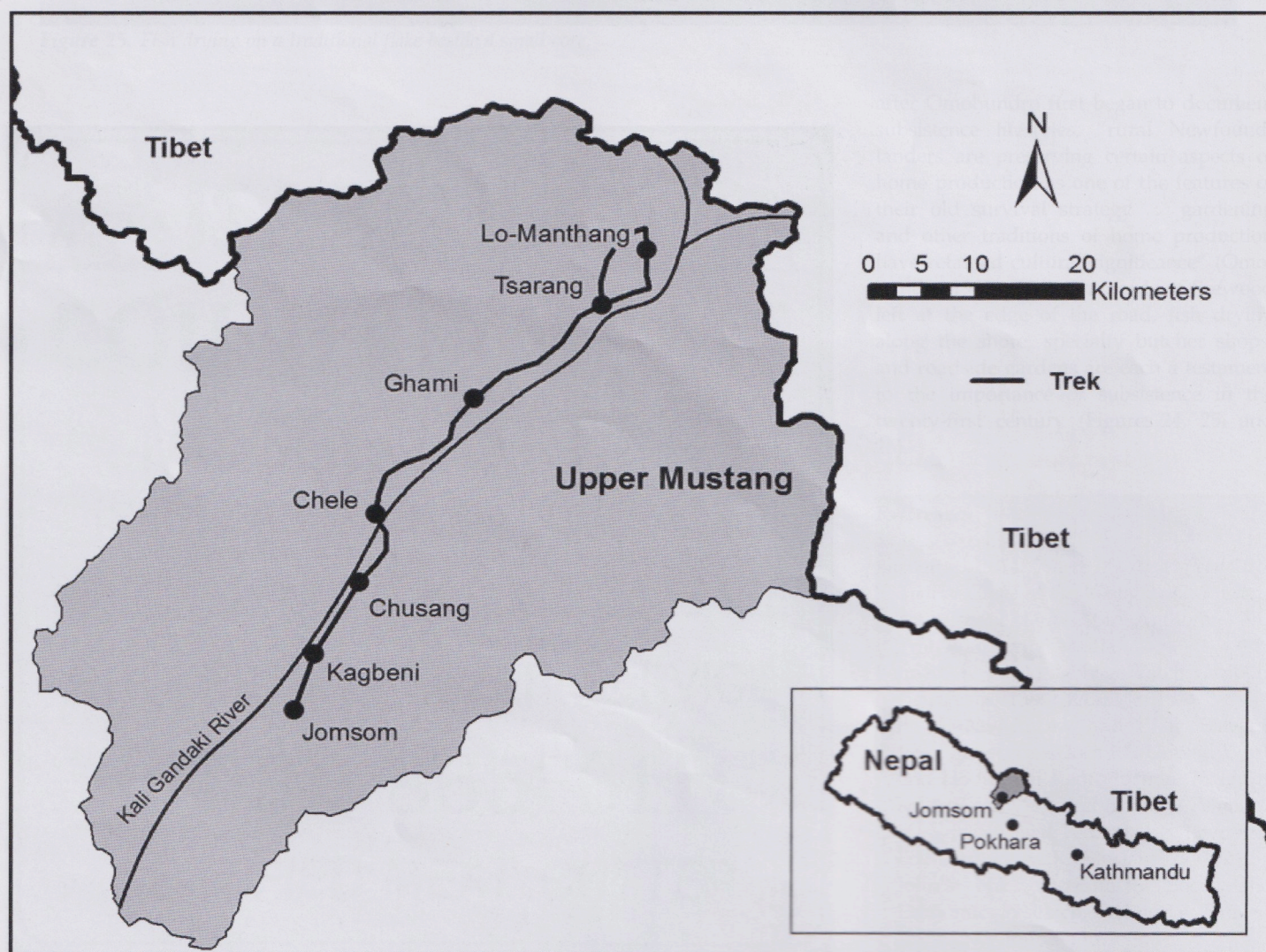


Figure 1. Upper Mustang Region, Nepal. Trekking route shown as a bold line.



Figure 2. The Annapurna Himal: Tangbe oasis village and Kali Gandaki River

wholeness (Bhattarai 2011, Stevens and Sneed, 1997, Peissel 1967). Use was strictly rationed; no more than 2,000 visitors per year (a figure seldom reached due to a \$50 per person/per day fee). Permits and guides were required.

We made it to Pokhara in mid-June during the monsoon. A three-month era of downpours was underway, so Everest Base Camp and other famous treks were ill-advised. Upper Mustang lies in the rain shadow of the Annapurna Himal and gets less than 4 inches of precipitation annually. We would trek in windy sunshine if we could just get there. After two drenched days in Pokhara (2,600 feet), conditions improved enough for Yeti Airlines to chance the short flight up to Jomsom (9,000 feet). As we took off on the puddle-strewn air strip, the Himalayas rose before us, shrouded in pewter-colored clouds. Green fields quickly gave way to forests and with a bumpy whoosh we landed in a

high desert. Buddhist pilgrims worked prayer beads as we walked across the tarmac. The fresh red and white wreckage of a plane littered the mountainside above town. A month before, five people, including one of the child actors from the movie *Slumdog Millionaire*, had been killed in a crash.

The trek felt precious before it even started. After a night at the Mona Lisa Lodge, our group assembled. Our guide was Bikram, our porter was Ramesh, and our horseman was Monik who tended a pony called *Sheto Gorda* ("White Horse"). These young men were Gurung and Thikali – ethnicities common in the region. Bikram and Ramesh were Hindus and Monik was a Buddhist, but they called each other "cousin." Syncretism is the essence of Nepal.

As Bikram explained our route, I was distracted by the staggering, glacier-covered summits rising to the south. Nilgiri

Himal, Khangsar Kang, and Annapurna I (Figure 2). More than three miles of vertical relief. Our trek would stay low following the Kali Gandaki River northward on glacial outwash deposits paralleling the broad floodplain. The name means "Black River," but Bikram said a better translation was "Black Woman" after Kali, the fierce companion of Shiva the Destroyer/Creator. Braided ribbons of dark water flowed across a wide, cobble-strewn channel. Curving ammonite fossils lay here and there. The gorge was far too deep and stuffed with fill to have been formed by this modest discharge. Ice Age torrents had swept thousands of feet of fill into this structural basin, and when the climate warmed, the unburdened river cut downward leaving high terraces on either side. The Kali Gandaki River is older than the Himalayas and has been superimposing its reach onto the rising mountains for more than thirty million years.



Figure 3. Mysterious caves at Chele

The Trek

We hiked out of Jomsom into a dusty landscape with shrubs growing far apart like scattered pillows. Upper Mustang has many plants that look instantly familiar to visitors from the American West: cinquefoil (*Potentilla*), sedges (*Carex* and *Kobresia*), needlegrasses (*Stipa*), honeysuckle, *Delphinium*, and *Spirea*. Each species is a botanical cousin to plants growing from Montana to New Mexico. We passed the first of hundreds of *chortens* – stone Buddhist monuments adorned with red, blue, yellow, green and white prayer flags. A pile of *katas* (cream-colored offering scarves) lay beside them. A herder walked

beside his string of eight horses. The bridles of each short, brown animal were decorated with brightly-colored ribbons.

Our first stop was the village of Kagbeni to get our trekking permits checked. I read the large Annapurna Conservation Area sign. We were entering a Tibetan cultural landscape full of Buddhist monasteries, sacred caves, and silence. Twenty-two forest types grew high on the mountains; at least where wood-cutters hadn't intruded. Endangered species were doing their best to survive here: musk deer, Tibetan Argali (a wild sheep), Impeyan and Tragopan pheasants (Inskipp 1989). Herds of blue deer or *bharal* (really more of a goat) served as the prey-base for the

region's apex predator – the snow leopard. Years before on a backpack trip in Montana grizzly country, I'd read Peter Matthiessen's 1978 account of searching for snow leopards in Nepal's Dolpo region. Then and now my fear was not the presence of the beast, but the absence. Matthiessen saw no snow leopards and they are now as rare as honor.

We walked past a Chinese organic apple farm (dusty and failing) and on to the village of Tangbe, built on a narrow point bar of the Kali Gandaki River. Tangbe, like all the villages of Upper Mustang, is a modest oasis in a profoundly arid terrain. Water from shrinking valley glaciers is nursed through hand-dug ditches onto terraced barley, alfalfa, and buckwheat fields ringed by low stone walls. A woman wearing a traditional striped Tibetan dress and red bandana cut grain by hand, making small stacks as she moved in a slow rhythm. Tangbe's entrance *chorten* was larger than the ones we'd seen; about thirty feet high with a small white dome and wonky crown. We did a brief *kora* – clockwise circumambulation. The stone houses were small and sort-of-square with stacks of cedar firewood stored along the rooflines. Each structure was as plain as the need: a warm dry place to sleep, an iron stove, food, hauled water, family; a place to end your day and spend your life beside a candle with sufficient time for prayers to be chanted and mysteries to be coaxed from the flickering shadows. Kierkegaard warned of the danger of too many possibilities in life. "The sickness of infinitude" he called it. Tangbe and the dozen villages we would see over the next two weeks revealed a rapidly expanding set of choices. A rude road was being built through the valley (Taipei Times 2007). We'd walked on the scraped surface for several miles and passed the resting dozer. Change had arrived and we tourists were the driver. A small restaurant calling itself "YacDonalds" offered Internet access powered by new electric lines moaning in the wind. We spun a row of Buddhist prayer wheels and headed upriver. We reached Chusang as late-afternoon sunlight warmed the sandstone cliffs rising up from the Kali Gandaki. After a meal of boiled eggs, momos (potato dumplings), and popcorn, we slept in a teahouse on narrow cots.

The next morning we crossed the river on a new metal bridge that was much too narrow for vehicles. The road ended for now. A hundred feet above the bridge, three dozen caves had been cut into a soft bedding plane (Figure 3). Each was a complete riddle. The vertical rock wall offered



Figure 4. *Sadhus*: Hindu pilgrims

no possible way up. There were no carved steps or scalable cracks, no hanging ropes or ladders, no ruined scaffolding or way to drop in from above. Perhaps over the centuries the cliff had receded, erasing all evidence of how monks and villagers gained access. Archeologists have studied the contents of these hand-riven caves all over Upper Mustang and they suggest three major eras of use (Finkel 2012). Three thousand years ago, the caves were burial chambers. Desiccated bodies and broken skulls are often found lying within. Two thousand years ago they were used as Bön and Buddhist retreats and storehouses for sacred texts, art, masks, and wealth. Bön is a faith similar to Buddhism that originated

in Tibet before the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama diffused into the region (Kvaerne 1995). A thousand years ago the caves became dwellings – places of refuge from invaders lured into this high landscape by a warming climate. The salt trade between the Tibetan Plateau and India was in peak operation and geopolitical collisions were frequent in Upper Mustang. In those mercantile times, salt was harvested from saline lake shores east of Mount Kailash and hauled by horseback down the Kali Gandaki Valley and on to Kathmandu and the Ganges Valley in India (Matthiessen 1996). Fortunes were made by local kingdoms. The “great cities” of Tsarang and Lo Mantang (still days north of us) achieved

prominence. Monasteries and palaces were built and wealth was counted as herds of horses and stores of gold. Trade goods of all kinds flowed back northward into Upper Mustang and Tibet proper. Salt was a valuable, necessary commodity for food preservation and human health. This gave the region strategic importance for centuries. When India switched to its own sources of salt, Upper Mustang’s economy withered.

Climate change was now withering it more. Beyond Chele, we walked beside hundreds of abandoned fields (Khadka 2011). Nearly all villages in Upper Mustang are located west of the river directly below glaciers that used to provide reliable irrigation water during the brief summer. Each of these now-shrinking bodies of ice lies within east and north-facing cirques. In contrast, on the other side of the valley, the slopes face west. Those glaciers are smaller and located about 2,000 feet higher; their struggle to survive even more acute. The pattern of villages and abandoned fields in Upper Mustang is a compass for navigating the world to come.

We stopped for lunch in the village of Samar – momos and eggs once again – but this time served with red and green chili sauce. Three orange-clad *sadhus* sat outside the teahouse enjoying the sun (Figure 4). *Sadhus* are ascetic Hindu wanderers and the men were on a pilgrimage to a high lake sacred for its association with Lord Shiva. Bikram engaged them in conversation. These holy mendicants came from diverse backgrounds; the son of an engineer, a grown up street kid, a stone mason who sought stronger stone in a life of faith. I noticed cigarette packs in one of their begging bowls. A young man plodded in carrying a seven-foot stack of strapped-together boxes stuffed with cans of Coke, bottles of water, candy bars, potato chips, and toilet paper. The region’s teahouses were supplied by these young laborers who often tote as much as 120 pounds. Samar was surrounded by irrigated poplar trees whose tops were pruned regularly to encourage sprouting. The slender vertical shoots were then cut, dried, and used as vigas (ceiling beams) in stone and adobe houses. For a moment, Samar had the feel of Northern New Mexico, but then I saw a three-foot tall *mani* (prayer) wall made of stones etched with a Buddhist mantra – *Om Mani Padme Hum*. Earthly sacraments to eternity (Powers 2007). The only sounds were a trickling stream and the soft chant of *sadhu*. A lammergeir (bearded vulture)

floated overhead on nine-foot wings, its rusty neck feathers and intense orange eyes glinting in the sunlight, a small bone clutched in its hooked black bill.

Our days pared down to eight hours of trekking up and down passes, watching herders tend their flocks of sheep, goats, horses, yaks, and joapas (a yak/cow hybrid), eating modest meals, and sleeping fitfully in the 12,000-foot air. *Namaste*, herders said as they passed. *Namaste* I'd reply. The word is derived from Sanskrit and means "I bow to you," but so much more (Thurman 1996). The essential message is: "My soul salutes your soul." This greeting is a way to reduce your ego in the presence of another. A kind of verbal prostration. A recognition that the God in me is the same God in you. The practice goes in deep. For months after the trek, I'd sometimes say *Namaste* to grocery checkers or store clerks, always to puzzled smiles.

The road was back. At Syangboche, this rough trace reappeared with the shocking sight of an Indian bulldozer squatting in the gravel. Locals wanted the road because it shortened the travel time from days to hours to get medical care in Jomsom and below. Most welcomed the improved schools, tourism jobs, and Chinese furniture, electronics, and beer that were trucked south from Tibet into Upper Mustang. I consoled myself with the knowledge that this has been a salt road for thousands of years. Globalization was nothing new here, but it was jarring to witness the first blade cut into the land.

We crossed a pass called Nyi La (12,900') and rested. The broad Ghami valley opened up below, a patchwork of irrigated and orphaned fields (Figure 5). An hour later, we entered a small Buddhist monastery where seven monks chanted, hit cymbals, and blew conch shells. Lovely dissonance filled the dark room. One monk was beaming and laughing. In the center of the prayer hall, a colorful sand painting representing a grand stupa was lit by a circle of candles. After weeks of painstaking, grain-by-grain work, the mandala would soon be wiped away and begun again. Impermanence. Back outside, the world provided ample evidence of that principle. Overgrazing of livestock had degraded the hillsides down to cobbles and dust (Raut 2001). The grasses and shrubs were gone. The soil had been washed hundreds of miles downriver into India, perhaps deposited near Kusinara

beside Buddha's modest burial stupa. A local woman blamed the land degradation on an ogress who once ruled the valley. This monster was finally slain by protective deities and the small mud-streaked *chortens* we passed were erected to imprison her liver, brain, and heart. The Mani wall beside them was 200 yards long, the most impressive in all of Upper Mustang (Figure 6). *Om Mani Padme Hum* – was carved into every painted river stone (Dalai Lama 1995). This rhythmic, cyclical mantra is designed to be chanted over and over. It is the silent roaring of eternity, the pure un-crushable diamond of existence, a reminder not to be waylaid by Samsara (illusion), and a deep resonant hum – some call it the "Music of the Spheres" (Garfield 2015).

A day later we passed a fine entrance *chorten* and entered the eerie village of Tsarang (Figure 7). The salt trade had once made it wealthy, but now the place seemed cast aside by time and geography. The abandoned Maharaja's palace was in grave disrepair, its dim interior showcasing the mummified finger of a saint or a sinner. No one could remember. Another mummy hung from the ceiling – a snow leopard stuffed with straw, killed decades before for eating sheep, her spots still vibrant but her teeth brittle and broken (Figure 8).

The Kingdom of Lo Manthang

On a bright dusty morning, we crested a 13,000-foot ridge overlooking the walled "city" of Lo Manthang; population 876 (Figure 9). The ash-colored landscape gave way to green fields. Smiles all around. We'd hiked 50 windblown miles in the past five days and Bikram said it was the King's custom to greet all foreign visitors. His name was Jigme Dorje Palbar Bista; a royal who could trace his ancestry back to Ame Pal, the warrior who founded this Buddhist kingdom in 1380 (Jinpa et al. 2005). We hurried toward the city's forty-foot stone/stucco wall, finished just after Notre Dame Cathedral, dropped our packs in a teahouse, washed up, and headed outside.

Small concrete ditches delivered water for domestic use and irrigated fields of potatoes, alfalfa, buckwheat, and peas. Rough stone walls marked the owner-ships. Higher piles protected small groves of poplar trees from hungry goats, sheep, and joapas. Women followed the passing herds, picked up their leavings, and laid them out on sunny stoops to dry for cook-

ing fuel. Each woman wore a long earth-toned dress with a traditional Tibetan wrap covering her waist and low back (Figure 10). The woolen cloth was diagonally striped in green, red, yellow, and periwinkle. The women's long black hair was tied back with barrettes and covered in cheerful scarves. Maybe it was the turquoise necklaces, but some of them looked Diné or Zuni. Distant cousins as the human genome story suggests (Olson 2002). Up ahead, a group of Buddhist monks wearing maroon robes and tall, fringed hats made strange ceremonial music with cymbals and horns (Figure 11). None of this ceremony was for the tourist's eye. We were the only Westerners. Everyone else was a *Loba* (resident of Lo Manthang). These monks were simply sharing the *dharma* – the teachings (Dalai Lama 1995, Thurman 1996). Buddhism is a universalizing faith and perhaps not everyone living here had found The Middle Way.

Inside the city's high walls was a warren of narrow lanes bordered by houses and shops selling food, kerosene, souvenirs, Lhasa beer, and Chinese faux-Red Bull. Internet access and Sky Mobile cell phone service were available. A café offered fresh cappuccinos if you had the patience to wait for the generator to be fired up. Lo Manthang had electric lines, but electricity was intermittent; a typical story across Nepal where "load shedding" means "no power for hours or days." The King's white, five-story, stone palace opened onto an empty square (Figure 12). It was guarded by huge black Tibetan mastiffs who watched us from a second story balcony. Long strings of prayers flags snapped in the wind along the eaves. We learned that the elderly King was ill and not taking visitors.

Disappointed we walked over to Thubchen Gompa – a 15th Century Buddhist monastery dedicated to Shakyamuni – the Buddha of the Present. Nearby, the Choede Gompa is aligned with Maitryea – the Buddha of the Future. We passed a phalanx of guardian statues and entered the soaring chapel. Luigi Fieni and Samantha Ezeiza greeted us with beaming smiles. These Italian art restoration specialists had been working for years (like others before them) cleaning and repainting the 24-foot tall paintings of Buddha, Green Tara, Avalokitesvara, Manjushri, and other manifestations covering the inner walls (Figure 13). Over the decades, the ram-clay roof had leaked and capillary action drew water through the earthen



Figure 5. Ghami Valley: Irrigated and abandoned fields with long Mami wall in the center



Figure 6. Mami wall painted with sacred colors



Figure 7. Tsarang entrance chorten: Buddhist spiritual monument

walls into the paintings. Pieces had scaled and flaked off. In places, entire panels had crumbled.

The story of this restoration project has been told in several documentaries including *Mustang: Journey of Transformation* (Parrinello 2010). Luigi and Samantha gave credit to the 32 Lobas they'd trained to do this delicate work. The restored areas were awash in meditating figures colored bright red, blue, green and white, but large sections remained where the paintings were gone. Lobas were carefully recreating them based on adjacent patterns and colors. "Not everyone is in favor of this," Luigi told us. "Art historians say it would be best to stabilize what we can and leave it at that." But the King, lamas, and community wanted the damaged figures brought back to life. The King called them: "incomplete divinities" (Parrinello 2010). One of the workers called them: "broken gods." Luigi came up with a compromise. Markers were left beneath the new paintings that can be seen using



Figure 8. Stuffed snow leopard at Tsarang Palace



Figure 9. City of Lo Manthang: red buildings are gompas, white building is the King's Palace

X-Rays. In the future, there will be no doubt about what 15th Century work was and what was created five hundred years later. The residents of Lo Manthang didn't seem to care. To them, Thubchen Gumpa was not a museum; it was an active place of meditation and spiritual practice. What some see as "Medieval art" is really a living part of an active culture. The people of Lo were aware how hard life was for their relatives just six miles away in Tibet. The Chinese hand has been brutal and their grip grows tighter each year. Vital parts of Tibetan Buddhist culture, such as these painted figures, survive in the relative safety of Lo Manthang and adjacent Dolpo province. That night we ate pasta at Luigi's home and toasted the project with glasses of clear local liquor that tasted vile and lovely.

The next morning, we took a long day-hike north through a broad valley covered with lush pastures (Figure 14). Hundreds of short furry horses grazed

contentedly in the warming sun. Most belonged to the King. Our horse – *Sheto Gorda* – got loose and made a run for it. He was born here and the enticement was too much. Monik shouted and dashed off to capture the poor homesick animal. My wife rode "Shetty" many times during our trek, but I only managed a twenty minute experiment, my feet dragging on the ground. To me, Shetty was a perfectly valid emergency evacuation plan, not a proper means of conveyance. We were on a trek, not a trail ride. "Mustang" is the Tibetan name for this region, but it has nothing to do with horses (Craig 2008).

Milky-blue glacial water rushed down several *kholas* (streams) and sub-irrigated the grasses all around us. The remaining flow was diverted onto round barley fields. The ruins of a 14th Century fortress called *Ketcher dzong* stood high on a dusty hilltop (Figure 15). The fortress was now the site of "sky burials." The body of the

deceased is brought to the summit and chopped into small pieces of flesh which are laid out for the vultures. When the Lammergeirs and Himalayan griffons are done, the remaining bones are ground up, mixed with dough, and scattered for the birds to finish off.

For lunch, Bikram found a family willing to cook up some baby potatoes. The price for the five of us was a few rupees, maybe a dollar. I felt guilty, but the mother smiled broadly at the meagre infusion of cash. We spent the rest of our eight-hour hike exploring side creeks, petting friendly kid goats, and singing Beatles songs to shy fowl. The sun was intense, but the temperature felt like the mid-sixties. The air was thin, but transparently clear. We took a break beside a *khole* cloudy with glacial flour. The ice sheets up on the Mustang Himal looked shockingly thin. This site felt like a classroom to sharpen the minds of climate change deniers (Kantipur.com 2013).



Figure 10. Loba – Tibetan Buddhist woman of Lo Manthang



Figure 11. Buddhist monks making ceremonial music

That night we ate frybread, eggs, and noodle soup with people working for the Snow Leopard Conservancy. Their lead scientist, another Nepali named Bikram, was organizing a group of young people called Snow Leopard Scouts (Snow Leopard Conservancy 2015). Tomorrow, they'd learn about reading tracks and scat and how to set up "camera traps" – motion-

sensing cameras designed to get photos of the elusive cats. An American wildlife biologist was holding court with ardent opinions. Eyes glazed over around the dining hall. He insisted that providing financial compensation for livestock killed by snow leopards would fail. I held my tongue. Compensation payments were working around Yellowstone National Park to

mitigate livestock losses to wolves. He also droned on against the restoration of the paintings in Thubchen Gompa – "They're desecrating precious works of art!" I slipped away and went to bed.

Our last day hike took us northeast of Lo Manthang into a narrow canyon named *Sichaphui Khola*. A sheer rhyolite cliff was pock-marked with hand-dug caves. Two young boys – monks in training – ran up to serve as guides. We paid them some rupees and they showed us the way in. The passageways were long, low, and dark; periodically brightened by a window carved in the soft rock. Crumbling ceramic jugs, frayed wicker baskets, and other "genuine" artifacts had been carefully laid out on stone benches. We weren't the first cave tourists through here. The squawk of hand-held electronic games filled the meditation caverns. The boys were playing with devices probably given to them by previous visitors. We climbed carefully out of the cave system and followed the dry wash for half an hour until a sign warned: "Attention Please. Restricted For Foreigner – Way To Tibet." We had to turn back.

Geopolitical Collisions in a "Hidden Kingdom"

Is Upper Mustang really a "hidden Tibetan Buddhist kingdom?" (Maurillo 1995, Peissel 1967). While the remoteness of the region is obvious, the recent "opening" to visitors conveys a message that the place has been lost in time. Road construction, Internet service, Tuborg beer, and the presence of international NGOs suggest otherwise. We met the Prince of Lo Manthang during our stay. His children are attending Brown University and he carried a smartphone.

Overall though, the cultural landscape of Upper Mustang remains robustly Tibetan and Buddhist. The place was literally part of Tibet until the late-18th Century when it was annexed by Nepal (Whelpton 2005). But political geography is a labyrinth of overlapping claims. That "annexation" was really a conquest by "Gurkhas" – a coalition of Hindu tribes from the Himalayas who invaded Kathmandu in 1767 when only that city was referred to as "Nepal" (Hamilton 2011). The British colonial army in India, seeking to control all of South Asia, launched a disastrous, failed attempt to defeat the expansionist Gurkhas. Emboldened, the Gurkhas moved north through Upper Mustang and invaded Tibet, which at that time was under the



Figure 12. Palace of the King of Lo Manthang



Figure 13. Thubchen Gumpa paintings restoration



Figure 14. Horse pastures and barley fields with Tibet lying beyond



Figure 15. Ketcher dzong fortress with Annapurna Himal

control of the Qianlong Emperor of the Qing Dynasty in Beijing. The Chinese emperor had converted to Tibetan Buddhism and sent an army who pushed

the Hindus out. The now-peaceful Kali Gandaki Valley was a war zone. By 1814, the British hold on India strengthened, and they invaded the loosely organized

“Kingdom of Gorkha” (now Nepal) and prevailed in two years. An array of kings followed until a bloody Maoist revolution (1996-2006) resulted in the end of monarchic rule, including that in Lo Manthang. In 2008, the Republic of Nepal was created and is run by a shaky coalition government. Given all these conflicts, changes, and claims, what is this place called Upper Mustang?

Buddhist lamas say they can escape the boundaries of space and time into a dimension called *Dharmadhatu* (Thurman 1996). Here, their pure essence fills the universe and they achieve bliss. In this state, China’s hold on Tibet and their looming presence in Upper Mustang appear impermanent. Mere illusions. There is wisdom and naïve vulnerability in that view. We saw hundreds of Nepali Army soldiers on the trails of Upper Mustang during our trek. They smiled and carried old rifles. *Namaste*, they’d say softly. My



Figure 16. A hidden kingdom?

soul recognizes your soul. Some of the soldiers held hands and chanted as they marched. Upper Mustang and other Tibetan Buddhist landscapes will not be defended by guns.

Following the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1950, a resistance army called the Khampa was formed that waged a guerilla war across Tibet funded by the CIA (Knauss 1999). The Khampas called themselves "Buddha's Warriors" (Dunham 2004). To support their cause, the King of Nepal allowed them to set up base camps in the caves and villages of Upper Mustang. The political border was of little concern to him. The cultural boundary was. However, the Khampas inflicted only minor damage on the Chinese in Tibet, and when the CIA abandoned them in 1969, they turned to banditry to finance their campaigns. This lawlessness helps explain why Upper Mustang was closed to the outside world for so long. The "open-

ing" of the region might be better seen as a "re-emergence."

It will take great wisdom to face the challenges of land and life in Upper Mustang. The Annapurna Conservation Area is a noble intention (Figure 16). Conserving snow leopards and negotiating culture change are abundantly worthy goals. Yet, the tension between internal and external worlds is strong in this spiritual but demanding physical place. The new boy lama of Lo Manthang has much to contemplate. The future King will have much to do. In 2013, UNESCO sponsored a two day symposium in Kathmandu focused "safeguarding the cultural landscape" of Upper Mustang (UNESCO 2013). Social transformations are shifting cultural priorities. Climate change is causing an out-migration of Lobas to Kathmandu where work may be found. India's crops are kept alive by Nepali irrigation water, but that supply is growing erratic and strained. Chinese

ambition has few limits. When the road fully connects Tibet and India, will a trucker culture arise in Upper Mustang with bars, prostitution, STDs, cave raiding, and illegal smuggling of artifacts? Will the salt road become a highway for cigarettes, booze, drugs, and Chinese hegemony? Will Nepal's partly-Maoist government welcome Beijing's advances? If so, what will happen to the Gompas and snow leopards?

On May 14th, 2015, Nepal experienced a 7.8 magnitude earthquake, with numerous large aftershocks coming in the following weeks. The national death toll exceeds 8,000. In Lo Manthang, the King's Palace was severely damaged, forcing the symbolic monarch to take residence in a tent. Across Upper Mustang, numerous Buddhist monasteries and shrines display large cracks. Choede Gumpa was the most severely impacted; the sacred site revering the Buddha of the future. A fierce reminder of impermanence.

The unfolding geography of Upper Mustang remains as cryptic as a Buddhist koan – a riddle that may be solved in many ways or never be solved at all.

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