

## CHAPTER 4

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# Hostile Territory

## *Communal Politics and Sentient Landscape in Ladakh, Himalayan India*

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### Introduction

In December 2014 I was conducting fieldwork in Ladakh, an arid and mountainous region of Himalayan India at the western edge of the Tibetan Plateau and (at that point) part of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. While staying outside the regional capital of Leh, I heard a story from a student originally from the village of Kumdok in the eastern part of the region.

There, he said, near his home, are two small lakes inhabited by *lu* (Tibetan: *klu*), subterranean spirits of water and fertility known across the Himalaya and routinely identified with the Indic *nāga*. While *nāga* are typically represented in Buddhist art as serpentine creatures, and while Ladakhi *lu* are often described as taking the form of worms, lizards, or fish (Dollfus 2003a: 9), the pair living within the two lakes are locally said to take the forms of a yak and an Indian ox (*glang to*). In the brief story the student related, a Muslim<sup>1</sup> man had approached one of the lakes as he made his way on foot from one village to another. Stooping down, he cupped his hands and made to drink when the surface of the water suddenly broke, and the resident *lu* rose up out of the lake in the form of an immense and angry ox. It charged at the man, chasing him away from the water as far as the next village; there, it suddenly crashed down into the earth, turning back to water and leaving behind a new lake in its place.

This account employs several elements that are common to stories from Ladakh and across the Himalaya: it describes landscape features inhabited and embodied by sentient beings who may enrich or punish those they encounter, and a landscape that moves and changes in response to shifting

relations with humans. The description of the moving lake sits alongside accounts of mountains that fly from place to place, lakes drained after battles between Buddhist missionaries and *lu*, and whole valleys sealed up to be hidden from the outside world (Allen 1997; Buffetrille 1996; Samuel 2021). In Ladakh, stories of the capricious entities of land and water often describe them bestowing wealth on households to repay individual acts of kindness—or, alternatively, striking down those that seek to exploit them. There is an underlying violence to many of these accounts, something that reflects the difficulties of life in Ladakh's cold and dry climate. Yet in stories like the one from Kumdok, the violence spills over into the divisions between people.

The student presented his story as an instance of just retribution: the Muslim receiving the punishment he deserved, the *ox-lu* rising out of the water like a bovine avenger. Springs and pools linked to *lu* are routinely associated with prohibitions on the use of water for washing or drinking, and the man's actions demonstrate either ignorance or deliberate disregard for such customs. The story marks him as an outsider and identifies this status with his religious background. The subtext is a commentary on the place of Muslims in Ladakh, with an embodiment of the land itself emerging to drive off an outsider. This is characteristic of stories told by Buddhist Ladakhis to demonstrate the power of local spirits and deities: such stories routinely describe outsiders falling prey to spirits, often simply because they failed to take the necessary precautions and were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Common accounts of migrant workers from Nepal falling ill after encountering unidentified figures on the road at night provide an object lesson in the resident dangers of the Ladakhi landscape, illustrated by figures who cannot recognise the beings that have harmed them. Yet the role of the outsider-victim is regularly given to Ladakhi Muslims instead, reflecting tensions that have emerged between Buddhists and Muslims in the region over the past sixty years. These stories may describe Muslims being chased off by *lu* or struck down by a goddess dwelling in a tree (see below); or a Muslim neighbour struck down with paralysis after meeting a red-skinned *tsan* (*btsan*) spirit near his house, who is only able to overcome his affliction by accepting the help of a Buddhist ritual specialist. These accounts all emphasise the idea—encouraged by political activists—that Muslims are not truly Ladakhi.

Taking the population of the region as a whole, Muslims in Ladakh outnumber Buddhists—though the groups are largely divided between the two administrative districts of Shia Muslim-majority Kargil and Buddhist-majority Leh.<sup>2</sup> Yet in recent years Buddhist activists have mobilised religious affiliation for political ends in a way that Muslims have not, and have increasingly sought to characterise Ladakhi identity as de-

fined by Buddhism. While this programme depends on the exclusion and marginalisation of the significant and long-established Islamic presence in the region, this is rarely acknowledged openly and tends to be carefully obscured in public discourse (van Beek 2003: 294). The politicisation of Buddhist identity rests on an undercurrent of hostility toward Muslims, a subterranean politics that rises to the surface in occasional moments of violence.

This deliberate silence mirrors the attitude of Buddhist activists to the role of the sentient landscape in religious life. While the practice of Buddhism in Ladakh is inseparable from relations with the spirits and deities that embody and inhabit the land, public representations of the religion typically depict it in a sanitised and rationalised form influenced by modernising trends developed over the course of the twentieth century. This has usually involved characterising Buddhism as a fundamentally peaceful, egalitarian, and scientific tradition focused on mindfulness and meditation (McMahan 2008: 5–8). Yet on a practical level, Buddhist ritual in areas such as Ladakh operates primarily as a framework for organising relations with worldly gods and the land (Mills 2003: 346). This was always most evident in historic forms of state ritual carried out by monasteries on behalf of the kings of Ladakh; but local spirits and divine protectors continue to play a central role in daily and seasonal ritual for laity, and social organisation remains dependent on the maintenance of household and village deities. Thus, while Buddhist activists have sought to carve out a political programme based on religious identity, the coherence of this depends on unspoken elements. In stories like the one from Kumdok, these emerge intertwined with the anti-Muslim sentiments that form a key part of Buddhist identity politics in Ladakh.

Anthropologists drawing on discussions of ontology have often sought to characterise concerns with sentient landscape as standing radically apart from dominant Western and colonial modes of being, offering alternative configurations of personhood, politics and relations with non-humans and the land (cf. Ingold 2000: 107–10; Hage 2015: 83, 201–3). Blaser, writing about a conflict between an Innu First Nation group and the government of the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador, has described a clash between separate worlds established on incommensurable grounds: authorities imposed a hunting ban on caribou that disregarded indigenous relationships with the “spirit master” of the caribou (or *atiku*), and the need to maintain those relationships through hunting (Blaser 2016: 545–48).

The existence of the spirit master and the responsibilities that Innu people owed to him were rendered “unrealistic” and “irrelevant” by the “reasonable politics” of the provincial government, which dismissed Innu

needs out of hand. This led Blaser (drawing on Latour 2004) to argue for an expanded understanding of politics that leaves space for both “ontological multiplicity” and dialogue between “multiple worldings” (Blaser 2016: 563). This depends on a “cosmopolitics” that leaves open “the question of who and what might compose the common world”: a space of political dialogue that allows these separate worldings to coexist without presupposing the conditions of reality (ibid.: 548). In practice this involves an emphasis on “homonymic” actions that seek to address incommensurable concerns simultaneously (“not a matter of either/or but of both/and”), sidestepping the need for agreement of a single common ground (ibid.: 565). Yet framing arguments to appeal to another party’s interests—while leaving open questions of contested claims and responsibilities—is simply how ordinary political negotiation works.

Applying this emphasis on ontological multiplicity to Ladakh presents complications. The organisations that claim to speak on behalf of Buddhists in Ladakh do not publicly recognise the worldly spirits and deities of the region, regardless of the continued relevance of these beings to everyday life and their importance for institutional Buddhism, and these groups have adopted their own form of “reasonable politics” shaped by Buddhist modernism and the demands of life in modern India. Yet accounts of sentient lakes, trees, and mountains routinely follow the dominant mode of Ladakhi politics, often displaying the same underlying hostility toward Muslims that characterises activist constructions of Buddhist identity. In contrast to Blaser’s depiction of discrete “worldings,” the political values of modern India and local concerns with gods and spirits flow into and shape one another. Ladakhi Buddhist activists may employ constructions of religious identity that obscure the role of spirits and deities, but Buddhist practice remains grounded in relations with sentient landscape; and the beings that embody this landscape have not been unaffected by the growth of “communal” politics in Ladakh. Alternative modes of being are not sealed off from dominant forms of politics, or immune to the power of divisive political movements; nor do sentient landscapes necessarily align with the interests of the marginalised and oppressed.

In what follows, I will argue that these issues operate on the level of rhetoric and not ontology: that to treat apparently incommensurable representations of religion, landscape, and belonging as radically distinct is to mistake political processes for essentialised cosmologies. I work from the understanding that people inhabit worlds characterised not by the unity of ontology but by what Lambek terms “a plurality of unities,” navigating between incommensurable and contradictory systems of knowledge and modes of being on a daily basis and seeking to resolve this fragmented

state through narrative. The images of life contained in stories about spirits, communicated informally and circulating in rumour, are less ontological artefacts than “the fragile, contingent, evanescent products of conversation and practice” (Lambek 1993: 379).

## Communal Politics in Ladakh

Stories like the one from Kumdok can only be understood in the context of Ladakhi politics, which in recent decades has become increasingly dominated by the role of “communalism”: a broad term used in South Asia to refer to various attempts to define political interests according to ethnic or religious identity, and often associated with violence between communities. Both the growth of communalism in Ladakh and the divisions between Buddhists and Muslims that it has encouraged result from the region’s complicated history with India and with Kashmir.

Ladakh joined the newly independent state of India in 1947 as part of the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, to which it had been forcefully annexed in the 1830s. For a little over seventy years, the state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) maintained a special federal status within India: retaining its own flag, its own constitution, and a degree of autonomy, governed by an elected assembly based in the Kashmiri capital of Srinagar and arguably dominated by the interests of the Sunni Muslim Kashmiri majority. For many Ladakhi activists, however, this situation represented little more than a continuation of Kashmiri colonialism, a view that parallels the attitudes of Kashmiri separatists towards the state of India (van Beek 2004: 195–6). Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Buddhist activists led by the Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA),<sup>3</sup> the most prominent such organisation in the region, agitated for increased regional autonomy. This led to the creation of the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC) as a form of local administration in 1995 (van Beek 1999: 439–40). Yet from the 1980s on, political campaigns began to focus on a bigger goal: the granting of “Union Territory” status to Ladakh, involving separation from J&K. This demand was strongly identified with the ideal of true regional autonomy, to be achieved through freedom from perceived Kashmiri oppression (Aggarwal 2004: 42).

This resentment of Kashmir coincides with Hindu nationalist attitudes towards what was India’s only Muslim-majority state, and over the last few years Buddhist activists have formed an uneasy alliance with the Hindu nationalist *Bhāratīya Janatā Party* (BJP), leading to local electoral success for the BJP in 2014 and 2019. The BJP’s wins in Ladakh resulted largely from their support for the Union Territory demand, with their po-

litical platform centred on the promise to formally separate Ladakh from J&K; but when the government elected in 2014 failed to achieve this, the BJP member of parliament representing Ladakh resigned in protest citing “false promises” made by the party leadership (“False Promises And Unwise Decisions” 2018). Yet in August 2019, the BJP-dominated Indian parliament revoked Article 370 of the Constitution of India and formally set in motion the dissolution of J&K’s special status. Ladakh was to be separated from the state from 31 October 2019 as a Union Territory administered directly from Delhi with no regional legislature of its own, while the regions of Jammu and Kashmir were to remain together as a separate Union Territory. The Indian parliament simultaneously revoked Article 35A of the constitution, enabling non-residents to purchase land in these regions for the first time since 1947 and effectively opening up the lands of the former princely state to settlement by outsiders.

The BJP’s success in Ladakh and the eventual realisation of the Union Territory demand were both founded on the growth of communal politics in the region. Buddhist support for a Hindu nationalist party may be little more than political expediency, but the BJP and activist groups like the LBA share a common antipathy towards Muslims and a willingness to exploit communal divisions for political ends. The LBA have encouraged divisions between Buddhists and Muslims to further their political goals, mirroring wider trends in Indian politics since the 1970s, and have increasingly identified Ladakhi identity and the goal of regional autonomy with communal values. This rose to a climax in 1989, when the LBA extended its agitation in support of the Union Territory demand to a “social boycott” of the largely Sunni Muslim “Argon” community in Ladakh, characterising this minority group as agents of Kashmir; yet this boycott was soon extended to cover Shia Muslim Ladakhis as well after they failed to support the LBA’s campaign. During the boycott, which lasted until 1992, Ladakhi Buddhists were pressured to avoid social contact and intermarriage with Muslims and to shun Muslim-owned shops (Aggarwal 2004: 43). This period was marked by sporadic outbreaks of violence between Buddhists and Muslims, leaving deep scars in Ladakhi society that remain to this day—further exacerbated by a later social boycott enacted in the outlying region of Zangskar between 2012 and 2018 (“Buddhists End 6-year-old Social Boycott of Zangskar Muslims” 2018)—and cemented the association of the Union Territory demand with communal politics. The results of this became particularly visible in late 2019.

The inauguration of Union Territory status was greeted in Kashmir by government-instituted curfews, the house arrest of leading politicians, and violent clashes between police and protesters (“Jammu and Kashmir” 2019; Ghoshal and Bukhari 2019). By contrast, as I witnessed on 1

November 2019, the predominantly Buddhist Ladakhi capital of Leh was dominated by celebrations: the main bazaar was decorated with the flags of India and the BJP, while local groups organised displays of dances and the unveiling of a highly romanticised statue of Senge Namgyal, a seventeenth-century king of Ladakh famous for his patronage of Buddhist institutions. Meanwhile the mood in the largely Shia Muslim Ladakhi town of Kargil was far more muted: local councillors described the 31<sup>st</sup> of October as a “black day” and spoke of their fears that Kargil would be marginalised within the new Union Territory of Ladakh (Donthi 2019; “Ladakh UT formation” 2019). In the months that followed, the initial jubilation of many Buddhist Ladakhis faded to be replaced by fears for the future: by concerns that Ladakhi language and culture would be under threat in the new Union Territory, that outsiders would buy up land in the region to establish tourist resorts, and that the BJP would fail to protect Ladakhi interests. On social media, Ladakhis shared images from a Hindi television programme describing Ladakh as the home of the Hindu god Shiva to illustrate fears of the “saffronisation” of the region: the colonisation of Ladakh by Hindu nationalists, with the imposition of Hindu values at the expense of local religions and cultures.

Whatever happens next, the LBA’s apparent success in achieving their political goal has at least demonstrated the efficacy of communal tactics in modern India. This is starkly demonstrated by the fact that Buddhist activists and Hindu nationalists have been able to set the agenda in a region where the population is around 46% Muslim, while Ladakhi Muslims themselves have effectively been marginalised by their failure to organise along communal lines. This may, in turn, partly reflect Sunni/Shia divisions in Ladakh (van Beek 2003: 304). As the BJP have demonstrated on a national scale since the 1980s, the Indian political system rewards those who successfully appeal to communal interests by enabling them to mobilise religious communities as voting blocs. The rise of communal politics in Ladakh follows these nationwide trends, with Ladakhi Buddhist activists responding to the perception that democracy in modern India requires communal representations of group identity (ibid.: 292–93). This is not a direct reflection of the form of the system itself—which primarily organises Ladakhis into eight “scheduled tribes”<sup>4</sup> that are little more than creations of state bureaucracy—but rather shows political activists attempting to respond to what van Beek terms “the perceived rules of the game” (2000: 549).

Buddhist leaders from Leh have thus been able to claim to speak on behalf of all Ladakh, while the region has become publicly identified with Buddhism and is routinely advertised in India and elsewhere as the “land of lamas” or as a “little Tibet.” Muslim representatives from Kargil have

become increasingly marginalised as a result, despite attempts to reclaim their identity as Ladakhis (Gupta 2013: 44). Yet the association of Ladakhi identity with Buddhism and its construction in opposition to Islam is a modern development, and a representation that works by obscuring historical Buddhist-Muslim relations as well as the very real divisions between Ladakhi Buddhists themselves. Marriage between Buddhists and Muslims has become socially unacceptable, a casualty of the boundary-policing begun during the 1989 social boycott. Both Buddhist and Muslim activists in Ladakh have become increasingly sensitive to perceived threats to communal identity, with rumours of forced conversions periodically circulating on either side. At the same time, the construction of a bounded and homogeneous Buddhist religious identity has involved papering over differences rooted in wealth, class, and caste, in regional divisions and sectarian affiliations.

This representation of a unified Buddhist identity depends on a distinctly modern formulation of Buddhism, one that has been labelled variously as “Protestant Buddhism” or “Buddhist modernism”: terms popularised by the anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere (1970) and the historian Heinz Bechert (1984) respectively. These labels cover a range of movements originating in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia that tend to represent Buddhism as a rationalised philosophy (or “way of life”) rather than a religion; that stress the compatibility of Buddhist doctrine with science, emphasising mindfulness meditation while downplaying ritual, the veneration of images, and apotropaic practices; and that stress a universalist and secularised emphasis on social values of peace and equality over either pragmatic ritual or other-worldly soteriology.

Buddhist modernists tend to represent Buddhism in a laicised form, where the religion is no longer purely the preserve of dedicated renouncers (i.e. monks and nuns) but is something practised by ordinary people on a day-to-day basis (McMahan 2008: 7). This places requirements on laity beyond their normal role of supporting monastic establishments, with this interpretation of a secular vocation transforming non-renouncers into the preservers of Buddhist culture. In Ladakh, this is visible in the LBA’s campaign to persuade Buddhist laity to become vegetarian on the principle that nonviolence is supposedly a core Buddhist doctrine (though most Ladakhi Buddhists, both renouncers and laity, continue to eat meat). It is also apparent in the organisation’s campaigns against abortion and some forms of contraception, on similar grounds, with the LBA circulating the statement that “Abortion is a cause to sever oneself from human rebirth in the next lives” (Aengst 2013: 29–30).

Yet each of these campaigns is “homonymic,” to use Blaser’s term, in that they speak to both modernist ideals and a communal opposition to

Muslims: butchers in Ladakh are overwhelmingly Muslim, so a prohibition on meat-eating would achieve similar effects to a social boycott; similarly, attitudes to abortion are motivated as much by fears of Muslim expansion and a declining Buddhist population as by interpretations of doctrine (Smith 2009: 209–10). The universalist and rationalised representations of Buddhist modernism emerge intertwined with hostility toward the presence of Muslims in Ladakh. As one young man told me in Zangskar in 2014, during the early stages of the social boycott there, “Buddhism is peaceful, like all religions. Except Islam. Muslims believe they must kill *kāfirs* [i.e. unbelievers].”

### Buddhist Modernism and Sentient Landscape

It is relatively unusual to hear anti-Muslim sentiments expressed as openly as this. Modernist representations of Tibetan Buddhism more usually follow the official line set by the fourteenth Dalai Lama,<sup>5</sup> encapsulated in blandly inoffensive statements that characterise Buddhism as concerned primarily with “happiness” and social harmony or as “not a religion but a science of the mind” (Dalai Lama XIV 1990: 115; Lopez 1998: 184–86). This tendency is especially pronounced in representations aimed at non-Tibetan audiences, but it is also apparent in the public reformist campaigns directed by groups like the LBA. In emphasising a rationalised and modernist form of Buddhism, these tend to obscure the major role played by worldly spirits and deities to represent local religion as defined by meditation, the study of Buddhist texts, and the observance of stringent ethical precepts. Yet for Buddhist laity in Ladakh, these are not the defining features of religious practice. While dedicated laity may take on temporary one-day semi-monastic vows (*bsnyen gnas*) on special occasions, and while people often turn towards the reading and repetition of religious texts in their old age as a way of acquiring merit in preparation for rebirth, on a day-to-day basis Buddhist ritual essentially operates as a framework for organising relations with the entities that embody the sentient landscape.

Life in Ladakh is conditioned by the presence of various spirits and deities who inhabit and embody the land, controlling the fragile water supply and watching over houses and villages by a kind of contractual obligation to their human tenants. Each village is linked to its own named deity, the *yul lha*, while every household belongs to a *phaspun* group centred on a shared deity, the *phas lha*, who functions somewhat like an apical ancestor for the group. On a more basic level, the land used for houses and fields belongs to the normally anonymous *sadak* (*sa bdaq*), spirit “landlords” who must be ritually appeased before the start of building projects, while water

and fertility are influenced by subterranean *lu* like the yak- and ox-shaped beings from Kumdok. These figures are all propitiated through ritual, their favour sought to ensure the smooth progress of life, and are usually housed in small shrines constructed by laity: the gods in cubic *lha tho* built from mudbricks or stone topped by sheafs of juniper branches, decorated and renewed annually during New Year celebrations, and the *lu* in small white “storehouses” (*klu bang*) situated beside springs, pools and streams. Just as *lu* inhabit water sources in the immediate landscape, so *yul lha* are sometimes linked to specific mountains that provide glacial meltwater to the villages below. There is an essential ambiguity to descriptions of these figures, who are treated almost interchangeably as the invisible *inhabitants* of the landscape and as the living *embodiments* of mountains, lakes, streams, and even trees (cf. Pommaret 1996: 42). The group identity of Ladakhi laity—organised into households, *phaspun*, and villages—is bound up with these beings, who embody places and the people who live within them.

For the most part, the ritual propitiation of these beings remains the preserve of Buddhist laity. Thus, laity perform the very basic ritual of *sangs* on a daily basis: an offering of juniper smoke made to cleanse the house and appease the *lha* and *lu*, often accompanied by the repetition of Buddhist mantras. Buddhist renunciators do not take part in these domestic rites, or in the annual renewal of the *lha tho* dedicated to the gods of villages and households. Yet monastic establishments have their own worldly protectors who play an equivalent role to the *yul lha* and *phas lha*, watching over Buddhist *gompa* (loosely, monasteries) and residing in their own rooftop shrines decorated with juniper branches. These are deities of the same kind as those venerated by laity, though with a superior status in local hierarchies, and in many cases possess biographies that describe their association with important local families before they became protectors of Buddhism. Such figures remain rooted in the landscape, ideally separated from ordinary agricultural practice but with a role in watching over particular villages and the gods associated with them.

Lay households annually sponsor Buddhist renunciators to perform *skangsol*, a ritual that repairs contractual relations between these divine beings and local people by offering atonement for wrongs committed by laity over the course of the year. Rituals like this place Buddhist laity in a three-pointed network of reciprocity: reliant on the protection and goodwill of worldly deities, lay households support local Buddhist *gompa*; and these *gompa*, in turn, provide ritual practitioners who can maintain and reinforce lay relationships with divine protectors. In practice, to be Buddhist in Ladakh is to be embedded in these networks of reciprocity that bind together laity, monastic institutions, and the landscape itself.

Political action in Ladakh was historically bound up with these forms of ritual practice, with the propitiation or invocation of local deities and the construction of religious architecture used to lay claim to territory, to prevent disaster, or to pacify the land and the people within it. This depends on the understanding that people are embedded in the landscape, tied to relations with non-human beings, and subject to influences emanating from the land itself. Ritual means could thus be used against human threats, and Mills describes local claims that the eighteenth-century *gompa* at Rangdum, situated on a hill before the high pass that separates the largely Shia Muslim Suru Valley from Buddhist-dominated Zangskar, was constructed as a geomantic counterweight (*kha gnon*) against Muslim influences emanating from Kashmir (Mills 2003: 21).<sup>6</sup> Where the story of the *ox-lu* from Kumdok shows the landscape itself rejecting Muslim presence, modern accounts of the foundation of Rangdum *gompa* work on the understanding that the landscape can be used to affect those living within it by ritual means.

Buddhism thus offers a hierarchical framework that harnesses and orders the sentient landscape; and for laity, involvement in Buddhist ritual is more normally connected to these pragmatic concerns than to soteriology or mindfulness. It goes almost without saying that none of this receives any official recognition from either the Indian state or local Buddhist activist organisations like the LBA, with the presence of local gods almost entirely obscured in representations of Ladakh and Ladakhi Buddhism. This silence does not necessarily indicate erasure, however, just as the modernist rhetoric employed by the LBA does not necessarily translate to changes in practice. Ladakhi Buddhist laity continue to annually renew *lha tho* and make offerings to local deities, though the sacrifice of animals to *yul lha*, still known around fifty years ago (Kaplanian 1979: 133) has now almost entirely been replaced by vegetarian offerings. Similarly, while anthropologists have predicted the disappearance of apotropaic behaviour used to divert harmful spirits (Dollfus 2003b: 303), in my experience protective diagrams were still visibly displayed on newly built houses in Leh as of 2019. Despite the irrelevance of local gods to Indian conceptions of Ladakh as a border territory, Indian troops operating on the “line of control” between Ladakh and Pakistan commonly make offerings to the prominent local deity Zangnam before heading to postings on the contested Siachen Glacier.

In other words: although the role of sentient landscape is silenced in public discourse, this does not mean that it is actively marginalised. As Mills has argued in discussing Tibetan refugee governmentality, concerns with ritual practice and relations with landscape are “hidden in plain sight” in Tibetan (and Ladakhi) politics: they remain implicit because

while they provide the basis for legitimate authority and structure the ceremonial processes of governance, they are not the *object* of political activity (2006: 202–3). In practice, modernist representations of Buddhism do not conflict with ritual practice oriented towards local spirits and deities; rather, they regularly appear entwined with one another, with ritual actions aimed at repairing or establishing relations with sentient landscape recast in the modernist language of peace and happiness. This can be seen in various “World Peace” projects undertaken by Buddhist leaders, whereby tantric empowerments and the construction of religious architecture used to pacify the landscape are represented as working for global “peace and harmony” (Mills 2009: 95, 98–100). These claims are not disingenuous; it is simply that they leave the *means* of bringing about their aims unspoken.

Modernist representations thus stand for the reasonable *face* of political action. Just as Ladakhi Buddhist activists employ communal tactics while publicly denying or downplaying any hostility toward local Muslims, so the group identity of Buddhist laity remains fundamentally grounded in and defined by unspoken relations of reciprocity with local spirits and deities. The rationalised and sanitised representations of Buddhist identity that form the public face of communal politics in Ladakh are influenced by these factors, which operate beneath the surface and shape one another. These issues remain absent from public political discourse, as irrelevant to the rhetorical mode of political representation in modern India, yet they remain present and emerge intertwined in popular stories like the account of the *lu* from Kumdok. These stories connect issues of belonging to frameworks of reciprocal relations with the landscape that are usually obscured, yet they recast these concerns in the light of communal interests to portray Muslims as outsiders ignorant of proper behaviour towards Ladakhi deities.

Thus, a story well-known among Buddhists in Ladakh’s capital of Leh describes the Tsugtor Lhachang, a “god tree” (*lha lchang*) inhabited by the local goddess Tsugtor Gyarmo and situated in one of the narrow streets of Leh’s predominantly Muslim old town. One of the branches of the tree grew through the window of a nearby house, leading its Muslim owner to take an axe to it. According to the story, he was immediately struck down by paralysis: the deity punishing him for an act of violent disrespect. As with the account of the *lu* from Kumdok, this dramatizes communal conflict from a Buddhist perspective: the Ladakhi landscape itself lashing out against perceived Muslim intrusion. Yet this portrayal is a consequence of the growth of communal politics since the 1980s and of the deliberate exclusion of Muslims from ritual involvement with *phas lha* and *yul lha*: Muslim intermarriage with Buddhists was not uncommon

before the social boycott of 1989, and many Ladakhi *phaspun* still encompass both Buddhist and Muslim households. In some areas of Ladakh, Muslims actively participated in annual offerings to local deities until relatively recently (Nawang Tsering Shakspo 1995: 186–87). What stories like this demonstrate is not that Muslims are inherently outsiders, but that Buddhist understandings of the sentient landscape of Ladakh—embodied in the gods and spirits of its lakes and trees—have fallen in line with the dominant, communal mode of modern politics in the region.

### Politics, Ontology, and Rhetoric

To return to the issues with which I began this chapter: while it is tempting to characterise concerns with sentient landscape as radically distinct from the politics of modern neoliberal nation-states, or to speak of “ontological multiplicity” and a separation between fundamentally incommensurable modes of being, in Ladakh accounts of local spirits and deities reflect an active involvement with the communal politics of modern India. Ritual relations with the landscape are entangled with issues of Ladakhi identity and with recent Buddhist-Muslim conflict, despite the widespread use of modernist rhetoric that leaves these topics deliberately unspoken; and religious identity in Ladakh remains grounded in networks of reciprocity with sentient landscape that have not remained unaffected by the growth of communalism in the region. The “homonymy” that Blaser describes as a solution to conflicts between incompatible worlds is a normal feature of Ladakhi political action and representation: the LBA routinely promote campaigns informed simultaneously by the apparently contradictory interests of Buddhist modernism and communal rivalry, while Buddhist leaders like the Dalai Lama engage in ritual practices that address modernist ideals through the pacification of the landscape. These actions draw on several conflicting sets of rationales at once, with multiple frameworks of interpretation apparently encompassed within a single rhetorical frame.

Yet it would be a mistake to assume that modernist representations of Buddhist identity are little more than an insincere front. Ladakhi Buddhist activists are not operating solely within the frame of Indian communalism, of Buddhist modernism, or of an underlying Ladakhi ontology established on ritual relations with tutelary deities; rather, they are operating within all of these at once. People routinely move between apparently incommensurable modes of being without confronting the apparent contradictions—between communal hostility and the modernist emphasis on peace and harmony, between a rationalised model of religious identity and the continued reliance on networks of local gods—because these dif-

ferent modes do not operate as separate ontologies or ideologies, and because people do not normally try to work out the full implications of any one mode in isolation. As Lambek has argued in reference to religious and medical knowledge in Mayotte, things “do not fully tie together”: people normally “live happily (as happily as any of us) in a partially fragmented world without being terribly conscious of the fissures.” And it is through narrative, not theorising or world-building, that people seek resolution (Lambek 1993: 379–80).

Thus, in stories about a *lu* rising out of a lake or a tree lashing out against a threat we see communal politics flowing together with a concern for the responsibilities due to the gods and spirits of the land. Like someone trying to reconcile a modernist emphasis on peace and universalism with a fear of Islam, the storyteller begins from the assumption that the different values and entities encompassed by the narrative exist in a single shared world. These representations may not exhibit much internal consistency if examined closely—identifying Muslims as ignorant outsiders while neglecting the continued involvement of Ladakhi Muslims in ritual practices aimed at local deities—but that is only a problem for the anthropologist seeking a unifying, underlying order. Like life, stories are messy and incorporate contradictions. It is a mistake to treat these as referring to self-contained, ordered, and stable realities, the ontologies and cosmologies described by anthropologists, which are little more than post-hoc systematisations of various actions and representations. While Blaser adopts the term “worldings” to escape the static implications of some of these arguments and to emphasise the processual quality of any mode of being, this nevertheless reproduces the two main problems inherent in these approaches: a basic essentialism (cf. Blaser 2014: 51–52) and the issue of ontological closure, whereby different ways of understanding and being in the world are characterised as radically separate realities.

The discussion of cosmopolitics is grounded in these assumptions, beginning with the idea that people normally inhabit worlds governed by abstract conceptions of cosmology, categories of being, and relations between humans and non-humans: Blaser builds on Latour, while Latour, in turn, establishes his arguments on Descola’s attempt to globally categorize and delineate four different ontological modes (Latour 2004: 457–58; Descola 1996: 87–89). This leads directly to the perception that ontological multiplicity presents a problem for political dialogue, and that the politics of modern nation-states necessarily require disputants to acknowledge the limits of a single shared reality. This misrepresents the tangled reality of how people live—regularly moving between incommensurable conceptions of life, identity, and the world—and misunderstands the function of political rhetoric. When Ladakhi activists invoke modernist representa-

tions of religion as the foundation for Buddhist identity in modern Indian politics, this involves a silencing but not an erasure of the role played by the sentient landscape in Ladakhi life. Activists adopt the language and forms of reasonable politics in modern India without necessarily taking on the assumptions and values these seem to imply. As such, political actions are *routinely* “homonymic”: addressing different interests and understandings simultaneously without requiring a common ground. Political rhetoric works by providing a contextual illusion of a defined and agreed common world, enabling dialogue between conflicting interests in the absence of any genuine consensus.

This is not to say that dominant forms of politics have no impact on other modes of being. The hostility toward Muslims that forms the *substance* of modern Ladakhi Buddhist communalism—but which is not typically represented in public discourse—has brought about distinct changes in Ladakhi society and in understandings of identity, social organisation and relations with the land; but this is a consequence of actions like the social boycott and not simply a product of adopting the rhetorical forms of modern Indian politics. Where this has spilled over into accounts of local spirits and deities, the sentient landscape of Ladakh is depicted as reflecting not only communal interests but also many of the values promoted by the Hindu nationalists that form the current Indian government. This is essentially an alignment with dominant forms of state politics, one that contrasts starkly with the situation of indigenous groups described by anthropologists employing the language of ontology. These concern contexts where relations between indigenous groups and settler-colonial states offer clear political dichotomies; yet these approaches simply do not apply to Ladakh, where Buddhist activists invoke colonialism to justify a hostility toward Kashmir that fits neatly with the agenda of the state.

## Conclusion

Buddhist identity in Ladakh remains bound up with networks of reciprocity with the gods and spirits of the land, enacted through ritual action addressed to the deities that embody corporate groups and the various nameless spirits that inhabit the land and water. Yet the role of sentient landscape is typically obscured in the modernist representations of Buddhism and Buddhist identity that play a key part in the growth of communal politics in Ladakh, with Ladakhi identity represented as synonymous with this rationalised image of religion. Ladakhi Buddhist activists have employed communal and modernist representations of identity as means

of achieving their political goals in the context of modern Indian democracy, seeking regional autonomy and separation from Kashmir. Yet in practice this has resulted in growing tensions between Buddhists and Muslims in Ladakh—with initial hostility towards Sunni Muslims later expanded to cover Ladakh’s substantial Shia Muslim population—and in the political marginalisation of non-Buddhist voices. The inauguration of Ladakh’s Union Territory status in 2019 seemingly demonstrated the success of these communal tactics, but the reality of the new situation may turn out to be quite unlike the ideal.

Throughout this chapter, I have tried to show that the adoption of dominant forms of political discourse by Ladakhi Buddhist activists has involved the strategic use of political rhetoric: that the apparent silencing of particular interests does not equate to an erasure or denial of those interests. As with modernist representations of Buddhist ritual, activist campaigns routinely address different goals simultaneously without resolving the contradictions through the establishment of a single common ground. This is possible because people normally move between multiple different understandings of identity, selfhood and the world on a daily basis. People do not normally mark ontological distinctions, but rather inhabit what they assume to be a single, continuous world that encompasses every aspect of life. This is reflected in narrative, as in the accounts of the *ox-lu* of Kumdok or the Tsugtor Lhachang in Leh, where the fragmented experience of ordinary life reaches towards a rough sort of resolution. Here the implications of communal politics emerge combined with the entities that embody Ladakh’s sentient landscape, in narratives where modernist rhetoric is completely absent.

As these stories should make clear, a concern with sentient landscape does not necessarily offer an alternative to dominant forms of politics: in Ladakh, accounts of spirits of deities increasingly align with the hostility toward Muslims that characterises the domination of modern Indian politics by Hindu nationalism. An analysis that points to radically distinct worlds or essentialist ontologies is an awkward fit for this context, where dichotomous characterisations of different modes of being are basically unhelpful. In contrast to accounts from indigenous groups in North America, Ladakhi Buddhist stories depict the landscape siding with power: turning against the marginalised and enforcing a politics of exclusion and division.

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## Notes

1. "Muslim" here translates *kha che* in Ladakhi, i.e. "Kashmiri." This regional term is used to refer broadly (though often inaccurately) to Sunni Muslims, as a counterpart to the equally inaccurate Balti (*sbal ti*, i.e. someone from Baltistan) for Shia Muslims. However, many Buddhist Ladakhis now use *kha che* to refer to Muslims in general without distinguishing between Sunni and Shia.
2. The 2011 census gives a total population of 108,761 Buddhists (with 88,635, or 81%, resident in Leh district) and 127,296 Muslims (with 108,239, or 85%, resident in Kargil district). The total population of Ladakh (both districts) at the time was 274,289: 46% Muslim and 40% Buddhist, with the remaining 14% consisting of Hindus, Sikhs, and Christians ("Kargil District Population Census" 2011; "Leh District Population Census" 2011). The census data does not distinguish between Sunni and Shia Muslims.
3. Or Ladaks Nangpe Tsogdus in Ladakhi (*la dwags nang pa'i tshogs 'du*), roughly "the association of Ladakh insiders." *Nangpa*, literally "insider," is a formal term used by Buddhists in Ladakh to refer to themselves as an alternative to the more common *boto*. It is contrasted with *chipa* (*phyi pa*), "outsider," formerly used to refer mainly to Hindus but increasingly used as a synonym for Muslim. The modernist explanation for these terms claims *nangpa* refers to the Buddhist concern with the mind and other "inner" states, in contrast to a supposedly Hindu or Muslim concern with external ritual and purity. Due to the communal associations of these terms, their use has been discouraged by the fourteenth Dalai Lama.
4. Specifically: Balti, Beda, Bot, Brokpa, Changpa, Gara, Mon and Purigpa. None of these groups really exist as "tribes" in any meaningful sense. As van Beek shows, these categories do not map neatly onto religious affiliation: while the Bot group largely covers sedentary Buddhist Ladakhis resident in the Leh Valley, it also includes Muslims and Leh's small Christian population (1997: 35). The designation of eight official "tribes" omits several other groups recognized locally, such as the predominantly Sunni Muslim Argons.
5. The fourteenth Dalai Lama has also played an active role in opposing communal agitation in the Ladakh region, urging an end to the Zangskar social boycott in 2016 and 2018 ("Buddhists End 6-year-old Social Boycott of Zangskar Muslims" 2018; Maqbool 2018).
6. Similarly, the fifteenth century Namgyal Tsemo temple, situated on a hill overlooking the regional capital of Leh, is described in local histories as having been constructed to invoke divine protection to repel an invading "Hor" (i.e. Central Asian or Mongol) army (Francke 1926: 103).

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