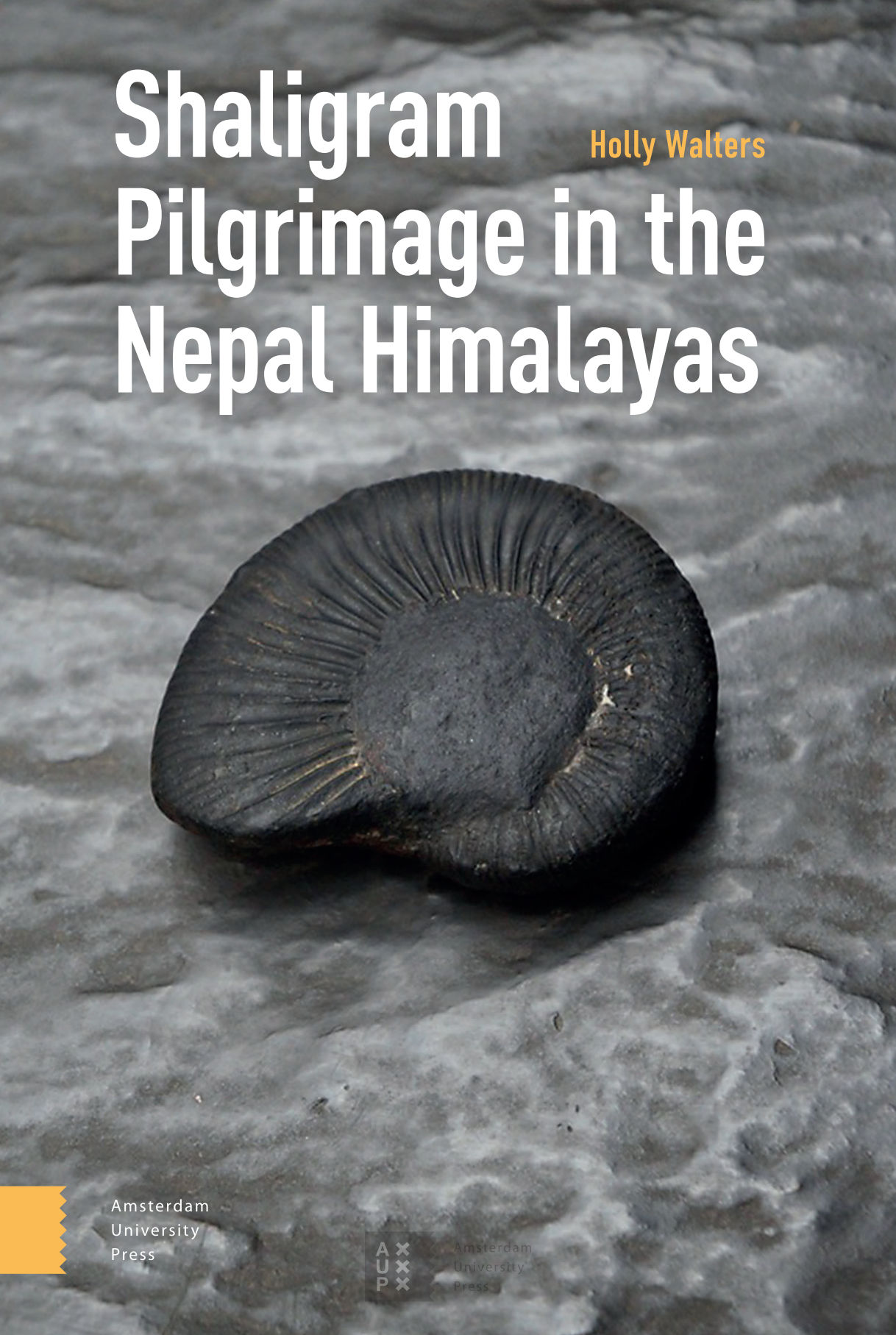
# Shaligram Pilgrimage in the Nepal Himalayas

Holly Walters



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*For my husband, Chris, the incomparable householder*

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*"Om Namo Bhagavathey Vishnavey Sri Salagrama*
*Nivasiney – Sarva Bheesta Bhalapradhaya*
*Sakala Thuridha Nivarine Salagrama Swahah!"*
*– Salagrama mula mantra* (*From Shaligram Mahimai by Murali Battar*)

(I pray that the LORD Sriman Mahavishnu –
who is residing inside the Salagrama, which provides all wishes,
fulfills all desires – quickly answer all our prayers)

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# Acknowledgements

My research for this book began in 2012, when I first arrived in India on a midnight flight to Kolkata with little more than a small grant and a bus ticket to Nabadwip. Since then, I have accrued many debts. First, my thanks go to the many pilgrims and devotees who took the time and interest to involve themselves in this work. Without their patience, careful correction, and suggestions for other avenues of inquiry, my research in both India and Nepal would not have been possible. In India, I owe a debt of gratitude to Rama Vigraha Das and his wife Muralipriya, without whom I would never have been introduced to Shaligram stones or their meanings. Those afternoons of fresh coconuts and conversation formed the very first foundations of what is written here, and their continued help from afar has only made the narrative and experiences richer. Additionally, I wish to express my gratitude to Mahalakshmi devadasi and Krishnalaulya devadasi, who took me under their care as I wandered the villages of West Bengal and saw to it that I became more family member than researcher.

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Dr. McIntosh, Dr. Schattschneider, and Dr. Lamb whose pointed questions and profound theoretical mastery that has shaped the contours of this work.

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My gratitude also goes to the Mellon-Sachar Foundation for the initial funding that took this project from India to the high Himalayas of Nepal in 2015 and also to the Fulbright Commission, who funded the entirety of the final year of research both in Kathmandu and all across Mustang from 2016 to 2017. Yamal Rajbhandary and Mily Pradhan provided invaluable support throughout the process, and I thank them for their faith in this research and genuine interest in its outcomes.

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And last, but certainly not least, my thanks to the Kali Gandaki and the deities of Shaligram; for your appearances, for allowing me to follow along in your journeys, and for your kind guidance during *puja* and *darshan* in the many homes of welcoming devotees. I could only go where you would lead.

# Note on Transliteration

While many books and articles transcribe words from Hindi, Nepali, Tibetan, and Sanskrit using standard diacritical conventions (*darśan*, *purāṇa*), I have chosen to transliterate personal names (Naga Baba, Shankaracarya), referents (Sri, Mataji), deity names (Shiva, Vishnu), place names (Muktinath, Pashupatinath, Kathmandu), and the names of scriptural texts along with Sanskrit, Hindi, or Nepali language source materials (Skanda Purana, Devibhagavata) into standard English. Due to both their multiple spelling variations across a number of linguistic fields and their inconsistent representation in quoted texts, my choice to render these words using standard English conventions is intended for both consistency and reader clarity.

Additionally, words that have become incorporated into standard English usage (Shaligram, ashram) have been neither italicized nor diacriticized, except when their use in the original language may differ slightly in meaning or context from the English usage (*śālagrāma*). Finally, my overall choice to use "Shaligram" in general throughout this work is also due to the fact that "Shaligram" itself has a variety of different spellings and pronunciations in different areas of South Asia. For example, *sāligrāma* (dental) is the typical pronunciation of the term among devotees throughout South India and to some degree in North India and Nepal, while other sources insist on the pronunciation *śālagrāma* (palatal) as more correct and referential to the original Sanskrit pronunciation. But since "Shaligram" is generally recognizable by all individuals referenced in this work, it will be the standard term used herein.

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# 1 Living Fossils

## Impressions of a Once and Future World

**Abstract**
For more than two thousand years, the veneration of sacred fossil ammonites, called Shaligrams, has been an integral part of ritual practice throughout South Asia. Originating from a single remote region of Himalayan Nepal, in the Kali Gandaki River Valley of Mustang, the ritual use of these stones today has become a significant focus of pilgrimage and exchange in India and Nepal and among the global diaspora. But Shaligrams are also deeply intertwined with divine movement, and the challenges of travel to Mustang have resulted in restrictions on a ritual practice that depends upon the mobility of people and stones for its continuation. As a result, many practitioners now believe that the worship of Shaligrams may be in danger of disappearing.

**Keywords:** Shaligram, pilgrimage, Hinduism, fossil, ammonite

Full fathom five thy father lies:
Of his bones are coral made:
Those are pearls that were his eyes:
Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.
*– Shakespeare, The Tempest*

A Hindu pilgrim, recently arrived from South India, stood anxiously next to a bus stand in Mustang, Nepal. "I'm going to burn my passport," he said. "I'm going to destroy all my documents and go to Damodar. I came here (on pilgrimage) to find Shaligram and I will find Shaligram. You can't put borders on sacred land." I was taken aback. The Damodar Kund, a glacial lake several

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days' walk far to the north, lay beyond the boundary between Upper Mustang and Lower Mustang, and without special permits and astronomical fees, foreigners were not allowed to cross into the politically contentious zone between Chinese-occupied Tibet and Himalayan Nepal. But this was not the first time I would encounter these sentiments. More than once, a Hindu or Buddhist pilgrim would explain how they might hide their passports in a mountain crevasse, strip off their clothes and travel as mute hermits (so that their accents would not give them away) and steal across the border late at night or in an area where there were no roads for government jeeps to travel. In every case, the reasoning was the same: they had come in search of sacred stones, and there was no border that could stop them. This was Shaligram pilgrimage, and where the Shaligram goes, so do the people.

For more than two thousand years, the veneration of sacred fossil ammonite stones, called Shaligram Shila (or alternatively, *sāligrāma śila* or *śālagrāma śila*),[1] has been an integral part of Hindu ritual practice throughout Nepal and the Indian subcontinent. While ammonite fossils are common throughout the world, these unique types of black shale river fossils originate from a single remote region of Himalayan Nepal, in the Kali Gandaki River Valley of Mustang District. Today, the ritual use of these stones has become a significant focus of pilgrimage, religious co-participation, and exchange between Nepal and India as well as among the global Hindu diaspora. Their characteristic ridged spirals and ebon-black coloration readily reveal their presence in the silty waters of the river as pilgrims and devotees step carefully through powerful currents to reach Shaligrams just beginning to appear out of the eroding riverbanks. Each Shaligram is one-of-a-kind where the forces that formed it have left behind distinctive combinations of characteristics: spiral shell reliefs, white quartz lines, and perfectly rounded black shale nodules sometimes paired with small holes or intricate internal impressions where the original fossil mold has long since worn completely away. But these characteristics are not only geological in nature, they must also be religiously interpreted, to determine precisely which deity has made their presence available within the stone.

Viewed primarily as natural manifestations of the Hindu god Vishnu, Shaligrams are called *svarupa* ("natural forms") and are therefore inherently

1 "Shaligram" has a variety of different spellings and pronunciations in different areas of South Asia. For example, *sāligrāma* (dental) is the typical pronunciation of the term among devotees throughout South India and to some degree in North India and Nepal, while other sources insist on the pronunciation *śālagrāma* (palatal) as more correct and referential to the original Sanskrit pronunciation.

sacred. The meaning of "natural", then, is often locally articulated as something whose formation lies distinctly outside of human agency (meaning, for example, through the will of the gods or with the landscape). Shaligrams are natural in that they are not human-made and ultimately demonstrate their own agency. For this reason, they do not require any rites of consecration or invocation, such as the *prana pratiṣṭha* (lit. establishing of breath/life force),[2] when brought into homes or temples. Shaligrams are also highly valued as symbolic manifestations of divine movement, either through a geologically and mythologically formative journey down the sacred river (which runs from the Southern Tibetan plateau down through central Nepal and into Northern India) or transnationally in the hands of devout pilgrims. Pouring out into the river each year following the summer melt high in the mountains, Shaligrams are gathered up by pilgrims, tourists, and merchants alike. On their way out of the mountains, they travel through forests and cities, into temples and homes, across great expanses of time and space, carried by the indescribable forces of nature or the complex networks of pilgrimage and exchange that underlie their vital mobility. As divine forms, Shaligram stones are representative of power expressed as a journey through a sacred landscape, and in the high Himalayas, religion is constantly on the move.

The ramshackle bus finally trundled its way up the steep road and groaned to a stop among the crowd of waiting devotees. As destination requests for far-flung villages or sacred sites were shouted between drivers and potential passengers, the pilgrim went on to remark, "I've known many who have destroyed their passports to get to Kali Gandaki. They say that I am foreign so that's why I need permits for Damodar (the source of the river in nearby Upper Mustang). But I am Hindu, and this land is *Shaligramam* (a reference to Vishnu). I could never be foreign here."

In recent decades, the mobility of Shaligrams has also come to represent the mobility of pilgrims and the fluidity of ritual practices themselves. Given Mustang's long-standing status as a travel-restricted political red zone, Shaligrams are fast becoming metonymic for sacred landscapes that are continuously coming into conflict with political landscapes. Through competing claims to Tibetan, Nepali, and indigenous origins, the national

2 *Prana pratistha* refers to the ritual by which a *murti* (image of a god) is consecrated in a Hindu temple. Hymns and mantras are recited to invite the deity to be a resident guest, and the murti's eyes are opened for the first time. Practiced in the temples of Hinduism and Jainism, the ritual is considered to infuse life into the image and bring to it the numinous presence of divinity.

identity of Mustang is currently framed by the region's perilous political position near the borders of Tibet, where it acts as a buffer region between China, India, and central Nepal. As a result, many Hindu and Buddhist pilgrims have come to treat these national borders and Mustang's political isolation as affronts to religious identities that depend upon individual mobility and the movement of sacred stones to extend family and community belonging beyond the boundaries of nation, ethnicity, or caste.

It is then this combination of movement through vast expanses of geological time, across historical and mythological landscapes, and into the daily lives of families and communities at the conclusion of pilgrimage that defines what it is to be Shaligram and therefore for devotees in turn, what it is to be Hindu or Buddhist. For Shaligram practitioners, to be in the presence of a Shaligram is to be in the constant presence of the gods themselves. To ritually worship a Shaligram is to accept the deities as members of one's own family, and to begin their veneration properly one must go to the places where Shaligram appears.[3] The aniconic character of Shaligrams and their natural formation within the Kali Gandaki comprise the first part of their journey into sacrality, and in this way, their geological formations as well as their geographical migrations from mountain to lake to river, which gives them their characteristic appearance, are just as much a part of their religious narrative as their legends and stories. Framing Shaligram practices through the themes of movement and time along with divine personhood and multispecies will then begin to reveal what Shaligrams are as well as how Hindu and Buddhist devotees in South Asia have come to experience them.

## Moving in Time with Life

At its core, a Shaligram is symbolic movement made physically manifest. The journey begins with the stones' geological and mythological travels

3 Unfortunately, there are no current studies which indicate approximately what percentage of Hindus or Buddhists are also Shaligram practitioners. Regardless, such a study would find defining Shaligram practice in this way difficult given that there are no specific standards of practice related to the worship of sacred stones in South Asia. In other words, some Hindus may use Shaligrams along with a wide variety of other deity icons in their worship while others might worship only Shaligrams alone. Some may also only worship occasionally (such as at a temple which houses a Shaligram) while others practice Shaligram rituals daily. Some may keep Shaligrams in their homes, others may not. In any case, the wide variety and extension of Shaligram traditions in South Asia imply that Shaligram worship is relatively common on the subcontinent and likely has been for some time.

down the sacred river and includes their equally divine transnational mobility in the hands of devout pilgrims returning to homes in regions and countries throughout the world. But to complicate matters, because the national identity of Mustang remains ambiguous and contested, the Nepali government has continued to make travel and access difficult for pilgrims as it attempts to control and homogenize the territory's identity under the central purview of Kathmandu. As a result of various restrictions on pilgrimage, the Shaligrams' own mobility has thus become weighted with special meaning: for example, a Shaligram's natural movement in eroding out of the mountains and tumbling down into the river to flow outwards into the landscape becomes both an analogue and an alter for pilgrims' own ideal mobility – a parallelism that is only made possible by the kinship between stones and people.

Throughout this book, I will use these and other examples to demonstrate how the co-mobility of stones and pilgrims is a kind of political practice that facilitates formations of national community and religious identity. Emerging from particular geographic and historical settings, Shaligram practices treat sacred stones as divine persons who are both linked to places and transcendent of them. As a result, both pilgrims and regional peoples also come to experience themselves as being "from" a particular sacred place even though they encounter pressures from outside entities – such as local or foreign governments, geological and political research studies, and national resistance movements – that mark the landscape as unstable and contested. As time goes on, it is then the divine personhood of the Shaligrams themselves, as deities endowed with consciousness and intent and as kith and kin to ritual practitioners, that continues to connect community and kinship networks across extraordinary expanses of time and space and beyond the boundaries of nation-state, gender, ethnicity, or caste.

With a theoretical grounding in the anthropological literatures of space and place-making (i.e., Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Hirsch and O'Hanlon 1995; and Basso 1996) in articulation with ethnographies of personhood and kinship in South Asia (Lamb 2000; Carsten 2000; Franklin and McKinnon 2001; and Uberoi 1993), this work links together current theories of cultural time and material temporality (Mieu 2015; Hodges 2008; Munn 1992; Hanks 1990; Parmentier 1987; Geertz 1975; and Evans-Pritchard 1940) with critical mobility studies (Ingold 2011; Hausner 2007; Urry 2002; Fisher 2001; and Graburn 1989). While the object-agency and object-personhood (Gentry 2016; Geismar 2011; Hoskins 2006; and Schattschneider 2003) of Shaligrams themselves situates this research within broader theories of cultural linking (de Bruijn and van Dijk 2012; Salazar 2010; Horst and Miller 2005; Castells

2004; and Appadurai 1986), I contend throughout this work that it is the life-long and generational relationships between Shaligrams (as both divine persons and objects), their practitioners, pilgrimage, and the landscape that generates new kinds of histories, transactions, and social belonging. As such, this work also resonates with many of the current threads of inquiry now gaining ground in the study of religion and materiality. Religious scholars in this area focus specifically on how religion happens through material culture, which may include everything from images, ritual objects, architecture and sacred space, art and archaeology, and religious objects produced for decoration or mass consumption. In addition to material forms, this growing sub-discipline also addresses the role of different practices that engage material religion in spiritual action, such as how various types of ritual language and performance, teaching and instruction, pilgrimage, magic and spiritual medicine, or liturgy and exegesis constitute and maintain religious worlds (Morgan 1999, 2010). As a departure from Thing Theory (Brown 2004), however, I am less attentive to "thingness" here as an aspect of human-object interactions and more concerned, for reasons that will become obvious, with the ways in which practitioners contend with the "entity-like presence" (Fowles 2010) of Shaligrams and the agency of the deities manifest within them.

Issues of temporality will also come up repeatedly in the formulation of Shaligrams as kin, where they link ancestors with descendants in such a way as to construct families and communities of the living, the dead, and the divine. Time is a valuable tool in the ethnographer's toolkit. This is not only because anthropologists should attend to their own and their participant's temporal views in the construction of intersubjective fieldwork (such as Fabian 1983) but, as in the case of Shaligram ritual practices, it is the layering of different kinds of cyclical and linear events in the lives of both individuals and communities that reifies these complex identities and relationships in the present day.

Because the theme of boundaries is so pervasive in my findings, I must also attend to what it means to traverse those boundaries. In previous studies of mobility in Africa and in the Middle East, roads, electricity and infrastructure, mobile phones, and the internet have all become objects of study in the ways that they remake political and economic power relations and introduce new spaces of peril and precarity (Bishara 2015; Dilger et al. 2012; McIntosh 2009; and Comaroff and Comaroff 1993). But instead of focusing on the rise of specific technologies in the growing concerns about the global "field", I offer a new view on an old topic: sacred stones as mobile techne. In this mobility paradigm, interrelationships between

place and culture are reframed by the interrelationships between object and personhood/kinship so that the ways in which (im)mobility and (in) flexibility shape relationships are foregrounded. Mobile techne, a concrete and context-dependent method of making something mobile, will then also involve physical movement through landscapes as well as symbolic and spiritual movement through the *dham*, the immaterial landscapes and dwelling places of the deities.

In this ethnography, mobility itself is the locus of transformation. But rather than a transient space of liminal *communitas* (in the manner of Victor Turner) that lies between categories of social belonging, mobility is taken here as a permanent potentiality that is quite literally set in stone. The mobility of Shaligrams thus provides an ambiguous, shifting space of change and renewal continuously available for renegotiating one's place in an unstable world. Along the pilgrimage route required to obtain a Shaligram, mobility includes the political practice of recreating and resisting ideologies of national and ethnic belonging in Nepal and India, where political restrictions on the movements of both people and Shaligrams becomes a contested point for the realization of national and religious identities. Like the *bhola*, the "gullible fools", of the Kanwar pilgrimage in India (Singh 2017), Shaligram pilgrims also use the mobile spaces of pilgrimage to reassert the power and sovereignty of individual lives regardless of economic, caste, or national status.

As practitioners and pilgrims move outwards and return to their places of residence, the mobility of Shaligrams is then translated into ritual and divine personhood through their intimate ties to community and kinship networks of reciprocity and exchange; a transformation that will also position them within community and familial relationships in a time of great social upheaval and out-migration. This places this particular ethnography of mobility into a somewhat odd space in relation to current anthropological literatures that use mobility as a framework for ethnographic study. Given that these literatures tend to focus primarily on the movement of groups of people in the context of social mobility[4] (the symbolic movement of

4 Grusky, David B. and Erin Cumberworth (February 2010). "A National Protocol for Measuring Intergenerational Mobility" (PDF). Workshop on Advancing Social Science Theory: The Importance of Common Metrics. Washington, D.C.: National Academy of Science. Retrieved 15 July 2014.Lopreato, Joseph & Hazelrigg, Lawrence E. (December 1970). "Intragenerational versus Intergenerational Mobility in Relation to Sociopolitical Attitudes." *Social Forces*. University of North Carolina Press. 49 (2): 200-210. JSTOR 2576520. doi: 10.2307/2576520.
Weber, Max (1946). "Class, Status, Party." In H.H. Girth and C. Wright Mills. From *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. New York: Oxford University. pp. 180-195.

individuals and groups between social strata), physical population mobility[5] (such as migrant labor, tourism and travel, pilgrimage, and diaspora studies), or ascetism and concepts of freedom,[6] this work draws together frameworks that merge physical and symbolic movement as conducted through object-person relationships, in the form of Shaligram stones, as producers of meaning and as positions for the negotiation of identity.

In this work, I am interested in how mobility stops being a means to an end (or a place) but instead becomes a vital practice in its own right. In the spirit of multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995), Shaligram practice can move out of the more traditional frameworks of single-site analysis to reveal the macro-constructions of a larger social order that cross-cuts common dichotomies such as "local" and "global" or "lifeworlds" and "systems." This is why I will use the term "mobility" with a view towards several equally important valences: to mean physical movement across space, to mean the potential for movement among both people and their deities, to mean exchange within kinship networks or as commodities, and to mean the capacity for a Shaligram to exist in both individual life times and in historical, generational, or geological time. Whenever necessary, I point out which meanings are most salient to the argument at hand, but it is important to realize that people often use the term "mobility" to leverage multiple meanings at once and are not especially troubled by the apparently contradictory pivots between one meaning or another. Rather, it becomes mobility itself that remains the primary concern.

Collins, Patricia Hill (1998). "Toward a new vision: race, class and gender as categories of analysis and connection. *"Social Class and Stratification*: Classic Statements and Theoretical Debates. Boston: Rowman & Littlefield. pp. 231-247.

Wilkinson, Richard & Kate Pickett (2009). "The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger." Bloomsbury Press.

5 Ramesh, S.S.; Ganju, D.D.; Mahapatra, B.B.; Mishra, R.M.; Saggurti, N.N. (2012). *Relationship between mobility, violence and HIV/STI among female sex workers in Andhra Pradesh, India*. BMC Public Health. 12 (1): 764.

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Blossfeld, Hans-Peter (2009). Life Course Inequalities in the Globalisation Process. Burlington, VT: Ashgate. p. 59

6 Hausner, Sondra L. 2007. *Wandering with Sadhus: Ascetics in the Hindu Himalayas*. Indiana University Press.

Salazar, Noel B. Salazar, and Kiran Jayaram (eds.) 2017. *Keywords of Mobility: Critical Engagements*. Berghahn Books.

## A Lifetime of Movement

Shaligram pilgrimage is the first vital preceding step to Shaligram practice, which transitions movement in space (pilgrimage and exchange) to movement in time (birth, life, and death alongside the generations of families and communities). Because of this, Shaligrams add a fascinating new dimension to recent studies that use temporality to capture ever more dynamic ways of "being in time". Because temporality is not merely a product of structural circumstances but is produced through concrete practices where people come to actively construct and embody time (Bourdieu 1977; Munn 1992), the links between spatial movement and temporal movement become clearer where practitioners continuously reinterpret pilgrimage both as a physical journey to specific places for the purposes of personal transformation and as an ongoing, lifelong process of aging and achieving milestones. In fact, "pilgrimage as life" was such a common metaphor among Shaligram practitioners that it often became unclear as to whether they were referring to actual plans for an upcoming pilgrimage or were commenting more generally on the transient state of existence.

The layering of time, mobility, and space is also especially important when the meanings of Shaligram ritual practices are expanded outward into the global South Asian diaspora, who often view Shaligrams as vital links anchoring them back to family members back home, to ancestors, to presiding household deities, and to the sacred lands of pilgrimage. As kin, Shaligrams then articulate with reflexive models of temporal kinship that permit people to establish kin relations with persons they meet, persons they are biologically related to, or with otherwise unrelated persons elsewhere, as well as with ancestors and deities largely distant from this particular moment in time. Therefore, as a kind of composite "kinship chronotype" (Ball et al. 2015), Shaligram relationships enable persons and communities to co-locate themselves and their kin or kin-like others in a wide variety of places and times and to use these ties to participate in collective belonging outside of typical boundaries of caste, religion, or nationality. Taking temporality to be an embodied symbolic process unfolding in practice (Mieu 2015) through which people imagine themselves to inhabit a present in relation to various kinds of pasts and futures (Munn 1992: 115-116), we can then begin to understand how a variety of large-scale political and historical processes affect practitioners' views about national mobility and belonging which they may then articulate through communal ritual practices using sacred stones.

This view of time and nationalism is the most initially productive relative to Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson's notion of "space": a critique of location,

displacement, and community that unmoors naturalized notions of essential places from their representations in geographical locations (1992). By attending to spaces and places as continually constituted and renegotiated over time, this project leverages mobility as an analytical viewpoint from which to re-theorize anthropological notions of contact, contradiction, and integration. For example, like other ethnographies of space and pilgrimage, mobility constitutes an intriguing ethnographic point of intervention into how the conceptual and material dimensions of places and landscapes are central to the production of social life.

But unlike ethnographies that tend to focus more on issues of global economic restructuring, urban displacement, migratory flows, or deterritorialization (Olwig and Hastrup 1997; Low 1999; Dawson et al. 2014; and Haenn and Wilk 2016) as they have undermined assumptions about the fixity of people, this work demonstrates how objects (Shaligrams) – which are distinctly from a specific place, transcend that place, and yet carry notions of space and place with them – upend assumptions about the fixity of place itself. As a result, Shaligram mobility demonstrates how identity and belonging are perceived differently among a community of religious practitioners who often describe themselves as being "from" a sacred place of pilgrimage that they have generally only ever visited (or have never seen at all, in some cases). What is more, by attending to the movability of placeness itself, the mobility of Shaligrams can then take on even more complex meanings of flexibility and ambiguity.

As one elderly Tibetan woman living in Pokhara, a town roughly 200 km west of Kathmandu, once described it, "I have lived in Nepal since the '60s but I am not Nepali. I was born in Lokha (a city in southeastern Tibet) but I have lived on the other side of the Himalayas for most of my life, so I am not Tibetan really either. But I carry Shaligram with me. Do you see it in my *chuba*? It also comes from Tibet, but it was found at the refugee camp in Mustang where my family settled. It stays with me always. It can't be taken away. So, you see, that is where I am from."[7] Whether she meant from Mustang or from "Shaligram", she would not say.

## Deities as Multispecies

The presence of a Shaligram stone within a Hindu household often marks the family as especially pious, and many devotees consider the worship

7 Conversation in English and Nepali. Transcribed from recorded conversation.

of Shaligrams as a way to link themselves, their ancestors, and their descendants with ancient Hindu stories and traditions and with sacred places extending thousands of years into the past. As is often the case in Shaligram worship, specific stones are also associated with the specific ancestors who acquired them on pilgrimages decades or even centuries previously. These Shaligrams are typically passed down from generation to generation of first and second sons, and many Shaligram devotees can recount the long genealogical histories of both their families and their Shaligrams accordingly. Ritual stones of this magnitude are usually venerated with daily *pujas* (ritual worship) and offerings of water, tulsi (holy basil) leaves, flowers, food, sandalwood paste, and turmeric and vermillion (*kumkum*) powder. The presence of Shaligrams is also indispensable to the performance of yearly festivals and important ceremonies (the Marriage of Tulsi and Shaligram festival being one especially salient example). Shaligrams often make appearances at weddings, funerals, house-warming functions (such as *grhapravesha* and *vastu-puja*), during pacificatory rites of various types (*shanti*), and at any point where the welfare of the household and family may be at stake.

In temples, Shaligrams play important roles in the construction of deity altars. The famous image of Vishnu at Badrinath is reported to be carved out of a Shaligram, as is the image of Krishna at Uḍupi in Karnataka and the Shiva Linga within the main temple of Pashupatinath in Kathmandu. Also, the present deity altar in Sri Padmanabhaswamy temple located in Thiruvananthapuram in Kerala is said to be constructed of more than 12,000 Shaligram stones arranged to form the icons of Padmanabha (Vishnu) who is reclining on the serpent Ananta. The serpent has five hoods facing inwards which signify contemplation while the deity's right hand has then been placed over a Shiva Lingam. Lakshmi, the Goddess of Prosperity, and Bhudevi the Goddess of Earth (two consorts of Vishnu) are arranged on either side of the main icon while Brahma emerges on a lotus emanating from Vishnu's navel. Similarly, the reclining Vishnu deity residing in another temple in Thiruvattar, about 50-60 kilometers from Trivandrum, is reported to be made out of 16,000 Shaligram stones.

In other cases, Shaligram stones are said to reside inside deity icons (*murti* – meaning divine image), such as the wooden icon of Lord Jagannath in Puri, at the Venkateshwar Temple in Tirupati, at the Dwakadheesh Temple in Dwarka, and in the Krishna Rukmini Temple at Bhet Dwarka in Gujarat where they act as *padartha* (literally "object" or "category" but used here to mean "essence of existence") within the images. According to many pilgrims to Muktinath Temple in Mustang, the icon of the Buddha

of Compassion, Avalokiteshvara (Tibetan: *Chenrezig*),[8] who also serves simultaneously as the icon of Vishnu, sits on the very first Shaligram to have ever been discovered in Nepal and who therefore holds within him the divine essence of all Shaligrams as a whole. In his seminal work on Shaligram mythography, S.K. Ramachandra Rao notes that it is a Shaligram stone that officiates as the *snapana-murti*, or the icon for bathing, at the shrine of Natha-dvura in Rajasthan and that a group of Shaligrams remains the principal focus of daily worship at the temple of Vengaḍam at Tirupati Tirumalai (1996: 2-4). Lastly, the largest and heaviest temple Shaligram known currently resides in the Jagannath Temple at Puri in Orissa, while the largest collection of Shaligrams outside of India is at ISKCON's Karuna Bhavan temple in Scotland.

For those deity altars that cannot accommodate Shaligrams inside the *murti*, it is not uncommon to see small collections of Shaligrams resting at the deity's feet, where they are the subject of daily *pujas* in connection with the iconic deities associated with them, or in the case of large temple collections, arranged on a side altar in full view of all ritual activities. In other cases, garlands (*mala*) of Shaligrams are used to decorate deities at particularly auspicious times, and many of the Shaligrams comprising these garlands are said to have been collected by successive groups of pilgrims over spans of hundreds or even thousands of years. One such garland, for example, occasionally used at the temple of Mayapur in Northern India is made of silver strands attaching one hundred and eight small Shaligrams together in a manner similar to a *japa mala* (Hindu rosary). And finally, though Shaligram practices are most common among the Vaishnava (Vishnu worshippers) traditions of Hinduism, among Shaivas (Shiva worshippers), Shaligram stones may also be used in homes and in temples as forms of the Shiva Lingam.[9]

Though Shaligram stones might initially appear to be good candidates for broader "object ethnographies" that track the movement of commodities

8 Throughout this ethnography, I will often refer to Avalokiteshvara as a buddha rather than a bodhisattva, which is more common in Tibetan religious texts and among religious scholars and specialists. This is because the people of Mustang, as well as elsewhere in Nepal, specifically used "buddha" when referring to Avalokiteshvara/Chenrezig and did not typically use the word "bodhisattva", if at all.

9 Shiva linga, the ostensibly phallic representation of Shiva (which is more often interpreted as "the pillar of fire" rather than as a castrated phallus), can come in either natural formations (like the white quartz bāṇa-liṅgas found in the river Narmada) which are referred to as "svayambhū liṅgas" or as man-made, called "mānuṣa liṅgas". There is also a reasonably common practice of making temporary lingas out of clay, cow-dung, flowers, or grain which are typically consumed or destroyed following the ritual worship.

through globalized free markets, resource distribution, and the commodification of religious objects for tourism, Shaligram practitioners actively resist this paradigm of cultural exchange in a variety of ways. Drawing on networks of kinship exchange, they routinely point out that no Shaligram should ever be traded for money but should, rather, only move from person to person through inheritance, through marriage or family transfer, or gifting. Furthermore, they have also begun to leverage digital technologies, such as internet communication (see Chapter 8) in order to "hide Shaligrams from money" and to facilitate the exchange of stones among people who are otherwise unable to travel to Mustang on pilgrimage. As a result, one of the central arguments of this work, Shaligrams as divine persons and kin, is more closely engaged with the mode of research termed multi-species ethnography.

In previous anthropological studies, non-humans (animals, plants, mountains, deities, etc.) were often relegated to the margins of discussion and framed as either symbols, food, part of the landscape, or otherwise peripheral and supplementary to human action. In recent years, however, ethnographies of animals (Ingold 1994; Sanders 1999; and Irvine 2004), insects (Raffles 2010), plants (Tsing 2005), fungi (Tsing 2016), microbes (Latour 1988; Paxson 2008; and Helmreich 2009), and even "earth beings" such as mountains (de la Cadena 2010) have shifted non-human agents and entities out of the realm of Agamben's *zoe* or "bare life," that which is acultural and killable, and into the purview of *bios*, being possessed of legibly biographical and political lives (Agamben 1998). As once living (fossilized ammonites) and now alive again (deities), Shaligrams present something of a conundrum to the study of organisms whose lives and deaths are so intimately linked to human social worlds. Indeed, they challenge even the very notion of what it means to "be alive" in the first place. While unkillable in the conventional sense, Shaligrams are nevertheless viewed as distinctly and actively living, carrying communal and family activities into what Eduardo Kohn might call a human "entanglement with other kinds of lived selves" (2007: 4). In other words, a Shaligram, while no longer an organism in the biological sense (though it once was), is reborn out of the landscape into a new kind of life whose livelihood is shaped by the religious, political, economic, and cultural forces that surround it (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010). Like many other multispecies ethnographies, this is an account of where nature and culture break down.

This view of Shaligrams through the lens of "multispecies" proceeds to complicate a number of conversations in the anthropology of religion.

Firstly, Shaligram practices do not fit into any popular dichotomy that views science/religion or objectivism/relativism as theoretically opposed. More importantly, Shaligrams as divine persons and kin also continue to question whether there is such a thing that we might call "religion" universally (Lambek 2008; Bubandt et al. 2012). Secondly, considerations of Shaligram ritual and pilgrimage complicate the conversation as to whether religion constitutes an experience (associated with particular psychological and phenomenological ideas of the sacred; see Eliade 1959; Otto 1958; and Van der Leeuw 1938) or a presence, i.e., a distinct social and material reality (Taves 2009; Engelke 2007). This is because the presence of Shaligrams facilitates relationships with the divine through multiple competing authorities, texts, actions, and objects. Furthermore, the discourses of science and religion, even among Shaligram practitioners, tend to be blended together as two related (and not mutually exclusive) "mythologies" that work together to explain the continued importance of Shaligram veneration in South Asia and elsewhere.[10]

The incorporation of Shaligrams in family life also challenges the distinction between "sacred" and "secular" categories that serve to elevate religion out of the context of everyday life. For the majority of Shaligram practitioners, the gods participate just as much in the mundanities of cooking and eating, work and rest, household maintenance, gardening and animal care, and child-rearing as they do in the interactions between people, spirits, and religious ideals. This is how Shaligram practices pull religion out of the medical, phenomenological, and naturalistic models of "spirit possession" and "mediumship" especially popular in modern anthropological accounts of religion as well as categories of "folk" or "primitive" religion versus "high" religion more common in theological studies. For these reasons, I pay particular attention to the multiple roles that Shaligrams play in the day to day, in wider political and social concerns, and in related conceptions of geological and mythological time. These distinctions between object, person, deity, and fossil will then help me to demonstrate complementary ways of studying religion that interrogates and describes the things that people may or may not define as "religious" versus systems that anthropologists might delineate as "religion".

10 As a bridge between concepts of Nature and Culture, then, Shaligram ritual practices serve to highlight a methodological split between critical theorists in the humanities and social scientists more focused on the natural sciences (often as played out in multi-species ethnography and Science and Technology Studies).

## Precious Persons of Stone

It may sound paradoxical to link objects with persons in this manner, but this work is indeed about an alternative view of the boundaries between "human" and "non-human" as it relates to shifting boundaries between the "sacred" and the "everyday". While scholars have already described the ways in which personhood in South Asia is often constructed through external relationships with other persons, places, objects, and ideas (Deleuze 1992; Lamb 2004), this research furthers those descriptions by demonstrating how divine persons (particularly divine objects as persons) are similarly constituted. Shaligram practitioners do not refer to Shaligrams as "stones", and the paleontological term "fossil" is unsurprisingly contentious. Rather, Shaligrams are typically referred to simply as "bodies" or otherwise given nominal distinctions using gendered pronouns (His/Her) depending on which deity is materially manifest. More importantly, Shaligram practitioners themselves do not generally use representational language when referring to Shaligrams. In other words, Shaligrams do not symbolize or "stand in" for deities, they *are* deities. The use of representational terms was more common on my part than on the part of my research participants, who were often quick to point out any misconceptions regarding who and what might be present at a given moment. My analysis of symbolic meanings is therefore largely my own and intended to clarify the relationships between broader cultural systems of mobility and religious practice than on the manifest nature of Shaligrams themselves. As a result, personhood here is therefore repositioned as a process that includes bodies that "are" present and bodies "as if" they are present so as to blur the distinctions between reality and its representations.

What is important to stress here once again is that Shaligrams are a part of the broader, everyday interactions between Hindus, Buddhists, Bonpos, and the divine – where the gods are immanent in the world, simultaneously transcendent, and embodied in multiple different kinds of earthly forms. Offerings and gift-giving to these forms are then meant to draw the deity's favor and to nurture good relationships with them through physical exchanges. The simultaneous presence of the divine in material bodies (such as stones, trees, elephants, rivers, etc.) then helps to mediate needs, problems, and conflicts in people's everyday lives by creating connections between an individual, a family, or a community's present circumstances and the actions or desires of the gods. There are also no specific standards of practice related to either Shaligram stones or to Hindu deity images (*murti*). This means that some Hindus use Shaligrams in association with a wide

variety of other ritual objects, altar objects, sacred places, and deity icons, while others use Shaligrams alone. Some devotees might also only worship occasionally (such as at a temple that houses a Shaligram or on festival days), while others practice Shaligram rituals daily. Some may keep Shaligrams in their homes; others may prefer to keep them in places of community worship. In any case, I do not in any way imply here that Shaligram veneration stands uniquely separate from the routine and familiar interactions that the vast majority of devotees have with the daily appearances of the divine.

Shaligrams are generally contextualized within larger ritual systems that venerate naturally occurring objects interpreted as divine persons or divine person-like beings (such as Shiva Linga stones, Dwarka Shilas,[11] rudraksha seeds, mountains and rivers, trees and forests, stars and celestial bodies, and certain animals[12]), but they are also commonly associated with specific deity *murti* (especially statues) with whom they share household and altar space. Therefore it is, again, important to note here that "person" does not specifically refer to a "human" but to a being that can have agency, speak, engage in social relationships and exchanges with other people, be cared for and care for others in return, have a life course and go through life-cycle rituals, such as a marriage or a funeral.

Shaligrams are also situated within cultural systems of reincarnation, within the concept of karmic life cycles, that view birthmarks, congenital abnormalities, and other notable characteristics on human bodies as clues to a person's past life experiences. For example, psychologist Ian Stevenson's *Reincarnation and Biology*[13] contains ten such examples of children in India with various birthmarks or birth defects that were said to correspond to places where their previous personalities were shot, injured, or otherwise fatally wounded. As persons, then, Shaligrams are equally integral to pilgrimage circuits as humans are, especially in terms of landscapes and practices

11 A type of coral stone obtained from the Gomati river (Gomti River) in Dvaraka. Often worshipped as manifestations of Vishnu along with Shaligrams.

12 "The Death of a Hungry God: The electrocution of a wild elephant in a village in northeast India illustrates how these formidable beings are experienced as both animal and deity" – https://www.sapiens.org/culture/elephants-india-religion/?utm_source=SAPIENS.org+Subscribers&utm_campaign=117193ae4e-Email+Blast+12.22.2017&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_18b7e41cd8-117193ae4e-216302925 Accessed 1 February 2018.

13 Ian Stevenson, 1997. *Reincarnation and Biology: A Contribution to the Etiology of Birthmark and Birth Defects*. Praeger. Reactions to Stevenson's work are highly mixed given his belief that birthmarks and "maternal impressions" were, in fact, evidence of previous lives and, specifically, indicated the manner in which the previous personality had died. In his *New York Times* obituary, Margalit Fox wrote that while Stevenson's supporters saw him as a misunderstood genius, mainstream peer review simply ignored his research as earnest but gullible.

that span hundreds of miles and reach across the national and geological borders of multiple countries and sociopolitical identities. Their "birth" in the Kali Gandaki River indexes the beginning of a new kind of belonging where landscapes of pilgrimage are repositioned as "homelands" in a different sense; as the birthplaces of family members, deities, and ancestors manifest in naturally occurring stone.

## What is a Shaligram?

From the viewpoints of both religion and science, there remains a fair question as to what one might mean when one says "Shaligram". The ontology of Shaligrams is, therefore, a theme central to much of this work. Briefly, ontology refers to the nature of being, the nature of reality, or theories of being. This means engaging with Shaligrams as inhabitants of a different "world" and not merely as objects in a particular "worldview" (Kohn 2013: 9-10). In a sense, this entire book is an exploration of the ontology or nature of being of Shaligrams and will encompass a variety of analytical categories related to place, divine person, and kin.

In the discourses of geological and paleontological science, Shaligrams are ammonite fossils. Ammonites are the common name given to the subclass Ammonoidea, an extinct order of cephalopod that, despite their outward similarities to the modern-day chambered nautilus, are more closely related to other living coleoids like squid and cuttlefish. The first occurrence of ammonites dates back to the Devonian period around 400 million years ago. The last surviving lineages disappeared, along with the dinosaurs, around 65 million years ago following the Cretaceous-Paleogene extinction event. According to the Geological Survey of India, printed in 1904, Shaligram ammonites date specifically from the Early Oxfordian to the Late Tithonian Age near the end of the Jurassic Period some 165-140 million years ago (1904: 46). Up to around 40 million years ago, the land that is now Mustang, Nepal was submerged beneath a shallow ocean called the Tethys Sea located at the southern edge of one of two continents called Laurasia. As the Indian subcontinent broke away from the east coast of the continent of Gondwanaland somewhere around 80 million years ago, it moved northwards, eventually crashing into the south coastal regions of Laurasia and resulting in the massive geological uplift that created the Himalayan mountains. But as soon as the mountains were born, they were destined to die by erosion.

After the Tethys Sea was completely drained, the fossilized remains of its seafloor were left to slowly wear out of the slopes of the rising mountainsides.

Consequently, the ammonites would tumble out of the mud shales and slate beds and into the rivers to churn their way smooth – a vital part of the movement that eventually transforms them into Shaligrams. In almost every respect, Shaligrams (and the ammonites that precede them) symbolize a crossing of lived culture with tectonic history – where each stone acknowledges the vast span of Deep Geological Time compared to a human lifetime. This discourse is, however, extremely contentious within the religious discourse of Hindu pilgrimage, and many pilgrims who journey to Mustang to obtain the stones express significant ambiguity in reading Shaligrams through the lens of paleontology. In many ways, their ambiguity recalls the conundrum of the Shakespearean lines with which I opened this chapter, where the pearl opacity of the subject's eyes hint of a corpse transformed: dead yet seeing, completely still but quite alive.

Since antiquity, ammonites have been associated with religion or with religious histories. Part of the challenge of writing about Shaligrams comes from the many layers of time and levels of antiquity that must be sorted through. For example, many Hindu and Buddhist pilgrims still refer to the scientific classification of ammonites as its own kind of "mythology": as a series of stories about events, persons, and arbitrary categories that took place in the past and explain specific phenomena in the present. This is a "mythology" they will then eventually link with their own for determining the answer to the ultimate question: "What is a Shaligram?" As origin stories, the fossil history of the Himalayas and the tales of world creation as relayed in the Puranas are often taken to be equally authoritative though value-laden in different ways. For the former, the taxonomical units of geology and paleontology are viewed as ways in which new forms of life are brought into being and described so that non-practitioners (i.e., Westerners and "modernized" South Asians) might be able to understand the significance of Shaligrams in space and time, couched in the language of logic and biology. For the latter, the progression of events within sacred texts renders Shaligrams' kinship and descent from gods to men meaningful and relevant to issues in the present day. Or, the fossil taxa of ammonites are made comparable – are made the same way, for the same reasons, of the same elements – as the religious taxa of deities and ancestors.

There is a primordial layer, the ancient times of ammonites themselves. Then there are their Greek and Latin source names along with their Vedic categorizations and Indian descriptions; another time of the "ancients". There is also their history of research within the rise of both Eastern and Western sciences, followed by their personal histories, which animates all earlier

times in the shape of the Shaligram in hand. In ancient Rome,[14] ammonites were known as *"Cormu Ammonis"*, *"Corni de Ammone"*, or *"Cornamone"* because their shapes were thought to resemble the tightly coiled ram's horns used to represent the Egyptian god Ammon. Pliny the Elder (AD 23-AD 79) even referred to them in the 37th volume of his work *Naturalis Historia*. In it, he writes: "The *Hammonis cornu* is among the holiest gems of Ethiopia, it is golden in colour and shows the shape of a ram's horn; one assures that it causes fortune-telling dreams" (see also Nelson 1968). The "golden colour" he refers to is a likely reference to the fact that many ammonite fossils, including Shaligrams, are often covered in iron pyrites, which give them a sparkling golden appearance. Georgius Agricola, sometimes referred to as "the father of mineralogy" and the author of *De Re Metallica*, a work based on Pliny's *Naturalis Historia*, also referred to ammonites as *Ammonis Cornu*. Even today, ammonite genus names often end with *-ceras*, the Greek word (κέρας) for "horn".

The Swiss naturalist Conrad Gessner included some ammonite illustrations in his work *De rerum fossilium* (1565), but even toward the end of seventeenth century, it is especially interesting to note that the organic nature of ammonites remained under debate (a debate that takes places in the Hindu Scriptures as well). Robert Hooke, the famed experimental scientist and nemesis of Sir Isaac Newton, was fascinated by the logarithmic coil of ammonite shells and their regularly arranged septa (recall the classic image of the golden ratio). It was he who reached the conclusion that ammonites were not only of organic origin but also widely resembled the nautilus and may therefore be related. However, it wasn't until 1716 that ammonites would finally join scientific taxonomy with a classification scheme first recorded by another Swiss naturalist, Johann Jacob Scheuchzer. The modern form of the word ammonite was coined by the French zoologist Jean Guillaume Bruguière in 1790, but it wasn't until 1884 that the subclass Ammonoidea was finally formalized in modern zoological taxonomy (Romano 2014).

14 The *Shaligram Kosh* makes the claim that early Greek geographers referred to the river where Shaligrams were found as "Kondochetts". This is, however, highly unlikely given the history of the region and the extent of Greek influences up to and including the time of Alexander the Great. While Kondochetts was apparently a reference to a river on the Indian subcontinent in Greek geography, it is unclear as to whether or not it is a reference to the Kali Gandaki, and the claim is not otherwise verifiable.
'Kondochates'/'Condochates', Arrian, _Indica_ 4.4 translation: https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/ancient/arrian-bookVIII-India.asp. Attested as Κονδοχάτην in the accusative, so Κονδοχάτης nominative. Accessed 6 September 2019.

In China, ammonites were called horn stones (*jiao-shih*) and were typically used in traditional medicine. Japanese texts, on the other hand, refer to them as chrysanthemum stones (*kiku-ishi*), and Buddhists interpreted their clockwise spirals (a representation of the direction in which the universe rotates) as a focus for meditation or as symbols of the eight-spoked dharma wheel (an interpretation currently shared by many Buddhist pilgrims to Mustang as well). Additionally, among ancient Celts, these fossils have been interpreted as a kind of petrified venomous snake (*ophites*) and referred to as "serpent stones". In medieval England, ammonites (along with various other types of fossils) were taken as evidence for the actions of Biblical saints such St. Patrick, St. Keyne Wyry of Wiltshire (c. 461-505), or St. Hilda of Whitby (c. 614-680). According to Sir Walter Scott's *Marmion*,[15] fossil ammonites were serpents that infested the region of Whitby before the coming of St. Hilda, who subsequently defeated the serpents and turned them to stone on the site where she intended to build an abbey (see also Skeat 1912).[16] In the Americas, Cretaceous baclitid ammonites were also once collected by the indigenous peoples as "buffalo stones" and were kept in medicine pouches as aids in corralling bison (Mayor 2005). Called *Iniskim*, members of the Blackfoot First Nations continue to harvest bright opalescent ammonites for ceremonial purposes even today.[17] Furthermore, aside from their role as Shaligrams, ammonites also have a long and storied history more broadly in what Van Der Geer refers to as the fossil folklore of South Asia. She relates in detail, for example, entire regions of fossil beds containing not only ammonites but ancient giraffes, elephants, and tortoises near the Siwalik Hills of the

15 Lovett, Edward (September 1905). "The Whitby Snake-Ammonite Myth." *Folk-Lore*. 16 (3): 333-334.

16 Skeat, W.W., 1912. ""Snakestones" and stone thunderbolts as subjects for systematic investigation." *Folk-lore*, 23: 45-80. Additionally, during the 19th century, it was not uncommon for people to carve images of snake's heads around the bottom aperture of the ammonite shell.

17 See also: Rainbow Ammonites and Bison Stones available at https://albertashistoricplaces.wordpress.com/2018/01/10/rainbow-fossils-and-bison-calling/ Accessed 10 September 2018.

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Himalayas in India, which are used as evidence of the great cosmic battle of Kurukshetra as described in the Mahabharata epic and which are also visited by religious pilgrims from all over the world (2008).

According to the *Epigraphia Indica* (vol. 2, p. 204), the earliest evidence of Shaligram worship in India dates back to the second century BCE, with an inscription near Mewar in Rajasthan that mentions a shrine for the twin gods Vasudeva and Samkarsana as being made out of Shaligram stones. There are additional inscriptions, one dating back to the 1st century BCE in Madhyapradesh, for example, that also describe the worship of Vishnu in the form of Shaligram, along with the well-known *Mora* inscription near Mathura, dating to roughly the same period, which mentions the "*five worshipful heroes of the Vṛṣṇi dynasty in their luminous stone forms: śālagrāmas, bhagavatām, vṛhṣṇīnām, pañca-vīrāṇāṃ, pratimāḥ* […]" (*Epigraphia Indica*, vol. 24. 194 ff.). Hindu scholars interpret this inscription as a likely reference to the five vyuha forms (incarnations of a divine attribute and not full deity incarnations) of Vishnu: Vasudeva, Samkarsana, Pradyumna, Anirudda, and Samba (son of Pradyumna) (Rao 1996: 4).

In the first millennium AD, Shaligram practices were finally written down in the Puranic scriptures and commentaries, though an effort to standardize their interpretations and rituals wouldn't come about until much later with many of the *bhakti* (devotional) reforms of the late fifteenth century. In South India, the Hindu saints Ramanujacharya (around AD 1017-1137) in Tamil Nadu and Madhvacharya (AD 1238-1317) in Karnataka would also set forth ritual proscriptions still followed by the Hindu Vaishnava and Smarta traditions today. In North India, the traditions of Gaudiya Vaishnavism (in West Bengal) and Sri Vaishnavism (Vishishtadvaita) as well as the Hare Krishna sect have maintained their own Shaligram practices, many of which have now been exported to the West, leading to new demands for stones in places far beyond South Asia. While few Vedic texts mention Shaligrams specifically, the Brahmavaivarta Purana, Garuda Purana, and Skanda Purana, as well as the commentaries of the eighth-century philosopher Shankaracharya,[18] are currently considered the most authoritative. Despite this, the majority of Shaligram practices remain at their heart largely composed of oral traditions, regional variations, tradition and sect specifics, and individual preferences.

18 While the use of Shaligrams in worship can be traced back before the time of the poet-saint Adi Shankara, Shankara's commentary of verse 1.6.1 of the Taittiriya Upanishad and his commentary of verse 1.3.14 of the Brahma Sutras demonstrate that the use of Shaligram stones was a well-established Hindu practice by the time of his composition.

The presence of Shaligrams in collections of archaeological artifacts excavated from earthen mounds inside caves occupied by the very first inhabitants of Mustang indicate that Shaligram practices likely predate the arrival of Hinduism in Nepal by several centuries and may have begun as a localized shamanic practice later adopted and disseminated by the spread of Vedic religion in the late centuries BCE. This is not surprising given the commonality of aniconic imagery in the early religions of South Asia. As Diana Eck writes: "the most ancient non-Vedic cultus of India was almost certainly aniconic" (here referring to a lack of anthropomorphic characteristics). Stones, natural symbols, and earthen mounds signified the presence of the deity long before the iconic images of the great gods came to occupy the sancta of temples and shrines" (1986: 44). Even fewer modern books and manuscripts discuss Shaligram pilgrimage or ritual practices in any depth, usually relegating them to a passing mention in the context of other cultural concerns or political issues. As of this writing, no detailed ethnographic descriptions of Shaligram pilgrimage exist in the academic literature, and almost no accounts of Shaligram practices have been analyzed at length in the corpus of the social sciences.

While Vedic and Puranic texts are often consulted as foundational authorities for Shaligram ritual practices, they do not encompass the depth and breadth of Shaligram pilgrimage and ritual practice among Hindus, Buddhists, and Bonpos (Himalayan shamans) today. Therefore, any account of Shaligrams must be attentive to both change and continuity: to sort out the processes and influences of various cultural contexts, cultural exchanges over time, and the issues of great distances between the mobility of pilgrimage and the spaces of veneration. To encounter a Shaligram at any one given point is to experience its significance particularly for that context, a kind of localization which, though enlightening, is potentially unrevealing of its broader meanings, substance, and connections. Privileging any single historical moment, including this one, at which the scholar might enter the scene does not help us to understand "why a Shaligram?". Undoubtedly, any one of these moments would be informative as to that particular Shaligram's use and importance in that context, but without a more expansive view that includes the movement of person, object, and narrative together beginning with pilgrimage to the high Himalayas of Mustang, to destination temples throughout South Asia and elsewhere, to the homes and communities of devotees the world over, a greater understanding of the profound nature of Shaligrams will remain obscured.

The following chapters explore the cultural meanings of the material world in motion for the religious communities of South Asia who venerate

Shaligram stones. They describe how space, time, and boundaries, especially the fluidity of political, geographical, and material boundaries, are constructed and experienced by Shaligram devotees in contemporary Nepal and India. In the place where both immigrant and indigenous Hindus, Buddhists, local Bonpos, and their deities converge, I found that religious, ethnic, and political identities became fluid and unstable, deities became manifest in the objects of the natural world, and people began to speak of a fossil that was not just a fossil but a living member of the family and of the community. Through this ethnographic exploration, this research then shows how these particular aspects of material religious practice are used to create and reproduce personal and familial identities as well as community belonging and cohesion among members of various, outwardly disparate South Asian religious traditions. It also discusses how these attachments through mobility are translated into anti-nationalist and boundary-rejecting political practices by allowing for the agency of stones who have become bodies and divine persons in their own right.

## Writing an Inconstant World

While discussions of scriptural traditions will be important, this book discusses Shaligram pilgrimage and veneration from an ethnographic perspective, not a textual one. This is partly because texts (including reading Shaligrams themselves as texts) play only a partial role in the overall complexity of Shaligram practices as a whole and partly because actual ethnographic accounts of people who use Shaligrams in their daily lives are almost non-existent. An essential task of ethnography is to convey a sense of the lived experiences and practices of people – in this case to demonstrate how devotees, landscapes, and Shaligrams actually interact – rather than reproduce textual ideals or religious ideologies that are never quite truly realized in the day to day. In truth, most of the complex intricacies of actual Shaligram practice bear little superficial resemblance to their descriptions in religious texts. Yet these systems are connected, not only in how people view their own positions within the greater context of Hindu and Buddhist traditions but also in the way in which devotees reconcile various contradictions that arise between day-to-day practices and sacred ideals. To some, the myths and stories contained in the Puranic texts are taken as a kind of practical instruction; a set of divinely inspired guidelines for conducting oneself properly in the presence of the sacred and through life in general. To others, such esoteric reading is irrelevant (thought to be mainly abstract

and symbolic) to the kinds of intimate and direct sense experience required to truly apprehend the material world and the divinity within and beyond it. For my part, it was vital to understand how Shaligrams fit into people's lives and experiences – as mediums of exchange, as symbols of religious affiliation, as material manifestations of the divine, as objects of cultural or political communication and organization, and as members of the family and community.

Instead of focusing on the textual histories of Shaligrams, then, I use real-life stories, quotations, conversations, and observations from the periods I spent working with Hindu and Buddhist devotees to convey the complex dimensions of Shaligram pilgrimage and practice such as it was in the first decades following the re-opening of Mustang, Nepal to foreign travel in 1992. In the sense that I am using it, ethnography is the study of communal meaning-making, the description of material practices and experiences as they appear in particular places at particular times. Shaligram devotees' descriptions of space, place, object, and movement therefore constitute the basis for my arguments. Through the use of Shaligram stones by adherents in multiple religious traditions (including co-participatory and hybrid forms), this work shows how mobility and transiency itself become the basis by which power and sovereignty are reclaimed and expressed. Through thinking about multiple different communities as they are unified by the movement of a particular object that is both rooted in a place and transcendent of all places, we will arrive at new ways of understanding mobility as a factor of collective identity and new ways of imagining how persons are embodied in objects and how objects therefore become persons.

To that end, there is also a fair amount of information that I had no choice but to leave out. In the future, there could be any number of books written on specific Shaligram practices in specific places, including the use of the courts in Kolkata, India to determine the "paternity" of Shaligrams for the purposes of inheritance, or the Shaligram festival traditions of Tamil Nadu, or even the ritual interpretations of particular Shaligrams specific to the Brahmin castes of Western India. But alas, only so much can be included in any one work, and I have chosen to begin this one where the Shaligrams themselves begin – in Mustang, Nepal.

## Into the Foothills

For more than two thousand years, the veneration of sacred fossil ammonites, called Shaligrams, has been an integral part of ritual practice throughout

Nepal and India. Originating from a single remote region of Himalayan Nepal in the Kali Gandaki River Valley of Mustang District, ritual use of these stones today has become a significant focus of pilgrimage, religious co-participation, and exchange throughout South Asia and among the global Hindu and Buddhist diaspora.

Viewed primarily as natural manifestations of the Hindu god Vishnu, Shaligrams are considered to be inherently sacred not only because they are not man-made but because the workings of the landscape (i.e., the processes of geological formation) has imbued them with a living essence and agency of their own. For this reason, Shaligrams require no rites of consecration or invocation when brought into homes or temples as presiding deities over the family and the community. In other words, the gods do not come to inhabit them nor are Shaligrams strictly symbolically representative of deities. They *are* them.

Shaligrams are also deeply intertwined with understandings of divine movement, either through a geologically and mythologically formative journey down the sacred river or transnationally in the hands of devout pilgrims. Pouring out into the river each year following the summer melt high in the mountains, Shaligrams are gathered up by pilgrims, tourists, and merchants alike. On their way out of the mountains, they travel through forests and cities, into temples and homes, across great expanses of time and space, carried by the indescribable forces of nature or the complex networks of pilgrimage and kinship exchange that eventually come to define their "lives" as gods and as family members. Shaligrams are therefore described as a kind of divine person, and one who is often in the habit of making pilgrimages throughout Nepal, into India, and across the world.

In Shaligrams, the discourses of science and religion meet, blend, and become comparable methods designed for a singular purpose: to narrate the past so that it explains the present. For this reason, many Shaligram practitioners often refer to both science and their own religious stories as "mythology" – or conversely, to both as factual truth if only from slightly different perspectives. Shaligrams as both fossils and deities then challenge us to question many of the taken-for-granted ways we connect the past and the present and what we think of as knowing through science versus knowledge in religion. In the end, these questions might help us to come to a better understanding of our own and other ways of being in the world, both physically and spiritually, or to understand how "fossil", "person", and "deity" are not necessarily mutually exclusive categories of existence but rather indications of a variety of experiences, relationships, and narratives that center on the veneration of a particularly unique kind of ammonite.

How, then, might an ethnography of sacred fossils be possible? In short, the answer is: a new methodology, one that takes into account both human and non-human actors as well as a community of practitioners who are not otherwise linked by nationality, ethnic identity, or even religion. This methodology must then also attend to mobility in the comings and goings of pilgrims along with the movement of sacred stones from family to family, community to community, and even from individual to individual over time. Without it, the larger systems at stake in the world of Shaligram veneration may not become adequately visible or might be lost in the particulars of time and place.

## Structure of This Book

This ethnography is divided into eight chapters and a conclusion, each of which is meant to "follow" the Shaligram stones outwards from their origins in Mustang, Nepal to their eventual destinations throughout South Asia and the world. Chapters 1 and 2 lay out the theoretical and anthropological groundwork of ritual and material practice for the ethnography of Shaligram religious and social worlds that follows. These chapters also act as the theoretical pivot of the work, joining the discourses of religion, science, personhood, and place-making together to demonstrate the ways in which Shaligrams are constituted as divine persons and act as agents in their own right. Contrary to popular Western viewpoints, geological processes (including fossilization) and social processes (such as ritual) in the formation of Shaligrams are not mutually exclusive and do not necessarily constitute two opposing versions of the creation of a single entity. This argument then demonstrates that both the physical and cultural constitutions of Shaligrams are consistent with general understandings of personhood in South Asia and are not, in fact, incongruous with formations of families and communities involving human persons.

Chapters 3 and 4 detail the histories and ritual landscapes surrounding the region of Mustang, Nepal and of the temple site of Muktinath. By addressing issues of political conflict, religious fluidity, and the corpus of Shaligram creation stories specifically tied to the Kali Gandaki River Valley, I demonstrate how the changing paradigm of mobility and nationalism along the pilgrimage routes has contextualized and influenced modern Shaligram practice as well as how government and scholarly narratives of the region have deeply influenced the ways in which pilgrims and local peoples speak about their own understandings of the world. These chapters present

an anthropological overview of the political and cultural issues currently facing Mustang, describing its history of conflict, migration, and religious blending as a way to address the conflicts between sacred and political landscapes from which Shaligrams are produced, collected, and exchanged.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 constitute the core of the ethnography by addressing issues of mobility and pilgrimage at the point of Shaligram origin and the subsequent social and ritual life of the stones once they return "home". These chapters are much more empirical than theoretical and are based directly on the stories, experiences, and narratives of Shaligram pilgrims and devotees themselves. By taking up topics of physical space and movement as they transition into symbolic space and movement, I demonstrate how devotees construct and reproduce meaning out of the material world and then leverage those meanings in political practice.

Chapter 7, "River Roads," is set in Mustang, Nepal between 2015 and 2017. In this chapter I show how a shared mythic view of the landscape constitutes the first linkage by which Shaligram devotees create a shared identity, despite differences in almost all other aspects of their lives. I contrast this with the experiences of resident peoples, many of whom rely on pilgrimage and tourism to support themselves economically. I argue that it is then mobility itself that becomes the ultimate expression of power and autonomy on the margins of a developing state. Where the sacred and the everyday become fluid, both pilgrims and residents continuously re-instantiate a sacred landscape over a political one, favoring religious affiliations over national identities in a space of relative political disorder.

In Chapter 8, "Ashes and Immortality", I address the nature of Shaligram "death" and the problem of Shaligram commodification in a digital world. As an intervention in the growth of virtual religious practices online, I note how the rising issue of global markets for selling stones in South Asia (and now increasingly abroad) has resulted in a kind of decolonized Shaligram practice that uses internet platforms as a method for concealing Shaligram mobility from monetary exchanges. As globally mobile religious commodities, however, Shaligrams are not diminished as agents in the eyes of devotees but rather begin to take on even greater symbolic meaning as representatives of the plight of human bodies caught in webs of marketing and global capitalism.

Apart from contextualizing events, I have kept detailed historical discussions of Mustang, Nepal (and of the complex national relations between Nepal and India generally) to a minimum. More in-depth histories and ethnographies of Mustang and its peoples are available elsewhere (Fisher 2001; Craig 2008; Ramble 1983, 2002; Snellgrove 1961; Dhungel 2002; and

Messerschmidt and Gurung 1974) and should be consulted by any student or academic wishing to learn more about the region and the more expansive ethnographic underpinnings of my analysis of Mustang. I include historical discussions here as a way of contextualizing the origins of Shaligram pilgrimage as well as the modern political and economic concerns facing the mobility of Shaligrams today.

Finally, while certain aspects of Shaligram practice are relatively consistent from one circumstance to another, most others are framed by time, place, religious affiliation, and history. This means that, should one encounter a Shaligram or Shaligram devotee at any given point, their specific ideologies and practices might not be rendered here exactly as one encounters them at that moment. This book is written in the hope that the reader might gain a larger, more overall sense of what Shaligrams are and what their meanings and practices entail for Hindu and Buddhist devotees in South Asia and, to some degree, among the South Asian diaspora. But also, perhaps more significantly, by delving into the ways in which one diverse and disparate group practices their faith and forges connections between persons and ideas at particular moments in time, we might come to better understand our own ways of being in the world, both physically and spiritually. In a world where "living fossil" no longer simply refers to the living and breathing simulacra of a more ancient creature petrified in stone, it may be possible to imagine, for a time, a stone that has lived, died, and once again come alive.

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