Territory, relationality and the labour of deities: Importing Raffestin on the Bhutanese spiritual landscape

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ABSTRACT: The Bhutanese landscape is highly contested by not only local livelihood practices and state policies, but also the activity of cosmological deities that lay claim to space. Territory and territoriality are explored in this context, the former of which represents physical space that is demarcated with the latter representing a social process of negotiation for space. These ideas, along with Claude Raffestin's theoretical work related to a relational approach to territoriality and labour are imported to the Bhutanese context. Respondents from Haa, Phobjikha and Laya illustrate a dynamic landscape in which human tenants are conditioned by deity landlords to act according to particular restrictions/prescriptions. The power of these deities is conceptualized as labour, and represents active shaping of both physical and social space. This work extends analyses within critical geography by illustrating the role of spiritual actors on the landscape that impose their wills and claim territory, which traditionally is understood as an activity of the state.

Keywords: Bhutan, territory, territoriality, cosmology, labour, Claude Raffestin

Introduction

For the average herder in Bhutan, the idea of territory or land ownership took a precarious turn when the 2007 Land Act scheduled to nationalize all communal and private rangelands by 2017 (Tshering et al., 2016). While traditional ownership of such land was recognized through the establishment of a compensation program, resource users found themselves at a disadvantage. Financial compensation payments were not recognized as being equal to the opportunity loss associated with not accessing rangeland areas. Regardless, many herders continued to use the land post-compensation with the only change being that tenure rights are not secure. As such, while rangeland continues to be used as it had before the Land Act in many cases, what has changed is the state's claim over the space and the power to establish user rights and conditions. This situation reflects a contradiction in which modalities of ownership do not necessarily reflect modalities of usage on the landscape. Actors in such spaces, or territories, undergo a series negotiations. Who lays claim to such spaces and what negotiations can allow access to a space's set of benefits (i.e. resources, shelter, travel corridors, etc.)? What are the spatial and temporal extents of these claims? These negotiations are made through a set of power relations in which perceived claims over space are used to legitimize territorial boundaries and allowable activities. Territory, according to Storey (2018), "is a word frequently used to refer to an area of land claimed by a state" while territoriality "is normally seen as the actions or behaviors

used to control or exert power over a geographically designated space" (p.34). The distinction between these two terms is important as the former merely expresses a unit of space while the latter is a social process of contestation and negotiation over that space. As such, this contestation provides avenues to explore power relations, discourses, and perceptions related to the landscape.

What is interesting about the Bhutanese landscape is that the state and local resource users are not the only actors laying claim over space. Non-human actors emerge as powerful claimants of territory legitimized by generations of Buddhist practitioners. Pommaret (2004) discusses territorial deities in Bhutan noting that "people have a very clear idea of the space – the territory – ruled by the *yul lha* [territorial deity] and can even indicate its exact limits" (p.49). While Pommaret (2004) focuses her attention on larger regional deities, other research supports a breadth of scale related to deities laying claim over regions, valleys, villages, households and even individuals (see Choden, 1999; Ura 2001; Kuyakanon and Gyeltshen, 2017; Allison, 2019).

In this research, we propose to explore the process of territoriality in Bhutan as it relates to sacred spaces. We conceptualize the actions of deities as labour, labour that works to impose power and establish territorial boundaries. In turn, human actors perceive this labour/power and conceptualize boundaries of influence, a process of territorialisation. However, these boundaries are fluid and porous (see Sassen, 2013), allowing flux that contradict strict boundary formations and rather support overlapping territories (Dyson-Hudson and Smith, 1978) in which government authorities, regulatory permits, private property, and other contemporary technocratic methods for delineating space contest spiritual claims. The power of deities is constantly negotiated with human actors adopting new forms of resource use and settlement patterns. These territoriality processes (that of contemporary society and of spiritual deities) represent a dialectical tension in which overlapping territories are perceived by local communities. How do communities navigate these multiple claims of territory and expressions of power? What are the repercussions of declining territorial claims of deities in the landscape? And finally, how do such territorial claims impact the relationship that local people have with the broader landscape? To this last question we turn to Claude Raffestin's work (2012; also see Klauser, 2012) in which he conceptualizes relational aspects of territory.

We recognize the immense potential that the Bhutanese context has for engaging with critical human geography and environmental humanities. These fields are rich with theoretical material that can both be fortified and challenged by cultural specificities in the south-eastern Himalaya. As such, this research serves as an initial intervention to connect empirical material from Bhutan with such thought. Specifically, we contribute to territoriality and Bhutanese literatures by dovetailing Raffestin's relational territory with sacred space analyses. What is shown is that the labour of deities establishes boundaries that manipulate how space is perceived and acted upon by human actors. Further, territoriality processes engage human and non-human actors in active negotiations in which territories change and overlap, acting in a porous manner in which modern and spiritual claims of space are intertwined. In what follows we first review the process of territoriality in light of Raffestin's work related to labour and relationality. We then show how this work relates to scholarship related to Bhutanese deities and the existing spiritual landscape. After which, we present findings from Bhutan canvassed from numerous rural communities from the western region of the country.

Specifically we draw on research conducted from 2016-2018 from the communities of Haa, Laya, and Phobjikha. To conclude we summarize lessons from these case studies that reflect on issues of labour, territory, relationality in the struggle over space in Bhutan.

Territory as relational

Part of the interaction that actors have with the landscape is a perception of territory. While modern perceptions of territory are dominated by state influence in which boundaries of governance are established and defended, this constitutes a small portion of territory-making that occurs. Territory may manifest in physical barriers of demarcation, but may also be perceived spaces that are commonly understood within a community. Duque-Wilckens et al. (2019) show how non-human species manifest aggression when protecting perceived territories which allow individuals to access benefits such as access to food, shelter and mating opportunities. Further, work in anthropology also works to establish resource distribution as a determining factor for human spatial organization (Dyson-Hudson and Smith, 1978). This setting aside of space is conducted in a way that powerful actors determine ownership, use of resources and restrictions/prescriptions that must be applied to interactions within these spaces and extends much more broadly beyond state boundaries.

Critical geography has used the term territoriality as a way to explore how territory is perceived and established by actors, which has resulted in numerous conflicts (Luna-Nemecio, 2019; Fang and Li, 2020). In particular, indigenous and marginalized communities have experienced a plethora of inequalities as historically perceived territories are integrated into a modern systems of land distribution. Privatization and government appropriation of land have been a dominant modes of ensuring that land is productive in a capitalist economy and has ensured efficiency in resource use. However, at times this has been done at the expense of social welfare in order to benefit economic hegemony as new forms of accumulation and alienation result from these capitalist relations. Bosniak(2007) promotes the concept of 'ethical territory' which she defines as "the conviction that rights and recognition should extend to all persons who are territorially present within the geographical space of a national state simply by virtue of that presence" (p.389). Bosniak uses this approach to legitimize ethical ways of interacting based on an actor's presence within a space, rather than one's legal status as a way of determining individual rights and obligations of the state. This creativity in the use of territoriality interjects morality within debates around immigration and how space can be used to justify corrective actions.

One corrective action that is of particular significance to this research is the work of Raffestin (1986, 1995, and 2012) who promotes relational aspects of territory and territoriality. Raffestin (2012) claims that territory is "socially produced space" (p.122) in which "territory results from the projects of labor – energy and information – by a community in a given space" (p.126). Labour is of particular significance due to its ability to interact and produce well-being through interaction with the physical environment. Humans extract resources and as a result also construct abstract notions of territory that are perceived by those that engage in labour on the landscape. Raffestin goes on to critique the field of geography for its lack of emphasis on labour, as "labor is a constitutive category

of territoriality, because it lies at the origin of power. Without labor there is neither transformation nor conservation of maintenance of ecosystems" (p.128). To conceptualize the relationality of territory further, Raffestin uses the terms 'exteriority' (the physical landscape) and 'alterity' (social space) as means to analyse labour's influence. In this relationship labour serves as a mediator that asserts control over physical space (exteriority), but is also used to access space, interact with space, produce barriers that include/exclude (alterity), thus the creation of territory. In these relations, labour serves as "the 'original mediator' that allows mobilizing and ordering the 'world of things'" (Klauser, 2012, p.115).

Labour as a form of power is an important equation for Raffestin, as this allows him to further dissect components of labour. Klauser (2012) notes:

> *Raffestin distinguishes between two basic means or components of power: 'information' and 'energy'. As a variable combination of energy and information, power is both genuinely related to knowledge formation (the accumulation and ordering of information) and to the accumulation and deployment of energy. With this conceptual construct Raffestin also connects energy and information with concepts of 'labor'... and 'mediation'(the concrete and abstract means setting the conditions for satisfying individual or collective needs in terms of energy and information)* (pp.113-114).

Here we find that power manifests in both information and energy, which serve as tools to order both physical and social space. 'Knowledge is power' is a colloquial saying that illustrates the importance of accumulating information. Information presents numerous opportunities to create new technologies that aid in the production of space, while energy is the physical outworking of this knowledge. As such, labour is understood as 'informed energy' (Raffestin, 1995), which incorporates both components of power, and serves as a means to mediate both physical and social space. This mediation work is critical as labour not only represents the "relational understanding of human being-in-the-world" but also the medial action in which "sociospatial relationships" (Klauser, 2012, p.114) are established. Labour mediates the landscape and the agent that acts within it. An agent engages and perceives their surroundings only through the act of labour, imposing power that manipulates physical space in order to produce a satisfaction of needs. Here lies the heart of Raffestin's relational theory of territoriality; agents use labour as a mediator to perceive, understand, and act within that which becomes territory, and in turn particular social relations and norms are established that guide interaction within that space. However, to date this work has not been applied to contexts that expand the notion of actors on and within the landscape. Work by Latour (2004, 2005), Escobar (2016, 2019) and others challenge us to think critically about the social landscape of humans, which more often than not incorporates non-human entities. Raffestin's relational theory, then, is complicated by the Bhutanese landscape in which spiritual entities also exert influence making territorial claims. Therefore, the Bhutanese context affords a strategic and creative expansion of Raffestin's theoretical work.

Bhutan's spiritual landscape

The actions of deities, as perceived by local Bhutanese, represent powerful forms of influence that shape biophysical and social space. As such, spiritual territories are commonly understood and enforced by deity labour within the landscape, imposing a process of negotiation between deities and human society over space (territoriality). With much of this spiritual landscape dominated by Buddhist ideals and philosophy that have come to characterize Bhutanese society, there remains an undercurrent of animistic folk traditions often referred to collectively as *Bon*. While *Bon* does not have a strict set of beliefs and practices prescribed by a unified clergy, it is understood as a pre-Buddhist tradition within the Himalayan region. As such, many of the deities associated with *Bon* were 'tamed' with the spread and dominance of Buddhism. Samuel (2013) describes the activities of Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche) who, starting in Tibet, "subjugated the local deities through his Tantric power and forced them to take oaths of obedience to the Dharma" (p.78). While this work was continued by other Buddhist deities and human followers, "this process was never fully achieved." (p.78). what resulted, then, was a lively spiritual landscape in which both enlightened and unenlightened beings dominated space.

This history of *Bon* within Bhutan has resulted in a number of traditions/practices that still remain within the country. Pommaret (2006) highlights these practices known as *Bon chos* and notes that "practitioners…are usually devout Buddhist. However, when performing rituals dedicated to local deities, they become non-Buddhist practitioners" (p.2). This suggests that allegiances are constantly negotiated, especially as it impacts the daily lives of human agents within the landscape. Pommaret (2006) goes on to feature previous scholarly work that examines such practice in the country, specifically a collection published by the Centre for Bhutan Studies (CBS) (2004) known as *Wayo, Wayo – voices from the past*. In the collection, the numerous authors dissect case studies from around the country in which *Bon* rituals are conducted to appease local deities seeking protection over agricultural activities and human well-being. Rapten (2004), from the same volume, notes that "Bonpo [*Bon* practitioners] are known for their knowledge and skills in harmonizing relationship between humans and those spirits…they play an important role as intermediaries…promote human health and well-being. They also exorcise evil influences, carry out divinations, and suggest possible remedies" (p.72). These divinations, known as *mo*, are critical rituals in which the *Bonpo* seek to understand how a community has harmed a particular deity (Pommaret 2006, Maurer, 2019). However, in recent years many such practices have devolved, become less visible, resulting in less practitioners. Responding to this, many lay Buddhist practitioners (*gomchen*) have adopted the roles previously conducted by the *Bonpo*.

Pommaret (2004) is a useful text for framing a deity's role within a specific territory, and how these territories are determined. Territory is understood as being the extent to which a local deity can exert power and influence. She comments that local deities are sometimes referred to as "gNas po [*neypo*], [or] 'host', which reflects the deity's ownership of the place, and the inhabitants are therefore considered as his or her guests. This implies that, as in every society, host and guest have duties towards each other and have to respect a certain code of conduct so that the cohabitation can be

harmonious" (p.44). Space then is understood as belonging to agents beyond the human realm, while humans use this space through acts of propitiation. A relationship between human agents and deities is grounded in this understanding where the *yul lha* (territorial deity) protects "his or her territory…this includes not only human beings but also cattle and the whole landscape, and implies a strong notion of ownership" (p.51). Therefore, while there may be some element of Yi-Fu Tuan's *Landscapes of Fear* (1980), there also exists a sense of belonging to and protection provided by local deities.

It should also be noted that there exists a hierarchy of deities in Bhutan as it relates territorial scope. Again, Pommaret (2004), recognizes that "each territory has its deity, each cluster of houses on the territory also has a minor deity" (p.44). The notion of scale is important in that while a more powerful regional deity (*yul lha*) may exert power over a territory that spans multiple valleys, less powerful deities may operate within this territory at smaller scales. Thus, there are overlapping territories that may be understood at regional, valley, village, household and even individual's scales. Choden (1999) highlights a number 'malevolent spirits' in the Tang valley of Bumthang Dzongkhag which are understood as operating at much smaller scales than the *yul lha*, and are viewed as being harmful requiring numerous rituals to ward them off. Being unenlightened, these deities nonetheless "impinge on the lives of the people and compel interaction on a daily basis" (p.1).

Allison (2019) also recognizes these 'worldly deities' and emphasizes their importance in the day to day interactions of Bhutanese within the landscape. The recognition of deity territory shapes human behaviour "through a variety of geographical and temporal prohibitions" (Allison, 2019, p.11) such as "the diversion or reconsideration of human construction and resource use" (p.1). Further, Allison highlights that these interactions between humans and deities expresses "a relational ontology that views place as sacred and as the site of on-going reciprocal negotiation between humans and the natural world" (p.13). To express this relationality further, as it pertains to territory, territoriality, and the spiritual landscape, we now move to share our own findings from Bhutan.

Methods

The data that follows is a culmination of material gathered from 2016-2018. During this period, 3-4 separate field work stints were conducted each year ranging from periods of 4-14 days. Locations included Phobjikha valley (Wangduephodrang Dzongkhag), Haa valley (Haa Dzongkhag), and Laya (Gasa Dzongkhag). This multi-site ethnographic study employed field observations and semi-structured interviews. A total of 52 interviews were conducted, which included 25 females and 27 males. Interviews were conducted in local dialects, facilitated by student researchers, and later transcribed into English. NVivo 11 software was then used to code data according to emergent themes identified by the authors.

It should be noted that the original purpose of these fieldwork stints were to explore local community impacts from the tourism sector, which dominates a majority of economic activity within Bhutan. This work resulted in a number of findings related to divergences in socio-cultural and human-environment relations (see Montes and Kafley, 2019; Montes et al., 2019). However, findings

from this work diverged from the limited scope of tourism revealing numerous avenues for exploring human-environment relations. Issues emerged such as perceptions of the environment, cosmological interactions, and identity formations that were all associated with particular local landscapes. As such, significant data emerged revealing potentialities well beyond the original scope of tourism.

Results

The results from each location revealed themes related to relationality and territoriality, thus the affinity with Raffestin's work. However, as the data will show, there is a unique application of Raffestin's theoretical approach onto a spiritual landscape. The data has been categorized according to interviewee responses based on the following; 1) demarcations of deity territory, 2) the labour of deities that manifests through protection and/or aggression, and 3) human interactions that result from particular restricted or prescribed behaviours.

Demarcations

The establishment of deity territories reveals a process of territoriality. Local Bhutanese perceive boundary formations through an exchange of interactions with deities, in which spiritual beings legitimize claims through power. However, these boundaries are fluid, changing constantly due to numerous variables such as waning power relations, seasonality, and interactions with other deities. Another characteristic of these demarcations is multiple scales in which, depending on the deity, the extent of the territory varies.

One particular type of deity that materialized consistently amongst Bhutanese communities is the *lu*. Allison (2019) describes the *lu* as "a subterranean spirit associated with prosperity and the maintenance of hierarchy, which can be easily offended by ritual or material pollution" (p.11). The following response from a 37 year old male from Laya expresses such a relationship:

> *We believe that there are lu present in the land and tshen present in the trees, so we conduct annual rituals performed by Pow-Phajo to please the deities and to have blessings from the deities. There are stupas present in each household which is constructed to please the deities of the area. Most of the stupas are built for the lu because we believe that the deities inhabit the land. When we build our houses it is believed that we need to ask permission from lu to let us construct our house on the lu's land and we need to construct a stupa for the lu to show our gratitude.*

Figure 1: Lu shrine in Phobjikha valley

Part of this demarcation process involves the building of *stupas* (stone shrines), that are used to provide oblations for the *lu*. The *stupas*, then, serve as a visible demarcation, but also a centre piece for human-deity interactions for which humans show submission to the deity's power (see Figure 1). As well, we see these particular demarcations at the household scale, this is further supported from Laya and Haa:

> *Yes, there is a lu near my house. There is a small stupa built where the lu is supposed to reside. The lu used to be inside the boundary of our house but now that has changed and the lu is outside the boundary. When the lu was within the boundary of our house, we used to worship and offer stuff such as milk but we don't do it anymore. (26 year old female, Laya)*

> *It is believed that lus are born wherever human homes are constructed. If I construct a house in a place where there is no lu then after the construction is done then the lu will inhabit in the area where the house is constructed because it is believed that lu will be there if humans are present. Even I have a lu in front of my house. It is natural to have lu in front of the house. Before constructing a house in an area, that area will be just land, but after construction the lu will inhabit the land. (50 year old female, Haa)*

> *If we pick up stones from the areas which is inhabited by deities then we need to put the stone back from where we picked up because if we keep the stoned then the deities will harm us. The reason for the deities for harming us is because the stones are considered as a part of deity's palace. When we construct a house we need to conduct mo [divinations] in order to see if the land is fine. If there is tshen[classification of deity] in that land then we need to conduct a*

ritual asking the deity to let us construct the house. Here the deity acts like a landlord and the person who is conducting the ritual acts like a buyer. We should conduct the ritual before construction so that the house will be built on goodwill. (39 year old female, Haa)

These quotes show that demarcations are everchanging. Deities may choose to migrate, but also human migration causes territorial changes. To build a house results in the creation of new localized territories in which deities spring up to take control. As such, human actors are never seen to have 'control' of a particular location but serve as residents in spaces that are already owned. And even if the spaces are not owned at the time, the establishment of human settlements initiates the creation of deity territory, showing that there is a relational connection between humans, the land, and the deity that stakes claim to the territory. However, other non-human actors can also influence territorial boundaries, as the following portrays:

There is another story about how there used to be lakes in the wet land areas. Once there used to be a huge lake in the wet land areas. The deity of the lake went underground so that the cranes could migrate to that area. Cranes did not have any area to settle during migration so the lake deity moved down below the ground. The reason that the deity moved was because the deity was touched by how the loyal the cranes were to their partners, so as a reward for that the deity moved. (Phobjikha field notes)

At a greater scale, beyond the household level, Haa valley is well known for its great protector deity *Aup Chundu*. It is believed that Aup Chundu was subdued by Padmasambhava and became a protector of Buddhism, although he retained a number of qualities such as being "gullible and an alcohol-lover" (Pommaret, 1994, p.10) but also wrathful and protective of his territory and those who dwell there. The three brother mountains, known collectively as *Meriphuensum*, that dominate the valley are said to be the abode of many minor deities, but primarily territory belonging to *Aup Chundu*. A 57 year old female from Haa comments:

I worship Aup Chundu because he is the protector of Haa Dzongkhag and now I am staying in his territory so I need to worship him.

Our village is Aup Chundu's territory so it is normal to be inhabited by humans and deities. There is benefit for us if there are deities in the area because if we are good to them then they do well to us and some time they also bless us.

These quotes portray a sense of allegiance that is associated with *Aup Chundu*. This allegiance is due to the interviewee's acknowledgement that they are in a territory that is not their own. Further, being in *Aup Chundu's* territory also affords them protection if they submit to his power and authority. As such, knowing the demarcations of various deities is critical as one negotiates a landscape. The following story of *Aup Chundu* reflects further on how allegiances are made with the establishment of

territories, with this case illustrating negotiation that involves multiple deities and human populations. In this story *Aup Chundu* intervenes on behalf of the famous Lama *Sherab Mebar* who stole treasures from a sacred lake deity in Haa:

> *Aup Chundu was walking around the mountains when he saw the lake [deity] on its way towards Paro. Sensing the danger of the lake flooding and washing away the villagers, he tried to negotiate and apologised to the lake for the unfortunate event. He then built a wall, as a treaty asking the lake not to cross it. Even the Paro people on the other side were asked not to cross it. The Lama lost all of the religious treasures on the way, except for the cymbals. So the reason why all people from the twenty dzongkhags come to witness Paro Tsechu [annual religious festival] is to receive blessing from this particular treasure. The cymbals are the main artefact of Paro Tshechu. The walls built by Aup Chundu earlier, were not built of stones, but with sheep and goat excrements. The walls were built a certain number of kilometres away from the town and the lake, as a border demarcation for people not to cross it, which even to this day people believe to be true. (45 year old male, Haa)*

Here we see *Aup Chundu* actively establishing territory working as a mediator between another deity and a human being. Further, this work has wide reaching implications as the border, which still exists today in the form of five *laptsas* (see Figure 2), is still recognized as a boundary in which those from Paro are not allowed to cross (also see Montes, Tshering, and Phuntsho, in review).

Figure 2: Laptsa boundary created by Aup Chundu

As a final note on the issue of demarcations, the data shows that people are actively engaged with deities in the determination of boundaries, constituting a process of territoriality. These boundaries determine certain allegiances, feelings of belonging, and even identity formation. Further, part of this process entails a recognition of power that deities impose on the landscape.

Protection and Aggression

The power that deities impose, using Raffestin's terminology, represents a particular form of labour. Their workings within space manifest as particular actions of protection and aggression that are imposed both on biophysical (exteriority) and social space (alterity). Protection is one form of deity labour that is expressed by interlocutors. As we saw in the previous section, those who live in particular territories can also expect some sort of protection from governing deities. The following are a number of similar expressions from the various field sites:

> *People believe, in most cases, that there are deities residing in boulders. Some even build homes for them so that they get protection. (36 year old female, Phobjikha)*

> *I think that the swamp where the cranes come is inhabited by mermaids which bless us with good fortune and harvest if we worship them... I have heard from others that if there are unusual rocks or trees around our house then that rock or tree will be inhabited by lu. If we worship the lu then there are chances that the lu will bless our family members. (56 year old female, Phobjikha)*

> *If we offer offerings on time then the deities support us and protect us from evil spirits. (55 year old female, Haa)*

> *If we have an older person among our company and we're travelling, they keep faith in such things and pray to protect the group when taking rest or sleeping in a different place. So if we are in the company of an elder person like that, we follow suit and pray with them as well to take care of us while we rest in 'your' territory. They say even if we sleep at the foot of a big tree, the tree might be the abode of deities, so we pray to them for protection. (24 year old male, Laya)*

> *There is one deity who is believed to look after the whole community, he is called Aup Gumo. It is believed that if people worship him and pray to him, he looks after them. There are actually several such deities... if we go a little more up, about 3hours from where we are now, there is one known as Aup Yenzop and further yet there is one known as Aum Dum. Unlike the previous two males, this one is a female. She is the overall deity of our community. Whatever we pray for, it is granted by this deity. (20 year old male, Laya)*

The performance of deities in their respective territories is recognized by human tenants as power that demands not only allegiances, but also a fearful respect. Interviewees recognize that family health, prosperous crops, and safe travels are the outcomes of these powerful actors that claim territory. However, while protection is one positive form of labour that manifests, aggression also surfaces as a

primary activity that dominates deity-human interaction. Interviewees express the following experiences:

> *If these deities get offended, firstly, giving an example, last year we extracted a lot of stones from Aup Mayep's place. So in this time, numerous bears came from the forest into the houses and destroyed people's belongings. It's like this was a sign from these deities. We also hear about our domestic animals dying when the deities are angry and at night we hear strange noises…if we dirty the place, some people get mentally sick and lose their mind. (20 year old male, Laya)*

> *If we offend lu then our body will have small lacerations that start appearing and if we do not conduct rituals then our sickness will get severe. If we do not react fast toward lu's action then there are chances that we might get paralyzed. It is difficult to appease lu once they are offended…and it is difficult for us to understand why it harms us. (39 year old female, Haa)*

> *There was a cave in which there lived a family of four (father, mother, son and daughter). When the family along with their own yak, which was carrying load, were headed to a location, they came across another yak. The two yaks got into a duel. The father prostrated and offered them milk to make peace. When the other yak refused to back down, the father started throwing stones at it. The other yak started backing slowly and reached a lake. The fight however only ended when the other yak killed the family yak near the lake. They were shaken by the death of their yak so they disposed of the bloodied carcass in the lake. The lake deity got angry because they dirtied the lake and so the lake pulled the son and daughter in and killed them. So if you offer prayers, they will bless you. Otherwise, the lake could cause you harm. (52 year old male, Haa)*

Here we see that the power of deities not only protect but also harm. Such harm can take the form of physical harm, paralysation, death of cattle, and death of family members. While these experiences indicate the importance of respecting and being mindful of not offending deities within their territories, aggressive actions have also been reported to go beyond established boundaries. The 39 year old female from Haa who reports the need for rituals to appease deities (quoted above) also reflects on a story that her mother told her:

> *Once there was a man who had cut down all the trees and taken out all the rocks from a lu's area. That man ran away from Bhutan to Tibet because that man had offended the lu and the lu was following the man. The lu wanted to kill that man. It took years for the lu to find the man. The lu transformed itself into a leaf. The man was staying in a Tibetan monastery as refugee and that was the time when the lu was able to get a hold of him. My mother was the one who told me about this story and she said that the moral of the story is that wherever we go the lu will find us if we have harmed the lu somehow.*

The labour of some deities is therefore understood to surpass territorial boundaries, especially in cases of retribution. Not only does this represent the power that deities hold to impact their surroundings, but it also placates human residents and motivates particular behaviours, rituals, and oblations (see Ura, 2001). It is to these restrictions and prescriptions of behaviour that we now turn.

Restrictions & Prescriptions

The behaviours of humans is directed by the power of deities experienced within the landscape, reminiscent of Sahlins' (2017) 'original political society', thus impacting social spaces (alterity). As shown above, the power may exert protective measures that build trust and heart felt allegiances, but may also be in the form of aggression motivating fear responses. In connection with these motivations for particular types of behaviour, norms have developed over time in which particular behaviours are either restricted or prescribed. Interviewees repeatedly expressed behaviours and actions within these two categories. While restrictions were often framed in terms of activities they should not conduct within or near deity territories, prescriptions primarily dealt with specific rituals that should be performed in order to gain protection, favour or permission for particular activities.

Restrictive activities seemed simple to qualify, usually dealing with cleanliness or noise. Deities are understood to enjoy cleanliness in both human hygiene and physical space, and are angered easily over pollution such as garbage, certain smells, and burning of various items. Certain deities, often in more remote places away from settlements such as alpine lakes, are understood to act in immediate harmful behaviours when people make loud noises through yelling, singing, or other means. The following are reports from interviewees regarding such restrictions:

> *I heard the greatest sin that a person can do is burn things on earth because there are deities present on the earth. We believe that in my village there are lu and tshen present in the forest so we should avoid slash and burn techniques as it harms the deities' areas by polluting the air... the areas which are inhabited by the deities should not be touched and we should not cut down trees or move rocks around as the deities will harm us and our domestic animals. (37 year old male, Laya)*

> *In order to appease them we can't just say sorry, we have to appease them by accepting our wrong doings and to clean up and vow to keep it even cleaner than before. It can even cause epidemics and disasters. (40 year old male, Haa)*

> *That area is inhabited by tshen and lu. The area is swampy so it is an indication that deities are present there. We can eat only the walnuts that have fallen down...we cannot pluck the walnuts from the trees. Common people like us cannot cut or break any plants near the temple. Only monks and tshampas [those committed to long-term meditation] are allowed to pluck plants and fruits from the temple. (39 year old female, Haa)*

There is a lake is known as Lake Wangduna and there is no such thing as people trekking to visit this lake because it is right at the top of the mountain. There are beliefs that we should not shout and scream or throw stones into the lake. If done, there will be sudden hailstorms and heavy rainfall…there shouldn't even be little amounts of pollution such as…dead bodies should not be brought near it or women during their period month should not go near the lake as well. If done so, the weather becomes extremely foggy and remains that way. (31 year old male, Phobjikha)

Contrasting the emphasis on what should *not* be done within and near deity territories, prescriptive activities were often associated with how to avoid harm and minimize the anger that may have been induced by the acting out of restricted behaviours. Religious rituals and oblations were often the remedies prescribed. While *mo* (divination) and *sho* (ritual dice) practices can be used to determine specific demands of deities, many prescribed rituals have become common practice. Interviewees comment:

If we want to appease the deity then we need to hire a monk to let the deity know that we will never offend the deity again. We need to promise the deity that we will not offend the deity and the ritual should be conducted by a monk near the deity's place. Rituals are conducted by monks to search for solutions and we need to conduct Lu-Thap thrice a month. Lu-Thap is conducted to please the deity and it is conducted annually to get blessings from the lu. We have to conduct different ritual for different deities because each deity has their own ritual and scripts. While conducting rituals for tshen we need sho [ritual dice], meat, and fruits but when we conduct ritual for lu we should not put meat or alcohol because lu are considered to be pure so they do not consume any kind of edible which can corrupt them. It is best if we can offer milk, butter, and curd while conducting ritual for lu. (37 year old male, Laya)

Then the people from my village invited Phasho, a pawoo [someone who subdues demons], who turned himself into a tiger and subdued the demon and that's why at present the village is peaceful. In Tseulakha, people who are working on the road and cut trees are still harmed. These people become sick and die if timely rituals are not performed. They don't die soon, rather they will be sick for a month or even a year. (Male Focus Group, Phobjikha)

When people from our community get sick we conduct mo and may find out that the tshen is angered by our action. I think tshen are not angry but from what I believe I think that tshen are hungry. As I said before deities are like us so they also get hungry…when we are sick we will conduct ritual and offer edibles. In the ritual we offer meat, eggs, milk, butter, cheese, rice, and sang according to the deity that we are pleasing. (42 year old male, Haa)

If we conduct rituals that were conducted by our ancestors then there is no problem because that way we do not offend the deities and the deities do not harm us. If we do not disturb the deities then they do not harm us and our agriculture products grow well. If we do not continue the rituals conducted by our ancestors then there are more chances of the community being in pain and becoming sick. (57 year old female, Haa)

The following also shows how these prescriptions may change over time and through the influence of other actors:

Before Je Khenpo [chief abbot of monastic body in Bhutan] banned the consumption of meat, each year our community had to sacrifice a yak in the honour of Aup Chundu and it is believed that the ritual originated during Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal. The sacrifice was conducted because there was a story of how Aup Chundu came victorious from a war, so in order to honour his bravery yaks were sacrificed. Je Khenpo had the yak sacrifice banned in Haa and he had asked the consent of Aup Chundu by conducting sho. When Je Khenpo conduct sho to ask for the ban of yak sacrifice to Aup Chundu the sho showed a good number indicating that Aup Chundu agreed on not having yak sacrifice. It has almost been five years that the yak sacrifice was banned in our community and till now nothing bad or unusual has happened. (57 year old female, Haa)

The above data reveals a sense of duty that humans have to appease those who rule territory. As subjects may appease a local king, so do human tenants appease their deity landlords. The deities make their presence known by conducting acts of labour that establish territory, and these demarcated spaces come with particular expectations of how tenants will behave. However, as we have seen, territories can be adjusted and so can these restricted and prescribed behaviours. Je Khenpo is seen to intervene on behalf of the people of Haa in order to align pre-Buddhist ritual practice with established norms of the Drukpa Kagyu sect of Tibetan Buddhism that dominates Buddhist practice in Bhutan. Therefore, while *Aup Chundu* is a deity that has established his own expectations for the people of Haa, there is a history of great saints (i.e. Padmasambhava and Je Khenpo) mediating this relationship.

During field work in 2018 we had the opportunity to observe a *bon cho* ritual in Haa valley. Pommaret (2006) describes such rituals as those "which ward off evil spirits or propitiate local deities and are performed by practitioners who are neither Buddhist monks…nor lay-practitioners" (p.2). During this three day event we observed how pre-Buddhist rituals were integrated into the lives of a community that full-heartedly identified as Buddhist. While Buddhist monks did not directly take part, they stood at a distance as observers neither contesting nor disapproving of the rituals being conducted. With this event the community embraced recognition of their submissive roles as tenants conducting oblations to a host of deities that impose power over the land. Through these ritual actions human actors ensure wellbeing for their community.

Conceptualizing the Labour of Deities

The labour of deities is represented by their ability to impact their surroundings. By applying Raffestin's emphasis on labour as a form of power, we see a more nuanced approach to understanding the deity-human relationship. The concept of labour, with its emphasis on energy and information, affords us the ability to describe deity interactions in a novel manner while also making linkages to traditional knowledge (TK) which has seen a resurgence of interest in academic and development communities. Energy is the power to impact, the effort released, but can never fully be independent of information. Energy requires direction for which information helps provide. As such, labour is 'informed energy' (Raffestin, 1995). In relation to deities, the cases point towards an experience of deity power in the landscape (energy) that is dependent upon a storied history of this relational activity (information).

Community members continuously reported interactions with deities either directly, or indirectly through other community members. This has resulted in the culmination of a large body of community knowledge and experiences that are storied over time, resulting in a form of traditional knowledge. Whether interlocutors had personal first-hand experience or not was not a determining factor in one's perception of a deity's power. Rather, what was more pivotal in one's understanding was the broader community's shared experience. This has profound implications for understanding perceptions of deity labour as a relational community experience that overlaps with previous investigations of TK. In Raffestin terms, then, we relate the informational component of deity labour to the storied experiences that a community creates and draws upon. Interlocutors are knowledgeable of their community's experience, which to them legitimizes the reality of deity interactions, and thus territorial claims. The actual stories are told and build up a storehouse of knowledge that is continually drawn upon by communities to make decisions. This historical body of knowledge is also in continuation as the relationship between communities and deities progresses over time. Therefore, the labour of deities within the landscape is dynamic and ongoing.

What is also revealed, however, is that the labour of deities also *mediates*. It not only serves to impact the landscape, but it also becomes the way in which people understand the landscape. Mediation is an act in which the performance (labour) serves as a way to understand biophysical and social space. The people of Haa, for example, heavily draw upon stories of *Aup Chundu* to understand the landscape and their own community interactions. *Meriphuensum* (the three brother hills) is understood in terms of *Aup Chundu's* historical activity, and the calendar is marked with numerous rituals for which the community comes together to celebrate his protection. Therefore, *Aup Chundu's* labour is used to understand both exteriority and alterity. The expression and experience of his power is the *labour*, while the use of this experience to interpret and understand biophysical and social space is the activity of *mediation* that the labour affords.

These laborious acts of deities then constitute the process of territoriality. Labour/power is expressed by deities, for which human communities respond through various behaviours and understandings of the landscape. These behaviours are directed to obey the restrictions and prescriptions in ways that comply with established demarcations. This social process, between deities

and humans, results in territories. And because territoriality is a negotiated process, these boundaries are fluid, changing over time, which also makes them malleable and at risk.

As Bhutan modernizes, cosmological space is contested at an increasing rate. It was noted through field observation, but also interviewees, that many who acknowledge local deities are of a previous generation, in which Bhutanese youth have less committed allegiances. This has created space for different forms of power, in a more traditional sense of local and state authorities, to take root and trump divine actors on the landscape. At the opening of this paper we spoke of the recent land reforms that have reterritorialized the landscape. This has not been done without some confusion amongst local rural communities. Yak herders in Haa previously consulted deities through *sho* (Montes & Kafley, 2019), however this practice is likely to devolve due to novel property rights that supersede these ritual performances. As well, policies related to natural resource management introduce novel ways of interacting with the landscape, such as community forests and permitting, which divert attention away from deity consultations. Ultimately, what is seen is a conglomerate of overlapping territories that compete for allegiances and recognition from human actors. While the data presented here illustrates a relational process of territoriality between deities and human communities, modern processes will certainly change the territorial landscape in the near future.

Conclusion

We would like to conclude by stating that Raffestin's theory was very much an afterthought in terms of our data collection and analysis. With field work being completed some years ago, and initially focussed on the ecotourism sector, we wrestled to understand many of the implications of the data set. What the relational approach to territory allowed us was a novel way to conceptualize perceptions of territory and deity interactions within space. While Raffestin's work has never been applied to the context of deities, we find great synergies in its application for interpreting the lived-experience of rural Bhutanese where biophysical, social, and cosmological spaces are intertwined. Further, we also recognize that other possibilities exist to which this data could be interpreted, such as within environmental humanities that is currently a burgeoning field of theoretical work.

Deities express labour, which serves as a form of power, in which they make their presence known while also claiming and demarcating territory. This labour makes an impact on biophysical space (exteriority) by creating boundaries that then guides human actions (i.e. settlements and resource extraction) and also social space (alterity) in which certain behaviours/rituals are performed. Through these interactions, there is *relation* or co-constitution between deity and space, deity and humans, and also humans and space. Therefore, as humans perceive and interact with deities, they also use this relationship to understand their surroundings.

This work points to profound resource management implications, as a long history of human-deity interactions have resulted in the current state of the environment in Bhutan, which is held in high regard internationally. To change these relations, or to manipulate long standing beliefs and ritual practices, will certainly also have outcomes for conservation practice in the country. Our field notes report one interviewee's loss of faith:

> *Aum Tshering does not believe in deities…long-time back she became sick and then she conducted mo. The mo showed that the deities were offended so they had to conduct rituals, but even after they conducted rituals she did not get better. So she went to the hospital and got cured. After that she lost her faith in deities. She does not have any stupa near her house. (Phobjikha field notes)*

The implications of this story are that multiple challenges to spiritual and ritual adherences present themselves that go beyond struggles over territory. In a modern era that rejects the spiritual, allegiances to local deities wither. Local Bhutanese may even feel rejected and offended when they are not experiencing the protection and care of their *yul lha*. Due to the importance of traditional deity territory for the purpose of conservation, more work is required to understand the intricacies of these relations and how they can be further promoted/supported by policy and programs. In particular, emotional, or affective (see Singh, 2015; 2018), components that exist between deities and human communities could offer additional insight to how these relations are evolving.

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