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Towards a Political Ecology of Scale in High Mountains

Global economic and political relations are increasingly dependent on India and China. The destiny of these new centers of power is irrevocably entwined with their ability "to share the same mountains"—the Himalayas—and to settle disputes left over from the border war of 1962 (Malone 2011, 152). Both governments have strengthened their military presence and have made heavy infrastructural investments in their high mountain peripheries. When India began to liberalize its market in the early 1990s (Kohli 2006), commercial interests increasingly affected geopolitical imperatives and advanced new patterns of regional restructuring. While rapid economic growth as well as the rising international significance of both countries attracted much public and academic attention, related and equally compelling aspects remained largely ignored. How are such ongoing processes of border-making experienced and negotiated by the ethnic minorities who live in the mountain peripheries? What implications do they have for the ways these people make a living?

While the Himalayas set effective barriers for state territorial expansion, unequal environmental conditions across the altitudinal gradient favored the flourishing of an extensive agro-trader-pastoralist economy (van Spengen 2000). The underlying production systems integrated several ecological zones, from the cold and arid Tibetan Plateau in the north to the subtropical humid middle hills of the Lesser Himalayas in the south, which are connected by natural corridors of transportation and communication (transversal valleys and high passes in the High and Tibetan Himalayas). Standard academic approaches often relied on simplified assumptions of ecological uniformity in different altitudinal belts, taking population size and its relation to resource depletion as the controlling parameters. Within such scientifically defined and predictable systems, pastoralists were largely seen as "politically passive migrants" (Agrawal and Saberwal 2004, 38), because their mobility was seen as incompatible with society's mainstream. Stimulated by scholars working in the semi-arid rangelands of Africa (Scoones 1995; Niamir-Fuller 1999), our research follows a new scientific agenda that foregrounds the proactive character of pastoral mobility in the Himalayas in three interrelated senses: its spatial and temporal organization; the narratives and discourses that different actors attach to such patterns when drafting policies, fixing routes, or scheduling tasks; and

finally, the lived and embodied practices and rhythms of seasonal movement (Bergmann et al. 2011).

We advocate the concept of "sociocultural resources" for capturing people's repertoire of action in response to ever-changing environmental, economic, and political conditions. The skilled practitioner—a Himalayan shepherd, for instance—develops a fluency of action that allows him not only to efficiently manage good fodder and nutritional supplies for his animals, but also to deal effectively with various "recognizing agents" (Shneiderman 2010, 307), which range from state officials to revered deities, and from representatives of international NGOs to widely dispersed village residents. Pastoral groups do not passively react to processes driven by these agents and their claims on natural resources; rather, they actively deploy their ethnicity, embodied techniques, and other forms of knowledge to find solutions, make decisions, and assert an identity (Forsyth and Michaud 2011). Although these resources are integral to local livelihoods and also contribute to the overall success of a production system, generalized approaches of mountain research tend to neglect them.

Our ongoing project tackles these issues with reference to the so-called Bhotiyas, a pastoral community in several high mountain valleys in Garhwal and Kumaon, the two former kingdoms and administrative units of the Indian federal state of Uttarakhand. Before the closure of the Sino-Indian border, they were involved in trans-Himalayan trade and exchanged sugar, grain, and wool products from India for salt, raw wool, minerals, and animals in Tibet (Nüsser 2006). Sheep and goats were widely kept and were well-suited for transporting commodities over long distances and through difficult terrain. Throughout history, the Bhotiyas have constantly attuned their migratory cycle to shifting political alliances and economic potentials. In Kumaon, however, the number of people that continue to seasonally migrate has approximately halved over the last fifty years (see fig. 1). The Bhotiyas practice combined mountain agriculture (Ehlers and Kreutzmann 2000): a mix of animal husbandry and crop cultivation across different altitudinal belts. This is increasingly supplemented by non-agricultural income sources.

In today's Uttarakhand, communal resource regulations can be identified as a focal point of state-society interaction (Agrawal 2005). *Van panchayats* (village-based councils for regulating the use of forests and grasslands) are one of the oldest examples and are of

Figure 1:
Seasonal migration in the Darma Valley of Kumaon, India.

lasting importance to migratory groups such as the Bhotiyas (Nüsser and Gerwin 2008). Dominant approaches analyze these formally approved agreements in terms of rational decision making and by means of quantifiable parameters, such as area size or number of users (Naidu 2009; Baland et al. 2010). Undoubtedly, such quantitative data is useful for assessing a local situation and exposing crucial patterns of resource use and sharing. However, scholars increasingly urge the need to move beyond such positivistic models (Jones & Boyd 2011; Agrawal & Chhatre 2011). While promising theoretical advances have been made, there are still very few case studies based on firsthand knowledge of the "cultural logics" that influence the negotiations within such institutional arrangements. In order to examine how local populations actively contest the influence of external forces, we emphasize the need to realize a combined analysis of both institutionalized and ritualized practices. While institutions provide an important arena for the formation and reproduction of daily routines, rituals constitute crucial strategies for the creation of social relationships of all kinds, including their power dimensions (Bergmann et al. 2012). Both are intimately tied to people's ongoing interaction with the environment, offering multiple constellations for negotiating seasonal movements through narratives and practices.

The emerging field of border studies offers an important orientation, especially since it foregrounds the notion of "scale" as a fruitful entry point for analyzing the historical "orderings and re-orderings of the socio-spatial landscape, including new geographies of accumulation, state power, and hegemony" (Jessop et al. 2008, 395). Scales are generally seen as hierarchically ordered spatial units: the smallest is the body, and the largest is the globe (Brenner 2001). In order not to lose touch with the concrete practices of everyday life that form the bedrock of such divisions and their restructuring, we follow authors who conceptualize them as contested webs of relations (Howitt 2003)—while some people have access to such webs "at different levels, or with a wider geographical span, others do not" (van Schendel 2005, 10). The resulting "politics of scale" (Cox 1998) is of particular relevance to Himalayan pastoralists, because their far-reaching seasonal movements are enclosed within numerous institutional and administrative arrangements. Relevant examples include the clash of customary regulations with state-sanctioned ones at the village level; reservations for communities perceived as under-represented, resulting in new regional alliances and strategies among Himalayan pastoralists; the building of dams and of transport infrastructure to integrate the mountain peripheries with state and national development; and, at the scale of international relations, a sealed and militarized border. One major task for a political ecology of scale is to identify and compare these alternative styles or projects of scale making (Tsing 2000; Zimmerer & Bassett 2003; Gezon 2004). Their ongoing interaction makes a mockery of the oppositions between highlands and lowlands, forests and fields, as well as between sociocultural and biophysical processes, whose transient character mountain research has been slow to accept.

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