

Special Section Research Article

Ruins in the Making

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Abstract

What do high Himalayan villages feel like as they shift in form and character through patterns of outmigration and the effects of climate change? How do people wrestle with enduring connections to place, through the pain and uncertainty that accompanies social and ecological change? What does it mean to steward a landscape and attend to sacred geography as well as history through these transitions? These questions are explored in this flash ethnography, set in the village of Samdzong, upper Mustang, Nepal.

Keywords

Flash ethnography; Mustang; climate change; migration; sacred geography

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Monsoon persists in the Himalayan rain-shadow as a gauzy sheath of cloud and drizzle. Snow settles across high mountains, but this settling is tentative, the ground still too warm for it to stick—in late September.

The Jeep sputters and lurches through powdery switchbacks of mountain soil, away from Nyenul toward Samdzong. It has been a decade since I last crested this ridge. Then, it had taken six hours by foot from Monthang. This morning, Gonpo, the Jeep owner, promises forty-five minutes of bump and jostle to reach this half-abandoned village. We climb, descend.

I stare out the window and think about two words—གནས་གཤིས་ and རྣམ་ཤེས་, weather and consciousness—and connections between them. Even in muted light, this place stuns. Intricate bands of cadmium and ochre swirl like marbled paper, then fade into tawny hills. A desiccated river threads like a tourmaline necklace along the canyon

floor, the thirsty body of this earth a clavicle bejeweled.

Gonpo muscles a choreography of steer and shift. My friend Kunzom rides shotgun. They chat about the price of petrol, the state of the road, local politics.

We pass stands of crumbling *chöten*, once grand and gilded cairns now returning to earth. They remind me of bristlecone pines – something kindred with those oldest of trees. Centuries of living can also be a testament to death, a form of dying.

As we inch along the riverbed toward what remains of the village, neither Kunzom nor Gonpo mentions uranium, but its presence is felt. Even on a day of diffuse light, the Chinese spy tower on the northern horizon is a shameless shimmer, a needle piercing the flesh of sky.

Some years ago, Samdzong's water source began running dry. The village was, some

said, a ruin in the making. The community was enticed to relocate to land bequeathed by the royal family of Lo. This area had no obvious water source, but neighboring villages agreed to share. Never mind that Samdzong's people live more for sheep and goat than barley and buckwheat. Never mind that elders refused to leave the village. Perhaps Samdzong was once a robust settlement, but in the decades I've known Mustang, it has never been more than fifteen households. Now six remain.

At a riverbend, Gonpo decelerates and removes his hat. Again, no words are shared, but all in this vehicle know that the female earth deity who dwells here is known equally for benevolence and wrath. She demands propitiation. Had we been on horseback, we would have dismounted and bowed.

Samdzong comes into view. Despite the dearth of water, a handful of ripening fields. Remnants of an earlier settlement tower above the village. I struggle to reckon sedimentary layers of civilizational impulse, at once enduring and eroded.

We walk the village, looking for signs of life. Everything is soaked in rain. A bevy of Himalayan quail emerges from a dwelling—half cave, half home—that juts from a rock canopy. The birds are flustered, as if to say, *You do not belong here.*

We encounter two grandmothers. One tends a basket of dried cheese. The other stacks crisp patties of dung with precision, even as her hands tremble. We establish kinship connections—whose son, whose sister—but resist calls to tea. Hospitality is a bodily impulse here, like breathing, but all involved in this exchange know that to make tea takes effort. We insist we need nothing. The old women acquiesce, their brows furrowed with embarrassment and relief.

Barbed wire rings the threshing grounds outside each home. I ask about snow leopards. *Those beasts have no shame*, answers one grandmother. With fewer domestic herds and mostly elder residents, these animals have shed stealth for brazenness,

fashioning a killing field out of remaining stock. The metal fencing is aesthetically incongruous but practical: a layer of protection against attack. *It is the only thing we can do*, says the other grandmother. *This is becoming their country again.*

We walk among rammed earth, riverstone, the ravages of time. It stops raining. Slate and sandstone prayer walls shine, saturated. Beyond the chiseled grace of Tibetan letters, I notice two stones. Instead of text they offer figures: the three protectors, Rig Sum Gonpo; a vessel holding the Buddha's teachings. The carvings seem at once out of place and perfect. I have never before seen *mani* like these. They remind me that before our practice of rendering thought into abstract associations of shape and sound, we humans had pictures. Meaning etches into us.

As we leave the village, we pause below a row of caves—places from which golden death masks, illuminated manuscripts, and human burials have been recently unearthed by archaeologists. Ours is an uncertain genuflection, here.

A herd of musk deer graze below another array of grottos, undisturbed by our presence. A blue sheep buck stands against a brightening sky. He towers, statuesque and magnificent, until he is gone.

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