

Book Review

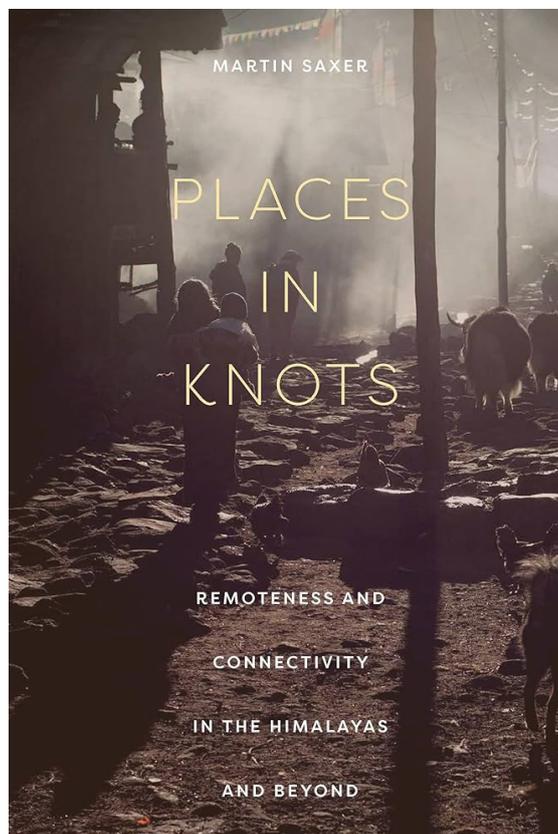
## Review of *Places in Knots: Remoteness and Connectivity in the Himalayas and Beyond* by Martin Saxer

*Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2022. 252 p. ISBN: 9781501766879*

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*Places in Knots* is the result of Martin Saxer's decade-long engagement with communities originally hailing from Walung and Humla, two Himalayan regions in northern Nepal that border Tibet (China). In this book, the Swiss anthropologist brings together several themes he has worked on with these communities since the late 2000s – including remoteness, connectivity, Himalayan routes, and evolving trans-border and transnational relations – into a richly insightful and concise volume. He notes that it has been common, both historically and today, for the communities dwelling in these regions to spend most of their lives outside their village of origin – for business, foraging expeditions, trans-humant herding, monastic activities, and studies. And yet, these communities have a strong sense of place and belonging. In Saxer's words, this sense is 'based neither on a sedentary life in one locality, nor does it stem from a nostalgic imaginary of a homeland fostered in a global diaspora; it is rather derived from the shared experience of repeated movement between a limited number of localities.' (p. 8). These places are tied into knots.

*“Saxer’s approach of intricately weaving together wide-ranging places, times, people, and institutions provides a refreshing and effective form of narrative that helps amplify its message of continuities between the local, national, and global – even in the ‘remote’ Himalayas.”*

- Abhimanyu Pandey on *Places in Knots*

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1, 'Locality and Community', focuses on the making and maintaining of communities between the Himalayan villages (of Walung in eastern Nepal and Humla in western Nepal) and neighborhoods in Kathmandu and New York City. Over the three chapters in this part, Saxer shows that global Himalayan ventures for these people are ways to spatially expand their community which, unlike out-migration, do not necessarily sever bonds with their

village of origin. Chapter 1 follows a few individuals originally from Walung – whom Saxer earlier met in New York – in Walung, as Saxer explores the kinds of intimate ties and conflicts that come up in the tying and retying of places into a knot. Chapter 2 gives historical context and depth to tracing the shifting configurations of remoteness and connectivity in Walung through an engagement with the biographies of elders from Walung. Chapter 3 moves to Humla, where Saxer follows a story emerging from the tension between the opportunities available across the border in the Tibetan town of Purang, and the traditional ties to the village through strict village rule, polyandry, and monastic obligations.

Part 2, 'Pathways', examines relations between the journeys made between the places in knots, the routes these journeys take place along, and the stories, both shaping and evolving from these journeys. In Chapter 4, Saxer conceptualizes Himalayan routes as 'pathways' as a meandering linear site shaped in certain enduring ways by topographical forces, along which life unfolds, and along which exchange, movement, and ambition inter-

mingle. He refutes the Ingoldian distinction between 'wayfaring' (a mode of movement in which the path compels the traveler to pay distinct attention to the land that opens along the path) and 'transport' (a

mode of movement in which the path and the landscape along it become secondary to the logistics of moving people and goods from place to place). Instead, Saxer argues that along Himalayan pathways, wayfaring has always been at the service of transport. Chapter 5 examines the role of the Himalayan roads built from the Chinese border into Humla and Walung in how they reconfigure present-day wayfaring, aspirations, and marginalization. Through the example of the transportation and

distribution of state-subsidized rice and salt in Humla, Chapter 6 analyses distribution as an issue that is simultaneously a logistic problem and a matter of distributive justice in the Himalayas. Through a focus on the relations between distribution, evolving Himalayan pathways, and places in knots, Saxer brings attention to an important facet of contemporary life in the Himalayas that has strangely received little academic engagement.

Part 3, 'Curation at Large', takes a critical look at interventions made in the name of development and conservation in Himalayan regions by the international development industry. Saxer uses the word 'curation' in the sense of its original Latin root, which means 'to cure', to signify the impulse that has guided developmental interventions over the long term across the Himalayas (p. 139). This impulse seeks 'to heal, to remedy, to make better', and at the same time 'to cleanse and preserve' (ibid). Over the first three chapters in this part, he interrogates curation and its fissures in the Kailash Sacred Landscape Conservation and Development Initiative (KSLCDI), a transboundary project (2012-17) managed by ICIMOD, a Kathmandu-based intergovernmental organization. KSLCDI involved border regions of western Nepal (including Humla), western Tibet (China; including Purang), and north-eastern Uttarakhand (India), and interventions therein by ICIMOD's partner institutions (state scientific institutions, NGOs, universities, and the private sector). Chapter 7 unearths substantially different curatorial ambitions of and frictions between the Chinese, Indian, and Nepali delegations at a KSLCDI planning workshop. Chapter 8 shows how the global approaches to development and conservation used in KSLCDI, for all their purported benefits, obscure and partially erase the histories, livelihood strategies, dreams, and ambitions of those they seek to help in the Himalayan borderlands. Chapter 9 highlights how cartographic practices—GIS mapping in the case of KSLCDI—are themselves creative of the reality which they seek to describe. Chapter 10, the final chapter, addresses the representation of Himalayan worlds for distinct audiences as acts of 'translation' which necessarily involve collaboration, in one way or the other.

Translation and collaboration are as much a part of the curatorial practices of the development industry (including a KSLCDI framework I drafted as the lead author at ICIMOD, which Saxer discusses earlier in this book), as they are of the Himalayan communities tying new places and ambitions into their knots, and of scholars such as Saxer who interpret Himalayan worlds for academic audiences.

Overall, *Places in Knots* contains valuable conceptual contributions to the study of not only the Himalayas but also any region deemed 'remote' in today's world. Given the trans-local and trans-national nature of the issues discussed, Saxer's approach of intricately weaving together wide-ranging places, times, people, and institutions provides a refreshing and effective form of narrative that helps amplify its message of continuities between the local, national, and global – even in the 'remote' Himalayas.

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