ASIAN BORDERLANDS

Swargajyoti Gohain

# Imagined Geographies in the Indo-Tibetan Borderlands

## Culture, Politics, Place

Amsterdam University Press

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# Acknowledgements

Many people have asked why I chose to work in Monyul. However, one's choice of a fieldwork site is overdetermined by so many factors that to construct a coherent narrative justifying the choice is a difficult task. The narrative I use is that I 'was sent there'. Between 2004 and 2006, when I was working as research assistant to sociologist Patricia Uberoi at the Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi, the euphoria of the Look East Policy and border trade was at its peak in India. Professor Uberoi was interested in sociological data for the BCIM (Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar) initiative for cross-border cooperation between the four countries which was carried out on the Track II diplomatic stage. She therefore sent me to conduct a pilot survey on the vernacular press and local opinion regarding the reopening of cross-border trade routes in the western part of Arunachal Pradesh. During this first trip to Monyul, I was impressed by the images of movement and circulation invoked by narratives of the border trade, which stood in contrast to the sleepy backwater feel of the place, and I kept returning to Monyul as a fieldwork location. I am thankful to Patricia Uberoi for sending me on the mission that eventually determined my first as well as continuing anthropological location, and for her constant encouragement of my work.

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# Introduction: Imagined Places

In summer 2008, when I was conducting preliminary fieldwork in Tawang in Northeast India, I heard vague murmurings of a movement for local autonomy that was brewing among a section of the population – news of which had not yet made it to the mainstream national media. I saw posters heralding a 'Mon Autonomous Region in Arunachal Pradesh under the Sixth Schedule' pasted on the doors and walls of offices and residences, as well as market spaces. People told me that if I wanted to know more about the autonomy movement, I should meet the brain behind the concept: Tsona Gontse Rinpoche, head of Gaden Rabgye Ling (GRL) monastery – an influential spiritual leader as well as elected political representative. In fact, many Monpa people in Tawang referred to the demand for autonomy as 'Rinpoche's movement'. In 2003, he had formed an organization called the Mon Autonomous Region Demand Committee (MARDC) and mobilized a section of Monpas to demand autonomy according to the Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution, which provides for local governance among marginalized minorities. Learning that Rinpoche was giving a public talk a few days later at the Kalachakra monastery in the nearby town of Dirang, I decided to make an unscheduled trip to see him.

The downhill journey from Tawang to Dirang, impeded by bumpy dust-tracks and abrupt S-turns, took around six hours; by the time I reached the monastery grounds, T.G. Rinpoche (as he was popularly known) was in the middle of his speech. He wore the yellow robes of the Gelug Buddhist order and was seated on a raised dais decked with silk streamers of yellow, green, red, blue, and white – the five Buddhist colours – surrounded by his monk attendees. An audience of around 200 people squatted on the grass, men and women with kids in their arms, carrying bags and hampers of food on which they would lunch, picnic-style, after the *wang* ('empowerment ceremony'; Tibetan Wylie transliteration: *dbang*) that was to follow. They listened intently to Rinpoche, some with their hands folded in veneration, as he spoke with impassioned gestures about the need to preserve the culture of the Monpas. Addressing the gathering, ironically, in Hindi, T.G. Rinpoche bemoaned the Monpas' use of Hindi – a language that is not their own – saying, 'Hamein [apne aap ko] Monpa kehne mein sharam aata hain' [We have forgotten how to be proud of being a Monpa].[1]

1 His statement could also be translated as 'we are embarrassed to call ourselves Monpa'. I have used the meaning that appeared most proximate to me. The Monpas and other Arunachalis

Later, sitting cross-legged on silk cushions in his private chamber, T.G Rinpoche explained to me that his plan was to secure autonomy for the Tawang and West Kameng districts, together known as Monyul, which are distinct within Arunachal Pradesh because of their Tibetan Buddhist traditions. As I proceeded with fieldwork over the following months and years, it became increasingly clear that this straightforward demand for local autonomy only touched the surface: multiple narratives of belonging clamoured for expression in the context of the autonomy movement. I realized that the demand for autonomy had potential to shed light on not just the Monpas' marginalization and identity politics *vis-à-vis* other, more dominant groups in Arunachal Pradesh, but also their new and renewed connections with other Tibetan Buddhist communities in the Himalayas.

This book is my exploration of the complex identities and transregional networks that shape contemporary politics in the Monyul border. I argue that the Mon demand for local autonomy is overlaid by transregional imaginations that are pan-Himalayan in nature. These do not manifest as a political demand for a homeland or a common political identity of Himalayan Buddhist communities, but are instead articulated in cultural, moral, and pragmatic terms by the Monpas and other Tibetan Buddhist communities in the Himalayan region. This transregional imagination is promoted most vocally by monks but supported in equal measure by educated youth, professionals, and political leaders, and acquires a concrete shape through forms of cultural politics that invoke the Monpas' Tibetan Buddhist heritage.

*Mon* is a Tibetan word meaning 'lowland' and *yul* roughly means 'settlement'; *Monpa* means 'the lowlanders' or 'people of *Mon*'. This nomenclature was initially used by Tibetans to refer to all Tibetan Buddhist populations distributed in the lower Himalayan altitudes on the borders of Tibet, but is now primarily used to refer to the ethnic minorities settled in Monyul. Wedged between Tibet and Bhutan in the Indo-Tibetan borderlands, Monyul is home to a number of ethnic minorities, among which the Monpas are numerically predominant.[2] West Kameng, covering an area of around

speak a pidgin Hindi that borrows words from the Nepali and Assamese languages and uses word combinations that are distinct from standardized Hindi. E.g., '*woh yahan baithta hain*' translates as 'he resides here', instead of 'he sits here', although *baith* means to sit down.

2 Colonial writers (Bailey 1914b&1914c; Kingdon-Ward 1940) as well as Bhutan scholar Michael Aris (1979b) locate both Tawang and West Kameng in the territory of Monyul. Neeru Nanda (1982: 2), however, states that Monyul only refers to Tawang and does not include the areas south of it. According to my information, Monyul includes both Tawang and West Kameng. The term Monyul figures more in anthropological, ethnohistorical, and local documents rather than in

7422 sq. km., is bordered by Bhutan on the west, Assam on the south, and Tawang and East Kameng districts of Arunachal Pradesh on the other directions, while Tawang, separated from West Kameng by the Sela Pass, is approximately 2172 sq. km. in area and bordered by Tibet and Bhutan. The combined population of West Kameng and Tawang is 136,963 (Batt 2011). Apart from the Monpas, these two districts house other groups including the Hrusso (known as Aka in pre-colonial and colonial times), Sajalong (Miji), Bugun (Khowa), and the Buddhist Sherdukpen.[3]

From the seventeenth till the twentieth century, for nearly three hundred years, the Monpas were under Tibetan political and spiritual control, and a regular traffic of goods, commodities, and pilgrims and tradespeople passed through the Monyul corridor (Aris 1979b) connecting Bhutan and Tibet. When British India expanded its rule to Assam in the nineteenth century, the colonial government did not initially map the frontiers. It was only in 1914 that, in reaction to suspected Chinese incursions into the Northeastern borderlands of Assam, the colonial government delineated the Indo-Tibetan boundary, separating Monyul from Tibet. They did not, however, extend regular administration there, and Tibet continued to exercise *de facto* control over the Monpas even after India gained independence from British rule; Tibetan tax collection, pilgrimage, and trade continued as before. Although conflicts about boundary alignment between India and China started to surface after decolonization, cross-border exchanges did not cease. Then, in October 1962, Chinese troops attacked several posts on the western and eastern parts of the India-China border (Lamb 1966), occupying Tawang and West Kameng for two months before eventually retreating. In the aftermath of the war, the border passages between Tibet and Monyul were militarily sealed, and the Monpas were more tightly integrated into the Indian state through development, education, and state-sponsored urbanization schemes. In postcolonial India, Monpas were ascribed the status of Scheduled Tribes, a constitutionally recognized category subject to state affirmative action. This tribal identity gives them common cause with other tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, with whom they otherwise share little historical or cultural bonds.

administrative documents. Since the early part of the last decade, it has increasingly occurred on local signboards.

3 The Sherdukpen are an ethnic group concentrated mainly in three settlements, Rupa, Shergaon, and Jigaon, of West Kameng district. They are Buddhists like the Monpas, but are differentiated from the latter by their language. The Sherdukpen also have myths of Tibetan origin but, unlike the Monpas, did not come under the jurisdiction of the Tibetan state and only paid a nominal tribute to Tawang Dzong once every three years (Chakravarty 1973: 7; Choudhury 1990: 148).

I first visited Monyul with my family in summer 2005. Bomdila, the district headquarters of West Kameng, is 165 km from Guwahati, my home town in neighbouring Assam – a hot, humid, and haphazardly organized city in the plains with a relentless traffic of people and vehicles; as we crossed Bhalukpong, the inter-state check-post where we entered Arunachal Pradesh, the small hamlets on the roadside appeared still and remote in the quiet, gathering dusk. After eight hours of travel, we reached Bomdila, tucked away at 8000 feet amidst foggy peaks. Tawang, located at an altitude of approximately 10,000 feet, was a further eight hours away. Although tired from the journey, I was captivated by the serene beauty of the sleepy settlement, once described by a reporter as 'a land that the rest of the world has all but forgotten' (Ramesh 2006).

But this is not a place as remote and 'forgotten' as we are led to believe; indeed, it *cannot* be, as it constitutes a disputed territory in the prolonged boundary conflict between India and China, the latter claiming the region as South Tibet. Notwithstanding their mountainous topography that inhibits easy access, Tawang and West Kameng are high on the security agenda of the Indian nation-state, as the number and density of the military population here attests. The army camps and sprawling military settlements lying at every major bend of the road mark this region as a militarized borderland. The current political demand for autonomy thus offers an alternative image of Monyul: rather than engaging in existing regional conflicts, it invokes transregional cultural ties to project Monyul as a Buddhist region. Monpa oral histories of trade and pilgrimage and collective memories of past mobility further enable a view of Monyul as a trade conduit. Monyul's present spaces are therefore overdetermined by colonial footprints, postcolonial tensions, and global connections.

Although my ethnographic inquiries centred on the practices and narratives surrounding the autonomy movement during its peak in 2008-2013, I resist depicting my work as only an ethnography of a political movement. The larger questions that the fieldwork prompted me to address were:

1) How is the local always tied up with translocal networks in a way that ensures that the *politics of the local* is already embedded in and shaped by wider regional and global connections? The Monpas' demand for autonomy shows how localities are not bounded, but instead operate in the intersection of historical, regional, and global forces (Amin 2004; Gupta and Ferguson 1997). To articulate their political demand, the Monpas adopted the autonomous council model from the Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution, which provides communities wishing to preserve their local culture with a template for local administration independent of the state administration.

Development is one of the main planks of the demand for Mon autonomy. In a region that lacks good public infrastructure, development becomes the common cause uniting Monpas and non-Monpas alike. However, while elaborating the goals of the movement, its leaders constantly refer to the preservation of Tibetan Buddhist identity in Monyul. Translocal networks and flows, of monks and monastery funds, as well as meetings, rallies, and activities promoting Tibetan Buddhist traditions, bring out this character of Mon local autonomy.

2) What 'new circuits of belonging' (Amin 2004: 33) can we identify when inter-linked networks of the local and translocal reconfigure traditional sites of community into transnational public spheres, organizations, and movements? What are the new cartographies that arise from such contexts? Memories and oral narratives of trade, pilgrimage, and kinship point to one way Monyul was, and continues to be, part of a Himalayan 'transnational circuit' (Shapiro 1994). More recent events have led to the reconfiguring of these transnational tendencies, especially since the 1962 boundary war. Yet, since the Monpas share these experiences with other marginal Buddhists of the Himalayan region, the forms currently taking shape in Monyul do not occur in isolation but rather as part of other cross-border processes. The discourses and practices of contemporary Monyul not only parallel but also, equally, participate in and contribute to processes unfolding not only in the Indian Himalayas but also in the regions beyond. These translocal networks, highlighted in the programmes to preserve the Tibetan language and medicine system in the region, shape the content of the demand for local autonomy.

In my discussions with both monks and lay people in Monyul, I frequently came across the term 'Himalayas' used to indicate not simply a physical terrain, but an imagined space of belonging: a geography held together by particular visions of and for Monyul as a Buddhist space. This imagined geography materializes through the statements, actions, and activities of actors who abide by a common programme of upholding Tibetan Buddhist traditions in the region. I call these new circuits of belonging – formed by networks rather than a circumscribed location – *a Himalayan imagined geography*. This encompasses not only the Monpas living in Monyul, but also Tibetan Buddhist people from the surrounding Himalayan regions, such as Sikkim, Bhutan, and Nepal. Although stemming from the discourse of local autonomy, the Himalayan imagined geography does not take Monyul as its only territorial referent; instead, it includes a number of politically discontinuous units spread across the entire Himalayan region. I therefore seek to theorize how the Himalayas are being reimagined in the new circuits of belonging.

3) What are the implications of an ethnography of contemporary cultural politics in Monyul for theorizing non-territorial identities – or, more precisely, politically non-contiguous identities (see Van Schendel 2002)? In other words, is a territorially bound identity the only possible way to imagine collective existence across political boundaries? If we can talk about nations as 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1991), in what form can we imagine a community that is not territory-bound? This is especially pertinent in border regions, where transnational connections are a way of life for many communities. For example, the trans-border Zo (Chin) people of the Indo-Myanmar borderlands, historically divided into different administrative categories by colonial rule, are now finding new ways to revive relationships with each other (Pau 2018). When groups assert transnational allegiance with other groups across the border, should it be problematic in imagining them as part of the nation-state or reduce these communities' moral claim to being native citizens of the nation-state in which they reside? Clearly, this calls for theorizing new ways of imagining community. According to Michael Kearney, 'members of transnational communities [...] escape the power of the nation-state to inform their sense of collective identity' (1991: 59). What this means is not that it is easy for such groups to affirm transnational belonging, but that an ethnography of their practices – whether migration, kinship, or other forms of transnational existence – is therefore necessary to highlight the modalities of a post-national geography (Appadurai 1996).

The classic model of the nation-state, which links a national people with a territory, became the dominant system of sovereignties in the eighteenth century because it constructed a set of ethical assertions of what should constitute the normative political order – a 'moral geography' (Shapiro 1994: 482). Various military, cultural, and narrative strategies go into maintaining this moral order, and those living a political existence outside this normalized national order are deemed to be 'Other'. Michael Shapiro suggests that we explore an 'ethics of post-sovereignty' in the actions, experiences, and stories of ordinary people who do not conform to the nationalist narrative in order to address the changing spaces of our contemporary unstable global map (1994: 488). Arjun Appadurai (1996) similarly calls for a post-national geography emerging from the mobility of populations such as refugees, diasporas, pastoralists, nomads, and exiles, whose mobility and cross-border links have always been seen as a threat to normative national existence and order.

Anthropologist Akhil Gupta has provided two empirical examples of how one kind of post-national geography may be imagined: the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), launched in 1961 in Belgrade, which reflected a

commitment to non-involvement in the Cold War on the part of 120 participating nations, and had its formal institutions dispersed in Yugoslavia, Peru, and Cuba; and the European Community, replaced by the European Union (EU) in 1993, which, in the present period, is the most effective example of consolidating the power of nations through a transnational imagination. According to Gupta, the nation-state is a distinctively modernist institutional and ideological formation that emerged out of decolonization and the imperative for sovereignty. In postcolonial times, cultural imperialism on the part of the stronger nations forced the economically and militarily weaker nations to draw on interstate solidarity and community to protect their fragile sovereignty, and the NAM represented such a transnational geographic alliance (Gupta 1992: 187). Both the examples of NAM and EU demonstrate an exploration of imagined communities that transcend national boundaries, question the naturalness of the nation, and reinforce the nation-state's role as only one of several possible commitments to spatial formulae that bind people and territory.

Saxer and Zhang (2017) present another, more contemporary example of reconfigured post-national geographies in post-Cold War Asia. They locate their analysis within what one may call the 'archipelago' framework laid down by Willem Van Schendel (2002), in which the theorized contours of the post-war world map should privilege discontinuous regions, such as archipelagos and patchworks, instead of the prevailing regional schemes focusing on contiguous areas alone. The various chapters in Saxer and Zhang's edited collection show how, in the contemporary era, formerly peripheral border communities in contact zones between nations, from Siberia to the Himalayas to northern Laos, have reoriented themselves in relation to China through an 'art of neighbouring', thereby giving rise to new kinds of geographies (2017: 9). In a twist to the argument that international connections among less powerful nations stem from the desire to deflect individual marginal statuses by seeking common ground, Saxer and Zhang argue that the Asian neighbourliness displayed by border worlds is inherently dual – characterized by both intimacy and agonism, such that cooperation can also morph into conflict; and that decoding the art of neighbouring among these countries therefore requires an understanding of the constant negotiation, reinforcement, and performance of goodwill that go into neighbourly relations.

My intervention in this discussion lies in showing how a post-national geography does not have to emerge from physical mobility or migration. Rather, I conceive of the Himalayan geography as exhibiting a post-sovereign ethics or post-national geography through the discourse of cooperation and

collaboration between its different, inter-connected parts. The Himalayan geography offers a competing lens with which to understand moral and cultural visions that do not fit neatly within the political geographies that are approved or permissible within the global order of nation-states.

In putting forth the vision of a transregional Himalayan community, supporters of Monpa autonomy are not simply proposing or promoting long-distance nationalism or a nationalism across borders (Glick Schiller 2005). Instead, they are engaging in a novel endeavour of place-making. The Himalayan imagined geography is not constituted through physically contiguous areas; it does not rest on people's actual movement or contiguous habitation, but rather on the idea of alliance or unity among populations who otherwise live separate existences in conventional political units across different regions and even countries. Indeed, it is articulated through the idiom of alliance on a territorially non-continuous plane, as indicated by the fact that the different Tibetan Buddhist communities dispersed across the Himalayan region have not translated their call into a cry for a Himalayan homeland.

A criticism of this might be that, although claiming to be non-territorial, the Himalayan identity does have a territorial anchor, because it invokes a continuous stretch of a very physical entity, that is, the Himalayan mountain ranges. It is undoubtedly true that the Himalayan identity is tied to a particular geographical terrain, and almost all the people subsumed within this identity do inhabit mountainous terrain. However, while the Himalayan geography does have a territorial support, it is not a support that comes from an identification with the landscape or the character of the terrain. It is not a form of community inspired by livelihoods attached to the land. Instead, the notion of the Himalayas as a cultural space transcends the boundaries of physical space.

In the following chapters, I track the contents and shifting contours of the spatial consciousness binding the Monpas with other Himalayan groups, looking not at one activity or area of expression but rather at a number of practices that include oral narratives, the politics of renaming, battles on the linguistic front, and inter-ethnic relations between Monpas and Tibetans within Monyul. The bonds between the Himalayan communities exist as fragmented narratives in oral narratives and political discourse. The Himalayan cultural area is a representational space (Lefebvre 1991) based on claims to heritage, and is hence a moral and cultural geography rather than a territorial unity that maps perfectly onto an empirical space. While tracing this spatial consciousness, I also show – following the view that spaces do not have fixed, singular characters (Malpas 2004: 63; see

also Massey 1994) – that this imagined geography is not representative of Monpa communities as a whole, since its boundaries shift and shrink to accommodate the pressures of regional and national allegiances. In a disputed border territory such as Monyul, where state security and regional and local commitments compete with one another, homogenous imaginings of a translocal community are fractured by oppositional tendencies from within as well as from outside. Going beyond a physicalist notion of place as a location, I treat place and identity as interdependent: places are 'embodied identifications' (Boyarin 1994; Malpas 2004). Individuals, groups, and social movements give a particular *character* to space by projecting outward a particular ethos, sentiment, or political vision, thereby connecting place to memory and narrativity; because of this intersubjective dimension, places have shifting and provisional boundaries. The same place can be different depending on whose representation or whose sensibility it is, or who is staking a claim to it, and how (Keith and Pile 1993). While the concept of identity has been critiqued for remaining silent about internal differences (Hall 1996),[4] the notion of place as plural and intersubjective that underpins my argument in this book facilitates an understanding of the contested and emergent spaces in Monyul. I unpack these shifting geographies of Monyul through various moments of ethnographic encounter.

## Imagined geographies

*Imagined geography* is a term used by scholars to describe different processes, but I invoke it to refer to non-territorial modes of imagining community. I use the word 'imagined' as Benedict Anderson does in his study of nationalism, *Imagined Communities* (1991) – not as fabrication or invention, but instead as projection, and re-invention: of taking something that exists and transfiguring it through the prism of narrative, memory, and practice. For Anderson, the nation was imagined into existence through the rise of vernacular print capitalism. Nationalism was a cultural artefact created through the conjunction of discrete historical forces, but once created it became modular, capable of being transplanted. The imagined community of the nation is a construct, in Anderson's formulation, but a highly potent one, for it drives people to martyrdom.

4 Scholars who have critiqued 'identity' for its implications of homogeneity and for silencing internal differences (Hall 1996) have proposed alternative terms, such as 'interpellation' (Hall 1985) or 'identification' (Cooper 2005; Hall 1996). But these are also heavily loaded terms.

Edward Said (1979) uses the term imagined geography to mean imperialist representations of the Orient that allowed one to 'see' the Orient through a variety of metaphors: feminine, emasculated, dark, savage. Orientalism as an imagined geography was thus about a specific place, but rather than *being* the place, it was an *idea* of the place – constructing it as childlike or vicious or sly – which was then put to use in colonial methods of subjugating the Oriental native. Thus, once imagined, an imagined geography becomes a monolithic entity that enables the power of control though the power of representation. Several scholars (e.g., Gregory 2004) have used this concept of imaginative geographies as spatial devices, which usually aid colonial or neo-colonial projects of domination.

In the Saidian sense, the continuing use of the term *terra incognita* for Arunachal Pradesh (including Monyul) in media as well as academic parlance, represents an imaginative geography in that, rather than pertaining to an empirical place, it rests on the idea of a place as empty, unknown, and isolated – and therefore open to military penetration. Anna Tsing (2005) defines this type of narrative as the 'frontier story': a national story that is firmly embedded in nationalist discourse. It is the myth of the lonely prospector making independent discoveries in a remote region. Using such a 'frontier story' in Monyul effaces older networks and histories of connection so that the region can be projected as a pristine space that requires state intervention.

Imaginative geographies are also 'normative geographies', insofar as they structure a normative landscape (Cresswell 1996: 9). By judging and labelling certain actions as appropriate for and belonging in a particular location, and certain other actions as inappropriate or out of place, normative geographies outline who can legitimately belong and who is an outsider. Such forms of normative possession of space are undergirded by power and ideology. I use the term *border-normative* to understand one kind of ideological appropriation of Monyul that happens through militarization. Border-normativity is the official vision of modern nation-states, sanctioned through international boundaries, treaties, and maps and defended by military surveillance and security technologies, which becomes especially forceful in conflict areas. From this perspective, Monyul is not just any border but a disputed one that is in danger and needs military protection. Border-normativity legitimizes military presence and defines the outsider by taking the border as a reference; accordingly, anyone who has transgressed the border physically, or even sometimes symbolically, becomes an outsider.

Unlike Said, however, I use 'imagined geography' as a tool to understand projects of both rule and resistance. In Foucauldian terms, one might argue

that if 'subject position' is the self-governing tendency or self-knowledge within individuals that makes them conform to an identity without being coerced through any external agency (Foucault 1994b: 130), then 'national subjects' are those who have successfully assumed a political identity that links them with a particular national territory. Many scholars (e.g., De Certeau 1984; Scott 2009; Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal 2003) have since offered a corrective to Foucault by showing how there might be scope for creativity even amidst constriction. For example, Michel de Certeau (1984) shows how various street cultures might provide the liberatory face of an oppressive structure through clandestine, tactical, dispersed, and makeshift popular practices (Harvey 1989). In other words, it is not enough to show how specific rationalities of power create and maintain the subject effect, but also how the subject effect is in turn subverted, resulting in alternative subjectivities. It is on this basis that I consider the mapping of Monyul into a Himalayan circuit as representing a counter-geography to the border-normative imagined geography.

The new imaginings of Himalayan community must be understood against the backdrop of the border closure after the 1962 India-China war, and the reorientation that this event forced. While Monpas were not physically displaced after the war, they did face significant reorientation in terms of culture and political economy, as they were turned away from Tibet towards the newly formed Indian nation. Their transition can be understood as marking what Christian Lund defines as a 'rupture', one of the 'open moments' during epistemic and practical shifts in history – such as colonialism, decolonization, post- Cold War transformations, and so on – when categories, practices, and relationships are fundamentally re-ordered (Lund 2016: 1202). We can conceive of the imagined geography of the Himalayas as both shaped by and shaping the epistemic shift and reconfiguration that were made possible because of the historical dislocations of Monyul and the Monpas. Anthropologists Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1997) refer to the new kinds of geographical imaginings resulting from (mostly postcolonial) experiences of migration and exile as 'imagined places.' Imagination, in this view, is generative of 'new kinds of politics, new kinds of collective expression' on the part of ordinary people, and in turn, 'new needs of social discipline and surveillance on the part of elites' (Appadurai 1991: 198). This view is closest to my idea of imagined geography.

However, as Arjun Appadurai writes, one man's imagined community may be another man's prison, and resistance can also morph into reactionary movements if its essentialist claims are reified (1990: 295). The attempt to create boundaries between places and their outward connections, to present

them as the site of nostalgia and 'home/homeland', and to imagine one essential character as embodying 'us' versus 'them', are processes that can happen all the time. That is, resistance to essentialist representations may be equally essentialist in character. Like the border-normative geography, the Himalayan counter-geography is *also* imaginative and normative in character and does not sum up the empirical reality. Not everybody in Monyul is a Buddhist, and even among Monpas there are many who follow the older Bon faith or who remain on the fringes of Buddhism. The attempt to give the region a Tibetan Buddhist makeover is a normative act that defines who is an insider and who is not. It forces the representation of Monyul into one single spatial frame. If the border-normative geography of Monyul as a militarized border region is challenged by the Himalayan imagined geography of Mon, the latter is countered by transgressive behaviours that do not fit into the narrative of Monyul as an essentially Tibetan Buddhist region. Protests from both within and outside the Monpa communities against Buddhist dominance in the demand for autonomy, the split subjectivities of some Monpas who identify with a regional pan-Arunachali ideology, and the sometimes, uneasy relations between Monpas and Tibetan refugees living in Monyul, are all factors that rupture the projected normativity of a Tibetan Buddhist Monyul.

Taking all these dynamics into consideration, I do not conceive Monyul according to a single lens, but rather as constituting shifting geographies that are both subjective and normative, whose boundaries and contours change depending on who is included or excluded and how relations between self and Other are framed. In each imagining of Monyul, whether as an Indian border region or as a Tibetan Buddhist place or as an Arunachali region, there is a normative geography at work, which in turn is troubled by internal and external contradictions. I therefore favour an *anti-essentialist* mode of analysis (Massey 1994), which conceives of various spatial imaginations without essentializing any of them. Such a view of place destabilizes the marginality of Monyul without putting forth any theory of autonomous agency or itself constituting a stable image of Monyul. I also avoid reifying spatial representations that claim an essentialist identity and show that each representation of space is internally fissured or limited by outside forces (Laclau 1990).

## Living under the spectre of war: State, security, and border

While the Himalayan geography is influenced by and indicative of translocal networks, the role of the Indian nation-state has not receded. The disputed

border status of Monyul influences government policies and decisions regarding this region, leading to a hyper-presence of the Indian state in what is one of the most militarized borderlands of the country. By *disputed* border, I mean not only a linear boundary line whose exact position is contested, but also an entire border region that is claimed by both nation-states between which it lies. Whereas *border disputes* figure along many international boundaries, where the alignment of the boundary is contested, the *disputed border region* offers a different case. So, while India has many boundary disputes with Pakistan and Bangladesh, it is only in relation to the boundary with China that questions about entire districts and states arise.

Contemporary politics and practices in Monyul serve to impress upon us that, even as borders are increasingly bridged in disputed border regions through cross-border migration as well as diplomatic cooperation between governments, the overt military structures in place lend a physicality to the border as a dividing line. I have characterized this particular spatial code as the *border-normative vision*, which is present in all nation-state imaginations but becomes intensified in situations of border conflict. Both India and China have stationed huge numbers of army personnel in the border areas, which are subject to constant surveillance.[5] The passages leading from Monyul to Tibetan areas are strictly monitored by military checkpoints. (This measure is not always in effect in other border regions, such as the Bhutan-Monyul passages, where some cross-border movement is possible and even condoned, directly or indirectly, by state agents). As a consequence, the impulses of transnationality existing in such disputed border regions are not curtailed but instead redirected towards new outlets and/or new forms and configurations that cannot be covered by common categories of physical border-crossing.

India and China have 2500 miles of common frontier – from northwest Kashmir to the trijunction of China, Myanmar, and India – and their border dispute concerns three main tracts along this frontier, amounting to 50,000

5 China has reportedly deployed thirteen Border Defense Regiments totaling around 300,000 troops. Six divisions of China's Rapid Reaction Forces are stationed at Chengdu city in southwest China, with 24-hour operational readiness and supported by an airlift capability of transporting the troops to the China-India border within 48 hours. India too has 120,000 Indian troops stationed in the eastern sector, supported by two Sukhoi-30 MKI squadrons from Tezpur in Assam, as well as a five-year expansion plan to induct 90,000 more troops and deploy four more divisions, and two more Sukhoi-30 MKI squadrons in the eastern sector (Goswami 2013). According to local reports, there are two army brigades stationed in Tawang district. Since each brigade has four regiments, and each regiment 600 soldiers, there should be an estimated 4800 troops in Tawang alone.

square miles of territory. In the Ladakh province of Jammu and Kashmir, there are approximately 15,000 square miles of contested territory along a 1100-mile stretch of boundary line (Sharma 1965). This is known as the 'Western Sector' (Aksai Chin area). Two-thirds of the boundary here divides Kashmir and China, and one-third divides Ladakh and Tibet. The second disputed area, the 'Central Sector', concerns certain border passes and specific points along the Indo-Tibetan border in the Indian states of Sikkim, Himachal Pradesh, Uttaranchal, and Punjab. The most important area in the India-China boundary dispute is Arunachal Pradesh, called the 'Eastern Sector', where the Indian government claims the border is the colonially determined McMahon Line, while the Chinese rebut this claim.

Following India's independence from colonial rule in 1947, the Indian and Chinese governments signed a trade agreement in 1954 but did not engage in direct talks about the contested alignment of the India-China boundary. While India accepted the colonial boundary, the Chinese government considered it an unfair imperialist deal made by the British. Between 1954 and 1959, military incursions by both sides were reported at several points of the India-China frontier, leading to major debates in the Indian parliament that did not officially acknowledge the possibility of a border war (Bhargava 1964; Sharma 1965). In 1960, the Chinese premier, Chou En-lai, proposed a trade-off whereby China would recognize the McMahon Line as the Indo-Tibetan boundary if India relinquished claim over Aksai Chin (Gupta 1974: 33); however, this did not happen. On 20 October 1962, Chinese troops attacked several posts on the Tibet-Monyul border, and soon overran the entire Monyul region. The troops remained there for two months before they were called back.

My oral history interviews regarding the Chinese presence during the war showed how the Chinese soldiers, far from harassing the locals, adopted a benevolent attitude towards them while trying to convince them that they would be happier being part of China. In contrast with the popular depiction of the bellicose enemy soldier, the Chinese soldiers helped the villagers build houses and harvest crops, staged theatre shows in tents to entertain them, and carried their own loads instead of making use of local labour as the former Tibetan government and the Indian administration were wont to. People also recounted that even though the Chinese captured Indian soldiers, they did not treat them badly, and gave them meat and hot water; when they left, they put the dead bodies of soldiers in coffins and distributed blankets and sweets to locals before leaving. My conversations with villagers revealed goodwill and at times even admiration for the Chinese soldiers who travelled light, as opposed to the Indian soldiers who clumped about

in clunky gear, burdened by their heavy food packets. One elderly Monpa commented, quaintly, that those from the younger generation who decide to join the Indian army should wear the traditional dress that would mark them as Monpa, for this would protect them from Chinese bullets. The Chinese strategy was clearly to appease the local population, to convince them that they respected their customs, and thereby win them over (Guyot-Rechard 2017). It was a form of propaganda intended to demonstrate that they cared and could protect the local population where the Indian administration had failed to do so.

The India-China boundary dispute has now spanned half a century, and yet political leaders of both countries remain stuck in the same impasse as they were fifty years ago, especially since the border issue has now become entangled with matters of national prestige (Gupta 1974). From the perspective of the Indian government, it is considered inadvisable to even broach the topic of the McMahon Line in diplomatic meetings with China, for this would be read as an indirect admission of the boundary's disputed status and could signal India's willingness to negotiate (ibid.). Since the 1980s, the Chinese have been demanding that India give them the Tawang tract as part of a border settlement, while Indian representatives have been rejecting this demand. The Chinese policy works according to the circular logic that if Tibet belongs to China, then Tawang (as a previous offshoot of the Tibetan state) also belongs to China. Since 2005, the Chinese government has been also making claims on Tawang on the grounds that the Sixth Dalai Lama was born here. China claims Arunachal Pradesh as part of South Tibet – but most analysts agree that this term was first used by China in 2006 (Adlakha 2017).[6] China continues to grant stapled visas to residents of Arunachal Pradesh, instead of stamping the visa on their passport, to indicate the contested status of the region's sovereignty.

Tibet's own position in the border dispute has fluctuated over time. Despite the Tibetan agent Lonchen Shatra signing the Simla Agreement in 1914 – according to which Tawang became separate from Tibet – by 1935, the Tibetan position had reversed (Hoffman 2006). After the 1959 Tibetan exodus and the Dalai Lama's exile, however, the Tibetan government-in-exile seems to have aligned with the official Indian position regarding Tawang.

The Indian state's response to the Chinese claims has been to integrate the region. From a security perspective, the question is how to win over the border people. One method has been to physically enlist the local border

6 Hemant Adlakha, Roundtable discussion on 'China's stance on Recent Developments in Arunachal Pradesh', Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi, 24 May 2017; See also Joshi 2017.

people in border security management. The philosophy behind the creation of the Special Service Bureau (SSB; later changed to Sahastra Seema Bal) in 1963, under the Ministry of External Affairs, was that the security of the borders was not the responsibility of the armed forces alone, but also required a well-motivated and trained border population. In a similar vein, many older Monpas who had been recruited into the Subsidiary Intelligence Bureau (SIB) units at the district level reported in discussions with me about being involved in guerrilla and reconnaissance activities, and of crossing the border for espionage purposes disguised as Tibetans.

The other way in which the Indian government seeks to integrate the border regions is through cultural co-option. Co-opting the monasteries is a significant strategy here since monasteries have a huge influence in cultural life. This co-opting strategy includes a financial component – in the absence of funds coming from Tibet and traditional customary donations, monasteries have come to rely on grants from the Indian administration (Gohain 2017b). The promotion of cultural tourism and festivals showcasing local Buddhist traditions comprise another angle of cultural co-option. Settlement of people and military forces from other parts of India, national schemes for development and education, and the promotion of the Hindi language through popular media have all contributed to Monyul's increased acceptance of a mainstream national culture.

The border anxieties surrounding Monyul become palpable during moments when the nation responds to media-generated scares about an impending border war. 2009 saw some such moments, when China protested the Indian government's decision to allow the Dalai Lama to visit Monyul and the Indian media reacted by whipping up a frenzy about possible Chinese aggression on the borders. In the months leading up to November 2009, when the visit was scheduled, the media became a cacophony of rumours about military developments at the border, advances by Chinese troops, and anticipatory reinforcements by the Indian government.[7] The anxieties about an impending war even took on astrological dimensions in some rumour mills: an especially fanciful prediction that reached my ears was that, since 2010 was the Chinese year of the tiger – the symbol of

7 When I came to Guwahati during fieldwork intermissions, people were invariably curious to know about the situation near the border, but when I asked people in Dirang or Tawang about their fears they would reply, dryly, that the media was inflating the situation. Army trucks make their way regularly up the main roads carrying supplies for the soldiers and it had nothing to do with an impending war. Around the same time, however, the print media carried reports that the Indian government would soon be sending reinforcements of 50,000-60,000 troops to the border (Wong 2009; also, *The Economist*, 19 August 2010).

bravery – China would go to war with India in that year. A similar pattern emerged in 2017 when, reacting to the Dalai Lama's visit to Tawang, the Chinese government renamed six places in Arunachal Pradesh (mainly in Tawang) to reinforce its territorial claims, by standardising the names of these places in Chinese characters, Tibetan and Roman alphabet (Singh 2017). This, in turn, provoked a slew of responses from the Indian media and intense discussions in political and academic circles regarding China's intentions.

I have offered this brief background sketch since the border dispute will become a common theme in the following chapters. A Monpa government officer, now in his early 60s, once irately complained to me, 'When I go down [to the plains] people ask me, "You are from Tawang. Do you prefer to go with China or India?" *Arre* [come on], bullshit. In 1962, the Chinese tried their level best to convince the local Monpas, but could not. Nobody went with them. So what do you mean?' Whenever I mentioned my research to people elsewhere in India, I invariably encountered the question, 'So, do they consider themselves Indian or Chinese?' My reply – that after almost seventy years of being part of independent India with minimal interaction with the Chinese state the people of Tawang could hardly be considered less Indians than anyone else – did not always increase the confidence of my interrogators. Frequently forced to face questions of national belonging and loyalty, and exposed to constant military presence, the Monpas deal with the border dispute as an everyday reality.

This raises a methodological concern: given the disputed border location of Monyul, it is important to understand how transnational expressions are modified to suit the context. The adaptive strategies of border populations sandwiched between two hostile political powers are necessarily different from those of populations in regions where border crossings happen. In such controversial border regions, strategies of adaptation, defiance, or accommodation have a more veiled character and must be conceptualized accordingly. Smadar Lavie's 1990 study of the Mzeini Bedouins of South Sinai presents a classic case of a border people living under occupation. The Bedouins could only perform their nomadic, trans-border identity (as romanticized in travelers' accounts) allegorically: to openly confront the spatial and temporal boundaries of military occupation could mean beatings, jail, and even death (Lavie 1990: 7, 39). In the same way, I analyse contemporary cultural projects in Monyul as bringing to light 'structures of feeling' (Williams 1977: 132) that are not immediately visible but can be traced through analysis. We 'need to pay attention to the structures of feeling that bind space, time, and memory in the production of location' (Gupta

1997: 197), and the location or place thus formed may mean geographical units larger or smaller than nations or that crosscut national boundaries.

The cultural projects in present-day Monyul may also be seen as indicating 'formations' (Williams 1977) with trans-national, or rather, inter-regional scope and character. Formations, following Raymond Williams' definition, are not institutionalized structures (church, school, workplace, family, or neighbourhood) but rather processes in the making. For Williams, while these formations (in which he includes structures of feeling) are mostly affective – alternative tendencies and movements in the artistic, scientific, literary, or philosophical domains – they may later become oppositional formal structures (Williams 1977: 113-119).

The imagined Himalayan geography may not be universally acknowledged by all sections of Monpa society. In fact, many within the community challenge the idea, as I will show. This does not mean that it lacks empirical validity. Michael Hutt writes about 'shared consciousness' in relation to post-conflict Nepal [which is] traceable through literary forms like the novel: 'Because the insights provided by 'art literature' are intended for an elite audience, one immediate objection to a sociological approach to it might be that it has a limited readership and can therefore have only limited impact. […] However, the fact that a novel is not read by the majority in a society does not mean that it holds no meaning for them' (2014: 19, 26).

The chapters in this volume indicate how ethnographic analysis might tap into social and political practices as well as affective processes that both inspire and aspire to ideas of a spatial community. At the same time, by juxtaposing parallel and oppositional narratives and practices, I show that no spatial representation of Monyul is complete; rather, various negotiations and contradictions create shifting spaces that momentarily enhance or diminish the category in question. In her discussion of Tibetan ethnicity, Shneiderman (2006: 14) terms this kind of shifting presence as the 'now you see them, now you don't' phenomenon. It is also characteristic of spaces that exist as structures of feeling or are in the process of formation.

## Localities unbound: Networks and nodes

> Spaces become localities because of how they are situated in particular networks with other people, places, and social entities. Localities are produced as nodes in the flows of people and ideas and are thoroughly socially constructed (Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal 2003: 12).

According to Kim Dovey (2009: 3), what distinguishes space from place is that place has an intensity that connects sociality to spatiality in everyday life. *Space* is given meaning and transformed into *place* through discourses, practices, and valuations that are attached to the former by different actors, and hence, place has an intimacy, often a felt immediacy of experience, that is not associated with space (Cresswell 2004).

In this book, I see places as embodied identifications. As philosopher Jeff Malpas explains, place is integral to the very structure and possibility of experience (2004: 32, 177), thus making identities intricately place-bound. Since place is not founded on subjectivity but rather is that on which subjectivity is founded, we must talk about 'embodied spatiality' (Ibid.: 35). Jonathan Boyarin's 'embodied memory' (1994) offers a comparable concept: an understanding of memory as not superorganic but rather integrally bound up with identity, for both 'collective memory' and 'collective identity' result from inter-subjective practices of signification and are not fixed but instead constantly re-created (Ibid.: 23). Many scholars writing about place and space draw on Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) concept of '*habitus*' as embodied dispositions – regulated practices that produce practices that in turn reproduce the objective conditions that produced the *habitus* in the first place – to understand the inter-relation between different levels of spaces, i.e., how perception can materially alter spaces and how imagination can affect the represented (e.g., Dovey 2009; Harvey 1989: 302).[8]

Viewing place as embodied identification does not reduce it to an essential identity, where a sense of place is rooted in a stable homeland. In fact, an inter-subjective understanding of place recognizes that spatial structures can never be a single space but, rather, are many spaces (Malpas 2004: 63).[9] Space

8 *Habitus*, in Bourdieu's conception, is not cognitively understood but rather internalized. It is the social order that inscribes itself on bodies. The concept of *habitus* is, therefore, a theory of power, for it explains how social divisions and hierarchies are reproduced. David Harvey, who is interested in understanding the political economy of place construction under capitalism (1989) and draws on Henri Lefebvre's social space framework to show how conceptions of time and space are created through material practices which also impact social relations and cultural forms, recalls Bourdieu's *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977) to explain the dialectical relation between power and representation in the production of place. Kim Dovey also references Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* to arrive at a similar notion of place, although understanding place as *habitus* is less useful for conceiving of how place-identities constantly change (Dovey 2009: 33).

9 Theorists of space occasionally cite Foucault's reflections on space (Massey 1994: 249), especially his statement that while it has been common to see time as life – and therefore dialectical – space is seen as dead and therefore fixed (Foucault 1980: 149). While Foucault admits that the discursive study of spatial descriptions and of how objects are implanted, delimited, and demarcated would throw into relief processes of power, he notably attaches less importance to theorizing space in comparison to time, and does not undertake any archaeology or genealogy of

is plural because it is socially constituted, just as socialities (communities) are constituted by spatial imaginations (Dovey 2011). Geographers Keith and Pile (1993: 6) use the term 'spatiality' to capture how the social and the spatial are inextricably interwoven, and to conjure up the circumstances in which society and space are simultaneously realized by thinking, feeling, doing individuals. Similarly, Doreen Massey argues for an 'alternative view of space' (she rejects the distinction between space and place), in which space is configured through social relations and networks that are dynamic and imbue space with this dynamic potential (1994: 264, 265). In Massey's (1992) understanding, place is open, outward looking, and global, its character made of connections and interactions instead of primordial origins and enclosed boundaries – in other words, she privileges routes, rather than roots.

Building on these spatial theories, I privilege a non-localist mode of analysis. Localist approaches are seen, for example, in the older anthropological view of cultures as discrete, bounded, and ahistorical entities having no relation with each other, which Eric Wolf (1982) adequately captured with his analogy of cultures as 'billiard balls'. Today localist approaches often define both the terms and conditions, and the analysis of regional politics, which Ash Amin (2004) terms 'managerial localism'. Such managerial localisms articulate a politics of place in territorial terms through demands for the devolution of power to locally governed institutional structures. Despite these claims to localize economic development and priorities, however, managerial localisms usually function through widely dispersed networks of knowledge and resources (Amin 2004: 35, 36). In a world increasingly interconnected by various forms of media, even local public spheres – understood as the discursive critical arena in which any individual can participate through books, newspapers, social media, and so on – are by nature transnational (Guidry, Kennedy, and Zaid 2000).

spatial discourse. For him, space is a site where power unfolds, and different ways of managing space over time testify to the evolution of more effective ways to govern. For example, he talks about sovereignty, discipline, and security as different modes or economies of power that are exercised over different types of spaces (Foucault 2007). Thus, sovereignty is exercised over a territory from a center, disciplinary power over a deliberately designed space to enable total control, and security over spaces that have to take into account the unknown and uncertain (the term he uses is milieu). His theory of spatial transformations does not have an agent (Harvey 1989). Foucault's concept of 'heterotopias' (1967), real places that are also socially produced spaces, transformed through ideological projection into something other than themselves (Deshpande 1995), approximates to an extent the notion of transmutable space. However, while Foucault's notion of heterotopias is useful for understanding the social – or rather discursive – production of space, it does not explain how space comes to be multiply characterized.

Nina Glick Schiller proposes the term 'locality analysis' for the study of how the flows and processes of global capital restructure cities in which both migrants and non-migrants live (Glick Schiller and Faist 2010: 35, 37). Schiller's methodology adopts a non-localist approach because it pays attention to how locally placed residents and institutions are situated within regional, national and global networks, instead of understanding migration through simple binaries of native/migrant. With respect to the Himalayan borderlands, Martin Saxer's ethnographic study shows how in seemingly remote places such as Walung, Nepal near the Tibetan border, 'exchange, movement, and ambition congregate' along bundles of lines that he calls *pathways* (2016: 105). Pathways is not just an alternative term for trade routes: it also captures how terrain, infrastructure, livelihoods, and environment interact with flows of people, stories, things, and popular aspirations to give rise to specific kinds of mobilities that endure geopolitical shifts. Such works analytically show how the local, far from being a pristine space, is produced in systematic articulations of wider social, economic, and cultural processes.

In my work, I conceptualise imagined geography as formed from networks rather than as a bounded location, where Monyul is seen as a participating node. Bruno Latour, who propounded Actor-Network Theory (ANT), views networks as unlike conventional, bounded spaces: they overcome distance by connecting two or more disparate and dispersed actors, groups, or elements. In this sense, networks are not 'real' spaces but rather associations (Latour 1996: 371). The second point I take from Latour is that the notion of network allows one to dissolve the distinction between micro and macro and the idea that one can move scale from individual to family to region to nation. This is because a network is never bigger or smaller in scale: it is simply more intensely connected. The notion of network thus facilitates the imagining of a global entity that nonetheless remains very local (Ibid.: 372). The third take-away point from Latour is that unlike a network in engineering or mathematics, where the tracing of the network is done by some other entity (the mathematician or engineer), an actor network does the tracing and inscribing itself. It is an ontological definition. I find many resonances between Latour's notion of network – although when he refers to actors in a network he means both human and non-human actants – and my concept of the imagined geography as networked space. However, I differ from Latour's notion of network in one way. According to Latour, a network is a positive notion that does not require negativity to be understood, for a network 'is all boundary with no inside and outside' (Ibid.), and the space between its connections does not have to be filled. However, in my conception of imagined geography as a network forged

through connections and channelled through participating nodes, there is the possibility of imagined boundaries, such as Tibetan Buddhism becoming the boundary marker.

Further, my notion of the network privileges the *node* to show how the local is part of an interconnected system in which events, processes, and things are momentarily concentrated, but movement is not halted. In the physical and natural sciences, nodes are stops or transit points in a moving circuit, and are not static but dynamic. A node could be a point in a network connected by lines or links, or the point on a stem where a leaf or bud grows, or a small mass of tissue that forms part of the blood circulatory system in human anatomy. In each example, nodes imply connection. In urban studies, the nodal point of view has been prevalent especially in discussions of global and gateway cities – cities interlinked in a global network of finance and management (e.g., Amin 2004: 33, 34; Sassen 2005). Any particular geographical site is a nodal connection in a networked space that never coheres into a discrete physical space.

In this sense, I view local politics in Monyul as representing a node. Translocal networks and flows in the name of Tibetan Buddhist cultural preservation give content to Monyul's locality, and this locality equally contributes to these wider discourses and practices. To understand how the imaginations of inter-regional Himalayan community that are visible in Monyul are nodal developments connected to outside processes, we need an inside-outside vision, or bifocal perspective (Peters 1997) or extroverted gaze (Massey 1991, 1992). Himalayan geography is an extroverted concept that is both inside and also outside Monyul, for it relates to processes occurring inside Monyul but whose purview extends well beyond the locality. In other words, Monyul represents one dot in an emergent connect-the-dots pattern, one node in the larger system.

Several connected processes are now underway in Monyul. As I show in the following chapters, these include the construction of new monasteries, the restoration of older Tibetan toponyms and previously neglected sites as Buddhist sacred places *nas* (Wylie: *gnas*), the reclamation of ancient Buddhist and pilgrimage sites, as well as the rise of private schools and institutions of higher learning which promote Tibetan Buddhist education and cultural traditions. A number of trends indicate the involvement of transnational patronage in the revival of Buddhist culture in Monyul. Cultural traditions in Monyul are thus being given a new lease of life, partly supported by international donations. Like Anna Tsing (2005), who writes about the internationalization of the environment, I see the internationalization of Tibetan Buddhist culture as spawning a vibrant local cultural revival

in Monyul. The global circulation of money and resources in the name of Tibetan Buddhism has not left Monyul on the periphery, but has instead helped reinvent it as a node.

## Chapter structure

In the following chapters, I show how the Tawang and West Kameng districts in Monyul are the locus for articulations of a local politics of place, while the trans-local agendas within the demand for autonomy simultaneously situate Monyul in wider networks of cultural and political-economic organizations. These networks are affected by concerns of border security, regional politics, and internal divisions in Monyul, and shape how actors selectively express or mute their trans-local identifications. This book attempts to convey the aspirations of a section of Monpas towards the formation of a pan-Himalayan identity, but is equally attentive to centrifugal forces that destabilize such unitary identifications and preclude talking about the Himalayan identity as a finished category. The Himalayan geography is a process in formation, which can be traced through particular discourses, practices, and social experiences. It may also change shape and direction with time.

Each chapter heading has a spatial framing, which I employ not to give a sense of fixed boundaries, but rather to write about competing, fluctuating loyalties in a volatile border region. I illustrate how these frames are themselves unstable, corresponding to shifting boundaries of belonging. Homogenous spatial representations constantly unravel as contradictory visions and internal conflicts surface. In each chapter I highlight both systematic efforts and unexpected encounters that either solidify or sunder unitary representations. Taking an anti-essentialist view, I show how in each case alternative imaginations pose contradictions or challenges: assertions to locality, for instance, are simultaneously something else.

Chapter One, Field, presents the anthropological location. Here, I give the historical background and ethnographic profile of West Kameng and Tawang and identify the past and present connections of these two districts and the people living there.

In Chapter Two, Locality, I discuss the demand for a Mon Autonomous Region that has been active since 2003 and show how the discourse of local autonomy is underpinned by the idea of translocal community. The autonomy discourse partly rests on the agenda of development, which addresses a space corresponding to the administrative contours of West Kameng and Tawang districts. At the same time, the parallel narrative of

Tibetan Buddhist cultural preservation undermines this construction of locality by including Tibetan Buddhist populations outside Monyul within its boundaries of belonging.

In Chapter Three, Connections, I trace narratives about transnational origins and migration. These stories are part of traditional Monpa oral lore but are now being shaped by contemporary politics as individuals express different modes of belonging by narrating stories of their origins. These oral narratives transgress the border-normative geography. Although not all acts of transgression, individually counted, add up to resistance (Cresswell 1996: 159), I argue that when origins narratives are articulated with the aim of countering the singular narrative of a 'national' origin, they count as resistance. At the same time, the controversial status of Monyul as a disputed territory introduces caveats in articulations of transnational allegiances with the Tibetan world: in the statements of many Monpas, declarations of historical and kinship affinities with Tibetans are accompanied by disclaimers regarding such ties in the present. Oral narratives of origins reveal how Monpa populations are pulled in opposite directions by their transnational histories and memories, on the one hand, and contemporary existence in a disputed border territory where constant military surveillance has led to a hyper-presence of the border in their daily lives and a creeping acceptance of the border-normative gaze, on the other.

Chapter Four, Periphery, focuses on contestation over place-names, and how it creates a politics of toponymy. The renaming of local places with Hindi names – mostly by the Indian army – symbolically maps Monyul as a national space, albeit a peripheral one. I argue that when Monpa individuals and organizations protest against the Hindi names and actively push for the restoration of older place-names, they constitute a resistance or counter to the nationalist production of space. This is paralleled by other activities in which local actors take the lead to materially reclaim space from the military, including the building of monasteries and Buddhist institutes of learning and the renovation of Tibetan Buddhist sacred sites.

In Chapter Five, Region, I explore the inter-ethnic relations between Monpas and the Tibetan community in Monyul, and how they complicate the Himalayan imagined geography. I show how Monpas are selectively drawn to a post-colonial Arunachali regional identity, formed largely on the platform of indigeneity and an anti-immigrant – including anti-Tibetan refugee – discourse. The Monpas' regional obligations are put to the test by their historical relations with Tibet, which include memories of harsh servitude under Tibetans as well as their present improved relations with

a now globally visible Tibetan diaspora community, whose primary base lies in India.

In this book, then, I place different spatial imaginations in tension with one another. Locality is not always a pristine space: connections are compromised, peripheries are contested, and regional obligations conflict with other affiliations. At the same time, I find it possible to distil a collective, emergent spatial consciousness that is gradually gaining ground in the Himalayan region, of which the current social processes in Monyul represent a localized effect. In the Conclusion, Corridors, Networks, and Nodes, I collate and revisit in more detail the arguments and observations from different chapters to make suggestions about this emergent Himalayan geography.

## Note on methods

In 2005, I visited Monyul to conduct a survey of local opinion on the re-opening of trade routes as a young research assistant employed in the New Delhi-based Institute of Chinese Studies (ICS). I was encouraged in this project by the then-director of the institute sociologist Patricia Uberoi, who was keen to see how regional and vernacular literature represent cross-border cooperation, as opposed to the policy circles in Delhi, which can be dominated by the security perspective.[10] As an important trade route that once linked Tsona in the south of Tibet through Tawang to the Assam plains (Pommaret 2000a), Monyul was a valid candidate for re-opening cross-border

10 My survey in Monyul was funded by the Institute of Chinese Studies (ICS), headed at that time by sociologist and China expert Patricia Uberoi, and the report was later published as part of the institute's occasional study series (Gohain 2006). Under Patricia Uberoi's leadership and with support from Ambassadors C.V. Ranganathan and Eric Gonsalves at the Centre for Policy Research, Delhi, ICS led the Track II-level BCIM initiative, earlier known as the Kunming Initiative, which aims to promote rail, road, and water corridors to link China, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam, Manmar, Bangladesh, and China through India's landlocked Northeast region, by highlighting the commonality between South East Asia and Northeast India. Track II-level diplomacy consists primarily of collaboration between academics, policy experts, retired civil and military officials, public figures, and social activists, instead of directly involving government representatives (Uberoi 2014). This was a time when optimism for India's Look East Policy was still high. The Look East Policy, later renamed the Act East Policy, was conceived by former prime minister I.K. Gujral as a measure to improve social, cultural, and economic ties with the South East Asian countries. It was officially launched during the Narasimha Rao-led Congress government, and later upgraded to the Act East Policy in November 2014 by the BJP government (Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region and North Eastern Council 2008). One of the primary goals of this policy was to revive ancient trade routes, currently fallen into disuse, between India's North East region and the South East Asian countries.

routes, though unlikely because of the security concerns clouding it. This initial exposure to Monyul later determined my choice of fieldwork location. Although I began by surveying trade narratives in Monyul during my pilot fieldtrip, I quickly moved on to the more pressing cultural and political narratives, of which border trade was only a part.

For this book, my fieldwork in Monyul took place between 2008 and 2013. I spent twelve non-consecutive months in Tawang and West Kameng districts of west Arunachal Pradesh, living primarily in the three towns of Dirang, Bomdila (West Kameng district), and Tawang (Tawang district), and visiting different villages for shorter stays. I made return trips to my field sites in 2017 and 2018, and kept myself updated with current developments through contacts in the field and by calling friends based there and, in the absence of a local press, following social media pages about events from Monyul.

My initial entry to the field location was facilitated to a large extent by the hospitality extended by the monk community at Gaden Rabgye Ling (GRL) Monastery. But in a small border region, where local politics and loyalties create sharp bifurcations between even husband and wife, I had to be careful not to expose myself to a narrow, partisan view. I therefore tried to maintain some separation between myself and my first hosts, since I did not want to represent only the views of the monastic establishment. I sought to diversify my sources and broaden my fieldwork database. The decision to move out of the monastery guesthouse and rent a room separately in the Bomdila College faculty quarters was also motivated partly by matters of finance and partly by a need for privacy. I deliberately took a random approach in selecting my chief informants and main leads in the different towns, so that my representative sample would be diverse.

My primary bases differ from one another in terms of dialect, local customs, altitude, and demography. Bomdila, despite being the district headquarters, was formed though the radial expansion of military quarters, and is peopled by migrants from both nearby Monpa villages and outside. In the ten years that have passed since I began my fieldwork, Bomdila has become connected to the cities of Guwahati and Tezpur in Assam through two major roads. Many government employees in Tawang seek job transfers to either Bomdila or other areas of Arunachal Pradesh so that their children can have access to better education and other resources. But the climate in Bomdila is extremely unpredictable – sunny one moment, cold and clammy the next, or even raining torrents. 'Bomdila ka mausam aur Bomdila ki ladki – ka koi bharosa nahin' [The weather and women in Bomdila are the same – fickle] is a popular, somewhat misogynistic saying among college-going youth. The rains also made scheduling fieldwork

interviews difficult. It was partly because of this climatic factor and partly because I was told that Dirang would offer me a better experience of rural Monyul that I diversified my base to include the latter town.

At approximately 4000 feet above sea level, Dirang, situated mid-way between Bomdila and Tawang, is lower in altitude than the other two towns, where elevations range from 6000 to 14000 feet; it also has a warmer climate and affords easier access to some old Monpa rural settlements. Yet, in its lack of infrastructure, Dirang is considered more remote than even Tawang, which at least has local travel agencies and regular traffic to and fro. The road connecting Tawang to Bomdila passes through the main Dirang market: a story goes that earlier Dirangpas (natives of Dirang) used to stop passing vehicles and forcefully (over)load them with passengers and luggage because passenger vehicles commuting from Dirang to Itanagar or the urban centres of Assam were so few and far between.

In Tawang, my experiences were richer as I stayed with a local household and enjoyed a more intimate interaction with my host family and their friends and relatives. Tawang, being nearer to the Tibet border and farthest in distance from Assam or Itanagar in terms of communication, is more likely to be cut off from road networks during landslides and snow, especially when the Sela Pass is blocked. Yet, situated at the confluence of both Bhutan and Tibet, and historically acting as an outpost of Tibetan rule in Monyul, Tawang is a focal point for both academic visitors and tourists.

As an ethnographer, my position in the field ambiguously lay somewhere between an outsider and insider. While my position as an Assamese cast me as an outsider, many people warmed up to me when they found out that I belonged to the Ahom community, the pre-colonial rulers of Assam of Shan ethnicity, who figure in the trade memories of the Monpas. In fact, many a time I was told that I look more Monpa than the average Monpa. Proper ethnographic fieldwork, according to the pioneering social anthropologist Malinowski, consists mainly in 'cutting oneself off from the company of other white men, and remaining in as close contact with the natives as possible, which really can only be achieved by camping right in their villages' (Wax 1972: 7). Though this kind of immersion was not my intention, I did not want to alienate local people by mixing more than needed with the Assamese society in Monyul or to give out the impression of being too provincially aligned. I thus consciously tried to avoid socializing too much with Assamese people, even though some of my primary contacts had been made through fellow Assamese. The fact that, unlike the average young Assamese woman, I willingly ate yak and beef and drank the local liquor often elicited comments to the effect that I was not 'like other Assamese'.

As a woman in the field, I only had the confidence to rent and travel on my own in Tawang and West Kameng because women are relatively safe there, compared to several other parts of India. This is not to suggest that it is an idyllic society for women. I witnessed quite a few cases where Monpa men who had acquired wealth and political power married more than one woman and maintained separate establishments for their different wives. Despite the dominant position of men in the society, women were quite independent and did all sorts of work – everything from housework to drudging it out in the fields and kitchen gardens, breaking stones on the roadside, collecting and carrying firewood from forests, conducting small trades and businesses in markets and fairs, and other activities. Their work makes the women of Monyul, and indeed, of many of the other states of Northeast India, visible and their presence accepted in public spaces in a way that is generally not possible for middle-class women in small towns of India, who are further burdened by an oppressive patriarchal caste structure.

My research methodology consisted of the ethnographic methods of participant observation, interviews, conversations, and oral history, as well as archival work in regional, national, and local libraries. Although I had begun studying the Tibetan language at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsala just before fieldwork, I did not complete the course, and instead made do with Hindi – the main language in public spaces and the second language in homes in Monyul – to conduct my interviews. My basic knowledge of the Tibetan alphabet and vocabulary did, however, gain the confidence of many of my informants, who seemed impressed that I had at least made the effort! Most of the quotations and interview extracts used in this book are translated from Hindi to English by me. In some cases, they are translations from Tibetan or the local dialects. I had the help of friends acting as translators during interviews with senior Tibetan Buddhist monks and old people in rural areas whose Hindi was too pidginized for our mutual understanding. I also used English to conduct interviews with some informants who were comfortable in the language, and who used both Hindi and English while conversing with me. I have recorded and preserved digital copies of most of my interviews with the permission of my informants, although, as any ethnographer well knows, important ethnographic revelations are often made during casual conversations. I supplemented my ethnographic work with archival data sourced from the Indian National Archives as well as the Assam and Arunachal Pradesh state and West Kameng and Tawang district archives, and the British Library in London.

## Fieldwork from the margins

A Monpa friend once joked, 'The other day, an officer came [to the monastery] and started asking me the names of the deities, pointing to all the small ones. Now how do I know what the names of all are [...] there are so many, although I know the names of a few. So I told him the names of all the kids in the village. The officer was happy. Before he left, he told me "very good"'. Deliberately dispensing this type of misleading information is, as I have seen, a fairly common response from most Monpas to the unwitting tourist or itinerant sightseer such as that officer. Many domestic tourists are usually unfamiliar with the religious and social life of the Monpas, and tend to ask what are, to the Monpas, irritating and useless questions. For example, if they see two young girls (perhaps in their early 20s) doing the chores around a guesthouse or homestay – a common enough phenomenon here – they tend to first assume that the girls are maids helping in the running of the guesthouse. Later, when they see the girls taking charge of payments, arranging accommodation and engaged in general supervision, they revise their views and start to think that the girls could be the daughters of the owner, which is sometimes a correct assumption. But if there is more than one girl running a guesthouse, it might not always be the case that the girls are sisters. The tourist who assumes this and puts it across as a question, however, would be told that yes, they are sisters, even if one is the daughter of the house and the other, a paid helper.

The problem is not with the Monpas but with the attitude of the inexperienced visitors who presume and then pose the query. In other words, it is a kind of subtle ethnocentrism where the general ways of life of the local society are seen with a kind of surprised paternalism – an attitude that is immediately understood by the 'native', and the expected answers given. Does this mean that telling the visitor what he expects and wants to hear is to conform to the stereotypes that propel the question in the first place? Hardly so. It is clear that the visitor, in the eyes of the average Monpa, is the object of fun and laughter for his/her obvious lack of knowledge. The second case is where the visitor asks apparently 'sensible' questions, such as the officer wishing to know what the names of the different deities were. But the Monpa who is asked such questions also knows that the officer is not really serious, and that his interest in the deities is transient. More interestingly for me, this anecdote brings out the seemingly innocuous but deeply loaded questions people ask when they only have stereotypes guiding them.

When I choose Monyul as my fieldwork site, I encountered a similar stereotype in anthropology, with a senior scholar advising me that good

research is not necessarily about going to places where nobody has yet done research. Once upon a time, research consisted of identifying empirical lacunae, so that if one researcher wrote a history, say, 'from 1857 to 1947', the next researcher would pick up from where the previous had left, and go on to write a history 'from 1947 to 1972'. While similar reasoning might have governed the choice of fieldwork locations in an earlier anthropology, where the least explored site could mean the most productive, after the 1980s cultural turn in the discipline, this anthropological convention has been subject to a critical gaze. My choice of location therefore appeared to be the old-fashioned, let us say, stereotypical, route to fieldwork.

However, by opting to do research in an out-of-the way (e.g., Tsing 1994) region, was I actually choosing an outdated route to research? The view that the relative absence of scholarly research in Monyul makes the latter an outdated site for research corroborates the official representation of Monyul as a remote margin. It is not only remote in a geographical sense, as being on the outskirts of the nation: it is also remote in terms of scholarly access. While some anthropological writing has come out of India (e.g., Dhar 2005; Dondrup 1994; Dutta 1999; Dutta 2002; Elwin 1959a &1959b; Jha 2006; Nanda 1982; Nath 2005; Sarkar 1980; Lama 1999), very few Western scholars – barring the colonial era ethnologists – have produced ethnographic studies of this region.[11] This is partly due to the difficulty for foreigners to receive long-term access to Arunachal Pradesh because of the inner line policy: foreign citizens require a Protected Area Permit (PAP) for entry into certain areas of Northeast India, including Arunachal Pradesh, for a stay of only up to 30 days. As an Indian citizen not from Arunachal Pradesh, I also had to procure an Inner Line Permit (ILP) to gain entry into Arunachal Pradesh.

Again, to speak of the 'minority state' of Monyul within South Asian anthropology is not so different from the codes of representation that depict it as remote, for both feed the same image of marginality. In perceiving Monyul as academically virgin territory, we might be succumbing to

11 Colonial ethnologies on this area include the reports of visits of or by the following: Nain Singh in 1873-75 (Trotter 1877), G.A. Nevill in 1912 (Arpi 2013), F.M. Bailey and H.T. Morsehead in 1913 (Bailey 1914c), F. Ludlow, G. Sherriff and K. Lumsden in 1936 (Arpi 2013), G.S. Lightfoot (Arpi 2013), Frank Kingdon-Ward (Kingdon-Ward 1938, 1940, 1941), and J.P. Mills (1947, 1948). After India's independence, Verrier Elwin (1959a & 1959b, 1965), Leo Rose and Margaret Fisher (Rose and Fisher 1967), Aris (1979b), and Fürer-Haimendorf (1982) have given us many interesting accounts of this region. More contemporary works include fieldwork-based accounts of the origins and migrations of the people of eastern Monyul and clan rituals (Huber 2012); on the cultural identity of the Membas of central Arunachal Pradesh (Grothmann 2012); the languages of Monyul (Bodt 2012); and a historical account of the India-China war from local perspectives (Guyot-Rechard 2017).

conventional representations of the margin. It is therefore pertinent to ask here, 'might it be possible to disentangle analysis of the rural and the remote from assumptions of the pristine?' (Tsing 1994: 282). Through a non-localist approach, I have tried to interrogate the supposed remoteness of the Monyul border by highlighting past connections and present politics and possibilities.

During interviews and conversations, people were quite willing to share information with me, since they saw me as a student of Monpa culture and history, but there were times when I sensed a certain curiosity about my real intent. I am sure many people initially thought I was a government agent, given that Monyul is such a politically sensitive area. One question that I frequently faced in Bomdila and Tawang was: Why did I choose to work on the Monpas? I particularly recall a conversation that took place between my host in Tawang, his friend, an English teacher from Nagaland, and me. The Naga teacher asked me why, if I was interested in cultural identity (the rubric under which I categorized my work), did I not choose to write about my own community? Why, he asked, couldn't the Monpas write their own history? Not expecting the critique, I blurted out that, as somebody from the Northeastern part of India, I was still an insider, and added that there were many Monpa researchers who *are* writing their own histories. My good-humoured host then came to my defence. Even if I put aside the inadequacy of my hasty answer, I have found that the question of who can represent whom, is deeply entangled with researcher position and subjectivity and equally with informant subjectivity, as well as ethics. Not even Monpas telling their own stories are necessarily able to present a complete or true picture, as my Monpa friends recognized. They would anxiously tell me, after I had come back from hearing stories of origins or migration, that I should not believe or write down everything I listen to.

By saying that I find representation to be a knotty issue, I do not wish to be tied down by the problem, but rather to move beyond to the solution. If we acknowledge Gayatri Spivak's argument that once we start talking about subaltern consciousness as a *thing* to be reclaimed, we objectify and essentialise subalternness (1988), or James Clifford's critique that the ethnographer constructs himself/herself by essentialising the native as Other, this does not mean that all ethnographic activity should be suspended. The subject has not disappeared; rather, the subject has been rendered difficult to represent owing to his/her diversity and polyvocality (Clifford 1986); ethnography must therefore be read as a textual site of contested meanings where many voices clamour for expression.

Suffice it to add here that my attempt is to foreground, interpret, and make sense of the representations that coincided with the course of my fieldwork in order to support my thesis. This, then is my aim: to bring out the contradictions and differences in Monyul's politics, perhaps not always by writing the ethnography as a dialogic text that reproduces the ethnographic encounter, but instead by bringing out in the best way I can the instabilities of identities, meanings, and geographies. Though my interpretation is only a partial interpretation, a partial truth (Clifford 1986) that omits, I hope it also reveals.