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Spiritual Ecology and Behavioral Ethics: Enabling Pro-Environmental Actions in the Himalayan *Beyuls*

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Abstract

This article investigates the Nyingma religious prescriptions that govern the sanctification of the Himalayan *beyuls* (hidden sacred valleys) and analyzes the ecological significance of such spiritually-driven actions. It explores whether spiritual ecology inspires the intended pro-environmental actions among the Sherpas of Khumbu whose ecological awareness on scientific terms is less pronounced. It intends to answer how sanctification of a certain location on spiritual and religious grounds results into its conservation in the long run. It adopts a qualitative, interpretive reading of *beyuls* discussed in Lakpa Norbu Sherpa's *Looking through the Sherpa Window*, Sherpa and Wengel's *The Sherpas and Their Original Identities*, and Francis Klatzel's *Gaiety of the Spirit*. It particularly focuses on the dos and don'ts related to a *beyul*, and foregrounds religious values as cognitive frameworks that regulate behavioral ethics. The cognitions are approached through behavioral indicators including cultivated piety to enter a *beyul*, attribution of personhood to nature, and refrainment from sexual transgressions in the Himalaya mentioned in the aforementioned texts. For the theoretical purpose, the article employs Leslie E. Sponsel's idea of spiritual ecology, and other related concepts including deep ecology and spiritual geography to understand cognitions that enable or restrict human behaviors in a *beyul*. The article concludes that in communities where ecological practices are not always articulated through scientific frameworks, spiritually driven actions that operate without prior scientific reflection, also contribute to the maintenance of a place's ecological ambience.

Keywords: Behavioral ethics, *beyul*, pro-environmental practices, spiritual ecology

Introduction

Beyuls are valleys in the Himalayas considered to have been hidden by Buddhist preacher Padmasambhava in the eighth century AD. According to Nyingma Buddhist beliefs, he hid those valleys, together with some powerful mantras buried in them, to be retrieved later in future and used

to safeguard the Sherpas' religion, Buddhism, in the wake of potential crisis. It is widely believed that Himalayan Buddhism might suffer persecution from potential enemies any day. Unearthing the mantras from those hidden *beyuls* would potentially subdue the enemy and ensure the safety of the religion. People also believe that only some pious souls would be able to discover a way to the *beyuls* and retrieve those mantras. So, the Sherpas try to keep themselves as untouched by sins as possible to remain worthy enough to access those *beyuls*.

Beyuls are many. However, in the context of Nepal Himalaya, Langtang in Rasuwa, Rolwaling in Dolakha and Khumbu in Solukhumbu districts are considered the most important ones of them. The valleys do not remain inaccessible practically, as settlement and tourism imperatives have lent access to several people into these landscapes. However, people believe that regardless of the physical access, people will not have spiritual access to those valleys, and would not comprehend their religious import unless they approach the valleys with pure intentions. One example of such entry sans spirituality is mentioned by Francis Klatzel who quotes a Rinpoche commenting on an American scholar's alleged access into Khenpalung, a sacred *beyul*: "He found the way to Khenpalung, the physical place, but did not see the real inside place. Our friend was not the right person, it was not the right time, and the team did not have spiritual preparation to see all that was there" (53-54). Only people with strong faith and right intention, who have made elaborate spiritual preparations, are believed to have access into such *beyuls*.

If so, significant amount of stress is laid on preparations, both mental and spiritual, to enter a *beyul*. Once inside, there are several behavioral restrictions and self-sanctions. One important avenue to see those behaviors would be through the lens of spiritual ecology intending to understand how the spiritual lessons connected with a *beyul* influence the relationship between the people living there or visiting them, and the non-human components of ecology, both living and non-living. This paper addresses an existing gap in the *beyul* scholarship by interpreting their moral and spiritual conceptualization as implicit advocacy for pro-environmental actions informed by behavioral ethics. This is to investigate how spiritual ecology and the consequent behavioral ethics offer an alternative basis for pro-environmental actions in the Sherpa community where scientific temperament for environmental conservation is not optimally verified yet. For the purpose, the paper revolved around a single research question that inquires if sanctification of a location impacts pro-environmental behavior among the settlers even if they are not environmentally conscious in scientific terms. The qualitative, interpretive reading of *beyuls* this paper performs is limited to three texts: Lakpa Norbu Sherpa's *Looking through the Sherpa Window*, Sherpa and Wengel's *The Sherpas and Their Original Identities*, and Francis Klatzel's *Gaiety of the Spirit*. The behavioral ethics among the Khumbu Sherpas that form the main subject of inquiry in the paper originate not in modern ecological consciousness; instead, they predate contemporary environmental awareness and are rooted in religious cognitions formulated much earlier, and perpetuated through religious inheritance. The source of such codes, therefore, must be sought elsewhere. It is claimed that principles of such conducts are encoded in the Sherpas' religious texts and beliefs, and are informed by spiritual considerations rather than environmental or ecological responsibility. The paper argues that *beyuls* function as religiously constructed sacred geographies where beliefs, together with their behavioral dictates, mediate human action, and make them pro-environmental.

Review of Literature

The *beyuls* have been mostly read and interpreted for their religious significance. Most of the earlier studies consider such *beyuls* places of religious pilgrimage and tourism. A cursory scansion of such scholarship reveals that *beyuls* have been interpreted on three grounds: spiritual geography, liberation of diverse lifeforms, and environmental ethics.

Louisa Kamal highlights Rolwaling *beyul* for its significance as a spiritual geography. She considers it a perfect meditation site in these words: "It is believed that in Rolwaling, through intense meditation practices, Padmasambhava assumed the likeness of Vajrakilaya, a wrathful form of the Buddha Vajrasattva, who embodies the enlightened activity of all the Buddhas and whose practice is known for being the most powerful for removing obstacles and destroying all forces hostile to

compassion” (par. 2). Andrew N. Hallahan adds spiritual energy to the earlier stress of spiritual ambience of the *beyuls* as: “Because *beyuls* are imbued with the esoteric, spiritual energy of Guru Padmasambhava, they are ideal locations for spiritual practitioners” (3). She underscores the indirect environmental outcomes of such spiritual considerations of *beyuls*, thus adding an ecological dimension to the existing meditative and spiritual energy discourse: “[The] understanding of the landscape as sacred geography, integrated with local stakeholders’ religious perspectives and historical traditions, can be correlated to an active appreciation of the region’s ecology, and efforts to counter increasing environmental degradation for a more sustainable, happy future” (93). Thus, the cognition of *beyuls* that emerges from the scholarship discussed above hinges on three important dimensions of signification: spiritual, meditative, and ecological interpretation that emerge from the existing scholarship.

Another significance Louisa Kamal accords to *beyuls*, besides their pure spiritual and liberating function, is as a site that enables animal liberation: “The concept of animal liberation is not only about safeguarding an animal’s survival by providing food and shelter but also ensuring that its life is improved mentally, emotionally and spiritually, especially by providing it with positive dharma imprints” (para 13). The claim corroborates with the Buddhist understanding that souls that inhabit bodies can improve through dharma, and prepare themselves for liberation after death.

Other scholars connect behavioral regulations to enter a *beyul* with the Buddhist concept of “*sonam*”—religious merit they would love to earn by “saving a life” in order to gain a smooth transition to next life after death (Norgay and Coburn 188). Their desire for *sonam* becomes manifest when they show “compassionate behavior” expressed through “respect for one’s own life” (Norgay and Coburn 188). Sanjay K. Nepal, Yang Mu, and Po-Hsin La contend that people’s behaviors in a *beyul* are governed by religious beliefs that define “certain sets of rules in the *beyul*, such as not harming or killing any living things, respecting local spirits dwelling in the natural landscape, refraining from violence and negative thoughts, and keeping a peaceful and compassionate mind” (73). Thus, they have underscored the pro-environmental behaviors that emanate from the recognition of their religious importance.

While these studies affirm the spiritual and ecological significance of *beyuls*, they have not systematically theorized religious cognition as a mechanism of behavioral regulation. This paper addresses that gap by foregrounding cognition as a mediating force between belief and pro-environmental conduct. The theoretical modality adopted for the study is primarily informed by the concept of spiritual ecology proposed by Sponsel. Assumptions of deep ecology postulated by Daniel H. Henning in his *A Manual for Buddhism and Deep Ecology*, and fundamental Buddhist concepts that align with the ideas of spiritual ecology and deep ecology have also been used. Connected concepts from environmental criticism are used to lend theoretical anchorage to the discussion. The indicators used for understanding the aforementioned cognitions consist of the foregrounding of three behavioral aspects: cultivated piety to enter a *beyul*, the attribution of personhood to nature, and refrainment from sexual transgressions in the Himalaya.

Spiritual Ecology: A Theoretical Engagement

Taken as a general environmental concept, spiritual ecology denotes those assumptions about the environment that are informed by metaphysical perceptions. Leslie E. Sponsel defines it as a “vast, complex, diverse, and dynamic arena at the interfaces of religions and spiritualities with environments, ecologies, and environmentalisms including intellectual, spiritual, and practical components” (1). Besides being a subject of academic inquiry, it is a “sacred subject touching their deepest concerns, emotions, commitments, and aspirations” (1). The plurality of cognitive factors like concerns and commitments, and affective factors like emotions and aspirations it incorporates within this functional definition makes the concept quite comprehensive. Its significance is even more pronounced when it is considered in relation to a spiritual and religious communities like the Sherpas, who practice a place-based religion that Sherry B. Ortner calls “Sherpa Buddhism” (iii). Several places, including *beyuls*, are part of their religious imaginations.

Unlike other ecological approaches that are focused on the physical aspect of the environment and the economic dimension of development, spiritual ecology looks into the “inner development” of the human beings in relation to nature which is considered as a “grand cathedral of communal beings” rather than a repository of exploitable resources (Sponsel 1, 2). What is of special significance to the study of ecology, especially the relationship between the human and other components of nature, is its presupposition of human-nature interdependence and interconnectedness. Sponsel adds, “Its working premise is that the health of humans and nature are interconnected and interdependent. The corollary is that restoring human’s well-being is dependent on restoring the well-being of nature” (3). Thus, it stops seeing the human world as discrete, and the rest of the environment as something different. Instead, it considers this relationship symbiotic or mutually dependent.

What is of special import for the study of ideas like *beyuls* is spiritual ecology’s subtle links with religions, including Buddhism as Sponsel clarifies: “The roots of spiritual ecology also include historical pioneers of many centuries ago like the Buddha as well as Saint Francis of Assisi. Francis was known, among other reasons, for the legend of taming a wolf that had been killing animals and people in an Italian village” (2). Buddha’s early-life story also demonstrates similar compassion for the living world. One famous Jataka story says he treated a swan shot by his cousin Devdutta, and let it free in the woods after healing it with befitting treatment and care.

Another theoretical overlap spiritual ecology bears with the Sherpas’ concept of *beyul* is its allegiance with indigenous spiritual system. As Sponsel further explains, it contends that “the indigenous people [share] the highest values of spiritual ecology, such as a profound psychological sensitivity to interconnected plants and animals” (4). Its significance for a non-violent community like the Sherpas is, therefore, immediate. Sponsel argues that “spiritual ecology may be quiet, nonviolent, and decentralized” and has the potential to “transform the place of humans in nature and thereby restore a far greater degree of ecosanity” (4). Sponsel explains how the transformation transcends the realm of the physical, and addresses the inner, psychological, and spiritual dimension of the human beings: “This transformation engages the inner being as well as the outer world; hence, it has psychological and spiritual as well as ecological and political dimensions. The main question is whether or not all of this will prove enough and soon enough to avoid a global catastrophe, when human environmental impact reaches some unknown critical threshold or tipping point” (4). The overlaps between spiritual ecology and Buddhism, indigenous cognitive system and non-violence, therefore, provide a logical background to link this discussion with the ecological spirituality of Buddhism.

Alongside Sponsel’s idea of spiritual ecology, Henning’s theoretical postulations relating deep ecology and Buddhism also allows a specialized grounding of this discussion on the Sherpas’ religious cognitive system that addresses ecology. This is because, deep ecology lends an academic lens to value each individual life in an ecosystem, regardless of its human-centric utility. Henning also shows the conceptual alignment of deep ecology with Buddhism, especially its concept of Dhamma, giving it a moral dimension as:

Much of Buddhism and its *Dhamma*, along with Deep Ecology, contain values, awareness, and concepts which could be incorporated into public participation efforts. Buddhism and its *Dhamma* is a spiritual, philosophical approach based on acceptance and compassion for all living things. Deep spirituality and deep ecology are philosophical sisters. Those who shy from the notion of “spirituality” should note that the enemy is secular and anthropocentric religion of never-ending technological progress, unlimited materialism, and uncontrolled development which pays only lip service to the health of this planet and welfare of all living things. (6; emphasis original)

Henning’s stress on acceptance and compassion is a continuation of concerns expressed by several other contemporary environmentalists, especially for the absence of a spiritual dimension in the existing environmental discourses. As for example, Al Gore identifies a subtle and deeper spiritual crisis as a cause for the aggravating environmental crisis: “The more deeply I search for the roots of the global environmental crisis, the more I am convinced that it is an outer manifestation of an inner crisis that is, for lack of a better word, spiritual. As a politician, I know full well the special hazards of

using “spiritual” to describe a problem like this one” (12; emphasis original). The postulations of spiritual ecology supplement this lack, and add a moral dimension to the discourse.

Henning’s basic theorization of deep ecology and Buddhism considers the Buddhist understanding of dhamma—righteous action—the very foundation of human-nature relationship: “Buddhism and Deep Ecology explore the ecological and environmental teachings of Buddha, particularly Dhamma (nature) and their relationships with Deep Ecology as well as with effective public participation. . . . Dhamma (also known as Dharma by many Buddhist) is nature, natural truth, natural law and the teachings of Buddha” (5). He considers “lack of effective communication and citizen participation” a cause for what he calls “needless environmental, societal, and economic problems and costs” (5). The contention is in allegiance with the concept of Dhamma as postulated by Buddhism, that has the potential to avert or solve several environmental problems. He explains the link between Buddhism, Dhamma, and pro-environmental conduct as:

Buddhism is a spiritual approach which emphasizes ecological values through a reverence and compassion for all beings or all forms of life. This approach, along with Deep Ecology, points toward the development of a spirituality, a higher consciousness or awareness . . . which would recognize and integrate spiritual values toward nature. The formulation of positive ecological and environmental values as the basis for assuming a wise stewardship role toward the earth is becoming increasingly important, if not critical, especially between peoples of diverse culture. (6-7)

Thus, as Dhamma informs Buddhist concept of deep or spiritual ecology, its behavioral prescriptions also recapitulate Buddhist teachings, especially those of noble conducts that have direct relevance to the conduct of people—both settlers and visitors—when they are inside a *beyul*. This is because, the influence of cognitive systems, including spirituality and ecological consciousness, are reflected through actions. Buddhist concept of morality has clearly stated rules for conduct that are also pertinent to environmental morality as:

The concept of morality manifests itself in the five basic precepts underlying the rule for monastic life and for laypeople’s conduct respectively: (1) not to kill any living being (often interpreted as “not to harm”); (2) not to take what is not freely given by the owner (stealing); (3) not to indulge in sexual misconduct; (4) not to lie; and (5) not to consume intoxicants that lead to carelessness. (Henning 37)

The rules are based on the basic Buddhist principle of fair conduct. When the theoretical assumptions that link spirituality and ecology are considered and the moral principles for good conduct are taken into account, the combination lends a clear theoretical modality to study *beyuls*, their spiritual significance, and the ecological significance of people’s conduct while inside them. This study considers spiritual ecology not only as a belief framework but also a cognitive system that translates metaphysical assumptions into manifest actions. The sections that follow discuss people’s do’s and don’ts while inside a *beyul* and demonstrate how such behavioral ethics, especially those pertaining to three principles of conduct—cultivated piety to enter a *beyul*, the attribution of personhood to nature, and refrainment from sexual transgressions in the Himalaya—informed and governed by Buddhist concept of spiritual ecology, influence their actions and make them pro-environmental.

Beyuls: Sanctification and the Religio-Cultural Mediation of Actions

As Sherpa Buddhism is deeply place-based, several locations in the Himalaya feature in the Sherpas’ religious imaginations as sanctified locations. They consider several of them their shrines, abodes of their deities, and places capable of ensuring their liberation. *Beyuls* are among such places. The Sherpas believe that “special spiritual powers” have been used “twice” to create a *beyul*: “first to sanctify it and then to open it as a sanctuary” (Klatzel 49). This means, sanctification precedes access. This takes the story of the sanctification of *beyul* to a pre-settlement era. This is consistent with the settlement history of the Sherpas in Khumbu, and their adoption of Nyingma, the sect of Buddhism that was popularized by Padmasambhava. Records show, the Sherpas migrated to Khumbu from Tibet “towards the fifteenth century” moving over the Himalayan passes” (Tenzing and Tenzing 2). The story of the sanctification of the Himalayan valleys, however, goes back to the eighth century.

Envisioning that “there would be times of trouble when people in the Tibetan region would have to flee their homes,” Padmasambhava had believably hidden and sanctified certain valleys, to which people would flee to escape the crisis (Klatzel 49). Lakpa Norbu Sherpa calls such speculated era a time of “great difficulty” (7). Though several reasons, including harsh climate and desire for arable land, have also been cited, one of the reasons most commonly cited for the Sherpas’ migration from Tibet to Nepal clearly credits religious crisis, consistent with Padmasambhava’s prediction: “The reasons for this migration are complex. One was the influence of Islam from Mongolia which affected the politics of Lhasa, Tibet’s capital, and created strong ideological disparities between central Tibetans and those of the remoter regions in the far east and west who were devout followers of Nyingma Buddhism or the unreformed sect of Vajrayana (Tantric Buddhism)” (Tenzing and Tenzing 2).

Looking back from the mid-fifteenth century—the believed time for the Sherpas’ migration to Nepal—the sanctification of these valleys took place at least seven centuries earlier, that is in the eighth century CE. This gives strength to the speculation that some Sherpas, at least the religiously informed ones, if not all, were aware of the idea of *beyuls* when they moved into Khumbu to found their new settlement. Thus, their cognitions predate their settlement, and the settlement is bracketed by religiously-informed behaviors. In this study, cognition refers to culturally mediated belief-structures that shape perception, intention, and action. The sections below examine the behavioral ethics provisioned by Sherpa Buddhism that forms the basis of cognitions that govern such ethics. The discussion is sequentially arrayed on three principles: cultivated piety to enter a *beyul*, the attribution of personhood to nature, and refrainment from sexual transgressions in the Himalaya.

Cultivated Piety to Enter a Beyul

Nyingma Buddhism has clear delineations for the type of people who can access a *beyul*. Only people with “pure hearts” are believed to gain access into such valleys (Lakpa Norbu Sherpa 7). The piety is, thus, not limited to physical actions; it also extends to intentions that define the purity or impurity of one’s heart. In other words, the “inner being” as well as the “outer world” are imagined in a spiritual continuum (Sponsel 4). Its behavioral implication is that most Sherpas try to stay pure to make themselves able to enter such sanctified valleys. For the purpose, they try to avoid “negative activities such as quarreling, violence, killing, unnecessarily disturbing the land, and polluting water, out of respect for others including supernatural forces in a *beyul*” (Lakpa Norbu 7). The moral geography that entails a *beyul* informs a holistic view for all types of life, including plants and animals that are “sacred and protected” inside the *beyul* (Lakpa Norbu 7). The *beyul*, thus, functions as a “grand cathedral of communal beings” in which the “health of the humans and nature are interconnected and interdependent” (Sponsel 3). The view is informed by Buddhist nuances of ecology that sees all lives in a continuous chain, and sees conducts in each life in relation to those in the past, and possible future.

The Sherpas have taken great care to maintain such piety throughout history. Klatzel has recorded opinions of people who narrate the stories of such “troubles” their ancestors faced “hundreds of years ago” in order to maintain the aforementioned piety (52). They left Tibet, considering those troubles against the ethics of their religion. How they chose the *beyuls* in the Himalaya connects their migration to prophecies concerning these sanctified locations: “They were looking for a *beyul*, a sanctuary, because the lamas leading them were following the directions recorded in a religious text. The lamas needed not only the skills to read and understand the book, but also the spiritual power to recognize clues in the landscape, in order to discover the *beyul*” (qtd. in Klatzel 52). It is evident that the Sherpas’ search for *beyuls* is ancient, continuous, and inherited, and has lasted across several generations. Evidently, the exercise of piety necessary for access has also lasted for generations. The Sherpas believe that their ancestor, Phachhen, was the first person to enter a Himalayan *beyul*, and several other families came following him and founded villages in Khumbu. Since then, efforts to gain the necessary qualification to have both physical and spiritual access into *beyuls* have been a part of the Sherpas’ spiritual geography.

Klatzel's emphasis on pure hearts literally connotes mental preparedness to abstain from any conduct considered objectionable for a *beyul*. However, the only avenues to manifest one's purity of heart are expressions and conducts. That righteous conduct has always been stressed as an imperative to be inside a *beyul*. What is permissible, and what is not inside it, therefore, provides a context to understand how actions are informed by spirituality, and how such actions endorse the assumptions of spiritual ecology. Refraining from "animal-killing," for example, in Khumbu is one of the instances of such spiritually-mediated actions (Sherpa and Wengel 61). This also resonates with Henning's identification of compassion as a common element connecting deep ecology and the Buddhist principle of dhamma as an approach based on "acceptance and compassion for all living things" (6). Such a principle of compassion governs several behaviors in the *beyuls*, especially those connected with treatment of other people, or other lifeforms.

One impact of such religiously informed behavioral ethics is seen in the meat-eating behaviors of the Sherpas. Most of the Himalayan *beyuls* are declared no-killing and no-meat zone, even though cases of secret meat consumptions are often reported. Nevertheless, the Sherpas relish meat if an animal dies in some accident, or it is slaughtered outside a *beyul*. In some rare cases, they slaughter an injured animal by employing a non-Sherpa butcher. This can be seen in instances that involve several animals, including the yaks, the commonest of the domesticated animals in the Himalayas: "They rarely slaughter yaks for meat, unless the animal is injured. The male yaks are too valuable as pack animals, and the female naks give milk. An irony is that while Sherpas as Buddhists will not themselves slaughter an animal for meat, they will purchase meat and eat meat if someone else has killed the animal" (Klatzel 78). Such behavioral sanctions, especially those related to the treatment of animals and plants inside a *beyul* are many, and each is informed by the Buddhist realization that a *beyul*'s sanctity is defaulted if anything against the religious prescriptions is taken up. The permissible actions are also indicated by prohibitions through a reciprocal relationship. Lakpa Norbu Sherpa makes a list of prohibitions one should keep in mind while entering a *beyul* as: "Those who try to force their way into these valleys will encounter obstacles and meet with failure and even death. All life within a *beyul* is considered sacred and protected. People must avoid negative activities such a quarreling, violence, killing, unnecessarily disturbing the land, and polluting water, out of respect for others including supernatural forces in a *beyul*" (7). Several of these codes of conduct Sherpa enlists correspond to Sponsel's claim that the principles of deep ecology "encompass ecocentrism with an emphasis on the psychological feeling for the intrinsic values of nature" (3). What inspires the Sherpa stress on good conduct inside a *beyul* rests on beliefs that are shared across the community. The Sherpas believe that *beyuls* are places where "*terma*, hidden treasures" are deposited, and they may comprise of "written texts, religious objects, guide books, or knowledge that is burned on rocks, earth, water, and sky, and survive in the form of human knowledge from ancient time" (Lakpa Norbu 6; emphasis original). Thus, alongside spiritual and religious beliefs, the Sherpa view of *beyuls* is also informed by their indigenous belief system sustained by folk beliefs like that of *terma*. This aligns with Sponsel's contention that "the indigenous people [share] the highest values of spiritual ecology, such as a profound psychological sensitivity to interconnected plants and animals" (4). One anchor of such indigenous sensitivity, as noticed in the case of the Sherpas, is the intangibles—like myths, tales and hearsays—several of which are connected to sacred places like *beyuls*. *Terma* presents only one from among several examples that show how behavioral ethics are perpetuated and transmitted among people through religious stories. Another avenue to inspect such ethics is in the way personhood is attributed to nature by the Sherpas, as discussed in the section that follows.

Attribution of Personhood to Nature

When even the non-living components like the rocks, earths, water, and sky are considered safe for hiding treasure, it can be inferred how the framework of spiritual ecology aided by Buddhism entails both biotic and abiotic components of ecology. A *terton*, who is believed to have the necessary qualifications to retrieve those treasures and decode their meanings, is expected to be "spiritually

empowered” (Lakpa Norbu 6). Provisions for such empowerment are present in those religious and spiritual cognitive systems that define people-place relationship in the *beyuls*.

The tendency to imagine the living and non-living components of ecology at the same order is rooted in the Nyingma concept of oneness. Nyingma texts, the fundamental scriptures that inform Sherpa Buddhism, believe that bodies that sustain diverse lifeforms are made of the same elements, and transformation of one form into another is possible as:

Our whole existence is determined by the elements: earth, water, fire, air, and space. Through them our body is formed and sustained, and when they dissolve, we die. We are familiar with the outer elements, which condition the way in which we live, but what is interesting is how these outer elements interact with the inner elements within our own physical body. And the potential and quality of these five elements also exist within our mind. Mind’s ability to serve as the ground for all experience is the quality of earth; its continuity and adaptability is water; its clarity and capacity to perceive is fire; its continuous movement is air; and its unlimited emptiness is space. (Rinpoche 251)

Such ideas of organicity between the human and the non-human elements of the environment, including the inanimate elements like soil, water, or air, govern several human actions. This is because, compared to other lifeforms, the human is usually the most influential actor in an ecosystem, and the regulation of human actions is key to the maintenance of ecological balance. The cognitions that uphold the sanctity of the Himalayan *beyuls* regulate human actions in relation to multiple life form. The forest, for example, is one of them. Several forests around the Sherpas settlement in the Himalaya are considered sacred, and no trees are felled there. Stanely F. Stevens claims that an “old dense birch forest that covers a slope adjacent to the village [of Phurtse] on the north is one of several Khumbu sacred forests,” and people are not allowed to fell trees here (Stevens 45). In spite of the resource crunch forced by expanding development imperatives, the Sherpas have maintained this restraint on several of their forest resources as:

Sacred trees and forests are an integral part of the landscape of Khumbu, an expression of the historical depth of Sherpa Buddhist faith. Villages and fields are dotted with trees believed to be the homes of *lu*, spirits worshiped by particular families who pass down the caretaking of the tree, spirit, and shrine through generations. Temples are surrounded by sacred groves. Other forests, called *lami nating* (lama’s forest) are set apart because certain lamas sanctified them as places where no tree must be cut and into which no cutting implement might be taken. These sacred forests and groves were the earliest, most strictly regulated, and most enduring of the protected forests. (Stevens 197; emphasis original)

Sherpa and Wengel also foreground the religious beliefs that inform such considerations like regarding a forest as sacred inside a *beyul*. The Sherpas, they claim, believe that “if someone cuts wood in a sacred forest, they will get sick and must be seen by a *lhawa* (shaman)” (87). Hence, they are advised to refrain from “harming nature” and to honestly abide by “spiritual perspectives and prohibitions reflected in environmentally sustainable practices grounded in religions” (87). They cite the roots of such spiritually-informed conducts in Mahayana Buddhism: “Overall, the Mahayana Buddhist way of life, its ethical principles, and its relationship with protector deities correspond with the Sherpas’ intention to maintain and respect the quality of environment by combining scientific and religious practice. Hence, the Sherpas’ emotional and spiritual connection to *beyul* and its landscape have reinforced conservation efforts” (87). Like forest, the Sherpas also consider the Himalaya, together with its rivers and ponds, sacred and refrain from polluting them. Jamling Tenzing Norgay claims, the Sherpas should keep their Himalayan valleys “pristine, undefiled by excessive human activity” (108). Lhakpa Phuti Sherpa provides evidence to suggest how sensitive the Sherpas are in keeping the *beyul* altogether unpolluted. She describes how she carefully hides her menstrual pads when she had her periods once while she was on her way to Everest:

How could I leave there a thing that could thwart the piousness of the Himalayas? I was caught in a terrible fix. With a deep sense of regret, I felt a sting for being born as a woman. I was down with guilt. I could neither carry the pad with me, nor throw it anywhere around

there. I was in utter perplexity. Finally, I resolved: "I will bury it some distance afar." Then I did as I resolved. I buried it under a stone and prayed, "God, absolve me of my sin." (255) The invocation of God to forgive the aforementioned act of spiritual transgression offers grounds to speculate that the act is more a part of Lhakpa Phuti Sherpa's spiritual cognition rather than absolute ecological sensitivity. This corroborates with Sponsel's claim that such spiritual awakening leads to indirect ecological sensitiveness manifest in people's refrainment from pollution: "It is ethical when we strive to let this spiritual and psychological awakening stimulate efforts to stop dirty energy, air and water pollution, and industrialism's destructive exploitation of nature" (1) Grounding actions on spiritual foundation, understandably, ensures rational mediation of behavior so that the natural ecological ambience of a place is not disrupted.

The reasons for refraining from pollution is one way of looking at nature. But the perspective is universal and applies to any place. The *beyul*, however, draws spiritually and religiously sustained explanations. The urge to keep the *beyul* sanctified, therefore, informs such actions more. This brings the discussion to a pragmatic aspect of spiritual ecology that explains people's physical treatment of nature and its components even without premeditated ecological awareness and understanding. Hence, spirituality acts as a pre-reflective instrument that eventually inspires ecologically sensitive pro-environmental behaviors. The Himalayan *beyuls* present a befitting context where spiritually-mediated acts acquire immense ecological significance.

Refrainment from Sexual Transgressions

Alongside scientific and religious arguments for informed actions, the call for guarding one's conduct in a Himalayan *beyul* also has a moral dimension. The Sherpas believe that unethical flirting with nature invites apocalypse, and misconduct by any individual can affect an entire society. Several tales shared by the people living in the Himalayan *beyuls*, including Khumbu and Rolwaling, bear such apocalyptic views. One, for example, is the belief that sexual misconduct—both intentional and physical—by any member of an expedition group on the way up, or bivouacked at the Base Camp, might spoil the entire team's plan by inviting disaster—storm, heavy snow, or avalanche. Jon Krakauer discusses an occasion from 1996 when the Sherpas held two climbers' "sauce-making"—their euphemism for sex—responsible for one of their team members Nawang Topche's "worsening condition" making him grow "sicker and sicker even at low altitude" (127). Krakauer presents the Sherpa version of the interpretation as: "They believed that one of the climbers in Scott Fisher's team had angered Everest—Sagarmatha, goddess of the sky—and the deity had taken her revenge on Nawang" (127). He quotes Sherpas as holding the aforementioned act of sexual intercourse responsible not only for Nawang's bad health but also for several other environmental adversities, including a storm: "Somebody has been sauce-making. Make bad luck. Now storm is coming" (127). The reference provides evidence of the fact that the Sherpas not only guard their own actions but also expect outsiders to honor the sanctity of *beyuls*. Krakauer claims, the Sherpas "fundamentally disapprove of sex between unmarried couples on the divine flanks of Sagarmatha" (157). The disapproval perhaps is an atavistic reproduction of monastic ethics cultivated among the Sherpas. Ortner observes that the Sherpas are most often eager to uphold and spread "monastic values, stressing the renunciation of sex, marriage, and family, and extolling the spiritual life" (180). Having said that, disapproval of pre-marital or extra-marital sex anywhere, and sex of all kinds in sites considered holy by the Sherpas has become a part of their collective imaginations vis-à-vis the *beyuls*. This is a part of what spiritual ecologist Sponsel calls "commitments"—a principle he enlists, among others, to characterize the "sacred subject" of ecology (1). It also exemplifies the stress on the "transformation" of the "inner being" of the humans, comprised of both "psychological and spiritual" dimensions as Sponsel mentions (4). Disapproval of, or refrainment from such acts in the sanctified locations comprises a psychological dimension of spiritual ecology, rooted in the deep-seated fear of defiling its sanctity.

Sex may be a non-issue in pure scientific ecological discourse; however, spiritual ecology also concerns itself with the moral dimensions of one's conduct, and thus, constitutes a part of behavioral ethics. This treatment of sex as an example of behavioral watch extends spiritual ecology

beyond environmental conduct into what may be termed moral-ecological causality, where violations of ethical expectations are believed to invite unwanted environmental consequences.

Conclusion

The discussion of permissible and proscribed human actions inside the Himalayan *beyuls* leads to four important inferences. First, it reveals how nature is subtly incorporated into the spiritual imaginations of Sherpa Buddhism that sees human and non-human components of nature in a relationship of interconnectedness and interdependence. The relations are sustained by spiritual understandings that endorse an elemental connection among ecological components that concur at various points in the life cycle of a being. Secondly, it establishes morality and ethics as key to one's access into a *beyul*, which is, otherwise, closed to immoral actors. This understanding extends the pure ecological discussion of environment to a moral plane, where un-premeditated conducts, by corollary, appear as ecologically conscious actions. Third, the study posits both locals and visitors on the same plane of ethical conduct whenever a *beyul* is concerned. Finally, the study connects apocalypse inside *beyuls* with their moral geography by citing the local Sherpas' belief that bad conduct by anyone could invite undesirable environmental outcomes. The study of human relationship with *beyuls*, including their cognitions and actions, presents a significant case of spiritual ecology. The Himalayan *beyuls*, thus, demonstrate that ecological sustainability can emerge not only from scientific rationality but also from deeply internalized spiritual cognitions. This inference suggests a pragmatic method to inspire actions among people with limited scientific understanding of ecological imperatives, yet eventually make them environmentally reasonable.

The study, thus, adds a dimension to the existing study of spiritual ecology by demonstrating how collectively transmitted spiritual and religious values direct actions that are imbibed without questions and conscious reflection, and how they eventually appear as pro-environmental performances. In communities that have limited scientific understanding of ecological seriousness as of today, stressing spiritually informed actions could be a way towards inspiring ecologically non-coercive conducts. The study, however, is limited to scholarly opinions about *beyuls*, and is not an inclusive and participatory study of all the existing *beyuls* in the Himalaya. Future study might address this limitation by making first-hand studies from inside the *beyuls*, reaching out to the people concerned, and investigating the lived impacts of spiritual ecology in their day-to-day action.

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