

# FROM UTOPIA TO HETEROTOPIA

## Toward an Anthropology of Ladakh

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### Abstract

This paper investigates and critiques the atemporal anthropology of Ladakhi space by questioning the spaces of anthropology. A review of the academic literature on Ladakh reveals that it has often been claimed as "Little Tibet" or "Western Tibet" by Western scholars and "Eastern Kashmir" by Indian scholars. This academic and nationalist territorialism is explored within the paradigmatic framework of a reflexive and praxis-centered anthropology. In order to construct a more complete picture, it must be recognized that histories are contested, identities are fluid, meanings are conflicting and social practices are negotiated.

The terms "utopia" and "heterotopia" are borrowed from Michel Foucault (1986:24) who defines utopias as "sites with no real place" and heterotopias as counter-sites where "all the real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted". The concept of heterotopia is well illustrated in the words of Apo Roziali, now deceased, one of my most knowledgeable informants from the region of Lower Sham which was the site for the major part of my field research. One summer morning, as we sat outside the little variety shop that was his window to the world outside, he said to me "We are mi-srar, made from mixed strains of barley grain. Some from here, some from there. A little bit of this, a little bit of that."

The relation between space and place is a problem in anthropological theory. Our discipline is grounded in the history of other places. Anthropologists are travellers in space, dislodged from familiar habitats. Anthropological writing derives its legitimacy and persuasive efficacy from "Being There", to use Clifford Geertz' (1988) phrase. Anthropologists have often forwarded their own locales, attributing totalizing essences to places which become reified demonstrations of the entire place itself (Appadurai 1988). Writing that validates its authority by producing environments that are inert, synchronic and timeless and histories that are universalizing, abstract and placeless, widens the distance between ethnographers and interlocutors. Inhabitants or "natives" living in these areas are then "incarcerated" and quarantined into the exotic confines of prison-like

spaces and prison-like modes of thought which academic territorialism and imagination have defined and concretized (Appadurai 1991).

Although the technological shifts in communication have accelerated the pace of diaspora, the transnational movement of peoples and goods across locales is not just a special feature of modern and post-modern living, but rather, a given condition of our ever transient humanity. People from different nations have been invading, travelling and migrating to Ladakh for centuries, bringing with them cultural imports of commodities and ideologies which have shaped the topography of this region. Therefore, a rehabilitative anthropology must recognize that place is not vestigial or passive but that it is historically crafted and sensually experienced (Agnew 1989, Rodman 1991). "It is time to recognize that places, like voices, are local and multiple," writes Margaret Rodman (1991:643). In order to do so, it becomes necessary to undercover territorialism by placing under scrutiny not only the appropriations of nations but also those of academics.

In his book, *The Myth of Shangrila*, Peter Bishop (1989) provides a comprehensive view of Western travel writing on Tibet through the ages. Tibet, he alleges, was invented as a sacred landscape sculpted from the mythic fantasies of Victorian Romanticism. Through the topophilic visions of Western missionaries, traders and explorers in the eighteenth century, Tibet became an archetypical utopia in Western literature, with no geographical roots, an enterprise furthered by the imperial expansionism and trade interests of Britain.

Most visitors to Ladakh carry with them this romantic notion of an idyllic land, eclipsed from time and space. In the Himalayas, it is easy to let the magic of timelessness enfold you. But the mountains are not infinite texts of wisdom, frozen in eternity. There are roads linking Ladakh to Srinagar and Himachal Pradesh, the daily flights bring in tourists from all over the world, the same bureaucratic afflictions ail Ladakh as other parts of India, and so do similar religious tensions.

Bishop is influenced by Said's model of Orientalism, which presupposes that Western textual representations of the Orient can be traced to the dual propensity to radically dramatize the opposition between East and West and to deprive the Orient of its historical, diachronic being. However, there are other essentialisms that the theory of Orientalism ignores which must be considered to understand the process and not just the product of this objectification (Carrier 1992). Lying between these categories of Orient and Occident are other selves, other places - dialectical, shifting, slippery. When

Ladakhis present themselves to others, their depictions oscillate between categories of hospitality and privacy, simplicity and ignorance, patriotism and self-determination, business acumen and spirituality, harsh landscape and celestial abode, depending on the context, the situation and the position of their audience, whether Kashmiri, Indian, Tibetan, whether a wealthy tourist or a "hippy" (chad-po), army official or civilian. Within Ladakh itself, people of diverse regions, religions and classes claim to represent the authentic Ladakh. According to Michael Herzfeld (1990:305), "people themselves ignore human agency when it suits them to do so".

Ladakh has been represented in dual terms, as a surviving remnant of the glories and mystic secrets of an unsalvageable Tibet and as a primitive wilderness at the fringes of the Indian sub-continent. To quote one eminent writer, "Ladakh comprises the last remaining area of the world in which the original Tibetan religious culture remains untouched either by communism as in Tibet proper or by the modernization to which refugees in India and Nepal are generally exposed" (Crook 1980:140). Crook's article goes on to prophesy that "the tourist, however poorly informed, visits Ladakh for its authenticity. If that is lost the nature of tourism itself will change" (1980:160).

In academic literature, Ladakh has often been encapsulated under the domain of Tibet ("Indian Tibet", "Western Tibet", "Little Tibet") even though no Ladakhi that I have ever met classifies himself or herself as Tibetan, politically nor ideologically. The rationalization forwarded is that Ladakh may be formally situated in India but that its culture is basically Tibetan. Thus, Barbara Aziz (1987) proposes to launch a Tibetan sociology of women, liberally disintegrating national and ethnic boundaries of diverse groups like the Ladakhis and the Lepcha, Sherpa, Tamang and Limbu people of Nepal, who she classifies as "fundamentally Tibetan, so strong has the influence from the northern civilization been" (1987:79) and then, later in the article, as "not pure Tibetan cultures" (1987:94). In investigating the position of women in Tibetan society, she infuses a diffusionist perspective where individual societies become mere proto-Tibetan emanations.

Patrick Kaplanian (1985) attempts to redress this problem with a quest to find a valid niche for Ladakhology. He welcomes a co-existence with Tibetan linguistics but decries the encroachment of phonological Tibetologists who demand an authentic, absolute and literary interpretation of texts and devalue the specificities of locale, dialect and experience with which their informants give new meanings to orthodox idioms. Kaplanian's plea to accord the Ladakhi language its due status is a welcome corrective but the debate is beyond a duel

between just Ladakhi and Tibetan. In Ladakh, several languages are inter-woven by speakers including the official languages of Urdu and English. Unfortunately, as John Bray (1991:119) writes "Ladakh's religious links with Tibet tend to obscure the significance of its relationship with other neighboring countries". To understand comprehensively how people experience the world, it is necessary to situate the study of Ladakh in a larger universe, as I discovered when I asked for directives to visit Achinathang the first time.

You have to get an 'Inner line' [permit] to go to Achinathang, I was informed. Inner lines could be obtained from the D.C.'s office. If he wasn't in, I was to submit my petition to the A.C. Once he had sanctioned the Inner line, a copy would have to be submitted to the G.O.C. and the S.P. I was never to take a Shaktiman or a one-tonne going that way. If I was fortunate, then it might be time for a scheduled tour in a Gypsy by Block or Agriculture, the C.M.O. or B.E.O., or even Ecology which was building a hydroelectric project there. If none of these options were available, I could take the Service which ran on alternate days as a last resort choice which meant that I would have to identify myself at the three T.C.P.s en route. After I had reached my destination, it was unlikely that I would be bothered for there were only B.S.F. in the area. The I.T.B.F., I.T.B.P. and the S.B. (or R.A.W. as it was commonly called), might conduct routine inquiries but they were generally polite. It should be relatively uncomplicated. And if at all I had any complaints, I could address them to the A.C. in Khalatse.

Most of those who offered me this counsel spoke Ladakhi and Urdu with almost no English except for the acronyms which seemed almost impossible to decipher. One year of intensive training in Tibetan had not equipped me to decode this bureaucratese.

The inter-religious riots in Ladakh have exploded any fantasy of a timeless and homogenous Ladakh. Gerard Rovillé (1991:113) cautions scientific researchers in Ladakh to refrain from succumbing to partisan politics and parochialism, from sketching a lop-sided view of Ladakhi society, "bloqués dans leurs horizons par la ligne de cessez-le-feu". Seldom do texts on Ladakh make mention of the fact that almost half of its population practices Islam. Thus, Crook (1980:140) writes about Ladakh's "remoteness from Islamic and Hindu centers". In travel writings on Ladakh (Harvey 1983, Rizvi 1983), Islam emerges as a dark blemish on the otherwise pure and pristine society of Ladakh, with allusions to the hostile and sinister one-night stop-over in Kargil with its veiled women or in the form of avaricious, scheming peddlers of Kashmiri origin. Even distinguished authors like Pascale Dollfus (1987) assume that it was the Balti Muslims in

conjunction with Kashmiri fleece traders and British trophy-collectors that endangered the ibex because Buddhism preaches non-violence toward living creatures, thereby prohibiting Buddhists from partaking in hunting. She falls prey to the official discourse, using stated ideals in place of experiential details. Rovillé (1991) further points to the total neglect of the study of Islam in Ladakh since Francke's article in 1929, which is fraught with references to the religious bigotry and conversion practices of the Muslims. Recently, there have been works which attempt to rectify this lacuna by voicing the political position of the Muslim organizations in Leh together with the demands of the Buddhist activists (Bray 1991, Crook 1990) and by researching the history of Islam in Ladakh (Dollfus 1992). There is, however, a greater need for anthropological revisionism and participation in this enterprise.

If Western academia has glossed over contemporary political realities, tending to dwell in wistful moments of paradise lost, Indian academics have also contributed to the process of partial representation. To most Indians the Himalayas are seen as sacred space, the abode of hermits for spiritual enhancement or as a protective frontier against invaders, sturdy, upright, impenetrable. There are songs that bear testimony to the heroic patriotism of those who shed their blood for the liberty of their motherland, defending the "wounded" Himalayas in the wars with Pakistan and China. From "Kashmir to Kanyakumari", we are taught, does the territorial sovereignty of India reign. The mention of Ladakh, however, does not evoke any sentiment of national pride or history despite its strategic importance and participation in the major wars since independence; in fact, very few Indians that I know have any idea where this place is situated. As Agehananda Bharathi (1978) maintains, "the Himalayas tend to be ascriptive rather than actual mountains" to most Indians except those who live there.

Bharathi (1978) adds that people in the Himalayas are considered to be mountain folk with strange body habits and stranger marriage relations. For example, B.L. Kak (1978:7) states that "judged from the outbreak of smallpox in Ladakh in 1834 with such fatal virulence that about 14,000 people were carried off, the mortal effect of such a contagious disease cannot be wondered at amongst filthy people, most of them living in the elevated tablelands, who never wash and only change their garments when the cloth has finished piecemeal off their persons". Kak (1978:23) takes an androcentric and derogatory stance in which polyandry ("the ugly system of plurality of husbands") is viewed as an abnormal aberration while "marital infidelity is nothing new in man's history, it has followed monogamy

like a shadow" (Kak:24).

Bharathi further posits that Tibetan Buddhism is deemed a corrupt and distorted form of Buddhism, pejoratively labeled "Lamaism", and therefore scholars of Buddhism from the plains of India refuse to learn Tibetan. The problem of translation is highlighted in the anthropological works of Indian academics like R. S. Mann (1978) who indiscriminately intersperses Urdu terms, presumably translated for him by his interpreters, together with Ladakhi ones and attests that these are the words of usage in Ladakh. Thus Mann (1978:90) asserts that the Ladakhis refer to their fathers as Bada Baap and Chota Baap, both of which are Urdu terms. In the foreword to his book *The Religion of the Dards in Ladakh* (1989), Rohit Vohra, in several instances, recounts the hardships he had to overcome in gathering data because of the inability of his informants to speak Urdu accurately, rather than self-consciously apologizing for his own failure to speak their language.

The process of fieldwork enhances the paradoxes of identities that are refracted and conflicting. My own position as an Indian educated in the United States unsettles the distinction between home and abroad, selves and others. Of course, I do not mean to imply that no Indian scholars learn Ladakhi or that all Westerners are accomplished Tibetologists. I have merely selected some broad problematic aspects of Ladakh studies with the hope that we can initiate a fruitful dialogue which scrutinizes not only the politics and practices of Ladakhis but also the politics and practices of the researchers who study Ladakh so that we may represent our experience as honestly and wholly as possible in order to bridge artificial chasms between East and West.

## Acknowledgements

I should like to thank the Sigma Xi Foundation, the Skomp Foundation and the Institute for Global Change and World Peace at Indiana University for supporting my doctoral research. In addition I wish to express my gratitude to Michael Herzfeld and Michael Jackson for their comments on my dissertation writing, of which this paper is a part. To the people of Achinathang, particularly Sonam Phuntsog, and to all my friends in Leh and Kargil, I am especially grateful.

## Notes

1. Although Bishop's approach is important because it probes the influences underlying textuality, there are some noticeable shortcomings. Bishop has been criticised for conflating the individual experiences of authors to collective imaginings, of succumbing to subjectivism by skewing and selecting his sources to promote his theory (Sperling 1992). Moreover,

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Bishop seems to be unaware of the genre in tibetan religion and literature which is itself concerned with hidden valleys and eternal places (*sbas.yul*).

2. In the light of some of the comments made when I delivered this paper, I think it necessary to clarify that I did not intend to suggest that there is no connection or identification of Ladakhis with Tibet but that this should not overshadow the multiple and multi-layered nature of Ladakhi identity. If Ladakh was called "Little Tibet" or "Western Tibet" in historical literature, these were points of reference used by outsiders in general, and not ethnonyms used by the people themselves. An old folk song, sung during the cultural programme on one of the evenings of the conference, underscores this distinction. With the assistance of Sonam Phuntsog, I have provided a somewhat rudimentary translation. The Ladakhi version can be found on page 66 in *Folk Songs of Ladakh* (1970) published by the J. & K. Academy of Art, Culture & Languages.

### *The Road around Lhasa*

*The road around Lhasa is narrow,  
There are many travellers on it.  
People from our birthland are even scarcer than gold.  
People from our glorious capital of Leh are even scarcer than gold.*

*The water of Lhasa is of all kinds,  
But nectar like chang and arak abound only in our birthland.  
The water of Lhasa is of all kinds,  
But nectar like chang and arak abound only in our glorious capital.*

*The grass in Lhasa is of all kinds,  
But the grass of peacocks and turkey-hens abounds only in our birthland.  
The grass in Lhasa is of all kinds,  
But the grass of peacocks and turkey-hens abounds only in our glorious capital.*

*The trees in Lhasa are of all kinds,  
But the best tree of all, the pencil cedar, abounds only in our birthland.  
The trees in Lhasa are of all kinds,  
But the best tree of all, the pencil cedar, abounds only in our glorious capital.*

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