

Culture Matters: Developing Ladakhi Education on the Margins of India

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‘Ju-le!’

ABSTRACT

This study explores understandings, experiences, and constructions of ‘culture’ in relation to education and development in Ladakh, a Himalayan area in north-western India. Discussion draws on five months fieldwork divided between two teaching placements. I worked with a Ladakhi development initiative established to reform the education system and sustain Ladakhi culture, and in two rural government schools.

‘Culture’, a core theme in anthropology, is central to India’s constitution, conspicuous in Ladakhi development negotiations, and variably present in everyday discourse. My own interaction with parties interested in the education-culture-development field in Ladakh exposed multiple understandings of ‘culture’. I argue that ‘culture’ must be understood as a temporally, spatially and individually situated interpretation or representation. Analysis must simultaneously take into account wider socio-political, historical and economic processes.

A theoretical over-focus on bounded localities concretises ‘culture’ into a distinct domain—an available paradigm for use in government policies. ‘Culture’, as inscribed within government agenda, is a concept that can then be appropriated by Ladakhis in making heterogeneous claims for resources and rights. Promotion of ‘a culture’ can obscure other voices, and may induce regional introspection, stagnation, resistance, or intolerance. Thus reified, ‘culture’ may subvert educational potentials that move towards people’s increased capabilities, greater interaction in society and the broadening of their horizons.

CHAPTER ONE METHODOLOGY

‘How do you deal with living in two worlds?’ a friend asked on my return from Ladakh. Yet where are these worlds, theirs or mine? As someone who has lived and worked in places described as ‘fragile’ or ‘indigenous’, I went to Ladakh asking questions: What is ‘Ladakhi culture’? What is ‘culture’? Over two spring-summer visits (of two and five months’ duration), I became aware that ‘culture’ is an endlessly polyvalent concept in terms of descriptions, ideas, and practices.¹

I do not present a finished corpus of knowledge on ‘Ladakhi culture’. This is not contingent on time, but in recognition that there is no overarching truth, no specific matter or essence of ‘culture’ to be discovered. This study is my reading of certain situations that I encountered, and in which I participated. As with ‘culture’, this representation must be read as a temporally contingent, ‘partial’ and ‘positioned’ truth (Abu-Lughod 1991: 142; see also Bourdieu 1988).

In sensitivity to my accountability as a researcher within Ladakh, all fellow commentators’ names have been changed; original names being cited only in textual references. I gathered information from placement experiences, informal conversations, seminars, semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire (in *bodyik* [Tibetan script, translated by Tsewang Tharchin] and English). The questions were simply phrased, and reflected the themes of this study:

What is ‘Ladakhi culture’?
What is development? Does it help maintain ‘Ladakhi culture’?
What can education do to keep ‘Ladakhi culture’?
What does education do to make ‘Ladakhi culture’ weaker?
What was better in Ladakh in the past, what is better now, and what will be better in the future?

Use of this written questionnaire raised issues of interpretation. The decontextualised format was open to diverse interpretations and subject to a double language translation. Despite these factors, the questions yielded almost identical responses from female and male students at the Students’ Educational and Cultural Movement Of Ladakh’s summer-camp, Gya government secondary school, and a Leh private school. The close correspondence of the answers is significant, and will be discussed in reference to the creation of a Ladakhi ‘golden age’.

¹ This paper was completed in partial fulfilment of an MA Social Anthropology with Development undergraduate degree at the University of Edinburgh (1998), and is presented here in its original format.

Rapid methods of investigation are prone to interference in terms of translation and audience. Yet information drawn from, or through, those with a grasp of spoken English did provide a means of dealing with the time constraints of a relatively short field experience. Those holding professional positions are most likely to be able to communicate in English, and were significant sources of information for this study. My own lack of fluency in Ladakhi was tempered by the increased openness of many Ladakhis, on account of my efforts to communicate in their language. I incorporated the REFLECT (Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques) method into my lessons. REFLECT attempts to bridge ‘formal and informal systems of knowledge within an educational process’ (Archer 1997:28). Integrating aspects of REFLECT’s participatory approach allowed for a more context-based interaction with students and, through that interaction, a more direct awareness of their life situations.

‘Culture’ is described by Calden and Wildavsky as ‘a residual category, an amorphous glob’ (cited in Robertson 1984: 49). Defining categories fixes possibilities as ‘things’, yet ‘culture’ is neither a category nor a totality. Such reifications may take on a powerful momentum of their own in political discourses (see Spencer 1990, Stolcke 1995 and Wright 1998 for critiques). The following discussion does not present value judgements but instead analyses the social frames that shape (but do not wholly determine), available life-choices. As Hall points out:

The circle of dominant ideas . . . becomes the horizon of the taken-for-granted: what the world is and how it works . . . setting the limit to what will appear rational within the . . . vocabularies of motive and action available to us. (Cited in Keesing 1994: 309)

Within such frames however, interpersonal relations may be reworked, renegotiated and re-evaluated. The concept of ‘culture’ is thus redirected via new social ‘frames’, and through the very notion of ‘culture’ itself (after Kolas 1996: 58). ‘Culture’ lacks ontological truth, and therefore tackling the issue here risks further reification. Many critics sidestep these problems by talking about what ‘culture’ is not, or by coining new phrases. ‘Culture’ has been replaced by terms like practice, discourse, tradition, ethnicity, identity, society, and custom, yet these words or categories can also acquire object-status. New terms alone do not remove reified forms, and neither does more mindful analysis in itself. Many terms in this study are ambiguous and shifting, and as such, are minimally used, indicated as problematic, and employed only in the interests of conveying the following arguments.

‘Culture’ is the term common to anthropological discourse, Ladakhi development rhetoric and, sometimes, Ladakhi dialogue. I endeavour to unpack some of the issues obscured by the terminological shorthand of ‘culture’ in relation to educational development in Ladakh. Issues of politics, nationalism, economics, history, religion, language, gender, memory, and learning are interwoven themes in this study. These issues suggest threads to follow in broadening and deepening an awareness of the politics of ‘culture’, as discussed below. I begin by considering ‘culture’ in some apposite anthropological senses, and provide an awareness of meanings attributed to education in academic and ‘stakeholder’ discourses. I then discuss India’s demarcation and constitution as providing frames for defining ‘minority cultures’ and geopolitical regions. Ethnographic data highlights certain issues involved in inscribing ‘culture’ in educational development programmes. Prominent concerns in Ladakhi development rhetoric are then traced in the context of two rural government schools to examine how this discourse permeates everyday life. In the penultimate section, the specific difficulties of developing a notion of a unified ‘culture’ are extrapolated. In conclusion, I revisit the position of anthropology in current debates on ‘culture’.

CHAPTER TWO

'CULTURE' AND EDUCATION

DEFINING 'CULTURE' MOMENTS

'The horizon recedes as we advance . . .' (Pattison cited in UNESCO 1996: 43).

Twentieth century anthropology has placed 'culture' at the heart of its practical and intellectual project. Defining 'culture' in a plural or relative sense provided a means for delimiting a distinct academic habitat for anthropology – anthropologists' own 'culture' or worldview. Anthropological meanings are but a small part of a much broader humanistic sense whereby people are thought of as 'cultural' (rather than purely 'natural'), or as 'cultured' (in the aesthetic sense of refinement and intellectual learning). Distinctions between humanistic, aesthetic and anthropological senses of 'culture' have often been collapsed, creating confusion in scholarly and political discourses.

Anthropological models, to a greater or lesser degree, have tended to theorise the world as if it were a montage of discrete, static, contiguous and internally coherent human systems, or 'cultures'. Over time, theoretical models have portrayed 'culture' as a determining, integrating, and aggregating feature of people's lives (see Cohen 1993: 195). Yet fixed, neatly bundled, theoretical models of 'culture' do not translate into life experiences. Theoretical and 'lived culture' correspond respectively with Foucault's utopias: 'sites with no real place . . . [which] present society in a perfected form', and heterotopias: 'counter sites . . . enacted utopia . . . all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, [which are] . . . simultaneously represented, contested and inverted (1986: 24, Aggarwal 1996 *passim*). 'Culture' is not, however, merely a contested space. In Cohen's words:

'Culture' . . . [is also a matter of] autobiography: of things we know about ourselves; of the person we believe ourselves to be . . . it is not so much that it does not exist as that it has no ontology: it does not exist apart from what people do, and therefore what people do cannot be explained as its product. (1993: 198-207)

Williams lists culture as one of the most complicated concepts in the English language, being applied to 'several distinct and incompatible systems of thought' (1988: 87). Understanding the world as distinct 'cultures', each with an internally valid and 'incompatible system' of beliefs or practices, is a relativist viewpoint prevalent in anthropological discourse. Yet even in anthropological terms, 'culture' has not had the same meaning to every person or at every place or time.

In 1784-91 Herder broadened the reference of ‘culture’ to a plural concept of ‘cultures’ (Williams 1988: 89). Tylor was later to describe ‘culture’ as ‘that complex whole’ (cited in Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952: 43). However, neither Herder nor Tylor’s descriptions constitute a consistent theoretical break with humanistic or aesthetic senses of ‘culture’ and it was instead Franz Boas who is credited with this important theoretical development. Boas’ 1898 arguments were specific to the intellectual climate at that time—that of ‘race theory’, the ranking of peoples on a hierarchical scale of physical characteristics. In removing the fixity and stigma of ‘race’, the culture-concept can be seen as a positive theoretical contribution, which concurrently created the academic space for a new discipline: that of social anthropology. Boas’ studies have legitimised diverse intellectual claims about ‘culture’, and are the single most important contribution in shaping both anthropological and popular perceptions of ‘cultures’. Geertz draws on Boas’ relativist foundations, urging us to look ‘past the empty similarities to grasp firmly the *essential character* of . . . the *various cultures* . . . if we wish to *encounter humanity face to face* (1973: 53 emphasis added). More recently, post-modern attempts to ‘deconstruct Western metanarratives’ have perpetuated a fragmented worldview as based on distinct identities and cultural difference (see Khan 1995: 133).

Critics of relativism have re-examined the notion of ‘culture difference’, as an apolitical construction undertaken by powerful selves about generalised, interpreted Others (Abu-Lughod 1991:139). Yet ‘culture’ as a concept is far from obsolete. Pigg asserts that in social processes of localisation and interconnection:

We are caught between wanting to recognise the integrity and coherence of culturally distinctive points of view and acknowledging the impossibility of delimiting ‘a’ culture in the face of overwhelming evidence of the cross-currents in which these points of view are positioned. (1996:165; see also Strathern 1995)

I argue that it is wrong—dangerous even—for anthropologists, or indeed anyone, to attempt to locate a prototypical essence of a person, ‘culture’, or even ‘a people’. Yet refusing to investigate ‘culture’ altogether evades important issues. Anthropology can make a significant contribution to understanding regional development discourses, and the situated practical and conceptual interpretations of ‘culture’ coming from the people themselves. I take Boon’s shift in focus, from an assumption of unity to an acceptance of heterogeneity, as a point of departure for discussing ‘culture’. Boon describes:

A multiply authored invention, a historical formation, an enactment, a political construct, a shifting paradox, an ongoing translation, an emblem, a trademark, a non-consensual negotiation of contrastive identity. (Cited in Clifford 1997: 24)

While no bundle of characteristics signifies Ladakhis or ‘Ladakhihness’, icons of Ladakhi life have been objectified by certain local parties and presented as ‘Ladakhi culture’. Ladakhi here pertains to people from the geographical area now administratively defined as Ladakh, particularly to the predominantly Tibetan Buddhist eastern districts where I worked. ‘Ladakhi’ is a textual reference that relates to my perception of a majority opinion as based on views gathered in Ladakh, and upon wider research.

Externalised, ‘culture’ is a tool of social identification for ‘insiders’. ‘Culture’ is also invoked on strategic occasions for political mobilisation against ‘outsiders’, and in legitimising bureaucratic claims for resources. The existence of ‘culture’ a homogeneous bloc is therefore only meaningful as a socio-political device. In certain instances ‘culture’ becomes a means by which people share a context-specific dialogue, being intrinsically without meaning, yet ‘capable of substantiation at the discretion of those who use it – multireferential, multivocal, an infinitely variable tool’ (Cohen 1993: 207). Through ‘culture’, certain Ladakhis’ understandings of the past, present, and future are reworked via newly-available frames.

LEARNING TO BE . . . LADAKHI?

The United Nations Declaration of Child Rights considers education to be a civil right, and recommends that through education children should develop a respect for their ‘own cultural identity’ (Sheikh *et al* n.d: 11: Article 29: 1 (c)). In academic terms, education is not conterminous with schooling, the institutionalised strand of education. Ladakhi students however, usually took education to mean basic literacy (as directly related to formal schooling). Education is the term in everyday use in Ladakh, and will therefore be referred to throughout. Imparting educational messages about ways to understand (and therefore live in) the world are political actions. Such messages frame what may be conceived of as valid within society, and communicate ideals about what society should be. The rubric of education subsumes ambiguities and contradictions. Whilst appearing to offer life-expanding or awareness-raising potentials, education may simultaneously entail the internalisation of certain social values or a given ideology. Curricula are authored for diverse reasons and employ specific methods. As one local headmaster expressed, ‘people think that there has to be a neutral form of education which will have no effect on Ladakh, but all education has overtones’ (Morup interview 13/8/1998 Leh school). In Ladakh, individuals who adopt authoritative roles convey messages to an apparently receptive public, yet between interested parties, education is both practically and ideologically contested.

Wilcox asserts that ‘to expect an institution responsible for child socialisation to depart radically from the needs of the culture as currently constituted is to expect a culture to commit suicide’ (1987: 271). Wilcox’s relativist view takes ‘cultures’ to be non-porous wholes, and students as a uniform group whose lives are fully determined by the school establishment. Shor understands education more broadly, arguing instead that ‘human beings do not invent themselves in a vacuum, and society cannot be made unless people create it together’ (1992: 15). In this sense, students are understood as being involved in an interconnected, relational, and negotiated social process, rather than bearers of inert civil frameworks. Education, social capability, and personal development are interrelated process that arguably increase people’s measures of freedom and expand their life-choices (Sen 1996: 10). In Ladakh, capability is an interface at which the objectives of many different interested parties meet. Yet as Lave and Wenger point out, learning does not merely concern a direct transfer of knowledge or the acquiring of abilities. Selfhood and experience—and therefore knowledge and ability, and their meanings to the individual and society—are never straightforward (1996: 116). Capability, as interlinked with power, privilege and gender, is pivotal in defining whose voice represents Ladakh, both within and outside this area.

Transformational potentials of education are ostensibly subverted in programmes aiming to ‘preserve culture’, as this notion privileges stasis. Furthermore, educational programmes based on ‘culture’ do not preserve a selfhood that exists, but strive to synthesise an identity as based on an iconised and inorganic concept of ‘culture’. In promoting such systems, local leaders assume the right and power to subvert the ordinary course of society.² Subjectively chosen features are thereby promoted as though representative of a commonly experienced ‘distinct culture’. Messages can become essentialised, contributing to chauvinism or authoritarianism. In Ladakh however, the heterogeneity of the ‘culture-concept’ concurrently facilitates an endless conceptual reworking which accommodates both an ostensible vision of inertia, and practices of innovation.

Education is currently *the* central development in Ladakh. For 1997-8, Leh district alone was allocated 45,297,000 rupees (647,100 pounds sterling, August 1998), the highest funding quota for any development sector (Directorate of Economics and Statistics 1997: 33). Students, teachers, parents, central and state education departments, Ladakhi leaders and even downstream (i.e. unborn) populations are ‘stakeholders’ with investment in boosting education in Ladakh. Many local stakeholders correlate

² The term ‘leaders’ pertains to a range of influential Ladakhi stakeholders who can exert influence in given areas and contexts over certain ideological aspects of society (see Brass 1991: 14, Scott 1985: 315).

education with the present and future potential of Ladakh. Delimiting stakeholders as specific groups however, presents a misleading picture, as almost everyone in Ladakh claims a stake in education. Looking into stakeholder issues shows that Ladakhis are neither a uniform nor circumscribed group. Ladakhis do not do, think, or want the same things across time or space, and fixed catalogues of attributes or wishes do not prevail within or between so-called ‘stakeholder groups’. Mutual concerns and cross-cutting allegiances and alliances exert variable or antagonistic influences, given the convergence or divergence of certain circumstances. Stakeholder terms are categories that give a generalised sense of more blurred realities. Referring to ‘groups’ is a commonly accepted practice, yet communal terms often become labels which people themselves would not necessarily designate, and certainly not invariably. However, conceptualising stakeholders as a *whole* reflects more accurately the heterogeneity of people (Ladakhis and non-Ladakhis), who have an interest in education in Ladakh.

Educational leaders are drawn from the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC), the Cultural Academy and non-governmental organisations (NGOs); primarily the Students’ Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh (SECMOL). In this study, ‘culture’ (except where specified) refers to leaders’ interpretations of anthropological interpretations of ‘culture’ as mediated by the Indian Constitution. Thus ‘culture’ is usually locally translated (after Boas), as the entire, idiosyncratic, internally coherent system of ‘a culture’. Leaders subjectively locate ‘culture’ in specific domains, reflecting those identified by anthropologists and also by India’s Constitution: religion, language, environmental relations and human organisation.

As Anderson asserts, ‘communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined’ (1991: 6). A plethora of voices claim to represent the ‘real Ladakh’. Characteristics identified as ‘Ladakhi’ form a pool of features. No one person identifies with all these features at any given time, and instead individuals may emphasise certain features in different times and places. What constitutes ‘Ladakh’ or ‘Ladakhi’ to one person in a given time or place, will not be the same for others, or to the same degree. Spheres of asserted commonalty and ‘boundaries’ of difference cannot be taken for granted, and are instead context, time and person-specific. Asymmetrical life experiences and implicit resistance—the silences and silencing of certain parties—complicate straightforward renditions of ‘Ladakhiness’ or ‘culture’. The following analysis identifies junctures through which more commonly perceived interests may be channelled.

Ladakh is situated in the Himalayan rain shadow of north-western India, lies predominantly at altitudes of 3,500 to 6,000 metres above sea level, and is inaccessible by road for nine to ten months of the year. With the instating of the LAHDC in 1995 (a sub-state council resulting from struggles for ‘home rule’), Ladakh gained limited capacities for self-governance. In politico-administrative terms however, Ladakh remains a region within Jammu and Kashmir State (J&K). Ladakh faces significant challenges in the creation of a school system, due to climatic and geopolitical restrictions. The issue of remoteness is also manipulated in educational claims made by Ladakhi stakeholders. Lack of access to resources and training—which greatly limit certification—have muted many Ladakhi voices in accessing and exercising power directly through central channels (‘centre’ referring throughout to the national Indian government in New Delhi). Communication, often through the link-language of English, determines whether voices are heard in bureaucratic spheres. ‘Culture’, constitutionally sanctioned and bolstered by Ladakhi leaders’ development messages, thus affords an innovative channel through which claims can be negotiated. ‘Culture’ becomes a means of engendering a sense of Ladakhi unity, and a form of ‘resistance’ in relation to variously perceived outside parties.

A Ladakhi proverb states that ‘it is only with the help of a mirror that one can see one’s own face’ (cited by Nawang Tsering 1994: 46). Ekholm-Friedman and Friedman likewise point out that ‘the practice of cultural observation is not the practice of ordinary existence’ (1995:165). ‘Culture’ is most easily externalised by those with life experiences outside their familiar environments. For many Ladakhis, relocation was for education, shifts that were in turn facilitated by the nascent local market economy (which tended to further privilege noble families), and by expansions in government education further afield. Externalisation has provided different meanings for ‘Ladakhi culture’; views concordant with that of the Indian Constitution and with anthropology. NGO and leaders’ treatises are widely, though not uniformly, promoted in Ladakh. Leh Radio and Ladags Melong (‘Ladakhi Mirror’, SECMOL’s magazine) are two media channels used by leaders to promote a ‘Ladakhi consciousness’ among disparate groups. As Gupta and Ferguson point out, growth of a ‘transnational public sphere’ allows the ‘creation of forms of solidarity and identity that do not rest on an appropriation of space where contiguity and face-to-face contact are paramount’ (1992: 9).

Ladakhis frequently do not conceive of a coherent external domain of ‘culture’, with the exception of students whose educational environments involve specific programmes to impart ‘Ladakhi culture’. Local people were often unsure of how to

describe ‘Ladakhi culture’. As Sonam Dorje Soso exclaimed: ‘When you say culture, we go berserk—what’s *that?*’ (1996: 3). On being questioned about their ‘culture’, Ladakhis frequently pointed to local ‘experts’—leaders—as repositories of such knowledge for inquisitive researchers. Equating leaders’ tertiary education with being cultured suggests that Ladakhis do have a notion of ‘culture’, yet are reluctant or unable to objectively define or externalise their ideas. ‘Cultured’, in the aesthetic sense of being refined, is a meaning that predates the more recent shift in emphasis to a plural, anthropological meaning of ‘cultures’ (as discussed in Chapter Four). In terms of development, Ladakhis generally favour changes that offer tangible benefits or an easier daily life, and it is instead leaders who single out ‘culture’ as a development aim. Neither secular schooling nor many of today’s technical communications are native to Ladakh, yet these anomalies can be overlooked or reworked, given the mobility and heterogeneity of the ‘culture-concept’. The possibility of defining Ladakh as a specific region arose simultaneously with the making of India. Investigation therefore must combine a ‘close-up high magnification view of the micro-politics of local life with a wide-angle picture of global interconnections’ (Pigg: 1996: 193). Without this dual perspective, the realities of Ladakh’s position within India and the world would be overlooked.

CHAPTER THREE

NATIONS, BORDERS, REGIONS

WHAT IS INDIA?

In 1880, Strachey claimed that:

There is not and never was an India, or even a country of India, possessing, according to European ideas, any sort of unity: physical, political, social or religious, no Indian nation, no people of India. (Cited in Mander 1992: 356)

However, The Educational Rights of Minorities maintains that ‘despite the diversity of religions and languages, there runs through the fabric of the nation the golden thread of basic unity’ (Mathew 1992: 1). Khilnani further argues that disparate areas did share ‘intelligible common cultural forms’ prior to the 1947 demarcation of India (1997: 155). Yet Khilnani’s statements are also valid for Ladakh’s links with a wider, historically-politically shifting, Tibetan cultural area. Ladakhi oral histories emphasised that, especially prior to the 1959 border closure of Tibet, trans-Himalayan trade and socio-religious links were of equal or greater significance to those with peninsular India.

Frontiers are socially positioned, politico-ideological markers dividing polities, which use map making, together with the ‘culture-concept’ of bounded, contiguous, and internally cohered, social spaces as their legitimising features (Handler 1988: 8). In 1947 British colonial powers hastily delineated national frontiers, creating the possibilities of ‘India’ and ‘Indians’ which are forcible tools of political manoeuvre today (Anderson 1991: 185). Frontier states are of prime significance in circumscribing northern India, yet these boundaries have been contested ever since their design. Anderson asserts that ‘in the modern conception, [national] . . . sovereignty is fully, flatly and evenly operative over each square centimetre of a legally demarcated territory (1991: 19). Yet it is frequently at the boundaries of nations, where central power is most sharply inscribed and experienced (Wilson and Donnan 1998: 17).

After Independence, India’s government was left with the task of bureaucratically generating a common commitment to nationhood. Reddy and Sharma claim that it is ‘the people’s will which is translated into the constitution by the people themselves’ (1989: 7). In practice, ‘people’ refers to non-colonial elites and leaders who by virtue of being Indian are deemed, by Reddy and Sharma, to be the legitimate representatives of India as a whole. A parallel process occurs in Ladakh, whereby the spokesperson’s role is usually claimed by (and locally ascribed to) Ladakhi leaders.

India's constitution endorses 'unity-in-diversity', a dual ideal of national solidarity and regional integrity. Furthermore:

[Article 29 (1) provides that] any section of the citizens residing in the territory of India, having a distinct language, script or culture of its own shall have the right to conserve the same...the state will not impose upon it any other culture which may be local or otherwise. (Mathew 1992: 3)

Inscribing a concept in bureaucratic terms creates a category, 'culture' thus becoming a 'legitimate right'. Cultural-rights, in this constitutional sense, are restricted to minorities only (numerically defined), and do not provide a needs-based source of assistance. The meaning of 'culture' in the Indian policy declaration is left unspecified, increasing the possibilities for interpretation and appropriation of the 'culture-concept'. 'Culture' may be used as a focus for Ladakhis' internal identification, and subsequently for mobilisation in leveraging resources and rights. However, the couching of arguments in overtly political terms is problematic, as a result of Ladakh's frontier location. In 1962 Sino-Indian war resulted in the annexation of the Aksai Chin (a 37,500 square kilometre tract of land) by China. Ladakh's strategic location became a major issue, affecting political procedures and dispositions, and propelling Ladakh into national public awareness (Rizvi 1998: 91). In 1989 Ladakhi dissenters exploited their strategic geopolitical site as a tool of political manipulation, arguing that Ladakh's de-linked history and culture (in relation to India) justified their demands for self-rule (Stobdan 1995: 7). In substituting 'culture' as a tool of political transaction, 'culture' instead becomes a politically and ideologically charged issue.

CENTRAL FOCUS

Chandra, head of research at the Council for Indian School Certificate Examinations, is developing 'culture specific' curricula for Indian minorities. Chandra describes himself as being:

As mainstream as you can get. I am perhaps disadvantaged in that I don't understand minority cultures because I'm not part of one. Cultures can be so separate that they can't even recognise what the dimensions of the other culture is. (Interview 1/5/1998: Delhi)

'Culture' here is seen as a collection of non-commensurable traits 'adhering' to a person, or even 'a people'. Chandra described Ladakh as 'a separate case, an island away from mainstream India. People didn't go to Ladakh for a very long time—it was *forgotten*'

(ibid.). In such statements, Ladakh is seen as homogeneous, ‘backward’ and far-flung, in contrast to the ‘civilised’ hub of central or state powers.

One of the main aims in education, argues Ravindranatha, is to bring about the elusive quality of ‘mental development’, described as people’s ability ‘to see things in a broader perspective in the wider context of the nation in which they live’ (1996: 31). Government school text-books produced in the central city of Hyderabad, state that the ‘culture element’ of their books ‘has no marked regional character and is, therefore, unlikely to present any great difficulty to pupils of different cultural areas’ (Central Institute of English 1996: vi). Central textbook illustrations however, privilege an idea of ‘Indianness’ based on the ‘mainstream’ representer’s own world: Hindu, north Indian, upwardly mobile, nuclear families, with quasi-Western aspirations. Ladakhi leaders argue that these books are ‘inappropriate for Ladakhi culture’, thereby using centrally-produced texts as bargaining tools to appeal for their own system; one which ‘respects Ladakh’s different culture’.

Books on India frequently omit the Himalaya, which are instead amalgamated, as ‘a sacred space . . . or as a protective frontier against invaders’ (Aggarwal 1997: 25). Ladakhis so frequently referred to India as if geographically distinct from Ladakh that I inadvertently used this wording in a questionnaire. One teacher from peninsular India took issue with my phraseology, contending that ‘the children won’t understand this question: *we are all Indians!*’ (Bose *personal communication* 28/8/1998 Leh). However, all except one student had nevertheless answered as though India did indeed begin in the adjoining state. Again, ‘cultures’, regions and their borders are not conceptually concrete, and are instead temporally, spatially, and subjectively perceived fields.

Wolf (1982: *passim*) argues that regional isolation did not occur in the past; all areas being implicated to differing degrees in creating one global history. Khilnani further asserts that before colonialism regions did not exist in any concrete sense to hinder or guide unification, and instead arose simultaneously with nationalism—both being processes of comparable self-ascription (1997: 153-157). Yet if there were no ‘cultures’, regions or times of isolation: how or why do movements to ‘preserve Ladakhi culture’ arise? Gupta and Ferguson argue that the sovereignty of a primordial community must not be taken for granted. We must instead ‘examine how it was formed *as a community* out of the interconnected space that always existed’ (1992: 8). The preceding statements lead directly to a consideration of Ladakhi development aims, and in particular to the education-‘culture’-development ideology of SECMOL.

CHAPTER FOUR
LADAKH:
STUDENTS' EDUCATIONAL AND CULTURAL MOVEMENT OF LADAKH
&
GYA AND SASOMA GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

THE STATE OF DEVELOPMENT IN A 'DEVELOPMENT STATE'

Political changes, especially the institutionalisation of borders, have meant that different and increasing numbers of non-locals have been involved in Ladakh over time. Ladakhis however, have not generally been the main practical or conceptual participants in this process. Benefits have mostly flowed out of Ladakh, the remaining assets being appropriated by those with greater access to education and channels of communication. While many central and regional authorities consider 'culture' to be an obstacle to development, 'culture' is, conversely, protected constitutionally and considered to be a national resource for generating tourism.

Local development messages from Ladakhi NGOs which stress a 'Ladakh-centric' ideological intent are no less ambiguous. The incoherence within and between NGOs in Ladakh is due in part to individual parties protecting their own development territories. Negotiations play out struggles for social status, relative respect and political legitimacy. Development leaders often assumed a benignly paternalistic attitude, one employee asserting that 'ninety-five percent of Ladakhis are neglecting their culture' (Jigmet *personal communication* 9/6/1998 Leh). Some argued that Ladakhis should now be fully active in 'preserving their culture' before it vanished or was taken over by 'another culture'. Local discourse implied that connections were being made between Ladakh's socio-cultural and territorial position, and the predicaments faced by their neighbouring region, Tibet.

Development discourses involved frequent debates about 'backwardness' (relatively defined *vis-à-vis* Leh and Sham administrative blocks); a feature concurrently represented by 'cultural intactness'. For movements aiming to 'preserve culture', it is somewhat ironic that so-called 'backward' areas are subject to more rapid change, due to LAHDC and NGO categorisation and prioritisation. Gya is one such area, which has no piped or pumped water nor electric power, where transport is limited, and the diet very basic. In Gya's case, these characteristics have been used as a lever for accessing development channels of support, especially in the educational sphere.

Leaders' messages engender a sense of 'cultures' as non-commensurable. As one SECMOL colleague privately expressed, 'I am confused over which way is best—the Western way or the Ladakhi way' (ibid.). Ladakh is described by leaders as 'developing an inferiority complex about its cultural roots' which is making young people 'ape the Western lifestyle rather indiscriminately' (Sonam Wangchuk n.d.: 3). Leaders often blamed the 'outside order of modernity', for changing students' values. Students were said to need more NGO and educational campaigns to raise their awareness; a change that would benefit leaders working in NGOs, as well as educational stakeholders. Leaders claimed that students would then be able to 'distinguish good change from bad'. Ninety-one per-cent of Leh District government school students fail their matriculation exams (Ladags Melong 1997: 39), which is presented by leaders as the fault of an 'alien' and 'culturally inappropriate' education system. The Students' Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh was initiated in 1988 by dissatisfied college students returning to Ladakh. Today, SECMOL is staffed mostly by Ladakhis, and is the NGO currently spearheading local educational reforms.

TRAVELS OF A 'CULTURE-CONCEPT'

SECMOL prioritise government (rather than private) schooling, and arrange dance tours overseas, summer-camps, the development of 'locally-applicable' Ladakhi textbooks and innovative teacher training programmes. SECMOL exemplify a process in which 'culture' is 'simultaneously objectified, an entity associated with a place and owned by the people, and subjectified, a context for relations which seek the idealised goals intrinsic to the objectified culture' (Wilson and Donnan 1998: 8). SECMOL defines itself as a movement rather than an organisation, aiming to reflect broader social change rather than establish a rigidly structured system. SECMOL's influence is encapsulated by the Chinese proverb on the office notice board: 'if we don't change the way we are going we will end up where we are headed'. In a wry play on words an external commentator dubbed SECMOL an 'Edu-Cult', and the following quotes should be read with their persuasive purposes in mind.

SECMOL blames current educational difficulties on Ladakhi's inclusion within the Indian Union (1947) which is said to have:

Sent them into a state of confusion and cultural shock due to the sudden exposure to the harsh 'modern' world outside with its arrogant and imposing concepts . . . Restoring such pride and respect is the only way to save the cultural heritage of Ladakh from rejection and extinction. (Sonam Wangchuk n.d.: 1-3)

While ‘culture’, as identified at SECMOL is unessentialised, a notion of what ‘Ladakhi culture’ is (or should be) is in evidence:

We might see someone in totally Western-looking dress, but [when] you talk to them, they still have the Ladakhi inside, and it’s important that this lasts. A person who has all the chances and still chooses to be a simple Ladakhi, that’s a real Ladakhi. (Stobgyas [SECMOL director] interview 8/9/1998 Leh)

In considering the present importance that leaders attach to ‘culture’, possible meanings in eras prior to the advent of formal schooling must first be traced. Ridout asserts that:

The simplistic view gives rise to the major misconception that education in nonliterate societies either does not exist in terms of organised training or the systematic transfer of advanced knowledge or, if it exists, does not promote social differentiation or foster sub-cultures. (Cited in Akinnaso 1992: 69)

Organised training and advanced knowledge corresponds with the Tibetan Sciences of Knowledge. Social differentiation and ‘sub-cultures’ are suggested by linguistic expressions of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’. Social literacy is also discussed briefly below.

TRACING SOURCES OF KNOWLEDGE

‘Yon-tan’, the Ladakhi word for education, is clustered linguistically with ‘culture’ and virtue (Norberg-Hodge and Palden 1991). Here, ‘culture’ refers to formal learning as equated with being *cultured* in a scholarly or humanistic sense. The ten Tibetan major (analytical/spiritual) and minor (aesthetic) sciences of knowledge carry the same meaning of ‘culture’, and were cited by leaders at the Cultural Academy as exemplifying Ladakh’s long-standing ‘civilised’ status. The sciences and literacy however, were primarily the prerogative of monks (logic/philosophy) or noble families (indigenous medical science) and cannot be taken as evidence of an all-encompassing system of schooling in the past, as they were outside most Ladakhis’ experiences of learning.

Goffman defines ‘regions’ as ‘any place that is bounded to some degree by barriers to perception’. Regions differ in the extent to which they are bounded, depending on the relative availability of outside connections (1987: 108). Classical Tibetan includes linguistic references to a variety of ‘selves’ and ‘others’, as based on ‘regions’. One distinction, based on Buddhism, was *nang-pa* or ‘insider’, and *chipa* meaning ‘outsider’ (Dawa Norbu 1994: 26; Gyelong Konchok Phandey 7/7/1998 Phey-

campus). Amongst the laity, regional affinities to *phayul*, ‘homelands’, were the primary sources of identification. More recently, development of mechanical and technological communication systems has facilitated the promotion of overarching sources of identification like *Ladags-pa* (‘[person] of Ladakh’).

Ricks asserts that ‘the meaning of a word is a human agreement, created within society but incapable of having meaning except through individuals . . . Some lapse; others change; new ones form’ (cited in Campbell 1989: 144). Regions of identification are not entirely fixed, and are instead part of an ongoing social dialogue which is negotiated between speakers, as related to time, place, and perceived personal status. References to insiders and outsiders indicate that there have been notions of sameness and difference that preceded the present calls for recognition of ‘Ladakhi culture’. The indeterminacy of these terms however, suggests that ‘culture’ was not conceived of as an overall cohering force for people in this area. Likewise, the terms do not indicate that ‘Ladakhi culture’ was objectified in the same (or in any) way.

While monastic systems indicate that formal learning is not an entirely foreign concept in Ladakh, the development of an overall system of secular schooling has been a significant innovation in Ladakhi life. Moravian missionaries were the first to attempt this responsibility. In 1898 Francke reported:

Students absent from school are forcibly fetched back by the police . . . we try daily to get more pupils; but to date all our efforts have been in vain . . . Buddhists are almost always farmers and have inherited from their forefathers the view that agriculture is best carried out by those who have no book learning. (1898: 1)

While resource shortages and the time-bound work of agriculture still interrupt education in Ladakh, today’s stakeholders see education as fulfilling new and beneficial roles. Formal education began as a central government initiative. Locally, stakeholders have transacted a site for schools within Ladakhi society, though one that is more fractured and contested than straightforward and stable. In general, education, rather than ‘culture’ *per se*, is a source of mobilisation for stakeholders, whereby schools become sites of spatially, temporally and subjectively perceived cohesion and dispute.

‘CULTURE’ GATHERING

My principal engagement with SECMOL was at the 1998 summer school at Phey. The main course lasted for three and a half weeks, then continued with one third of the students for a further eight weeks. Students were invited from all over Ladakh, young women and rural area students being given particular encouragement. In practice, the

overwhelming majority of the sixty-six students were from Sham, an area distant from Leh but with a long-standing tradition of education (resulting in the Shammas' nickname of *pandits*, or 'scholars'). SECMOL's programme was varied, and included talks on indigenous medicine, nuclear-testing, and women's health. My subsequent experiences of village schooling revealed this learning environment to be a new and creative experience for the students—novel also in terms of the possibilities open to village-based students in their daily lives (or what leaders would call 'Ladakhi culture'). The 'culture-card' was thus only played when it was strategically advantageous to do so.

SECMOL is generally presented as working to reform an 'inappropriate', 'alien' and 'dehumanising' school system (SECMOL 1998a: 1). SECMOL further maintains that 'even with a 100% success in these exams the present education system would be a failure in Ladakh because the system has hardly any relevance to life in Ladakh' (SECMOL 1994: 7). Students however, said that *they* came to SECMOL to learn English, and to consolidate their academic knowledge following unsatisfactory school results in their home areas. Camp-students did not initially cite preservation of 'Ladakhi culture' as a motivating factor in their decision to study at SECMOL.

Students' arrived at SECMOL with a view of 'Ladakhi culture' as influenced by the themes of contemporary Ladakhi songs. Lyrics purvey moralising education-'culture'-development messages, and contrast 'Ladakhi culture' (noble behaviour, tradition) with the 'outside world' (bad habits, 'modernity'). The texts of these songs are enacted in formulaic dance routines. Students' chose this means to 'perform Ladakhi culture' to a visiting Korean television crew, a scene filmed against the backdrop of snow-capped Himalaya; another icon. The words of contemporary songs are written by Ladakhi leaders, transmitted by radio, and learned orally by students. Leaders overlook the irony that it is these *untraditional* contemporary 'culture-songs' that are most frequently practised by students, rather than those with a long-standing, *cultural* oral history in Ladakh.

One activity focusing on 'Ladakhi culture' at the summer-camp was the showing of a video made by the Ladakh Ecological Development Group (LEDeG). *Ancient Futures* (Norberg-Hodge 1992) is an idealised awareness and fund raising film to demonstrate the lessons that Western audiences can learn (and take home) from 'Ladakhi culture'. Of *Ancient Futures*, Nawang Tsering wryly comments that Ladakhis 'can rediscover their own cultural identity has been nurtured unconsciously for centuries in isolation . . . a Ladakhi reader may even get an inflated ego from the . . . flattering description . . . [attributed] to our people' (1994: 46). *Ancient Futures*' sub-text was

translated differently by students; its messages contributing to an implicit shift in the camp-students' focus; from education to that of 'Ladakhi culture'.

Vehemence against outsiders surfaced at specific points over following weeks, prompting my own re-evaluation of the implications of the politics of history, education and 'culture' that had initially brought me to Ladakh, and that continued to surround and shape my own ethnographic experience there. At SECMOL, distorted, and at times intolerant, expressions were whipped up:

Student 'I don't like your culture!'
[BM aside to SECMOL colleague] 'I feel like she is saying 'I don't like you!'
'No, no! She is saying she doesn't like Western culture'.
'But she doesn't know "Western culture".'
'But she has been told about it in Ancient Futures' (Phey-campus: 16/6/1998).

The increasing consciousness about 'Ladakhi culture' was also echoed in students' sentences, created using 'appropriate' new vocabulary (in italics):

'If the Ladakhi people are fortunate, our culture will remain as before, *generation* after *generation*'.
'I am *xenophobic* for Kashmiri teachers and the Indian army'.

Paradoxically, one student, arguing that Ladakhis should eat only Ladakhi products, then revealed that she did not actually like this food. The discrepancy between voicing and living 'culture' indicates that sustaining an idea of 'Ladakhi culture' is at least as important to students (at least in moral terms), as the actual continuation of all Ladakhi practices. Generating an imagined unity or idea of 'Ladakhi culture' also provides a potent tool for bargaining whereby, in making such claims to outside parties, leaders concurrently negotiate their own levels of status and respect amongst themselves.

While present day locations are becoming more diverse and indistinct, *notions* of dissimilar 'cultures' are becoming more prominent (Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 10). Engendering a sense of boundedness by use of symbolic identification can register resistance against forces that are otherwise understood to be beyond people's sphere of direct influence. As Stobgyas commented at SECMOL, 'I want Ladakh to be an island, a mountain island – *a new concept*' (7/5/1998 Phey-campus). In constructions of a unified 'culture', particularities are de-emphasised in favour of presenting wholeness. Yet such objectification risks stifling individual agency, and may provoke friction when people find the promoted 'Ladakhi culture' incompatible with their own experiences, visions, or interests. The promotion of 'culture markers' is also problematic as it creates symbols which may then be used as labels. Thus reified, 'culture' is easy prey for co-option by

less tolerant forces, and may be translated into a code to which ‘participants’ must conform.

UNESCO considers ‘culture’ to be a ‘human right’, and assert that ‘cultures are ways of living together’ (1997: 26). Yet ‘culture’ in a hegemonic form, is concurrently a separation from other ‘cultures’, or from different people. In asserting the intrinsic value of distinct ‘cultures’, such messages may be extended to uniqueness and then superiority. Claims to constitute a ‘separate culture’ may thus engender unforeseen auxiliary effects. Ladakhis with access to promotional messages about Ladakh frequently asserted that, as a Westerner, I ‘had no culture’. At all India Radio, the director maintained that:

You can’t compare Ladakhi culture to any other culture. There is no culture in your foreign countries. And you will not find any culture in Kashmir or Delhi—*but here you will find it!* And Ladakhis are very conscious of their culture. (Dolka interview 17/8/1998)

Relativist assertions reflect a shorthand of identification based on observable practices as much as on ideologies; signs of ‘culture’, not unlike racial traits. More overt messages came from the state education department in Leh, the Kashmiri Head Assistant asserting that:

Ladakhis are not biologically capable of having such mental capabilities as those in Kashmir or Delhi. It is divine that in Ladakh, human beings get a retarded mind—they fail to understand! It is no excuse to say that they are Ladakhis! We must first look to the biological phenomena and climatic conditions of this area. (Shahid interview 13/7/1998 Leh)

Metaphorical connections of blood, ‘race’, and evolution rather than ‘culture’ were used here to explain the lower certification levels of students in Ladakh.

Stocking argues that ‘culture’ merely ‘provided a functionally equivalent substitute for the older idea of ‘race temperament’...for “racial heredity” read “cultural heritage”’ (cited in Malik 1996:159). While providing a veneer of acceptability (or even desirability), expressed within an essentialising discourse, ‘culture’—as with race theory—becomes a force of prejudice and separation. Reductionism is likewise antithetical to education, if education is conceived of as widening a person’s field of vision and capacities for agency and action.

‘A CERTAIN CULTURAL HERITAGE’ (Dalai Lama 7/7/1998 Choglamsar).

On the eleventh of July 1998, the 14th Dalai Lama, exiled religio-political leader of Tibet, inaugurated SECMOL’s ‘alternative school’, eighteen kilometres from Leh. The Dalai Lama prioritises educational engagements throughout his Ladakh tour, arriving ahead of schedule at SECMOL to allow himself more time to speak to headmasters and village committee stakeholders. The Dalai Lama recounted how he had initially felt SECMOL’s campus to be:

Remote from the rest of the people, but...I think it’s actually very much relevant in the society...the culture aspect is...very, very relevant...for the whole Himalayan range of Buddhist culture...Now in the Ladakh state...there will be a future. But in case this is the Tibet truly gone, then I think the greatest potential for preserving the Tibetan Buddhist culture, I see this in Ladakh. (Teaching, Phey-campus 11/7/1998 emphasis added.)

The Dalai Lama is an influential moral and spiritual guide for most Tibetan Buddhists and a socially orienting figure for diverse parties around the world. For many Ladakhis, their conspicuous attendance at the Dalai Lama’s functions took precedence over all other duties. The Dalai Lama emphasises education as an ideological tool for sustaining ‘a Buddhist cultural identity’, and as a practical means of equipping students with skills needed to negotiate ‘the modern world’. The Dalai Lama’s prioritisation of Ladakhis’ ‘unique identity’ as people ‘belonging to Ladakh’ (ibid), further legitimised messages advanced by Ladakhi leaders.

‘We don’t want your shady business!’
‘J&K board: shame, shame!’
(Protest 4/8/1998 Leh)

Some weeks after the inauguration, students from Sham district (some of whom had attended SECMOL’s summer camp) held an emotive rally in Leh. Dissent was projected onto the state government over its decision to withhold exam results (which, in turn, was due to widespread cheating in matriculation exams). ‘Culture’ and educational issues merged, and students’ ostensibly cohered for this political event. The SECMOL camp, the Dalai Lama’s inauguration and the strike action, are instances of inter and intra regional relations in which Ladakhis outwardly subsumed their differences. ‘Ladakhi culture’ fused in certain moments (and for certain audiences), and fissured—especially by region and gender—in others.

WHAT IS 'LOCAL' AND 'TRUE'?

Internal criticism of SECMOL arose over the concentration of power in the director's hands, making SECMOL a subjectively and singularly prescribed campaign. Senior students argued that SECMOL thereby lacked credibility as a movement. Lack of relevance and sustainability was blamed on the absence of 'anything local or true' within the current arrangements (Seniors' letter to the Director 2/8/1998 Phey-campus). In making these criticisms, the students did not merely desire the inclusion of 'any and all localness'. Instead, the idioms of belonging, justice, and morality were used to negotiate seniors' involvement, benefits and respect amongst themselves, and in relation to SECMOL and to outsiders. Within and outside SECMOL, criticism focused on 'foreign people' within the organisation, interest centring on the amount and appropriation of NGO funding. Coexisting with the explicit manifestations of discontent were Ladakhis' efforts to access SECMOL as a source of financial and social benefits.

Over emphasising 'the local' reduces interconnected spaces to bounded places. 'Local' may become synonymous with 'culture' in an overly 'Ladakh-focused' way. Yet what do these categories mean in terms of lives and places, and where do such spaces end? NGO and bureaucratic categories provide frames through which new concepts come into being and old ones are reworked. It is not that places, people, practices or preoccupations did not exist before they were categorised, but that 'local', 'Ladakh', and 'Ladakhi culture' were not ascribed the same meaning or objectified in the same—or in any—way. Organisational frameworks at many levels may thus externalise 'culture', contributing to the overall processes of entification.

LOCALITIES AND TRUTHS - CHASING SHADOWS IN GYA

'In the schoolhouse we will study education [and] learn culture.
We will change into adults/important people.
(Song: Mi Chhenmo Chhenmo)

Geertz describes groups as 'charged with a "corporate sentiment of oneness"' (1973: 264), which equates with Geertz's conception of 'culture' as networks of meaning (1973: 5). The heterogeneity of life practices, perceptions and expressions in Gya-area, suggests that notions about such tidy grids of 'culture' are misplaced. Geertz's argument also raises wider epistemological questions about how far it is possible to speak of groups of people at all, especially in straightforward or concrete senses (see Brass 1991: 258). Social life only appears with such coherence to transient or detached spectators, or

to over-zealous ethnographic editors. Underneath any apparent oneness, are competing actions, crosscutting sentiments and voices that fall silent, go unheard or are ignored.

Gya is described, apocryphally, as the first village in Ladakh. It is the principal settlement in a loose agglomeration of hamlets (Rumtse, Sasoma, Miru, Khartse), and has a total population of nearly five hundred and fifty people. Gya-area lies on the main Leh-Manali route at the foot of the third-highest motorable road in the world (the Taglang-La). The area has no through-traffic for all but two months of the year. Gya-area is seldom mentioned in textual works (except Rasmussen 1981), and, apart from incoming teachers, has had no long-term visitors. Leaders described Gya-area as having a relatively 'intact culture' and praised their active Village Education Committee (VEC). In Gya-area, reference to 'culture' (except in specific instances), was noticeable by its absence.

The uppermost village is Rumtse (which lies at an altitude of 4,267 metres and means 'high place'). It was here that I stayed in a family home for over five weeks. I taught a six-day week for one month, in both Sasoma High School (two classes daily) and Gya Primary School (three classes daily). Though no written records exist, only four or five students (all male) are said to have ever passed the basic matriculation exam (the principal certificate of education in India) in the thirty-two kilometre catchment area. Ford asserts that failed students are 'left suspended between two worlds and may feel that they no longer belong anywhere' (1995: 26). The worlds implied are 'the traditional' and 'the modern'. Yet people in Gya-area and Ladakh are not caught in abstract limbo between categories, worlds, or 'cultures'. Instead they—and we—engage with the diverse predicaments, challenges and pleasures of life in ever-shifting times.

School learning in Gya-area is hierarchical, leaving students little space for active engagement in the learning process. Students are taught by teachers from Ladakh, Jammu, and Kashmir, and the written and spoken medium of instruction varies between Ladakhi, Urdu, Hindi and English, often within one class. Teachers expect students to be compliant and soak up imparted information. The students were both treated as one body, and presented themselves likewise, while being taught. In moments of tension (like the harsh treatment of a student by a non-Ladakhi member of staff) the children seemed more unresponsive and group-like. Yet despite their apparent submission, students registered their discontent either non-verbally, or passed comments in Ladakhi to each other. Since teachers from outside the region do not generally speak Ladakhi, the local language could thus work against students in the school context, but could also be used as a subtle but subversive means of resistance (Scott 1985: *passim*). One Kashmiri teacher fervently argued that schooling in Gya-area was 'wastage, entire wastage',

asserting that students were ‘backward, very backward, really backward, completely backward!’ (*personal communication*, 28/8/1998 Sasoma High School). Kashmiri/Ladakhi attitudinal differences however, do not correspond to a negative/positive dichotomy, as was sometimes held by leaders. Ladakhi teachers professed a commitment to educating Ladakhi students, yet were equally likely to take weeks away from their posts to return to their farms and families elsewhere. Ladakhis’ actions were often naturalised by leaders as the auxiliary effects of teachers’ support for Union Territory Status (absenteeism having been a tool of negotiation in this agitation).

UNESCO maintain that ‘what we have reason to value must itself be a matter of culture’ (1996 14). In Gya-area it is currently education that is asserted to be the central priority, rather than ‘culture’ *per se*. Flicking through a SECMOL textbook, one Delhi-educated Ladakhi teacher trenchantly remarked:

“Preserve your culture”? Nonsense! Education, education, education! Otherwise, what can we do? How can we know what to preserve? In the world there has been a man on the moon. We must be able to learn this new technology, not just this “wear-your-goncha” [typical traditional outfit] stuff! (Phuntsok *personal communication* 23/7/1998 Sasoma High School)

Education provides a forum through which diverse and disparate stakeholders express, aggregate and separate their interests. While certain ideologies on education or ‘culture’ prevail in particular times or places, other voices struggle against the particular expression of education and/or ‘culture’ which achieves prominence at any given time.

‘CULTURE’ IN EDUCATION - NEW HOPE FOR LADAKH?

Operation New Hope (ONH), a 1994 initiative in the primary sector, was one of the first measures brought in by the new Hill Council, and is the most substantial of SECMOL’s educational reforms. ONH is a tripartite coalition between the government education department, Ladakhi villagers and NGOs (primarily SECMOL). Teacher training and academic subjects were identified as *processes* to be enhanced. Poor results and the ‘destruction of Ladakhi culture’ were *outcomes* to be amended. Due to the dilapidated condition of Gya Primary school’s buildings, the lessons this summer took place outside on a boggy riverside where it was easy to observe the lack of ONH implementation. One ONH co-ordinator reported that many villagers had little confidence in the new methods and instead urged teachers to use formal methods and textbooks (Skarma feedback 31/8/1998 Leh).

Lack of uptake is less surprising however, when certain socio-historical precedents are considered. In Ladakh, learning experiences are based on hierarchy and respect. Ladakhi parents do not generally engage in games or creative pastimes with their children, and it is instead practical tasks that are undertaken together. Honour of familial elders and those of higher standing is reflected in a Ladakhi educational proverb: ‘If tea is hot, it is good; if teacher is hot [i.e. strict] it is good’ (Moulvi Ghulam Iqbal, discussion 21/8/1998 Leh). The presence of hierarchy and respect forms (at least at the level of ideals, if not always in practice), temper notions of Ladakh as an egalitarian, cohered or commonly-experienced ‘culture’. Poor ONH uptake does not necessarily demonstrate a resistance to change, and instead suggests that formal schooling (itself based on antecedent Indo-British methods) may be closer to Ladakhi social values and monastic ways of learning, than the ONH reforms. As Dorje described, ‘the main thing is to control their minds and how to behave’ (discussion 14/8/1998 Leh school). Aside from discussing the relative merits of formal/non-formal approaches, ‘play-way’, child-centred methods (which assume a horizontal teacher-student relationship) are not a direct reflection of Ladakhi ‘culture’ or experience. Such innovations however, are assimilated into NGO rhetoric as ‘preserving the best of Ladakhi culture, whilst improving negative aspects’.

Certain residents of Gya-area have, on a number of occasions, pooled their finances and labour to improve decrepit school facilities. The new primary school for Sasoma, a small, simple structure, was thus built in just fifteen days. Students’ were quick to make use of this new social arena, independently creating their own drama production about ‘Ladakhi culture’ (echoing the themes of contemporary songs).

‘We will teach good behaviour to the whole world.
We will build a school on the round-moon’ [through education, anything is possible]
(Song: Mi Chhenmo Chhenmo)

Villagers, as catalysed by dynamic committee leaders, used the tripartite ONH coalition to gain support to conceive, propose, negotiate, and execute their plans. The construction of Sasoma School represents a juncture at which ‘culture’ and ‘community’ programmes intersect with village participation, thereby building an enabling framework that enhanced stakeholder capabilities.

On one visit to Gya-area in August, I found all the schools closed, though the matter seemed closed for discussion. One teacher finally explained that the closures were due to Sham's examination results strike-action. I found out later however, that Rumtse and Sasoma stakeholders had asked the teachers to present an alternative account to me. Assuming that I had come to Gya-area because of their VEC's committed, participatory reputation, stakeholders were concerned they would appear as 'foolish villagers' unable to sort out their troubles (VEC member, *personal communication* 30/08/1998 Rumtse). Though information was never forthcoming from the people directly involved, it transpired that Gya-area's strike was due to a handful of educated activists. These 'elites' (supported by the National Conference, a Kashmir state party) wanted the centrally located Sasoma High School to be moved to their larger village of Gya, and levied a heavy fine for strike-breakers. Gya villagers did not breach the restrictions, yet the strike action was not universally supported. Many villagers valued school attendance over dispute, and privately expressed concern that their children had become entangled in these political arguments.

Although I had arrived independently in Gya-area, word spread that I was associated with SECMOL. The NGO itself had an ambiguous status in the rural context. Teachers valued SECMOL's Phey-campus training, yet were annoyed about the NGO's criticism of teachers, asserting that 'SECMOL has its own ideas for education' (Stanzin *personal communication* 15/7/1998 Sasoma School). Finally, VEC members sought my own allegiance, requesting that I refrain from telling SECMOL of Gya-area's strike. The NGO funding body thereby became the ultimate audience from whom stakeholders wanted strike information to be withheld.

The current strike had its origins in Gya villagers' initial refusal to accede any land for a high school. The school was instead built on Sasoma government department land, as negotiated by Sasoma and Rumtse stakeholders (aligned with the central Congress Party). Gya-area political wrangles exposed internal historico-political affiliations to central and state parties, and dissension between Gya-area and Leh, Gya and other villages, and between villagers themselves. These tensions could be subsumed or transcended at specific junctures like the building of Sasoma Primary School, where convergence and collaboration took precedence over divergence and separation. Gya villagers' withholding of land reveals the limit of the 'niche' that schooling occupies, together with the changing politico-ideological importance attached to schools over time. The cacophony of internal voices indicate that 'community', Geertz's "corporate sentiment of oneness" (1973: 264), is an oversimplification. When extended to mean

‘culture’, such ‘oneness’ in everyday life is unfounded.

SELF AS ‘OTHER’

Throughout my fieldwork I tried hard to displace the preconceptions that certain Ladakhis held about ‘Westernness’, by living simply and by involving myself in village activities. In Gya-area however, people wondered why I had come to such a ‘backward’ place.

‘Rich children all have a motorcycle,
I’m a poor-person and only have a scrawny bull.’
(Song: Chhukpai Trhugu Tshang-ma)

Gya-area students, who had only a precarious grasp of English, relied on versions of ‘My name is Stanzin, I am from Gya, I live in a very poor house, Gya is a very backward region’ to present themselves to me. In relation to ‘Westerners’, students oscillated between a conceptual pride in Ladakh, and apparent shame over their perceived lack of material possessions and ‘deficient’ education. While SECMOL camp-students voiced opinions consonant with those of the leaders, in their everyday lives students innovated rather than conformed to elites’ ‘culture messages’. As Cohen remarks, ‘the apparently monolithic character of [culture]...at the *collective* level thus does not pre-empt...continual *reconstruction*...at the personal level (1993: 198). Disregarding ‘culture-rhetoric’ indicates that students generally feel able to choose different ways of being, and only in specific circumstances do concerns about ‘Ladakhi culture’ become leading axioms (see Handler 1988: 187).

These instances suggest ‘othering’ processes are being projected outwards from a putative ‘culture difference’. Student translations and re-workings of leaders’ messages are concurrently implicated in this process. Assuming difference undermines possibilities for co-operation and understanding, two values Ladakhis themselves regard as central to ‘noble behaviour’ and good education. Difference itself becomes an arbitrary barrier to translation and interpersonal relations. Yet the difference between certain Ladakhis and non-Ladakhis may be less than that between Ladakhis as a whole (after Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 20). Constructions of Self and Other, wherever such ‘boundaries’ lie, can obscure mutual connections and work against greater communication and understanding.

CHAPTER FIVE

POLITICS AND PRESENTATIONS OF UNITY

‘NOT LOCAL’ AND ‘NOT TRUE’?

Inclusion within the Indian union is generally viewed as beneficial by Ladakhis, with grievances instead being directed at the J&K state apparatus. Leaders used the dominant paradigm of nationalism, together with ‘race theory’ and the Indian constitution’s sanction of ‘culture’ in arguing that:

We are a separate nation by all the tests – race, language, culture – determining nationality, the only link connecting us with the other people of the state [J&K] being the bond of common rule. (Chhewang Rigzin cited in Nicolson 1975: 37)

Disputes are not oriented around state neglect, but on geographical distance, and, by extension, Ladakh’s ‘culture difference’. Ladakhis argue that their lands made up over sixty per-cent of state territory (hence Ladakhis’ continued investment and ‘conceptual ownership’ of the annexed Aksai Chin area). In terms of benefits, Ladakhis protest that ‘everyone knows we don’t get our own share’ (Dorje discussion: 14/8/1998 Leh school). Ladakhis claim that policies from ‘The Valley’ (i.e. Kashmir) are not relevant to Ladakh’s needs as a ‘unique culture’ and Himalayan environment. Having Ladakhis as staff, and at close proximity, was said to allow for improved monitoring and accountability. Ladakhis maintained that local employees would work more efficiently if they were working for Ladakh itself. ‘Localisation’ would render government posts available for Ladakhis and, it was believed, halt the diversion of central resources into J&K state coffers.

Leaders argue that state governance makes Ladakhis ‘dependent’, a subversion of ‘traditional self-sufficiency’. Yet Ladakh has always had wider interconnections, it being the frequency and weighting of relationships that has altered over time (see Ghani Sheikh 1996: 11). Agricultural, feudal and reciprocal links are now supplemented by national interventions and provisions, international subsidies, and tourist earnings; all of which have both positive and negative aspects. SECMOL itself is almost totally supported by overseas funding. Co-operative farming, as an icon of ‘Ladakhi culture’, is now pitted against a threat of dependency. Such warnings encourage social mobilisation in winning back an imagined past and a relative degree of self-sufficiency.

Ladakhis argue that fracturing the state to reflect the so-called different ‘cultures’ would promote ‘traditional values of democracy, tolerance and solidarity’ (Namgyal 1997: 330). These claims re-articulate village interpersonal accountability and

occupational relations as ‘natural Ladakhi characteristics’. The wording used exploits mainstream political idioms, and promotes Ladakhis as ‘modern’ agents rather than ‘backward’ subjects. Herzfeld asserts that, in creating ‘an identity’ for ‘a culture’, leaders may remain detached from the experiences of certain groups whom they represent politically, while simultaneously announcing the ideals of democracy (1992: 1). Localisation is one such instance which could create new opportunities for certain Ladakhis, but which would not necessarily bring greater social cohesion, and might create greater competition and differentiation. Funding, as allocated by administrative block, has thus been the source of Karu and Saspol’s campaigns to fragment Ladakh into two further localities.

REGIONAL CUES

Anderson argues that states were previously ‘defined by centres, borders were porous and indistinct, and sovereignties faded imperceptibly into one another’ (1991: 19). While enduring, bounded areas did not exist bureaucratically prior to 1947, symbolic borders of identification did prefigure (but are not coterminous with) present macro-national and micro-state boundaries. Dress is one such ‘identity cue’, the contemporary significance of which is not merely an epiphenomenon of recent social or political changes. Instead, clothing has long been an indicator of regional affiliation, wealth, marriage (for women), and caste in Ladakh.

Herzfeld points out however, that the persistence of symbols through time does not mean that these emblems manifest a consistent temporal, spatial, or personal meaning (1992:11). Indeed, the growth of inter- and intra-regional channels of communication in Ladakh has allowed dress to reference broader spheres and take on different meanings. In 1996, *gonchas* (in maroon, previously a high caste preserve) were instituted by the LAHDC as the Ladakhi government school uniform, replacing so-called ‘Indian’ and ‘Western’ clothing. The LAHDC action re-presents the formerly stigmatised *goncha* as an emblem of ‘Ladakhi culture’. *Gonchas* are worn conspicuously by leaders in the public sphere, thus turning clothing into a sign announcing a politico-social cause. Counter-claims arise when the ‘Ladakhi culture’ selected by leaders does not correspond with the views of others. In summer *gonchas* are cumbersome and hot. As uniforms, some Ladakhis argue that *gonchas* make students resent wearing their ‘own’ clothes, as the garments take on negative connotations of the school experience itself. This contrariety signifies the differences between apparently diverse social ideals and practices (cited in Tarlo 1996: 13); the absence of a pan-Ladakh experience of

‘culture’. Yet ‘culture’ cannot be identified on the basis of appearance only, as clothes can deny or endorse socio-political standards and may disguise or disclose identities (Tarlo 1996: 17). Leaders may consciously or inadvertently suppress regional or dissimilar styles of apparel, and override those vying to present different expressions of ‘Ladakhi culture’.

‘WE LADAKHIS . . .’

The ideal-typical Ladakh is reflected in SECMOL’s ONH textbooks, which focus on: countryside, villages, agriculture, egalitarian gender relations, traditional dress, religious equanimity and definitive Ladakhi foods. Yet these practices are only representative for certain people in certain places, contexts or times. Shalwar-kameezes (popular ‘trouser and tunic’ summer-wear), urban living/technology, nomadic/herding lifestyles, cash work, different experiences of womanhood, communalism, ration foods, Islam/Muslims, a high military presence, Kashmiris, peninsular Indians, Nepalis and tourists are aspects of contemporary life which are subsumed.

Brass argues that symbols with strategic political significance are chosen by leaders, rather than ones representative of the primary values of a society (1991: 16). According to Brass, key factors in melding disparate groups for political action are the presence or absence of a socially mobilised population, efficacy in translating and managing symbols of ‘a culture’, and past or present animosities (1991: 293). Success depends on the abilities of leaders to amalgamate a symbolically meaningful ‘Ladakhi culture’ as an internal reference point, as an announcement to non-Ladakhis of their identity, and as a reason for united Ladakhi action. However, Brass underestimates the temporal, spatial, and subjective considerations that make the identification of ‘central axioms’ impossible in pan-Ladakhi terms. Symbols, as Cohen describes, are ‘intrinsically meaningless but powerfully eloquent’, the imprecision of which enables them to be manipulated by the maximum number of people to their own interpretative ends (1993: 201-5). Morup further describes the arbitrariness of symbols, the origins of which are lost in adaptation:

Now potatoes are not German anymore, they have been given a Ladakhi baptism. Potatoes are sold in the market by women who can’t speak a word of English. Now it is possible to say ‘I hate the Kashmiri potatoes, but I love the Ladakhi potatoes!’ (Interview 13/8/1998 Leh)

Decontextualised, malleable symbols take on new and expanded meanings. Set in texts, such symbols are available to be recognised, interpreted, examined, rejuvenated, or dissipated (Handler 1988: 12).

So why have certain symbols been selected and not others? Superior road access along pre-existing trade routes gave Leh and Sham blocks prolonged access to material and ideological resources and a concomitant head-start in education. Most Ladakhi leaders come from this Indus valley 'heartland', and reproduce their own experiences when imagining an ideal-typical Ladakh. These representations are in turn related to leaders' own interest in promoting one vision of 'Ladakhi culture', and not another. Uneven experiences of life within Sham and Leh, and the greater necessities of other regions, may be unreflectively hidden in assuming an ideal, homogeneous, or cohered Ladakh. As Kilnani argues, in bureaucratic and pluralistic senses, safeguarding the identities of a 'multicultural' populace frequently involves a 'tortuous simplification of internal cultural diversities into a uniform political identity, a tidy template singularly distinguishable from those of surrounding states' (1997: 205). Critiques of pluralism however, often merely replicate the very ideologies and processes they seek to criticise, and become implicated in a '*never-ending quest to locate authenticity in individuated units at some other level*' (Handler 1988: 189).

Many Ladakhis overlooked the mismatch of reality and text, arguing that leaders' parcel of 'Ladakhiness' sustains a memory of Ladakh's 'true culture' for subsequent generations. Other views are smuggled out of the picture, relegated as variously disingenuous by the momentum of the current representation. Disenfranchised leaders expressed concerns that the present interpretation compromised Ladakh's 'authenticity'. ONH's 'appropriate school textbooks' (1998) were thus criticised for pandering to fashion in using names like *Angmo*, thereby disregarding the significance of *Wangmo*, meaning 'powerful'. Similar voices argue against the 'Indianisation' of place names on maps and signboards. For example, *Gia* removes the socio-historic significance of *Gya*, meaning 'hundred' (the number of original inhabitants). Underlying calls for the Ladakhi language to be recognised as an Indian language are the 'immediate benefits for Ladakhi scholars', which will also be 'a clear announcement of Ladakh's importance as a part of India's cultural heritage' (Nawang Tsering Shakspo 1985: 204).

In India, language and religion have been the primary indicators of 'culture' for defining state boundaries, whereupon other temporal, spatial, and personal differences are obscured. Religion and language have been instituted as the principal forms of identity, thus acquiring socio-political significance as channels of social mobilisation and identification. Language, especially in education, is of particular socio-political importance. Certain leaders favour Ladakhi as the medium of instruction in schools, arguing that only their native language is appropriate for transmitting Ladakhi knowledge and 'culture' directly. If Ladakhi were the medium of instruction, more jobs

would become available for local people (non-speakers being excluded by default from these posts). Most stakeholders however, argued strongly for English to be the medium of teaching, considering it to offer the greatest opportunities to compete in the world, and on more equal terms.

‘LOOKING FORWARD TO THE PAST’ (Thupstan Chhewang 1995: 18).

Ladakh’s history has been presented as an internal invention (see Kaushik 1995, Kak 1978), or as merely a ‘Little Tibet’ (Rasmussen 1981). While Ladakh’s past and present have regional specificity, they are inseparable from the area’s broader interrelations with the plains, trans-Himalayan socio-religious relations, and High Asia trade (see Rizvi 1998 *passim*). In popular discourse however, formulation of Ladakh as ‘a culture’ in the present, follow from portrayals of a similarly hypostatised past. One prevalent idea promoted by leaders is that of a ‘golden age’. In this ideal bygone era unanchored to any specific time or place, a perfect ‘Ladakhi culture’ is imagined. Often this putative ‘golden age’ is extended to cover all times previous to the present. Namgyal thus asserts that ‘we Ladakhis never considered ourselves as a ‘minority’ until we became part of Jammu and Kashmir. Indeed, until that time, we were a proud, independent and vibrant society, and ancient culture’ (1997: 329). Students synthesised the discrepancies between leaders ideal lives and their lived lives with comments such as: ‘culture was better in the past. All round, development is better now’. NGO messages can become tangled however, the current emphasis on ‘Ladakhi culture’ prompting certain students to extrapolate a *contemporary* golden age. One student thus asserted that any undesirable aspects of had evolved over time, leaving ‘Ladakhi culture’ in a ‘perfected’ state today.

Today’s views of the past are not assembled from first-hand narratives describing specific changes within each lifetime. Instead, Ladakhi history becomes polarised, asserted to be ‘simple, happy, honest and content in ancient days. Now people are greedy, selfish, with less faith in the religious things’ (Dorje *personal communication* 14/8/1998 Leh school). Students also now conceptualise a distinct rupture in time, counterpoising two distinct Ladakhi ‘cultures’: past (co-operation, harmony), and present (competition, insecurity). The influence of a golden age conception of ‘culture’ was displayed in students’ responses to my questionnaire. Their answers showed such a remarkable correspondence across all three locations that computer-literate Wangyal, a SECMOL translator, declared that ‘they could be “cut and paste”, with a few alterations’ (10/6/1998 Phey-campus). The overall congruency of the answers is partly due to copying, yet copying also reflects how students did not have an entirely detached or

fully objectified notion of 'culture'. Leaders' messages were reproduced by students as though the elites' version was 'the correct answer'. Re-production itself follows from the processes of formal schooling, in which students are expected to repeat rote-learned answers in response to teachers' cues.

Grist points out that 'what people present as their own history is largely a subjective matter that normally owes more to their present circumstances than to the past *per se*' (1997: 169). The oral histories of two of Gya-area's oldest residents indicate that across living generations, memory is unevenly recollected. The hept- and octogenarian told of times of hunger (especially in conjunction with sickness and the subsequent inability to farm), debt, and a general lack of opportunities and resources in the past. These villagers expressed the changes that had taken place over their lifetimes in mainly positive terms; one saying 'now we can get anything'. The younger generations were said to 'know the meaning of culture, but they do not keep it' (*personal communications* 10/8/1998 and 28/8/1998 Sasoma). Today's younger generations look back on an edited Ladakhi history whereby older members recollections are being quietly faded out from the messages that are available via formal educational sources.

As Kolas argues:

Recollecting the past is certainly not an accidental or spurious activity, it is a vital political tool. Symbolic construction, creative negotiation and representation are inherent aspects of social life. (1996: 63)

A 'golden age' idea of 'culture' is significant in perpetuating a vision of internal solidarity, and in concurrently legitimising mobilisation for political campaigns. In golden age representations, 'culture', in being sustained, is being changed. Yet in being changed, an *interpretation* of 'culture' is being sustained. History is brought into the present as a *raison d'être* for social action. By understanding 'culture' in innovative ways Ladakhis (and in constructing texts, anthropologists), may present a past that never existed. Yet in the act of trying to sustain 'culture', new social meanings are created and change ensues (adapted from Borofsky 1987: 144).

The danger of elevating the past into a social goal is that it inhibits the desire and capability of younger generations to oust stagnant models of the past (Lowenthal 1986: 71). Informal situations revealed tacitly held viewpoints:

Kapoor [from Delhi] 'You must be very fortunate to be reborn here'.
Gyalpo [Ladakhi] 'Many of us think the fortunate are those who are born elsewhere.'
(20/8/1998 Sasoma Primary School.)

Many Ladakhis do not aspire to the past, and would welcome increased ‘non-Ladakhi’ ideological choices and material resources. Furthermore, aiming to revive the heritage of bygone generations may suffocate the agency of young people and can choke beneficial social innovation (Lowenthal 1986: 71). It is the present that must be animated for—and by—contemporary generations.

EXCHANGING ASPIRATIONS

Prominent NGO rhetoric has circulated messages about the powerful forces of ‘Western globalisation’, which is said to diffuse over an innocent and unspoiled ‘Ladakhi culture’ (LEDeG 1988: *passim*). Parry and Bloch however, emphasise the complexities involved in monetisation of exchange economies (1989: 7-12). Likewise, economic changes cannot be taken as a straightforward practical or moral rupture between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ (two further problematic constructs in themselves). Ladakhi initiatives have arisen under the auspices of resistance to such discourses, rather than merely to directly experienced effects. While many Ladakhis welcome the practical capacities that money affords, ideologically money now represents as an amoral force in certain discourses. Leaders and students argued that money engenders an endless desire for accumulation, and that the insecurity it produces undermines co-operative ideals. The threat of individualism/‘modernity’ is an appropriate vision against which to position the supposed unity and ‘tradition’ of pre-fiscal times. Mobilisation may then be oriented around the avowed ‘encroachment of modernity (see Parry and Bloch 1989: 17). Implicitly, salaried leaders’ own rhetoric elevates them to a position set apart from such ‘traditional insecurities’.

Ideologically representing money as a negative force bolsters Ladakhi claims to a ‘golden age of culture’; the absence of a cash economy becoming synonymous and contemporaneous with an imagined absence of amoral behaviour. Yet socio-economic and political changes in Ladakh and India also produced the possibilities for certain people (usually children from noble or wealthy families) to acquire tertiary education. Education coincided with monetisation to create a social differential, a professional class who now act as spokespeople for Ladakh. Leaders thus appropriate the ‘culture-concept’, and in doing so disenfranchise others.

‘Culture’ is emphasised in claims to state, central and overseas funding bodies; parties asserted to have ‘lost their culture’. ‘Culture’ is thus staked out as the authentic franchise of Ladakh, a productive arena in which Ladakhis can compete on their own favourable terms. The idea of socio-historic isolation is used to signify the ‘intactness of

Ladakhi culture’—proof that Ladakh is worthy of preservation. An undifferentiated Himalayan ‘model culture’ is then reflected back to a so-called ‘disenchanted West’ in obtaining financial donations (see Adams 1996: *passim*). Funding brings educational and other resources to Ladakh, which do not lie within the leaders’ self-ascribed domain of ‘traditional culture’. Such ironies can, however, be skilfully reworked into a mobile and pliable definition of ‘culture’.

INTER-GENERATIONAL CHANGE - GENERATING UNEVENNESS

I didn’t want to go into the family circle. It’s like a rope that ties your hands, feet, neck. [As a woman] you must attend to the marriage, children, house, cooking—*all!* (Kunzang *personal communication* 9/5/1998 Alchi)

Women from high-status families are often educated outside Ladakh, allowing them opportunities to enter prominent positions of Ladakhi society. Such women are upheld as evidence of ‘gender equality’ (thereby promoting Ladakh as an egalitarian and unified ‘model society’). Yet as Kunzang’s words indicate, matching equality directly to ‘Ladakhi culture’ may devalue or ignore alternative experiences of life for local women. Compared to most areas of peninsular India, Ladakhi women have a higher degree of freedom in terms of speech, dress and movement. Recent socio-economic shifts however, have emphasised implicit gender-specific biases that are not merely attributable to so-called ‘Indianisation’.

Students and women are the largest groups in many VECs, yet are often represented by men in official meetings. Men are more likely to learn English, giving them a voice in official domains. Men engage in more cash-work than women (21,000 Males to 9,000 Females) and undertake much more marginal work (47,000M to 3,830F, Directorate of Economics and Statistics 1997: 7). Women are more often employed in primary teaching (4F to 3M) than in more prestigious high school positions (8M to 1F, figures for Gya-area). The discrepancy in gender opportunities means that women’s independence is in some ways more restricted today. Job opportunities for men frequently coincide with heaviest periods of agricultural labour. Therefore, tasks that were previously co-operative are now more likely to be undertaken individually by women. The present focus on school education disenfranchises women in that they are less able engage in academic pursuits open to younger generations, and are more limited than men in the types of cash work they may do. SECMOL are negotiating for the school vacation to be moved from winter to harvest time. This proposal represents a juncture at which NGO interest in increasing the local applicability of the curriculum

could potentially coincide with women's interests. Changes show how women (and men) do not necessarily share a common experience of life or 'culture' in Ladakh across time, place, occupation, or class.

VIRTUALLY PERFORMING

BM 'Do you pretend?'

Thupstan [laughs] 'Sometimes, yes—I *have to!*'

(*Personal communication* 21/7/1998 Sasoma High School)

Wilson and Donnan suggest that in 'liminal' frontier areas, identities are especially heterogeneous (1998: 13), yet such diversity is subsumed by leaders' in relation to idealised frames of 'Ladakhi culture'. Concealment is an aspect of presenting a unified 'culture' to outsiders, whereby expressions that do not fit the idealised 'whole' are implicitly or explicitly subsumed. Against these archetypal parameters, disquiet voices agitate for more practically oriented and sincere dealings (Rigzin interview 23/8/1998 Leh). Thus, Morup considers leaders' attempts to maintain a façade of 'culture' to be 'double-speak', it being 'only the ones with the break with their culture who try to preserve it' (interview 13/8/1998 Leh school).

Maintaining a measure of 'Ladakhi culture' for an outside gaze seemed especially important on strategic occasions. In withholding Sasoma strike information, Gya-area villagers came together as 'team players' to 'sustain the definition of the situation that its performance fosters' (Goffman 1987: 141). VEC members 'over-communicated' an ideally cohered 'community', which necessitated that heterogeneity (of practice or conviction) be 'under-communicated' (ibid.). Gya villagers' appearance of unity is also related to the ethnographer's own presence, educational NGO development frames, and leaders' messages about 'Ladakhi culture'. Rigzin suggests that many Ladakhis feel obliged to present definite ideals, a pressure that has arisen concurrently with an idealised image of 'Ladakhi culture' (interview 23/8/1998 Leh). Rather than straightforward 'performances' however, such *interactions* are two-way processes in which various outsiders concurrently participate (see Adams 1996: *passim*).

A complex predicament is set up. Ladakh occupies a strategic international location. Ladakhis perceive their position within the Indian nation as politico-economically marginal, and believe this insecurity would diminish with autonomy from J&K state. The constitution of India includes rights for minority 'cultures' (an apportionment of the world based on the 'culture-paradigm' historically associated with

anthropology and colonialism). This bureaucratic clause has been accessed by Ladakhi leaders who represent Ladakh as a coherent ‘minority culture’. A reprocessed, reified ‘culture-concept’ is then upheld as unique, a model more worthy of resources than other areas ‘without culture’. Such claims use a re-presented history (based on Ladakh’s past as a formerly independent kingdom) as a substantiating tool. Yet Ladakh’s strict binding to J&K state by the constitutional clause of Article 370, and its problematic geopolitical situation, make it unlikely that Union Territory Status (i.e. direct Ladakh-centre political relations) will be granted.

TRANSACTING POWER AND GAINING A VOICE

One thing is understood, we must prove that we are culturally very strong . . . (Sonam Dorje Soso 1996: 4)

Many Ladakhis do not argue for increased separation from India, as they believe this would add to their isolation from channels of power and resources. Furthermore:

Understanding the whole situation in a global context is crucial, not Ladakh as a well and ourselves as frogs in it, who know that there is a limitless world out there and to get out of it is our final enlightenment. (ibid.)

The development of ‘culture-based’ Ladakhi education involves a web of interconnections, structures and negotiations, which cannot be reduced to an individual process or entity (after Pigg 1996: 193). At the personal level, differences may seem trivial, yet taken together, greater discrepancies in hierarchical power relations are highlighted, and wider patterns emerge. Power relations, centrality, and communication are crucial in whose voice represents ‘Ladakhi ‘culture’ to Ladakhis, and to outsiders.

As Lave and Wenger point out, moving from marginality to a more capable, engaged position in society through participation is an enabling situation, whereas restricting this progression leads to disenfranchisement (1996: 36). Ladakhis’ lack of proficiency in English (the language used in mainstream bureaucracy) has limited the possibilities for negotiating with bureaucratic organisations on fair terms. Education thus represents a potential source of empowerment for Ladakhis having a voice—and therefore a stake—in decisions of consequence. As Ishe, a SECMOL senior said:

It is my dream, that Ladakh should have some strength of its own, some confidence in its own ways, that Ladakh have some power to remain different from India and outside places and not get taken over by the outside things, development where *Ladakh* has the power to decide. (*Personal communication* 23/5/1998 Phey-campus)

NGOs themselves use the idiom of education as a catalyst in villages, citing its potential to enhance Ladakh's overall standing within India, as measured by power and peripherality. Educational benefits are still unevenly distributed however, as influenced by historical legacies (regional politics, familial status, channels of communication, and access to symbolic and material capital). At SECMOL, Stobgyas asserts that the task ahead is to:

Move the people in the villages to take care of their own education, to see that in this world, at this time, *education* will decide where they stand and how marginalised they will be. (Interview 8/9/1998 Leh)

Education has a potential capacity to enlarge both people's fields of vision and the spheres in which they transact power. Education may therefore enable marginalized Ladakhis, individually or more widely, to engage in more representative negotiations at both the bureaucratic level and in day-to-day life. In this way 'culture' may become more representative of its constituency, in all its senses (after Brass 1991: 256).

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Through the processes of this study, my initial motivations to investigate ‘culture’ and ‘culture loss’ became somewhat obsolete. Handler (1988: 27) expresses a similar dilemma:

I no longer claim to be able either to present an account of “the” culture’ or to demonstrate its integration, but . . . focus instead on cultural objectification in relation to the interpenetration of discourse – that is, on attempts to construct bounded cultural objects, *a process that paradoxically demonstrates the absence of such objects.*

Said comments that ‘anthropological representations bear as much on the representer’s world as on who or what is represented’ (cited in Abu-Lughod 1991:159). Yet this is true for all those representing ‘culture’. Concepts are shifting, indeterminate, related to their contexts. People also manipulate categories and invest them with political currency. ‘Culture’ may thus be better considered in a Rorschach sense, whereby representing this amorphous concept reveals more about the definer, in a given time and place, than about ‘culture’ as such. In these discursive terms, ‘culture’ is thus produced through change; change producing (in a Foucauldian sense), ‘culture’.

Yet as Stobgyas points out, “‘culture’ does not mean you overlook the realities’ (interview 8/9/1998 Leh). In its humanistic or aesthetic senses, ‘culture’ presents an opportunity for communication within and between social situations and places (after Pigg 1996: 192). Pre-existing experiences and practices are redirected through new frames of reference, reworking meanings, and creating innovative forms. More porous, adaptable and fuzzy conceptions and expressions of ‘culture’ thus present opportunities for a multivocal dialogue, by way of which Ladakhis may reorient their lives in ever-changing times.

Educational efforts by Ladakhi leaders are held in tension by mainstream policies; both parties producing messages and actions which are covertly and overtly contested in Ladakhi social politics. An intrinsic difficulty however, is the non-contiguity (or even absence) of stakeholders’ interpretations of ‘culture’, development, and education. Leaders, central government, and many Ladakhis aim at capability. Yet these concepts are modalities as associated with various temporal, contextual, and subjective meanings and discourses. Conceptual entanglement stems from limits to communication and understanding—both of which are asserted as being educational aims—which in turn undermine seemingly significant common goals.

I have referred to ‘culture’ from an anthropological perspective throughout, a discourse associated with leaders and education. Further investigations, undertaken by a fluent Ladakhi speaker, would allow for a more intricate awareness of ‘culture’ as differently perceived by stakeholders themselves. If the different senses of ‘culture’ (anthropological, aesthetic, political, and humanistic, and so on) were better understood, more representative policy decisions could be made. A greater understanding of education, schooling and learning, a neglected field in anthropology, would contribute to a wider understanding of social dynamism, life-trajectories, intergenerational experiences of knowledge transmission, conceptions of selfhood, and links between education and social justice. Learning, power, ‘culture’, self-presentation, and explicit/implicit resistances are issues implicated in anthropologists’ own fieldwork. Learning how people learn would allow for increased reflexivity and a greater understanding of how anthropologists learn about the contexts they seek to represent.

‘Culture’, a paradigm associated with (or even produced by) anthropology, is now frequently taken for granted in everyday reference. Furthermore, ‘culture’ has been appropriated and used as a legitimising device for Third World nationalist activism, as based on ‘culture difference’. As Keesing argues, ‘if “a culture” is thinglike, if “culture essences” endure, then “it” provides the ideal rhetorical instrument for claims to identity, placed in opposition to modernity’ (1994: 303). The consummate irony is that the ‘culture-concept’ provides a perfect emblem to muster against ‘outside’ parties. Anthropologists are thus liable to be accused of having looted or traded ‘it’ for their own profits or, (as ‘others’ attempting to translate ‘insiders’ own mysterious sum and substance), having misinterpreted and falsified ‘it’ (ibid.). Indeed, Ladakhis often warned that my research would not be representative of ‘the real Ladakh’, as my visits fell within summer months.

Anthropologists have much to contribute, or undermine, in their own translations of ‘culture’. Augmenting disciplinary legitimacy by prioritising not social issues but science is a reductionist step. Sahlins rightly asserts that ‘essentialised descriptions are not the platonic fantasies of anthropologists alone’ (cited in Borofsky 1994: 472). Yet in arguing further that ‘they are the generalised cultural conditions of human perception and communication’ (ibid.), Sahlins advances essentialism as innate; beyond human agency. As texts such opinions take on authority as facts, and may be used to authorise diverse (or subversive) actions.

The ramifications for those inscribed within ‘culture-discourses’ are two-fold: namely, being essentialised themselves, and taking on processes that essentialise ‘others’. Reducing the world into neatly parcelled, mutually incompatible ‘cultures’ can

become 'culture' (or anthropology) without a human face. Sources and processes underlying interpretations and/or productions of 'culture' in all their diversity must now be unravelled and understood as situated knowledge and as authored representations. Drawing anthropology, 'culture' and history into a shared field of politics, power and knowledge, and tolerating incongruous, processual, and less-objectified local understandings, is a vital reorientation for anthropology today. Remaining heedful of people's living situations, as interrelated with wider issues, allows for more honest relations and worthwhile anthropological contributions to be made. Anthropologists must tackle the awkward and uncomfortable politico-economic implications of 'culture', as amidst growing world economic inequalities, Chandra's assertion that 'their culture is all they've got' (interview 1/5/1998: Delhi), could take on potentially explosive meanings. Anthropologists must engage with the actualities of translation (or creation) of 'cultures', mobilising their capacities to break down stereotypes, reduce perceptions of cultural distance and widen social horizons. Going beyond anachronistic models and following more human-centred directions, thus constitutes a requisite and timely 'cultural education' for anthropology itself.

ABBREVIATIONS

J&K: Jammu and Kashmir state.

LAHDC: Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council.

LEDeG: Ladakh Ecological Development Group.

NGO: Non-Governmental Organisation.

ONH: Operation New Hope.

REFLECT: Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community
Techniques.

SECMOL: Students' Educational and Cultural Movement Of Ladakh.

UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation.

VEC: Village Education Committee.

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