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The Sacredness of (Himalayan) Landscapes

Introduction

Where the mountains can be gods – *om Himālayāya namaḥ* – it is not problematic to talk about the sacredness of landscape. Thus, “the Sacred Landscape of the Himalayas”, sounds both attractive and justified. But what does it really mean? What “Himalaya” means, is obvious. It is the region where the snow never melts, where the gods meet and the kings are in the clouds, where scholars discover hidden lands or lost languages, and where Reinhold Messner finds the Yeti. But what about “landscape” and “sacredness”? Both terms are full of obscurity. Are they adequate for describing the perception and experience of space in the Himalayas?

Firstly, “sacredness” is a term which is disputed and questioned *ad nauseam*. I do not want to elaborate on the debate surrounding this term but simply wish to point out that, in Sanskrit, “sacred” does not correspond to a single term. Equivalent terms of “sacred” could be *puṇya*, *pavitra* (as well as *śuddha* or *śuci*), *maṅgala*, *daiva*, *pūjya/pūjārha* or *vaidika*, all denoting sacredness plus other aspects: merit, purity, auspiciousness, divinity, worship or the Veda.

Secondly, it should be noted that “landscape” is a term which as “landskip” was introduced into the English language as late as in the late 16th century. It came from the Dutch together with “linen” and “herring”. In Dutch, it denoted a settled area, even a juridical district, but also something which was beautiful to look at.¹ In English, it primarily became a term for painters which reminded the spectator of rural sceneries. To look at a landscape meant, in a way, to look at pic-

tures of rural scenes; “it was ‘picturesque’ because it looked like a picture” (Thomas 1984: 265).

Thus, from the beginning of its introduction into the English language, the term “landscape” had a constructivist connotation. Landscape was not nature or wilderness, but nature made to be seen by men, especially painters. Landscape, thus, was primarily a matter of aesthetics. The philosopher Joachim Ritter (1963) claims that three are required constituents for the proper use of the term landscape: a) the feeling spectator or the sensitive subject, b) the aesthetic view free from practical aims and needs, and c) the totality of the perceived nature free from partial interests. He concludes that nature as landscape could only develop under conditions of liberty on the foundations of a modern society.²

In modern times, thus, landscape stands for a totality which can be grasped, perceived or seen only through *theoria*.³ This, of course, is true for any object of perception. Landscape, however, was from the very beginning meta-physics, and it gradually acquired even a semi-divine status. It was opposed to culture. And the more the human work was felt as destructive, the more nature was regarded as a substitute for God (cf. Michaels 1996: 831–833). Landscape in this sense is always sacred. In the words of the German romanticist Novalis (1960/I: 85): “Man kann nicht sagen, daß es eine Natur gebe, ohne etwas Überschwängliches zu sagen.”

Such a romanticized or religious view of nature might partly explain the boom of conferences, exhibitions and books on landscape and

1 See Schama 1996: 16–29. For an etymology of “landscape” see Jackson 1984: 3–8; see also Thomas 1984: 265 and Hirsch/Hanlon 1995: 2.

2 Ritter (1963 = 1974: 162): “Natur als Landschaft [kann es] nur unter der Bedingung der Freiheit auf dem Boden der modernen Gesellschaft geben.”

3 See for the modern discussion on landscape see also Smuda 1986, Wilke 1994 and Siefert 1997.



Mustang: Shrines and walls of houses and threshing compounds are marked by colours - to represent and radiate protectiveness. The colours of the Rigsum Gönpö, the Three Protectors (red = Mañjuśrī, white = Avalokiteśvara, grey/black = Vajrapāṇi), are sometimes found in a repetitive manner.

nature. However, as Sieferle (1997: 26) aptly points out most landscapes are not any more pure nature since only very few areas have been untouched by men. Parts of the Himalayas might still be considered belong to it as well as some deserts and jungles. "Landscape" in the sense of something opposed to the industrialized and technical world does not make much sense in the Himalaya. But landscape as opposed to wilderness, realms of the terrestrial beings as opposed to the realms of ghosts and gods, kings, shamans, animals etc. is meaningful in the Himalayas. Thus, already in pre-modern societies there exists "aesthetic" perceptions of nature. Landscape is not a discovery of painters or modern men.

But is it really all construed? Is there truly no outer without inner landscape (cf. Panikkar 1991)? Such problems of physiocentrism or anthropocentrism in the conception of nature are philosophical problems since antiquity⁴, but they also concern the work of anthropologists, architects, geographers or philologists. This is even more the case, if maps, drawings and photographs are used for demonstration. Such media are extremely selective and suggestive, at expense of the aspect of the totality of landscape. Maps are geometrical constructions of nature which reflect an ideal or proportional space. Maps, thus, are always mental maps.

Maps and pictures represent what is defined by the Aristotelian criteria of reality: movement, rest, number, size and solidity of objects.

However, in landscape there is more: soul and atmosphere. In traditional societies (and in the Himalayas) the "soul" of the landscape is, to a large extent, its so-called animism: rivers, forests, mountains, rocks etc. are considered as subjective beings (see especially Dujardin's contribution to this volume): they reflect beings and thereby make an area auspicious or dangerous. But what about the atmospheres of landscape? What does it mean if one speaks of elated or sombre landscapes. Are these emotions ascribed to nature or are they its properties/qualities? Is the landscape elated or are we seeing this particular landscape in a joyous mood? After all, one seeks beauty or wilderness in the landscape not because one feels beauty or something untamed in oneself, but because one wants to be stimulated. Tourism or recreation in nature would not be necessary if such qualities were all just super-imposed on nature.

To be sure, what is seen in nature is influenced by culture and society (Evernden 1992, Ellen 1996). The landscape seen by Western tourists or scholars in the Himalayas certainly does not correspond with the inhabitant's perspective. The landscape seen by a Buddhist priest does not correspond with the view of a farmer. The landscape of a mountaineer is different from that of a shepherd. Moreover, perspectives change. In early 17th century England, mountains were described as warts on earth, hundred years later they were regarded as "temples of Nature, built by the Almighty" or "natural cathedrals" (Nicolson 1959: 3, cf. Groh/Groh 1996).

The problem of cultural and historical relativity forces to be cautious with regard to research on culturally different concepts of nature, landscape or space. The contributions to this volume are particularly helpful in reflecting the differences in conceptions of landscape and space, even if sometimes the value of indigenous terms should perhaps have been stressed more. For, what cannot be translated expresses best a different world-view. Terms for nature, landscape or space in Tibetan and other languages of the Himalayas are especially worthy of being analysed and compared.

Since antiquity, the West and Western science in particular prefer the solid states of things, i. e. meadows, mountains, forests, houses, temples or other buildings etc., in contradistinction to "soft", changing, subjective features such as impressions and emotions. Due to the secularization of nature, the greater importance attributed to work done by hand in Christendom (as compared to antiquity), the dualistic metaphysics of Descartes and other such factors, more attention is paid to measurable, checkable and "reliable" things in nature than to feelings and atmospheres. However, as said before, one does not only have the "hard" items in mind when one speaks of landscapes.

⁴ See Schmitz 1969, Böhme 1988, Seel 1991, Großheim 1999.

What, for example, makes for the “character” or quality of a landscape? It is certainly not just the addition of “hard” details.

It is without doubt, that topographical, geographical and geo-physical features have to be considered in analysing concepts of space and landscape. The Himalayas are, for example, shaped by the following special dichotomy of up and down to which I return below:

Notions of up and down in the Himalaya

<i>Up</i>	<i>Down</i>
high mountain region with snow lands and glaciers	the plains of the Ganges with fertile lands
dry land	forests and jungles
pastures for sheep and yaks	meadows for cattle
walking, climbing	walking and driving
tribal societies and little kingdoms	caste society and kingdoms
tibeto-buddhist culture	indo-hindu culture
tibeto-burmese languages	indo-european languages

Yet, all these factors are not enough to “discover” Himalayan landscapes. Both more and less is required since “landscape” is a term which denotes the complexity of totality and at the same time the uniqueness and singularity of a certain place. The sacredness in the “secular” sense given above is only possible if a place is regarded as irreducible, if it becomes a power place of its own. It is through such unique places that social groups or inhabitants of settlements define themselves, as could be seen in many of the papers. Through identifying with the residence of a deity, social groups regard themselves as protected. The sacredness of places (temples, seats, peaks, etc.) leads to focussing and centralisation: a particular house, temple, settlement, village etc. – in short: the inside world.

However, the sacredness of places cannot be reduced to just one particular point, for that would mean to reduce and imprison what is considered to be free and encompassing. The power of a singular place can therefore be enlarged, opened and widened to many complex structures. The sacredness of these various places leads to opening and peripheralization: relationships with other houses, temples, settlements, villages etc. – in short: the outside world.

Both, sacred places and structures of sacred places, focussing and opening, centralization and peripheralization, are combined when it comes to landscape. Thus, landscape is defined by singularities as well as by vertical and horizontal distance markers. One does not speak of the landscape of a single house or temple, but of villages,

settlements, pastures, forests and rivers. Landscapes need the birds-eye perspective of an eagle which catches sight even of mice. Both the uniqueness of certain places and the totality of place structures make for the “character” or “quality” of a landscape.

The majority of papers on landscape in the Himalayas, including those presented here, have pointed out the following strategies and processes for creating landscapes or spatial complexity (which will be specified below): moving (especially walking), building, numbering, naming and colouring. While moving and building are bodily actions, numbering, naming and colouring are basically conceptual actions figuratively expressed in texts (myths, legends, inscriptions) or images (pictures, paintings). Moving and building refer more to what is done in space whereas numbering, naming and colouring refer to what is perceived in space. From this perspective, landscape turns out to be more a process rather than an essence of space.

Moving: Many papers deal with movements, preferably walking (pilgrimage, journeys etc.) in space. It is sometimes only through movements that a structure of space can be discovered, for they show what people consider to be combined or separated. If, for example, as Charles Ramble points out, vertical movements open up space by distancing in contradistinction to horizontal, especially circumambular movements which create boundaries and protection (see also Gansach), then he rightly demonstrates the sacredness of a certain landscape: circumambulation means enclosing the sacred, separating the inner from the outer. Vertical movements, on the other hand, separate the distant from the near.

In the Himalayas, special emphasis has to be given to vertical movements and some papers have paid attention to it. If I am not mistaken and as I will try to show below, one can even speak of a special Himalayan concept of verticality. There are, for instance, levels of verticality which, as is demonstrated by Marc Dujardin, correspond with hierarchical settlement and house structures (Vanquaille/Vets, Dujardin, Herdick): in Rukubji/Bhutan it seems to make for a special quality of spatial hierarchy of the built landscape. Gutschow and Ramble stress the descend of the gods. Herdick points out the great importance of sun-fall and shadow, especially for the slope valleys.

Building: It is true, as Marc Dujardin remarks, that in the Himalayas, each village settlement, each temple and each shrine exemplifies – both in a pragmatic and ritual sense – a high level of commitment, meticulousness and expertise. According to most Himalayan inhabitants the whole world is built and structured, which is another example for questioning the dichotomy of culture and nature.

Building (which includes cultivating) often follows its own rules and

regulations. There is, for instance, often a considerable pressure on space for new settlements which leads to building in a compact manner (Harrison, Vanquaille/Vets). Settlement structures are often arranged according to limited physical and topographical conditions. However, religious (mostly Buddhist) concepts also lead to the limitation or arrangement of settlement and building structures. The *maṇḍala* pattern could be mentioned here (see Harrison)⁵, or the building of *stūpas* in four directions (Gutschow/Ramble). Building seems to denote the safe, cultivated, protected area against the wilderness. It is, thus, a favoured method to ward off the evil, and it separates the inside from the outside marked preferably by thresholds (Gutschow/Ramble, Dujardin), gates, fences etc. The ‘building fever’ of Tibetans (and Nepalis) is worthy of being analyzed. It is astonishing how places are tamed by Tibetans wherever (around the globe) they settle, and how Nepalis build fences around their estates before they construct houses.

However, building includes construction of accommodation where sometimes gods or Bodhisattvas are the architects since some buildings are considered as created by gods or as self-arisen (*svayambhū*), e. g. the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara statues (Ehrhard, this volume) or *stūpas*. Thus, instead of the dichotomy between nature-culture other oppositions seem to be more appropriate: built by humans vs. created by gods, or built/created vs. the *other* area (wilderness). After all, “building” implies the dwellings of human beings *and* gods. Moreover, building is also regarded as taming; through building demons, ghosts etc. are forced to stay at a place, thus pacifying a defined territory, making it fit for habitation.

Numbering: To a great extent a landscape may have a Buddhist quality by numbering or, more precisely, by arranging things according to the number of Buddhist conceptual rows. Thus, the Three Jewels are a model for groups of three *chörten*, three mountains, three protectors etc. The Three Worlds are reflected in three-tiered conceptions of the world represented for instance in the levels of houses (Dujardin). The directions end in four *stūpas*, four rivers, Eight Auspicious Signs (Gutschow/Ramble).

Naming: Naming is the most popular and wide-spread (and best studied) form of creating complexity in space. It is especially significant in verbal journeys, myths, legends etc. of sacred places. Naming can be seen as a part of symbolizing, e. g. anthropomorphic or theriomorphic interpretations of landscape (Dujardin), references to model figures in landscape etc. Naming is of great importance in ritual verbal journeys practised by shamans and priests which might be a substitute for the topographical difficulties in reaching (moving or making

pilgrimages to) distant places. Naming is thus a way of travelling. *Colouring*: Colours appear in landscape in relation to order. They have a fixed meaning and are used in this sense for ordering space, e. g. black cube wards off ghosts (*dhi*), the white one malevolent gods (*lha*), and the red cube spirits (*tsen*).

I have mentioned only a few processes of creating spatial complexity or landscapes which seem to be typical for the Himalaya (though they are not limited to this region). There are more. Of great importance are, for example, the interference in nature by men or the ecological processes and changes: cultivating (including terracing), afforestation and de-forestation (which sometimes leads to erosion and landslides), channeling (Kim Gutschow) and the construction of drainage and irrigation systems, reducing the variety of species through excessive hunting (including eradication of species), breeding (new varieties) or collecting herbs, constructing motorable roads, supporting tourism. By these ecological and economical processes the landscape is altered dramatically. Although such processes have not been the focus of most papers, they contribute to what is to be considered as Himalayan landscape.

All these processes have to be studied in detail and with scrutiny. In the next section, I shall try to be more precise with regard to just one aspect: the sacredness of verticality.

UP and DOWN as sacred categories

If one would collect all the books on space and landscape, the heap could be higher than the Himalaya. However, the majority of these publications concern cosmological, symbolical or mystical concepts of space as well as anthropological or geographical studies on pilgrimage. In the past years, the cognitive sciences have taken more and more of an interest in this topic as well (Bickel/Gaenzle 2000, Levinson 1997, Ellen 1996). In this field scholars have mainly pointed towards the meaning of every day (common) language for spatial orientation. I would like to touch upon an aspect of this discussion that has something to do with the keyword “sacred” for I want to ask: *Can one maintain the geomorphic spatial orientation also for the religious understanding of space or are there other factors determining the latter?* I begin with an example from Katja Buffetrille (1996): In oral myths and written texts of the Indo-tibetan area, one finds every once in a while the notion that certain mountains can fly away and that it needs the power of specially able people (*mahāsiddhas*) or Bodhisattvas (for example Padmasambhava) to prevent the mountain from flying away. What kind of conception of space does this involve?

5 Macdonald (ed.) 1997 focusses on such *maṇḍala* structures rather than landscape.

Without doubt the opposition of UP and DOWN is decisive in the Himalayas. I have already named a few examples, and what I mention hereafter is partly commonplace: Up are the mountains, snow, pasture land; from up comes the rain and with it fertility. The life in partial narrow valleys or on ridges with wearisome paths, remote and economically not self-sufficient (therefore a lot of load has to be brought there) leaves its traces. The saying *ukālo-orālo*, “up and down”, in Nepāli has more than a metaphorical meaning; it is the daily experience which translates itself in many ways, amongst others in the concepts of the upper and lower city of the Kathmandu valley (Gutschow 1982, Michaels 1994: 217 ff, 238 f). Also from the religious point of view UP in this world is unusual. It is the valley, which designs (constructs) the mountains as a counterworld. As DOWN in the (Hindū) plane, *araṇya*, “wilderness” (related to lat. *alter, alius, ille*) makes up the other world to village or settlement, so it is the DOWNS that determine the UP as a completely different world: UP is the realm of the gods, from UP the first kings often come, UP the ancestors reside; UP is the pure world; who ever is UP has the sovereign authority; UP is health – one thinks of mountain resorts – and pureness, but not social intermixture or every day life, UP is salvation. Salvation comes from above, this catabasis is probably universal.

But how is UP to be understood in the sacred context? As an ego-centrical spatial determination, based on such parameters as “location of the individual”, “gravity” or body/head? Or as an geocentrical indication of direction, related to topography, terrestrial magnetism and cardinal points? Hardly either since all named sacred viewpoints – height, gods, sovereign authority, pureness, salvation, are not restricted to the topographical UP, not even in the Himalayas, no matter how the individual perceives and represents it semantically/cognitively, i. e. says or thinks it. Sacred mountains are not simply there but they are created. Ramble (1997: 132) expresses, referring to Tibet, what the anthropology of landscape has manifoldly perceived: “Savage nature does not represent an ideal state to the Tibetan mind. It may even be said that part of the aspiration of Tibetan religious ideology is to eliminate wilderness by subjugating it.” Holy mountains are not simply there, but made, they are the product of discovery and taming.

Likewise holy places, including mountains, are generally discovered in that they show or make visible, where a miracle has happened or where a holy person has settled down. If I am not mistaken, there is not even a word for holy mountain in Tibetan (Dollfus 1996). The two terms in question, *yul lha* and *gnas ri*, indicate more: *gnas ri* means “power place” in general, on which especially a holy person

has worked and which therefore attracts a lot of pilgrims; *yul lha* means literally “God (*lha*) of the country (*yul*)”. *Yul* can be compared with the range of meanings the Sanskrit word *kṣetra* has, which denotes not only a country or region, but also nation, state, area or field. But if UP in the sacred sense means neither an ego- nor a geocentrical indication of direction, what then? Here I would like to propose to usage of the term *Richtungspotenz* (“sacred potency of direction”, cf. Michaels (1998: 314 ff.) and (Michaels forthc.)). I would like to explain this by referring to Raimon Pannikar (1991) and the German



Mustang: chörten, horizontally coloured red, white, black to indicate the presence of the Three Protectors.

philosopher Hermann Schmitz (1969). The perception of space and landscape starts partially with the perception of distances and directions. Piaget and Barbel (1967) are of the opinion that a child's perception of distance is connected with developing self-awareness, especially with the possibility of differentiating between the ego and others. Separation is therefore at the beginning of perceiving space co-ordinates, differentiation allows A to be up and B to be down. In other words: Without DOWN no UP and without UP no DOWN. When it comes to the perception of spaces (plural!), then this is of course only the outer shell, not the whole, since, in a religious context, one cannot separate A and B and still talk of a sacred space.

The distinction of "geo-centred" and "ego-centred" is obviously not sufficient when for example the meaning of the sentence "Śiva sits upon Kailāsa" needs to be understood. Neither does the sentence "Śiva sits north of (India or rather Jambudvīpa) upon the Kailāsa" determine Śiva's seat sufficiently. The mountain Kailāsa does indeed exist and it can be exactly located by stating geographic degrees of latitude and longitude in the Himalayas, pilgrims go there and circumambulate it regularly (but they do not ascend it: that is forbidden, even the Chinese government has not dared yet to allow the first ascend) but not a single person can pinpoint the place of Śiva in the same way. It is obvious in this context that the indication of direction is not to be perceived by means of space co-ordinates. UP in the sentence "Śiva sits UPon Kailāsa" means more than merely on top. But neither is UP only used in a mythical or metaphorical sense.

This lexical deficiency of languages is not unusual, but rather the rule (cf. Levinson 1997: 16f.). A mere description of a face for example is always incomplete. Our language is rarely sufficient to describe smells or tastes: One has only to think of the odd and inadequate descriptions of wine. The recollection of a face or the taste of a wine can of course be precise but the semantic representation is at the same time insufficient. With the sacred indication of direction it is similar though here I would leave the question of indexicality unanswered since it is a theological question. One should therefore add to the three spatial orientations which Levinson (1997: 31 ff.) has worked out a fourth one. Levinson differentiates between a) absolute systems of co-ordinates (like the cardinal points), b) relative systems of co-ordinates (which are based on anthropo-centred co-ordinates, amongst them up and down), as well as c) an intrinsic (to be inherent, within) systems (for example the backside of a baboon). One should maybe add an emotive system of co-ordinates, amongst it the sacred.

In many Himalayan languages Sanskrit words are used for "up" and "down" which denote much more than directions:

Sanskrit terms for up and down

<i>uttara</i>	
(northern, left, up)	
<i>paścima</i>	<i>prācīna</i>
(western, posterior, last)	(eastern, to the front, former)
<i>dakṣiṇa</i>	
(southern, right)	

In such co-ordinates UP is a sense for space or exactly a sacred *Richtungspotenz*, but not an indication of a direction within a certain space. The geocentric north (German "Nordung") is aligned vertical – according to conventional maps –, but in a sacred north the east-west axis is of more importance. Up is therefore a singular sacred quality and therein absolute. UP is then always UP, also if one would stand on one's head. The peculiarity of a religious sense of space is exactly that which cannot be relativised, functionalised or reduced, since it always includes the other world as well: religious events always take place *illo loco* and *illo tempore*. Therefore religious sites or places "within space" or on a map can never be the whole holy place. UP in the sacred sense is only up, when the place takes in the religious sense of space. Here Durkheim's strict distinction between sacred and profane can indeed always be found. The differences between both conceptions of space can perhaps be presented as follows: Whereas in a scientific perception of space, "up" is an indication of direction *within* a space, in a religious sense of space UP forms a sacred *Richtungspotenz* which embraces various spaces. In a profane space "up" determines the direction within a space, which consists of a continuous, homogeneous, isotropic diversity of place. In a religious space, UP belongs to sacred *Richtungspotenzen* which is rather felt than perceived. Different directions can have the same sacred *Richtungspotenz*. In a profane space up and down, right and left or the cardinal points are relative and depend on abstract relations: weight, gravity, the spectators' location and so on. Sacred space on the other hand is absolute and therefore in principle detached from profane space. UP and DOWN, RIGHT and LEFT and so on are not mere conventions but absolute forces like gods, light or principles, because the religious human being does not know similarities of contents of space, only identities or differences.