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At the Margins of Death: Ritual Space and the Politics of Location in an Indo-Himalayan Border Village

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# at the margins of death: ritual space and the politics of location in an Indo-Himalayan border village

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*I base this article on an event that transpired during a funeral ceremony in the village of Achinathang in Ladakh, India. This incident, which coincided with a period of interreligious conflicts between Muslim and Buddhist communities, led me to question the manner in which margins become sites for the definition and contestation of citizenship and power. Here, I analyze the construction of margins in multiple contexts: in negotiating boundaries between death and rebirth, in coping with and challenging the control exerted by town-based political reform movements over rural space, and finally, in locating the position of the ethnographer in histories and spaces of domination. [death rituals, social space, politics of location, Buddhism, South Asia]*

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On the 48th day after the sky-door (*nam-sgo*) had opened to release the forces of death, on the 48th day after he had collapsed at his daughter's residence in a neighboring hamlet, preparations began in earnest for the funeral feast (*shi-zan*) for Jamyang Chosphele of the devoutly Buddhist Tung-pa house.<sup>1</sup> The rain fell gently, bringing a luster to fields that were gradually regaining their green. It was springtime, the mating season. Flowers were in bloom, sheep were reproducing, the river swelled. It was my second month in the Himalayan village of Achinathang, situated on the Indo-Pakistani border, in the district of Ladakh in North India—a district where both Buddhism and Islam are practiced. I was researching cultural performances, so when I learned that female relatives of the deceased were kneading dough in the Tung-pa kitchen to make fried flat breads (*kab-tse*) for the banquet the next day, I decided (at my hosts' urging) to witness the event. I thought it would help me to make sense of the funeral to which the entire neighborhood had been invited. Cautious not to appear obtrusive, I paused at the main entrance door, the *rgyal-sgo*, while my companion (a daughter of the family with whom I was residing) ventured in at my request to solicit permission for my presence. Nawang, the male head of the Tung-pa household, happened to be sitting in the courtyard between the main door and the kitchen.<sup>2</sup> He was the one who responded to the petition, and his response startled both of us. He yelled at my companion, saying that there was nothing to "see" and that I would bring dishonor to the entire village through my writings. Then, apparently regretting his loud tone or alerted to my presence at the portal by the loud whispers of children, he conceded that we could come in if we wanted to. We did not go in.

I was consumed with regret for my poor judgment and dismay about the anthropological process itself through which I had attempted to make a spectacle out of death and personal grieving. Later, a discussion about Nawang's conduct ensued in the kitchen of Aba and Ama, my hosts. Aba was not surprised by Nawang's behavior.

He insisted that I should not have asked permission but should have entered quietly because, according to local convention, people may walk directly into the house to the inner door of the kitchen, unlike in Leh, the capital town of Ladakh, where they wait at the main door before they are summoned in. Aba argued that asking questions arouses suspicion and provides the host with unwarranted power to refuse. He said that I had created new thresholds for arbitration in my eagerness to avoid trespassing, which only succeeded in highlighting my status as an outsider who could not be trusted. His wife, Ama, on the other hand, thought that circumspection was appropriate because the time for dealing with the dead was potentially charged for both guests and members of the Tung-pa household. She warned that taking photographs of the dead body could cause my film to rot just as audiotaping the laments of wailing women could lead to other mechanical debacles. A few months later, Nawang himself provided a reason for his hostile behavior, explaining that my presence had been suspect because I was positioned as an urban youth at a time when farmers were at odds with youth groups that were restricting the foods to be served at mortuary feasts. The explanatory narratives of Aba, his wife, and Nawang framed my understanding of how thresholds (as represented in this case by a literal doorway) become obstacles for departing souls and barricades for trespassers in Achinathang.

In this article, I illustrate the different planes of experience at which the metaphor of marginality resonates. I begin by exploring marginality in death rituals where symbolic thresholds occupied by the deceased and the mourners represent ideal realms and sociocultural patterns of village life.<sup>3</sup> Second, I trace the manner in which ritual margins become dangerous arenas of liminality in regional power struggles, social spaces that are politically charged. Mortuary rites illuminate the crisis of citizenship and residence as conflicts arise between the eternal and the historically contiguous and between local praxis and religious allegiance. Third, I examine marginality as it is constructed by the process of fieldwork, drawing from anthropological concerns with reflexivity and representation to investigate how borders related to the project of ethnography arise.

Because death marks a symbolic and literal border, death rituals are particularly productive junctures for the study of indeterminacy and multimarginality. My analysis of funerary rites is informed by Clifford Geertz's well-known essay, "Ritual and Social Change" (1973a), in which he writes about the controversy surrounding a funeral performance in Central Java when worldviews and lifestyles, religion and politics, clashed in a system that was traditionally a synthesis of local customs, Hinduism, and Islam. In his case study, Geertz infuses a dynamic perspective into symbolic theories of ritual by paying special attention to the micropolitics of death rituals as they are affected by historical socioeconomic changes. But, as Jamyang's funeral illustrates, in Achinathang it is not just social conditions that impact and alter rituals; death rituals themselves induce horizons that are fraught with ambiguity and subject to mediation. Cultural meanings of death are not static, originary, or fixed in predetermined structural oppositions. Rather, they are themselves composed, authenticated, and even disrupted in lived space.

Furthermore, while I have deconstructed some aspects of my interaction with Nawang to elucidate systems of social differentiation and identification in Ladakhi society, I cannot make claims to total cultural entry.<sup>4</sup> As Geertz himself has noted elsewhere (Geertz 1988), introductory episodes that narrate the linear transition of the ethnographer from fumbling outsider to specialized cultural expert are devices used to assert and ratify the ethnographer's authority. In practice, the discipline of anthropology is fraught with the potential for failed communication as its practitioners attempt

to converse across cultural borders. These failures, according to Kamala Visweswaran (1994:99), "are as much a part of the process of knowledge constitution as are our oft-heralded successes." Ethnography, she advises, must take into account moments of disidentification between observers and their subjects as much as it does points of cultural entry and moments of rapport.<sup>5</sup> It must be "multi-sited," to use George Marcus's (1995) term, delving into multiple facets of location and marginality and placing ethnographers in a world system scenario where they are implicated in histories of knowledge production and not merely complicit observers gaining access to insider worlds.

A multisited ethnography that moves away from what Gupta and Ferguson (1997) call the "hierarchy of purity" can demonstrate that place is emergent and that areas designated as remote or local offer significant precedents for crafting alternative cultural and national frameworks. This decentralizing approach is especially relevant today with the escalation of border disputes between India and Pakistan. Most of post-colonial India's major wars with neighboring China (in 1961–62) and Pakistan (in 1948, 1965, 1971, and most recently in 1999) have been fought in Ladakh. As the frontier becomes more permeable and the line of control is rent by bullets and missiles, there is an even greater attempt by right-wing activists to control purity within the interiors of both nations. Government officials are making conscious efforts to erase hybrid histories and plural cultures by controlling information, redesigning history books, and designating some rituals as more authentic than others. Yet, people in the border community of Achinathang trace identity and define ritual meaning through spatial classifications that defy such strict categorization, undercutting ties of religion or residence at times and reinforcing them at others.

The sections of my article portray various facets of marginality in Achinathang to illustrate how ritual boundaries transform and are transformed by those borders constituted by regional politics and anthropological fieldwork.

### **lived landscapes**

The name of the area now called Ladakh is etymologically linked to the term *ladwags*, "a dwelling amidst high mountain passes." It shares borders with Pakistan, occupied Tibet, and the Kashmir valley. It is a land where Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity are practiced. From the ninth century until 1846, when it was conquered by Dogra rulers from Jammu, the region was an independent kingdom of fluctuating size and fortune. Currently, it is part of Jammu and Kashmir, a state whose name is drawn from two geographically specific locales (Jammu in the south and Kashmir in the north), but excludes any mention of Ladakh, its largest district.

If Ladakh is a border zone, situated on the outskirts of the Indian nation, the village of Achinathang is the quintessential margin land. It is located at a considerable distance from the center of Ladakh, on the peripheries of the predominantly Buddhist district of Leh and the predominantly Muslim precinct of Kargil, a place rarely mentioned in the great histories of empire, rarely debated in the speeches of parliamentary dignitaries, seldom visited by curious travelers eager to glimpse the splendors of the Himalayas. Its marginal location, however, does not lessen its importance. As Anna Tsing (1993) has powerfully demonstrated, places isolated, traditional, and fixed are nonetheless integral parts of national and transnational processes, and people who inhabit them actively reinterpret established categories of centers and margins, insiders and outsiders. The increase of diasporic and communication networks should not erase the fact that people in the most "out-of-the-way" places (Tsing 1993) have been invading, traveling, and migrating for centuries, bringing with them cultural imports of

various commodities and ideologies. Not only do these people resist and oppose incorporation into centralized ideologies, but in the praxis of everyday life they often see themselves as constituting the center of the nation itself. A focus, therefore, on the "inhabited spaces" (Herzfeld 1991:13) of Achinathang is useful in understanding lived contexts where centers are shifting and histories are multiple.

Achinathang is defined by both its social associations and territorial contours. The Ladakhi word for village is *yul*. The village or *yul* of Achinathang is both an imagined community and a social reality, an abstract category and a contextual reference point for various locales (cf., Srinivas 1998). In its narrowest, territorial sense, *yul* means a place where one possesses a house. In a wider context, it can mean a whole region (*Ladakh-yul*) or nation (*Gyagar-yul*, the Ladakhi term for India). It can be the land of one's birth (*skyes-yul*), the land of one's fathers (*pha-yul*), or simply a place where one dwells.<sup>6</sup> Ideally, to be considered a fellow villager (*yul-pa*), a person must be able to undertake the exchange of fire (symbolic of hospitality around the hearth) and water (symbolic of labor reciprocity outside the house), participate in ritual celebrations, and claim a shared history.

Buddhist families in Achinathang often call their village *thang* (the plain), while identifying the larger village of Skyurbuchan, 14 kilometers to the east, as *yul*. Most households in Achinathang trace their origins to an area in Skyurbuchan. They have relatives from that region, owe allegiance to its monastery, and send their children to its high school. Marriage between the inhabitants of the two communities is frequent. Some families in Achinathang are still required to contribute to a Skyurbuchan village fund. Now a hamlet of approximately five hundred people, over seventy-five percent of whom are Buddhist, Achinathang officially falls under the leadership of the headman of Skyurbuchan who has the authority to collect taxes from its landholders.

The inhabitants of Achinathang, however, acknowledge other zonal affiliations besides those with Skyurbuchan, each replete with its own history about how things came to be as they are. Seven kilometers southwest of Achinathang is Hanu, the land of the '*Brog-pa* (people of the high pastures). Across the Indus, toward the west, lies Chigtan, an area that was converted to Shi'a Islam through a gradual process that commenced about four hundred years ago. The people of Achinathang have been influenced by the histories of both these places. Achinathang's spatial configuration also reflects its changes through time. The village has expanded over the years and continues to do so in a descending movement along the mountain. A three-hour walk from the road leads one to its highest settlement, Achina Lungba. A 15-minute walk away from the road (at an altitude of about 9,000 feet above sea level) lies Achinathang's most densely populated section, Gongmathang, founded 200 years ago. In 1991, all of the 27 main houses and 26 branch houses in these two areas were Buddhist.

The period from the 16th century through the 19th century can be regarded largely as a time when Buddhism in Achinathang was consolidated due mainly to the fact that King Jamyang Namgyal donated the entire area of Lower Ladakh to the '*Bri-gung-pa* sect after he was healed from leprosy. But historians like Sikander Khan (1987) argue that Achinathang was actually founded in the ninth century by a king called Ti Sug and his queen, Ganga Sug, who took shelter in a castle on the other side of the Indus from Achinathang when attacked by invaders. They were believed to have been pre-Buddhist "Dardic" rulers who had migrated from a royal lineage in Gilgit, now in Pakistan. Called '*Brog-pa*, their descendents are said to be of Indo-Aryan heritage, racially distinct from those of Tibetan origin.<sup>7</sup> This origin story has its proponents and opponents in Achinathang, but most elders concede that the village was partially inhabited long before the 16th century and the earlier habitation was called

'Brog-pa'i-mos (the grazing ground of the 'Brog-pa), now a segment of Achina Lungba. Oral deeds for some houses in Achina Lungba attest that land there had been purchased in exchange for fields in Hanu. Place names in this area reveal a connection with the Shina-speaking 'Brog-pa people of Da-Hanu. At some point, the 'Brog-pa may have lived with other Ladakhis until they were pushed back into the region of Hanu.

Today, most Buddhist villages have a protective deity (*yul-lha*) who bestows prosperity on its occupants and whom the occupants, in turn, honor with monthly and annual rituals. The village deity (*yul-lha*) of Achinathang is brag dmar lha chen (The Great God of the Red Rocks).<sup>8</sup> Buddhist households take on the responsibility of patronizing the prayer ceremonies (*sangs*) held during the third day of the new year and the rituals performed in the monastery for the benefit of the *yul-lha*. Like the solidarities formed for herding village cattle and goats, gods are tended through a system of household rotation (*lha-res*). In addition, villagers sponsor household prayers by providing sustenance to the monks and by supplying the ingredients required for prayer ceremonies that are held in the temples.

The Gongmathang settlement is divided by a valley from the third major neighborhood Yogmathang, which lies close to the road. Yogmathang was settled about eighty years ago, principally by Muslim migrants from the areas of Chigtan and Kargil with which many residents still maintain strong alliances. Of the 20 households (population 117 in 1991) that lived in this section, 15 belonged to Shi'a Muslim families. Muslim households are responsible for donations to the mosque and the *matam-serai* (house of mourning) in Yogmathang.

During my fieldwork, I observed diverse religious groups and members of different sections in Achinathang interact with each other in myriad ways. Representatives from both religious communities attended weddings and funerals. Economic exchange was especially important for occasions such as wedding feasts or accidental deaths, which produced sudden shortages of barley grain in Buddhist families. These shortages could be remedied by purchasing surplus grain from Muslim households where there were often extra supplies because Muslims did not brew alcohol. Collaboration and collective decision-making were required for operating projects such as the micro hydel electric generator and for monitoring the working of the school system. Years of living in close proximity had paved the way for friendships and alliances between the residents. Although there were instances of friction between the Muslim and Buddhist residents of Achinathang on issues such as the rights to grazing grounds in the Achina Lungba and the prohibition for Muslims on accepting cooked foods from the hands of non-Muslims, cooperation was a necessary part of living together. When differences arose in lifestyles and rituals, people explained these differences on the basis of factors such as kinship, history, and customs of residence and place (*yul-pa'i khrims*), not just the canonical dictates of religion.<sup>9</sup> Thus the village of Achinathang, the geographical backdrop against which Jamyang's funeral was performed, had a layout and history that fostered divergent and intersecting forms of identification that could not be reduced to any single factor.

### the thresholds of death

The funeral feast (*shi-zan*) for Jamyang Chosphel was staged on his family's threshing ground (*g.yul 'thag*) located behind the house where he had lived. The threshing ground was a circular space, bordered with stones, where cattle were driven in circles during the autumn months to trample the freshly harvested and winnowed awns. The sound of rhythmic male voices humming and chanting the *Om Mane*

*Padme Hum* litany in unison reverberated through the air that day. In the evening, the guests arrived: Jamyang's relatives and clients from neighboring villages and male representatives from Achina Lungba, all bearing *chang* (beer) and *tagi* (wheat-bread). The deceased man was precious and moral, they said. They had come for this last farewell, bringing gifts in memory of this expert weaver who had woven so many robes to clothe their bodies. There was so much beer that the keg was filled. A neighbor collected the offerings on the family's behalf, announcing the house names of the donors.

The joking and laughter of the men (who had taken up positions on the right hand side of the threshing ground) merged with the elegy of the widow and her children (seated on the left) and the incantations recited by the astrologer (who sat at the center).<sup>10</sup> More and more people came. The number of *tagi* they bore ranged from four to 16, even numbers since this was a sorrowful occasion. Baskets filled with an assortment of dried black peas, roasted barley grain, apricot seeds, and sun-dried apricots had been laid out. Generous quantities of apricot oil and rice broth blended with stewed chillies and crushed walnuts were handed out to the guests. Finally the *kab-tse* (the deep-fried, flat bread that had been cooked by the women the day before) and *pa-ba*, round balls of barley flour mixed with water, were served by relatives. We were also served one or two big slices of wheat bread, one half-slice over which a small piece of *pa-ba* was applied, and one *kab-tse*. The *pa-ba* was taken from a concoction called *pha gnyen ma gnyen*, symbolizing the synchronization of the male and female principles, the mother's and the father's kin, agnates and affines, meshed and ground together, from which the child, now passed away in his old age, had first emerged. "Generally, this is served on the seventh day. It is the food of comfort after the suffering has abated a little. The people cry give me some, give me a little," observed one guest.

The guests folded the bread, broke off a piece, and dropped it on the floor for the dead person. The food was distributed, people ate, children passed their share on to their mothers when they could eat no more, and mothers collected the remainder of the goodies in pockets or baskets, all the while drinking beer.

As this was a public ritual, I was invited to attend by members of the Tung-pa family. I chose to attend in order to overcome my embarrassment caused by the tense encounter the day before. During the funeral feast, Nawang came up to me and explained, "Funerals are the most extravagant and expensive occasions, costing more than weddings. My brother is dead. That is his wife and those are his children. Today we will eat and feast a lot and give him some, too."

Unlike wedding feasts, which can be postponed for as long as a year, Buddhist funerals have stipulated durations and obligatory expenses because they are associated with a period of ritual pollution that poses a potential threat to the community as a whole. The actions of living people have a lasting impact on the fate of the dead, which must be decided within 49 days.<sup>11</sup> The *shi-zan* marks the transmigration of the soul from death to rebirth during which it detaches itself from its erstwhile existence and assumes a new corporeal form. Anything that goes wrong in this transition can prove harmful to the successful rebirth of the departed and to the sanctity of the living if the soul should be reborn in undesirable form. Reincarnation in the land of gods, demigods, and humans, is considered auspicious (even though the goal of enlightenment is ultimately achieved through deliverance from the worldly cycles of birth, death, and rebirth) whereas reincarnation into the lands of animals, hungry ghosts, and hell is visualized as a lowly, tortuous pit of ignorance.

The interim stage between death and rebirth is called *bar-do*. It is described as a narrow passageway through which the soul squeezes (Evans-Wentz 1957).<sup>12</sup> Bar-do is a liminal, twilight zone, “between and betwixt” two worlds (Turner 1967). During this period, monks and villagers nourish and instruct the soul for its journey toward rebirth. The villagers communicate with the departed, feeding them with food produced in the village, so that they get a sense and taste of that food on their way to the other life. The turmoil of the bar-do stage is recounted as terrifying and hellish images in art, folk tales, and litanies of a text entitled the *Bar-do thos grol* (liberation in the intermediate state). Bar-do is a particularly difficult period because it calls on the living and the dead to accomplish the ideal of detachment from a habitus that is familiar. In everyday life, people liken travel away from the comforts of home to bar-do. In Achinathang, children often sing a song in which a young soldier proclaims the joys of patriotism but also sighs about the forbidding glaciers of Siachen where he has been stationed. Far away from his village, living a life filled with obstacles, he has seen bar-do, the song announces.

The experience of death, like birth, is considered a physical, emotional, and social separation in the Buddhist world. The journey of the dead from the hearth at home to the edge of the village and beyond illuminates the shifting margins of ritual space. The migration of the itinerant soul in the hybrid bar-do stage unsettles quotidian frontiers between persons and nonpersons, insiders and outsiders. The dead person must be weaned away from familiar territory and, until that time, the hearth, the home, and the village are tinged with impurity.<sup>13</sup> Territorial boundaries, where the departure of the dead is moderated, are important sacred and social sites for the community of the living.<sup>14</sup>

The soul or consciousness (*rnam-shes*) of the deceased is channeled out of the body by a highly ranked monk through an opening that he makes in the skull by pulling out some hair. The soul must migrate or “change body” (*pho-ba 'deb pa*) and the first ceremony performed by the monk is to guide and facilitate the transition from embodied existence into an asomatic state.<sup>15</sup> Women begin wailing as the demise of a near relative is announced, broadcasting to the world the virtues of the deceased and the pain they are experiencing. Monks recite verses and perform liturgies to guide the soul through bar-do and propel it to the western paradise, the abode of Buddha Amitabha.<sup>16</sup> The prayers last for several days. Astrologers (*dbon-po*) prepare horoscopes to interpret the signs and the obscurants that caused death. They determine future dates and routes for the dead.

The soul of the dead person lingers in the home for seven days, gradually becoming aware of its condition after the fourth day, when it no longer perceives its footsteps or shadow. The *bdun-tshigs* feast (held seven days after the cremation) marks the soul's departure from the home. The monks execute the *g.yang-gugs* ceremony in the house with the main-door firmly secured from inside to prevent the wealth of the household from escaping with the dead.<sup>17</sup> Suspended between death and rebirth, the soul wanders for 41 additional days in the vicinity of the village. It is at this time that the shi-zan (funeral feast) is held.

Formal political power is in the hands of men in Achinathang, but the shi-zan is dominated by women whose elegies situate the phenomena of death within a complex nexus of social power. Laments (*bshad-pa* or *ngus-mang*) express bereavement through tears and talk, evoking paradoxical states of hierarchy and equality, order and disorder. A woman's advice to an unfortunate dead soul to live and eat well in the afterlife may contain a veiled barb that the deceased person was not well fed or clothed when alive. At a parent's death, women might go on to curse their own helplessness



as poor daughters who were unavailable to provide filial care, indirectly pointing to neglect on the part of their brothers who were at hand because they were the ones who inherited the natal home. Surviving spouses may hint that the cause of death lay in the misbehavior of relatives while sisters of a dead man may charge a sister-in-law, married in polyandry, for favoring one brother over others. Occasionally, the stylized verses of the laments may lead to open hostilities. But in most cases, moderation is displayed for people judge those verses with favor that hold subtle revelations of truth and have emotional and aesthetic appeal.<sup>18</sup> During Jamyang's funeral, the air simmered with soulful sobs as the words of women threatened to expose some of the tensions that had existed between Jamyang and his family members.

After the gathering had cleared, the funeral party moved to the Tung-pa house to drink, cry a little, laugh a little, and bury their sorrows. The next day there would be no collective grieving or tears holding the soul of the dead back from its inevitable passage onto rebirth. So that Jamyang would know in the *shi-yul*, the land of the dead, how much was given for him, his relatives weighed portions of pa-ba with an imitation wooden scale and churning stick. Once the weight was recorded, they marked the mock scale and discarded it along the path between the house and the threshing ground. "He will receive equal amounts in that distant land," commented an age-mate of Jamyang. The maximum duration for sanctioned private mourning for all social persons who have passed away is one year, after which sorrow must be contained, dancing resumed, drab apparel put away, and celebrations of joy attended once again.

### Buddhism in contested fields

The funeral of Jamyang Chosphele was closely linked with the vicissitudes of daily life in which kinship, economic, and residential alliances were affirmed in the habitats of the living. It re-ordered the world of the residents of Achinathang but not in a finite way; some social differences were resolved and others were exposed. Fusing hierarchy and interdependence, solidarity and segmentation, the *shi-zan* was a "cultural performance" (Singer 1972) upheld by the villagers as a spectacular exemplification of their ideologies of charity, hospitality, citizenship, and power. There were marked variations in the roles of men and women, monks and laity, adults and children, and poor and affluent individuals that were reinforced in the negotiations of seating arrangements, funeral pyres, donations to monasteries, and the sponsorship of prayers, all of which had to be handled with delicacy lest they lead to quarrels about rank and place. Under these circumstances, efforts to maintain the sanctity of sacred space during the funeral brought farmers and town dwellers, village hosts and ethnographer guest, to the brink of confrontation. The danger of disorder lurking in death rituals was made all the more potent by the cultural reforms and boycott dictums so that the conventional repertoire of rites and behaviors that mourners could draw on for averting danger were thrown into disarray.

Tung-pa Jamyang's funeral transpired during a ritually charged period of *bard-do* and during a phase of my fieldwork that Turner (1974:38) would deem a moment of escalated "crisis." The year, 1991, was the year of India's adoption of the World Bank driven economic liberalization reform package and the year in which youth power was being harnessed in the Indian plains to support a brand of cultural nationalism that would eventually result in the Ayodhya riots. Struggles around issues of identity had been generated by Ladakh's strategic location in the strife-torn state of Jammu and Kashmir. There were violent clashes between Muslim and Buddhist youth factions in the capital town of Leh. Buddhists use the word *phyi-pa*, meaning "outsiders," to classify Muslims; referring to themselves as *nang-pa* (insiders). Friction against

Ladakh's marginalization in the Indian State was verbalized by the Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA) in religious terms, a move that intersected with the growing communal sentiment of Indian nationalism.

The LBA launched an agitation in 1989 for Scheduled Tribe and Union Territory status that would bring Ladakh under the direct control of the federal government, arguing that Ladakh's incorporation into Jammu and Kashmir had resulted in a "future dark and their race and culture threatened in the hands of the Kashmir government" (Ladakh People's Movement for Union Territory Status 1989). The LBA, an outgrowth of the Young Men's Buddhist Association that was registered in 1938 to represent the needs of Buddhists within the Indian nation, originally had a membership consisting mostly of elite men from Leh, but over the years, it came to adjudicate matters related to religion and local politics and claim as its members all Buddhist Ladakhis.<sup>19</sup> With the breakdown of party politics and the suspension of elections in the state in 1990, its influence deepened. A wide network of village and block-level youth committees, collectively called "youth-pa" by locals, functioned as enforcement branches of the LBA.

In 1989 (and through 1992) the LBA called for a social boycott, urging Buddhists to refrain from interacting, interdining, and intermarrying with Muslims. Although the protest was first directed against the Kashmiri government, it was projected onto the Sunni Muslim Argons of Ladakh whom the LBA criticized as being opportunistic agents of the state and recipients of special favors because of their racial and religious affinities with Kashmiris. Muslim groups marked for boycott eventually included the Shi'a community, which is in the majority in the Kargil division. The LBA embarked on a mission of social reform in the rural areas to strengthen its foothold as the voice of Buddhist Ladakh, to instill a sense of religious purity, and to prevent cultural heritage from decaying.

In Kargil, two factions with connections to Islamic centers in the Middle East functioned as purveyors of Islam: the Islamiya School, founded in the 1950s as a school for religious instruction, and the Imam Khomeini Memorial Trust (IKMT), established after the death of Khomeini as a welfare organization devoted to education. As Grist (1998) has pointed out, with the dismissal of foreign clerics from Iraq in 1974, several Kargilis clerics returned to Leh and set about reforming religious practices in the countryside, preaching a textual Islam and imposing a stricter standard against dance, music, and alcohol consumption. The IKMT had been aligned with the state-level National Conference party, a move that further linked it to Kashmiri separatists in the eyes of the LBA who primarily supported the Congress party at the national and state level.

On the one hand, the LBA sought the collusion of the peasantry in its attempted pan-Buddhist agitation against state discrimination but on the other hand, it depicted peasants as immobile, unworldly, and antiprogressive with obsolete ideologies that thrived on ritual and rumor. Similarly conflicted articulations of Buddhist nationalism can be found in Sri Lanka, where Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988) attribute changing social trends in Sinhalese Buddhism in the 19th century to the rise of an anticlerical village intelligentsia who attempted to fashion a Buddhist social and economic ethic grounded in material rationality and personalized worship. In Ladakh, too, a shift in the political economy from subsistence agriculture to cash labor resulted in the fragmentation and reformulation of traditional political and economic authority but, as Bertelsen (1997) argues, this took place not through the privatization of worship but through the abstraction and universalization of Buddhism in a manner that attacked local customs and religious pluralism. The systemic organization and extensive bureaucracy enabled the LBA to reinscribe varied communal and regional differences

into one unified manifest destiny of Ladakh. A set of guidelines was issued to Touring Committees, formed to mobilize villagers and recruit representatives from the rural areas, instructing them to implement the boycott and penalize defaulters (Bertelsen 1996). Through motivational and intimidation tactics, the LBA maintained a front of consensus. Its office-bearers proclaimed that once the value of the boycott was understood, it caught on "as a hysteria."

Farmers did not accept the marginalization and fossilization of their lives into temporally and socially distorted pasts. Through "everyday acts of resistance" (Scott 1985), strategic manipulations, and "counter-archaeologies" (Herzfeld 1991), they claimed alternative centers.<sup>20</sup> In arguments about food, alcohol, and ancestors, villagers from Achinathang positioned themselves in multiple ways, and the margins between those who dwelled on the inside and those who were on the outside fluctuated in the face of different sociopolitical circumstances.<sup>21</sup>

The impact of the new policies was felt strongly in Achinathang. Jamyang Chosphe's brother, Nawang, a practicing farmer (*shar-ba*) in his fifties who had served in the army in his youth, was an elected representative of the village council of the Gongmathang community. He was often asked to act as an intermediary between visiting dignitaries and the villagers. Since 1989, there had been an unusual number of visitors from Leh to Achinathang: external politicians; abbots; government administrators; and the diasporic community of wage-earners who returned to justify the boycott, seek collaboration against the state, and initiate reforms. As in other villages, cultural preservation committees and youth vigilante groups had sprung up in Achinathang and Skyurbuchan. They were supported by the Youth Wing of the LBA under the leadership of town-based wage-earners with roots and land in Achinathang who deployed the younger generation of adult men (roughly between the ages of 18 and 35) in the village to carry forth their mission. The youths with whom I spoke initially saw themselves as part of a progressive rebellion that would simultaneously free them from the hegemony of tradition, ally them with a larger cultural movement, and save their religion from persecution. Nawang's position as a councillor was stressful because he often had to appease older and younger landholders. Any euphoria that older farmers may have felt for the emancipatory potential of the social boycott began waning by 1991, and some of the youth in the village were disillusioned too. As one young farmer told me, "The benefit is for those in Leh." Clandestine rebellions against the boycott were frequent; these had to be hidden from the gaze of outsiders for fear of repercussion and exposure.

Since 1989, grave altercations had ensued between youth and older farmers about the quantity and nature of food offerings to be distributed during feasts.<sup>22</sup> Already, the reformists had called for a reduction in the size of the *'brang-rgyas*, the meal-mountain carved from barley-dough that stood at the center of the ritual ground during marriage and birth banquets and on the fourth day of the New Year.<sup>23</sup> In the past, barley was the staple crop of the Ladakhi countryside. Households in Achinathang had a mixed economy comprised of agriculture, animal husbandry, and horticulture. A complex trade network of salt and wool had enabled villagers to diversify their lifestyles in the past. Yet, village communities were sustained largely by raw materials available in the local environment and by the reciprocal exchange of labor and goods. In recent times, subsidized rations of rice and wheat, new commercial markets for apricots, and increasing employment in the army and civil service sectors had begun to compete with older habits of food consumption causing the importance of barley in urban areas and among the youth to decline. The youth joined the farmers to retain the symbolic value of the meal-mountain without subjecting themselves to unnecessary

economic burdens. A similar move toward controlling the presentation of food had been imposed on Shi'a Muslims by the IKMT from Kargil, limiting the number of days for wedding feasts and the number of dishes that could be served in order to decrease the monetary strain on the bride's family who bears the brunt of the culinary costs incurred.<sup>24</sup>

For mortuary feasts, the LBA had denounced the convention of distributing barley-flour balls, deeming them inedible and prescribing their substitution with a dish called *tshogs* (made with a better quality of barely flour and sweetened with jaggery) to prevent undue wastage. But defending the custom, one grandmother from Achinathang argued, "The shi-zan is a type of *las-bes* (labor exchange). We make the food so that the dead will receive it in their world, adding on to our list of merit." Another villager declared that offerings were made in order to feed a soul in transition, because to be reborn as hungry ghosts (*yi-dwags*) who capriciously devour souls but are never content or satiated is the worst destiny imaginable. Villagers believe that ghosts (*shi 'dre*), who rise from the dead, and cannibalistic witches (*gong-mo*), who envy the possessions of others, have ravenous appetites. They lure unsuspecting persons with invitations to tea or to meals. The victims hear voices soliciting them and can be afflicted by sudden illness if they allow themselves to be tempted by these venomous solicitations. Villagers considered envy and greed to be the roots of such sorcery.

Older men used the notion of charity as a powerful critique against attempts by the cultural revivalists who had restricted sacrificial offerings, categorizing them as anti-Buddhist squanderings of precious resources that prevented people from capitalizing on surplus. "I don't believe in the hunger of the dead," contended one guest, "but the next day I find that the food I laid out has disappeared. An impoverished fellow villager, a starving child, or a bird or animal must have eaten it. That is the essence of true Buddhism—charity toward all sentient beings." Another guest added, "And so what if the pa-ba is unpalatable. We feed it to our cattle. We are farmers and herders, after all."

Mortuary rituals affirm power structures but they have subversive facets, too, which undermine social hierarchies. Feasts are also about the resolution of social inequity, challenging karmic laws of reward and punishment. Among the guiding principles underlying feasts are charity, humanitarianism, and egalitarianism. Correspondingly, Brauen (1982:323) affirms that the *'brel-tho* (connection-list), a remarkably detailed record of the goods received by a household during the funeral, bears testimony to the importance of reciprocity in creating solidarity and cohesion between individual households. Accordingly, the receiving family consults the *'brel-tho* when the donors host a similar celebration (Brauen 1982). Their gift will be of an equal amount or a bit in excess of the foodstuffs they originally received. Thus, feasts are not undertaken solely for the benefit of the dead. They are closely linked with the vicissitudes of daily life, in which kinship and residential alliances are reaffirmed and economic exchange attested to in the habitat of the living.

Another major source of controversy in the practice of funerary rites involves the centrality accorded by Buddhist farmers to the keg of *chang*. *Chang*, or beer made of barley (*nas*), is brewed in every Buddhist household and served at funerals and festive occasions. Drinking *chang* is intricately tied with a pattern of agricultural life and with a sense of collective and personal identity. Alcohol parties often set the stage for making political decisions about the future course of village affairs. Traditionally, it was middle-aged farmers who made these decisions, but since the boycott their authority and leadership were challenged by the youth. For the latter, barley and *chang* were linked to a peasant identity and to a nonproductive economy. For the elders, the policies

to prohibit chang were unilateral decisions made by the youth wings (*gzho-nu tshogs-pa*). The elders told me that these external organizations were not qualified to evaluate the state of commerce for all of Ladakh.

The LBA used a discourse similar to British colonial critiques against chang to argue that it was drinking that kept the villagers steeped in indolence and ignorance, hindering the modernization and development of Ladakh.<sup>25</sup> Antialcohol campaigns were launched through modern morality plays, extended village tours, and education programs. These operations received some support from student groups in Achinathang and Skyurbuchan, especially in those houses where alcoholism had resulted in abuse and illness.

Farmers generally provided powerful justifications for their drinking, emphasizing "tradition" and recognizing drinking as a vital ingredient of social practice and Ladakhi identity. Elders whom I interviewed noted that chang was consumed at public congregations in the past but now that personal profit had taken ascendancy over social largesse (and land was not the chief source of sustenance for many), drinking had become more private. People blamed the beer that was consumed by those huddled in the privacy of their houses for the present discord.

Beer was not only brewed for secular ceremonies but for those occasions associated with sacred dates as well. The LBA sought to cleanse what it believed was decadent and defiling to Buddhism by mandating that both monks, who must maintain ritual purity, and readers and astrologers, who come in contact with venerated texts during prayer feasts, be subjected to strong antialcohol prohibitions. Through the persuasions of the youths, the villagers agreed to shift their beer parties to alternate dates or to abstain from drinking on holy days. But there was considerable resistance to adopting these measures. One elder pointed out that it was inconceivable to him that anyone might consider drinking chang antireligious. Chang, he argued, was a libation for the gods and ancestors who would be offended if the appropriate offerings were not made. He was referring to the custom of sprinkling the first drops of each pitcher of beer with the fourth finger as an offering (*lha gsol-ces*) for the deities of the three worlds, (the *lha*, the *klu* and the *btsan*) and also for the dead (*shi-mi*). Another villager, arguing against sanctions on drinking alcohol on the tenth night of each month (*rtsis-bcu*) to honor Guru Rin-po-che, saint of the Kargyud-pa sect to which Buddhists in Achinathang belong, claimed that Guru Rin-po-che himself was the patron of liquor.<sup>26</sup> As his devotees, villagers were obliged to follow his deeds.

Yet if drinking too much chang was considered pathological by the LBA and in violation of the ideals of Buddhist identity, drinking no chang was considered equally sacrilegious by many villagers. The few young people who had responded to the social measures and had given up drinking chang altogether were put under immense pressure to drink at parties. When they declined, they were mockingly called *Purig-pa* (Muslims who were believed to have originally come from the Purig region), a term that challenged their claim of being pious Buddhists. According to the Muslim inhabitants of Achinathang with whom I spoke, chang was also perhaps the most salient feature distinguishing them from Buddhists. Young Muslim children learned to wrinkle their noses at even a whiff of alcoholic breath. Achinathang Muslims often criticized Buddhists for failing to live up to the prohibitions on alcohol dictated in their religious texts. Among the Islamic community of the village, the intake of intoxicating agents like chang was forbidden, and people justified abstinence in this life by insisting it would be rewarded by flowing rivers of wine in the afterlife. A middle-aged pilgrim, newly returned from *hadjj*, explained that alcohol clouded one's ability to reason and prevented one from functioning effectively. Even so, some elderly Muslims whose

ancestors had emigrated from the Purig region recalled stories of parties that had been celebrated with much song and dance at a time when Islamic practice had been more tolerant and even Islamic festivals (*Id*) were marked by the consumption of a special beer called *id-chang*.<sup>27</sup>

In contrast to their view of Muslims, Buddhist farmers considered migrant workers from Nepal (called "Gorkhas," regardless of their ethnicity) who worked as rock-cutters or masons in Achinathang to be hearty drinkers. These workers had an ambivalent standing in the community; they were praised for their hospitality and generosity and disparaged for their propensity to spend their wages on meat and alcohol. Buddhist villagers emphasized their own distinctiveness as landholders who were obliged to reinvest in their land as opposed to the landless Gorkhas who wandered from place to place in search of jobs and a roof over their heads, building houses and clearing fields that they would never inhabit.

Drinking alcohol was a means of creating boundaries between insiders and outsiders. To abstain from drink was to surrender desire for sociality and become a devoutly religious person (*chos-pa*), bordering on celibacy and monkhood. Conversely, abstaining from drinking was to give up religion altogether and become like a Muslim. To drink too much was to violate the norms of propriety. From the point of view of older farmers, an upstanding Buddhist was not a teetotaler but one who could maintain an appropriate balance, who was prosperous but not too haughty or self-sufficient to share a cup of beer with villagers, and who could indulge in alcohol but not lose control.

Yet another issue of dissension between the town-based youth-*pa* and farmers was whether or not dead souls (*shi-mi*) were authorized to participate in the world of the living as ancestors. Each patrilineage (*pha-spun*) in the village has its own cremation hearth (*spur-khang*).<sup>28</sup> The pyres of monks are built separately at an exalted height on the grounds of their families. Aba described cremation areas as dangerous, and school children admitted to me that they were afraid to walk near them lest they run into wayward, malignant ghosts. On the fourth day after death, the surviving bone fragment, relics of the corpse, are pulverized and mixed with clay and the dust of the five elements to construct clay tablets called *tsha-tsha* (cf. Brauen 1982; Khan 1987). The clay tablets are entombed in a *mchod-rten* (reliquaries) or in the niche of a sacred wall, or preserved in the chapel, depending on the economic standing of the family. Rich families tend to build separate shrines to commemorate their dead (Khan 1987). By and large, *mchod-rten* are built in honor of high monks or individuals of renown or affluence. Conversely, ancestor worship in fields and houses is a means for farmers to demarcate the landscape with their personal and collective histories. With the abandonment of ancestral practices and the metamorphosis of land from areas of cultivation into guesthouses for tourists, field ancestors have become almost outmoded in towns, contributing to judgments by the reformists that they are outmoded in all areas.

The LBA had legitimated social segregation in the name of religious preservation. For this purpose, the LBA surrendered the dialectic tension between circular time (which marks the genesis, destruction, and reincarnation of the dead) and linear time (in which the dead have forsaken the world of the living to enter into a removed and remote domain) in favor of a doctrinal interpretation of Buddhism, labeling local customs as heterodox. But mortuary rituals, as David Holmberg (1989) has illustrated, do not necessarily contradict the textual constructions of Buddhism; rather they can be "paratexts" (Holmberg 1989:205) through which Buddhist ideology takes accessible form.<sup>29</sup>

For Buddhist farmers in Achinathang, burial grounds and crematoria lie outside the trails on which the living tread, but exclusion of the dead is not fixed and final. If displeased, they might return as malignant spooks, hungry ghosts, or souls that have lost direction. If appeased with appropriate rituals of hospitality, they can become protectors of the living. On the eve of the Buddhist New Year, women mark their kitchen doors with fresh spots of flour to ensure that ghosts, if they should wander back into their houses, would flounder in confusion on seeing these unfamiliar marks and, becoming convinced that they have entered the wrong houses, leave once again. Ancestors, however, are verbally invoked at the hearth on occasions when important meals are served and fields are plowed for the first crop. They are propitiated with food and offerings on the hearth, on the rocks outside the homestead, and on the edges of the mother-field (regarded as the original field sown by the family's ancestors). Bits of wheat bread, barley cakes, liquid butter, and beer are placed on rocks at the margins of fields in gratitude for the founders who first cleared the land. The first households to commence plowing are those that belong to the families of the initial settlers.

To honor ancestral beings, the festival of *mamani* is celebrated in the cold of winter by both Buddhist and Muslim families in Achinathang, although dates of observance differ. The victuals for *mamani* include the cooked legs and heads of goats and sheep that have been stored throughout the year and buckwheat bread (*tan-tan*, the fruit of the second harvest).<sup>30</sup> On January 21, Muslim villagers visit graves of their forbears and read the Koran. They exchange food with each other in an appointed field.

Historically, *mamani* is said to be of 'Brog-pa origin, having found its way into Purig and Ladakh by way of Gilgit (Francke 1904).<sup>31</sup> In Khalatse, the *mamani* feast used to be held beside a row of shrines called *mamani mchod-rten*, a name that denotes an admixture of Buddhist and 'Brog-pa views of the world. Yet in the ideology of purity that prevailed during the boycott, the past had to be polarized into discrete segments in which a syncretic religion could not survive. The devotional or placatory aspect of ancestor rituals met with stern reproval from some Islamic clerics in Kargil who denounced the veneration of ancestors as jeopardizing the fundamental belief in one god. Celebrations of *mamani* and ancestor propitiation, with their animal sacrifices and legacy of burial, were also condemned by the LBA as Islamic in nature or as remnants of an unenlightened and misguided pre-Buddhist past. If, as Khan (1987) reports, citing an inscription deciphered by Francke (1904), *mamani* is held to pay homage to the founders of the Ba-ni-yar tribe of Gilgit and to the first 'Brog-pa leader, Melo, then its significance is particularly subversive, challenging Buddhism's authentic and timeless control in the territory of Ladakh.

Moreover, ancestors are present even in more orthodox Buddhist practices, spatially concretized through reliquaries (*mchod-rten*), edifices bearing the relics of saints, venerable monks, and dead relatives. These shrines sometimes occurred in formations of three (*rig gsum mgon po*), painted white, red, and blue. Although this color system is attributed to the Buddha trinity of Great Protectors [Avalokitesvara (Boddhisatva of compassion), Vajrapani (Boddhisatva of power), and Manjusri (Boddhisatva of knowledge)], laypeople often gave alternate explanations, relating white to *iha-yul* (land of the gods), red to *btsan yul* (land of the terrestrial deities or demons) and blue to *klu-yul* (land of the subterranean guardians and water serpents), a cosmological division that stems from local beliefs.

Farmers in Achinathang are not ignorant of the formal significance of sacred shrines either. The new *dben-sdum mchod-rten* in the midst of the residential center, constructed in 1986, was selected from among the eight different architectural styles

of *mchod-rten* that are representative of the eight essential acts of the Buddha's life (Tucci 1980). After a particularly distressing and conflict-ridden phase in Achinathang, villagers hoped that with the construction of this shrine peace would prevail, as it had when a council of monks constructed an epitaph of peace when Polemic discord threatened to disrupt the unity of the *Sangha* (the monastic order) during the life of Buddha. In the course of their routine activities, people circumambulate this structure in a clockwise direction, creating a repertoire of merit and symbolic capital with the circular motion of their bodies, agents setting in action the wheel of time.

In 1991, however, peace was hard to procure. The effects of the boycott were far-reaching, transforming all major facets of life in Ladakh. As a result of the boycott, Muslim neighbors from Achinathang, who would otherwise have attended Jamyang's funeral, were not invited. Although clandestine rebellions against the boycott continued through covert purchases from Muslim shops and informal social visits between Buddhists and Muslims, the policing of the boycott in the village generated an environment of intense censorship and suspicion. The ritual habits that were aspects of Jamyang's funeral feast—such as consuming *chang* and foods like *tshogs* and *kap-tse*, and feeding the ancestors—were now inseparable from the reigning conflict around identity. Viewed through this broad political and social framework, hybrid customs became all the more conspicuous and the attempts to contain them all the more forceful.

### ethnography at the margins

At a time when boundaries of lived space had been exposed and rearranged in the displacement unleashed by death, when severe constraints were placed on the residents of Achinathang due to regional struggles, my effort to examine the preparation of funeral foods at the Tung-pa house was a reminder to some that I was an urban outsider who might judge their culture unfavorably. National and transnational sites of knowledge production had inspired an atmosphere in which selective ideas of progress were absorbed into reformist discourse, often at the expense of syncretic histories and transgressive viewpoints. As an anthropologist concerned with observing and recording, my arrival too was inscribed in discourses and histories of cultural control and surveillance.

When I first arrived in Achinathang, villagers often thought I was a Kashmiri schoolteacher, health worker, or some such government official. Development was a central concern of the state administration and government employees occasionally visited the village to file progress reports and survey the status of education, health, and economic growth. Staff members of these bureaus were generally appointed from areas outside Achinathang. As Pigg (1992) has shown, the targeting of village societies in frameworks of development plans often essentializes villagers as backward. Likewise, government policies for *taraqi* (Urdu for "progress") in Ladakh are frequently concocted and executed without adequately assessing their relevance to the village community. In Achinathang's Lungba settlement, for instance, a primary school building was constructed by government contractors, but it was placed right next to the cremation ground and remained abandoned for a long period because most of the pupils and teachers were afraid to approach it. On questioning some of the government contractors about their action, I was informed that the only piece of land the villagers were willing to surrender for erecting the schoolhouse was that which they deemed worthless for cultivation. This failed project is an indication of the alienation that farmers feel toward the modern education system.



Besides being associated with development personnel, I was also classified by my profession. When asked what my profession was, I could not find a corresponding word for "anthropologist," so I identified myself generically as a writer (*'bris-mkhan*). I was always asking questions about history and culture, and the purpose of my endeavor was unclear to many villagers. Several villagers made sense of my project by thinking of it as a guidebook for tourists. Tourism is fast emerging as Ladakh's largest income generating industry, spurred by the popularity of Buddhism in the West. In travel brochures, Ladakh is described as "Little Tibet" and portrayed as a pure and pristine haven, untouched by modernity. The cultural plurality of the region is rarely alluded to and seldom do texts mention that almost half the population practices Islam.

Due to security considerations, several parts of Ladakh situated close to border zones were sealed off from the gaze of tourists, including Achinathang, which first became part of the tourist circuit in 1995. Even Indian citizens were required to obtain Inner Line permits to visit the area. Although it is now open to visitors, Achinathang is generally used as a rest stop by those travelers eager to reach the Da-Hanu area to experience what is advertised as its authentic and quaint 'Brog-pa Indo-Aryan culture. Although tourists tend to pass by rather than engage in the life of Achinathang, their existence is not peripheral; residents use it as a measure to separate Achinathang's economy and culture from other villages, which they define as affluent and corrupt because of tourism. In turn, villagers are indirectly subject to constructions of authenticity shaped by tourists' preferences. Indeed, Westerners impacted the history of Achinathang long before 1995. In the 19th century, during British colonial times, a mission of the Moravian church was established at the block capital of Khalatse. Attempts were made by missionaries to convert the inhabitants of the region to Christianity in order to liberate them from devil worship and heathen beliefs (Bray 1985).

Today, more and more facilities in Ladakh are being provided to accommodate travelers. Houses in Leh have been converted to guesthouses and several restaurants have opened in the last decade. The influx of national and international tourists has created a considerable demand for travel agencies and consumer shops. There is an increased sense that Buddhism is on display. Most of the monasteries are now accessible by road and many have shifted their annual festivals to the summer months to attract tourists.<sup>32</sup> Tourist literature emphasizes some rites and customs over others. Those practices that Westerners may consider eye-catching and exotic find a special place in this literature; for example, several travelogues on Tibet (Iyer 1988; Seth 1983) report the spectacle of the disposal of the dead by feeding their flesh to birds. One of the most widely read texts on Tibetan Buddhism in the West is the *Bar-do thos grol* (popularly translated as the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*), a spiritual translation of a text of the Nyingmapa sect of Buddhism that has come to stand for Buddhist eschatology in the West and has been reincarnated in various versions, each version shaped by its translators (Lopez 1998). Even as the "ritualistic" aspects of religious life are becoming objects of curiosity, the packaging and marketing of Buddhism reveals the historical proclivity in the West for granting credibility to its meditative, monastic, and textual forms. According to Bishop (1989:95), "It was easier for the West to produce a rational and coherent 'Buddhism' from textual sources than from the seemingly chaotic and culture-bound practices of Tibetan religion."

Such views of purity are also part of academic discourses on Ladakh that have been predisposed to concentrate almost exclusively on Buddhist society.<sup>33</sup> Thus, John Crook (1990) conflates Kashmiri Muslims with Ladakhi Muslims and blames Islamic capitalists and leaders for creating cultural strife by gaining undue trade advantages

over their innocent and naive Buddhist compatriots. Simultaneously, Crook denies Buddhists agency by denouncing the social boycott as a phenomenon merely rooted in modernization, mobility, and bourgeois sentiments of competition and individualism, perpetuated by Buddhist Ladakhis ignorant of the true principles of Buddhism. Attributing the boycott crisis to a fall from spiritual purity, Crook writes: "Of Buddhism itself they have little learning, and their interest in meditation is limited to stress reducing, mind calming practices of a non-hierarchical non-monastic form suitable for improving the performances of bank managers or engineers" (1990:385).

Like roving souls who may or may not become beneficial ancestors, tourists and scholars also display itinerant behavior and unpredictable loyalty. Residents of Achinathang have their own interpretations and divisions to delineate the community of insiders. These interpretations had a large impact on how I was perceived. Although my religious affiliation continued to be a source of interrogation, it was spatial categories by which I was mostly identified. Indians are regarded as those from down below, from the plains versus the mountains. My presence in Achinathang (into which only Indian nationals were usually permitted) convinced the villagers that I was an Indian national, but as a young woman traveling alone I did not conform to stereotypes of Indian plainswomen (whom they had mostly encountered as army wives, schoolteachers, or actors on the Bollywood screen). My double agency confounded notions of foreign and national and, initially, I was subjected to occasional inquisitions and permit checks. I was told the tale of a haggard, beggarly woman who had once passed through this village. So pitiful was her plight that some women had been moved into giving her barley and water. But they soon learned that their hospitality had fed a stranger who turned out to be a spy, a young able-bodied woman disguised as an old hag. Travelers often resorted to disguise to reach Ladakh and Tibet during colonial rule. And during my stay in this area where military inspections regulated entry and exit, stories of espionage were still frequent. I also heard neighbors and visitors refer to me as "Kha-chul-ma" (woman from Kashmir), probably assuming that I was a government official or schoolteacher because women from outside the parameters of the state territory are seldom found in Achinathang. After the agitation of 1989, antipathy toward Kashmir was growing in most parts of Ladakh and to be mistaken for a Kashmiri had risky political ramifications.

When I first boarded the public bus from Leh to Achinathang, one month before the funeral of Tung-pa Jamyang, interested largely in ritual and politics, I thought myself unusually fortunate when a wedding party headed for Achinathang came aboard in Skyurbuchan. On reaching Achinathang, I was informed that the wedding was the last of the year because it was also the first day of spring in Lower Ladakh and the season for sowing had begun. It is only in the cold of the winter, when fields are bare and there is labor to spare, that nuptial feasts are celebrated. I had observed several weddings in Leh during the summer and had not anticipated any seasonal constrictions elsewhere. Discouraged, I stopped by the house of the Yogmathang representative of the village council, requesting that he inform me of upcoming weddings. The word that I used for weddings was *bag-ston*. Instead of pronouncing the initial consonant as a "b", I enunciated it as a "p" so that the word sounded more like *pak-ston*; this was a way of speaking that I had learned in Leh that the Achinathang villagers designated as *stod-skad* (high speech). The representative mistook me as requesting information on Pakistan. That incident, coupled with my own expressed expectation that ritual time in Achinathang would be no different from that in Leh, enhanced my identification with educated elite and the exotic world of international espionage.<sup>34</sup>

My habit of asking questions and taking notes accentuated my difference from farmers. Their distrust of me was even more pronounced under the ritual danger of bar-do, for social reintegration and successful rebirth come not with fixity but with detachment and acceptance of mutability. Never would people perform funeral laments for me outside a funeral setting, and I was instructed never to reproduce them in Ladakhi. My tendency for observation and documentation through writing, recording, and filming rendered eternal those traits that had their place in ritual time and social rebirth. Like a soul in bar-do, my inability to comprehend impermanence could have proven haunting and menacing in multiple ways.<sup>35</sup>

At the door of the Tung-pa house that day, amidst the crisis of regeneration caused by death, the uncertainty over ritual performances, and the political clashes that rocked life on the border, my presence as a fieldworker called for new thresholds of arbitration between insiders and outsiders.<sup>36</sup> Through this encounter, I came to understand that domains of inclusion and exclusion in Ladakh vary with shifting conditions and times. Therefore, a focus on rituals in their dynamic and social settings (Geertz 1973a), on the multiple sites of experience (Marcus 1995), and on the networks of domination within which the ethnographer is situated (Haraway 1988) can provide opportunities to convert lost paths into pragmatic maps and negotiate entrances that are sensitive to power and context.

## notes

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1. According to Buddhist cosmology, the earth and the sky are shut off from the world of humans by apertures called nam-sgo (sky door) and sa-sgo (earth door). On the east and west sides of house walls, a complex threaded contraption is hung to ensure that the doors do not open (Powell 1977).

2. Tung-pa Jamyang and Nawang are pseudonyms.

3. Here I draw from Mary Douglas's (1966) work on symbolic margins. She asserts that notions about purity and pollution work to control boundaries between internal and external states, but I depart from the implications of her thesis that these states are fixed, abstract and cognitive, always indicative of a reality out there. Charles Frake (1975) usefully extends the analysis of thresholds to the organization of social space, showing how doors introduce procedures for discerning and regulating classes of people.

4. For instance, my focus on public performance does not account for the psychological or private meanings of death. Besides, as Rosaldo (1989) and Grindal (1995) have shown, death is an emotional event that cannot be comprehended by analytical devices alone. An emphasis on experiential and collective modes of seeing and sensing rituals is also important, as Jackson (1989), Stoller (1989), and Turner et al. (1992) have demonstrated. While researching sorcery among the Songhay of Niger, one of Paul Stoller's teachers told him, "If you listen to us, you will learn much about our ways. But to have vision, you must grow old with us" (Stoller 1989:83).

5. Such an assumption of ethnographic rapport underlies the method of "thick description" prescribed by Geertz (1973b). Although Geertz probes into the contextual tiers within which culture is performed, bringing the study of ritual to intricate scrutiny, his method has also invoked much criticism for being predicated on the separation of the observer from the observed in a way that sanctions the interpretive authority of the observer (Clifford 1986; Marcus 1995).

6. In his study of Tamil personhood, E. Valentine Daniel (1987) contrasts the abstract, bounded, and constant units of territorial demarcation (*tecam* and *kiranam*) with the person-centered and shifting notions of country, nation, state, or village (*ur* and *natu*). The definition of *yul* is similar to the latter.

7. The term, '*Brog-pa*, is considered disparaging if used as a contemporary appellation or form of address for the residents of Da and Hanu who are called Dards by some authors (Francke 1906, Vohra 1989). The residents of Da and Hanu were subjugated through a series of battles and brought under the suzerainty of the Ladakhi king. Subsequently, the king forbade the people of Hanu to speak in their language and dismissed their religious practices as primitive and shameful. Stories glorifying the resistance of local heroes are still told in these parts (Sonam Phuntshog 1999).

8. This deity was installed by a monk just 65 years ago. It was brought from the Skindiang valley of Khalatse.

9. As Grist (1998) has illustrated, in Kargil, voting patterns in the elections for the State Assembly and Lok Sabha in 1996 and 1998 denoted diverse affiliations based on kinship, residence, economic transactions, and historical ties that often undermined religious solidarity.

10. In his classic essay, "The Pre-eminence of the Right Hand: A Study in Ritual Polarity," Robert Hertz (1960) proposes that sanctions that privilege the use of the right hand over the left are based on ideological social institutions. The right side is identified with male vitality and sacred spheres while the left side is linked with women, death, and profanity. In her analysis of Hindu rituals in India, Veena Das (1977) disputes this dichotomy between impure and pure and traces the relation between lineage gods, ancestors, and the left hand to death. Similarly, Beck (1972) ties the principles underlying caste organization in Konku society in South India to the right/left divergence, in which left-hand caste deities are generally female and connected to death, serpents, and darkness.

11. See Evans-Wentz (1957:6–7) for the symbolic significance of the number 49. This is more of a normative schedule than an actual one, for rebirth can take place at any time after the soul becomes aware of its state and looks for a new body.

12. Composed in the eighth century by Padmasambhava, *Bar-do thos grol* is a treasure text about the art of dying. There are three main bar-do states described in this book, each of them containing the potential for enlightenment (Evans-Wentz 1957). The first state is called '*chi kha'i bar-do* (transitional state of the moment of death); here the soul is not yet aware of death, but if it comprehends reality in the clear light that dawns during this period, it can be spared rebirth. The second state, *chos-nyid bar-do* (experiencing of the glimpsing of reality) marks the breakdown of the personality when the soul realizes that it no longer possesses a body. If reality is still not comprehended, the third state, *srid pa'i bar-do* (transitional state of rebirth), sets in. This state is defined by the quest for a new body. A description of the symbolism of the bar-do stages is provided in Corlin 1988.

13. The stamp of ritual impurity first affects intimate members of the deceased person's extended household. For one month, they must not approach the hearth or eat from everyday utensils. The hearth is the center of social life in the household in Achinathang, a zone where hospitality is most poignantly expressed. The relatives of the dead are also banned from crossing irrigation canals or entering fields (see Gergan 1940). They are more or less sequestered in the house and barred from public celebrations. For those with suspicious natures, any sickness, crop failure, or climactic misfortune that prevails can be attributed to the surviving spouse. When the obligatory uncleanness has ended, a person from their pha-spun (residential descent groups with an agnatic idiom) consoles and feeds the mourners, helps them to wash their hair, and provides them with a sumptuous meal (*sdug-zan*), symbolizing the conclusion of the period of contamination.

When the process of cremation has begun, a patrilineal kin member makes bread from the flour brought by villagers and gives some to the women present. All the villagers must gather below the main gate (*rgyal-sgo*) in an open space on the property of the dead person. An inner ring is formed by men who conceal the corpse-bier from the women while women circumambulate the men and the body. In Achinathang, it is only men who carry the corpse to the funeral pyre, which they encircle three times, prostrating themselves on the floor between each circle,

shouldering the thrust of contagious contact. The cremation sites for most households and the open shelters behind rocks, where bodies are preserved until it is appropriate to immolate them, are located at the periphery of the village where the fields end. The men who carry the corpse to the funeral pyre can pause for rest only on the lands owned by their lineage members.

14. The *ya-tra* ritual is one such example; it associates travel with death. In case they do not return, people who plan to set out for pilgrimages or long journeys throw a banquet for villagers before departing. It is mostly Muslim families in Achinathang who practice this custom, even though the ritual is not considered to be of Islamic origin. It is said to have once prevailed among the 'Brog-pa villages nearby. To my knowledge, in Da and Hanu elders still throw banquets for villagers who plan to travel (though they do not have to isolate themselves afterward as in the past).

15. This Buddhist extraction ceremony has been discussed in considerable detail by Gergan (1940), Kvaerne (1985), Paul (1982), and Waddell (1978). I have not seen it performed, but have heard it described by lay villagers and one monk from Achinathang.

16. The monks most often perform prayers of atonement (*skong-bshag*) in order to purify the sins and obstacles of the dead and the living. They also perform the peace rate rites (*g.yang-zab* or *zhi-khro*) dedicated to Samantabhadra Buddha or Kun-tu Bzang-po, the earliest manifestation of the Buddha depicted without clothes. The two are always performed simultaneously.

17. The *g.yang-gugs* ritual is also performed when a bride leaves her natal home to reside with her husband's family and at the end of the second harvest each year.

18. Similarly, Briggs (1992) writes about the significance of women's wailing in Warao death rituals.

19. A detailed history of the LBA can be found in Bertelsen 1997 and van Beek 1996. Grist 1998 provides a good background on political factions in Kargil.

20. Michael Herzfeld (1991) offers a contrast between "social time" (what is constituted in the everyday interactions between people and in their formal relationships) and "monumental time" (what is appropriated by a modernist bureaucracy to naturalize space). "The battle," he writes of the Cretan town of Rethemnos, "is over the future of the past" (1991:5). The citizens of Rethemnos actively debate claims to authenticity and antiquity, defending their stance by forwarding "counter-archaeologies" as they strive for a "place in history."

21. The manner in which peasant insurgencies transformed bourgeois politics and hegemonic government policies in colonial India has been well documented by the subaltern studies school (Guha 1983). The transition to nationalism in India may not have proceeded directly from peasant revolts but it would be erroneous, maintains Chatterjee (1993), to reject them as localized events without significance.

22. Arjun Appadurai (1981) labels as "gastro-political" the conflicts surrounding food exchanges. Ortner (1975, 1977), too, writes about the political power of ritual offerings in the Buddhist practices of the Sherpas of Nepal.

23. Martin Brauen (1983) asserts that the meal-mountain is a symbolic representation of Mount Meru (*ri-rab*), which, in Buddhist theology, stands at the heart of the universe.

24. Propaganda by youth groups to curtail wedding expenses is also noted by Takashi Maeda (1976:156) in Japan where, he alleges, the crusaders are seldom bound to thrift in their own practices.

25. Such a directive from the British in the 1930s is presented in Bertelsen 1997. About India in general, David Hardiman (1986) describes the manner in which the revenue-collection system of the colonial British regime criminalized home-brewed alcohol by transferring the brunt of taxation on the subaltern peasantry, while simultaneously forwarding itself as a moral imperative that curtailed a "pernicious habit." As the control over the production and distribution of liquor was wrested from the peasants, alcohol became a nonlocal, illicit commodity. Although the discourse of modernity validated itself as a rational outgrowth of commodity exchange and surplus production, it nevertheless deployed the hallmarks of "tradition" in the enterprise of alcohol production.

26. It is believed that in the ninth century, Guru Rin-po-che or Padmasambhava (in Sanskrit) spread the doctrine of Buddhism in Ladakh. He was a Tantric practitioner from India who tamed resistant divinities and converted them to protectors of Buddhism. Among the marvels

that are attributed to him are the discovery of apricots, new methods of irrigation and agricultural fertility, and the invention of chang, originally an offering to appease flesh-eating and alcohol-drinking deities (Paul 1982:152).

27. *Id* is the Arabic word for festivals connected with the religious Islamic calendar.

28. The pha-spun, which literally means "father's brothers," is a system of inclusion and exclusion, found largely among Buddhist Ladakhis. Members are connected by the principle of "bone" (*rus*) descent, a substance inherited from one's fathers. Despite the normative prescriptions, however, descent through the pha-spun is flexible and is largely influenced by residence and the maintenance of cordial relations between families.

29. In his study of Tamang rituals, Holmberg (1989) argues that the dichotomy between sacrificial factions and canonical Buddhism is a misconception. He explores the polyphony or multivocality of religious practice in the ritual and mythical fields of Tamang society, using an interpretive model in which culture is viewed as a text. In the tradition of Brohm (1963) and Tambiah (1970), Holmberg focuses on the dialectical tension and the complementary synthesis of lamaic and sacrificial formulations in the single total field of religion in Nepal. In Tamang culture, Buddhism is tribalized and clan-based, not universal and totalitarian. Holmberg attributes this to the history of state-formation in Nepal where the regimes in power have favored Hinduism and where the divergences among Tamang ritual practitioners (*lama*, *limbu*, and *bombo*) are not exclusive and absolute, but permeable and transformative.

30. According to Sikander Khan (1987), in the past a live sheep or goat was slaughtered and eaten raw in 'Brog-yul to appease bloodthirsty ancestral spirits.

31. Mamani was originally celebrated around burial sites. Excavated graves and bones are evidence that before they were converted to the Buddhist belief in incineration, the old nomadic tribes of Gilgit buried their dead.

32. Similarly, the staging of mortuary rituals among the Sa'adan Toraja in Indonesia has been altered by national bureaucracy, mass media, and tourism to accommodate new human audiences who have gained more importance over traditional spiritual invitees (Adams 1993).

33. The first systematic inquiry into the Muslim community by a non-Ladakhi was conducted by Nicola Grist in 1998. Other historical, political, and cultural perspectives have been provided by Aggarwal 1994, Dollfus 1995, Pinnault 1999, Rizvi 1983, Srinivas 1998, and van Beek 1996.

34. I have been entering and exiting Ladakh every year for the last eleven years. The villagers' impression of me gradually changed as I gained confidence in my ability to speak the local dialects, as I learned to be comfortable with my surroundings—allowing my body to follow the paths up and down the mountain without reflecting upon the possibility of falling—and as I abandoned my efforts to eat in isolation in my private room at the edge of the courtyard and began to spend most of my time in the family kitchen, the center of social life. Eventually, as the seasons went by and as I began teaching in the school and making friends, I came to be addressed by my first name or by kin terms such as *a-che-le* (elder one) or *no-mo-le* (younger one).

35. Robert Desjarlais (1992) connects anthropological epistemology with the aesthetics of soul loss in another Himalayan community, the Yolmo of Nepal. My approach differs from his in that I seek to integrate the political and poetic dimensions of ethnographic practice without assuming unproblematic commonalities of experience.

36. The Indo-Pakistani border bears testimony to the staggering displacement of the twelve million people who crossed sides during the Partition of 1947. Villagers from Achinathang related accounts of the sound and fury of shells shot across the border during the recent Kargil war of 1999. They described the sight of thousands of soldiers' corpses transported through their village and the strain of working for the army as porters, nightly carrying to the frontline 35 kilos of armaments each.

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