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A photographic essay

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Beyond the human in pastoral ethnographies: a photographic essay

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In a pastoral ecosystem, the roles of herders, herd animals and the environment are intertwined, interdependent and mutually constitutive. Yet the latter two are often only deemed good to "think with", as "hapless bearers of symbolic projection" (Latour 2005, 10): animals and the environment, defined as bound and distinct entities, are too often made a part of ethnographies only to better understand the human beings whose livelihoods and cultures they support, as props to a human backdrop.

With the new "animal turn" in academia, in which authors advocate for a reconsideration of animals and the environment as social participants in their own right, anthropology as a discipline that is etymologically concerned with human beings is trying to redefine itself. Deleuze had already asked the question when he wrote: "I remain stuck on the question of 'how': how anthropology moves beyond the human, but also the larger problem of how humanity moves beyond the same – the stubbornness of our inherited nature, the lingering potential of its malleability, the forces and channels that might further provoke its becoming-otherwise" (Deleuze 1986, 1811). The question at stake grapples with the possibility of studying the relationships between humans and the animals they work with, and how they become-otherwise together (Meuret and Despret 2016: 171-173; Haraway 2008; Deleuze and Guattari 1980).

The two main challenges in this endeavour are, on the one hand, to avoid anthropocentrism, and on the other, to not solely focus on non-human animals without the adequate training in ethology. The focus has to remain on the relations between humans and animals – on where their worlds overlap. It is in this sense that a growing number of authors call for an expansion and a redefinition of anthropology as the study of more than just one species, as an "anthropology of life" (Kohn 2007). Kohn, for instance, encourages anthropologists to practice "a kind of anthropology that situates all-too-human worlds within a larger series of processes and relationships that exceed the human" (2007, 6). More recently, Archer writes: "relational approaches to the study of people and environment increasingly stress the importance of recognising that humans are enmeshed in an intricate and active world which necessarily entails a more-than-human approach to the study of social life" (Archer 2018, 110). However, anthropology is still, by definition, concerned with human affairs. But this does not entail its boundedness; on the contrary, to better understand humans, we must recognize the multispecies nature of human lives.

In this paper, I argue that one fruitful entry point lays in positioning the herder in a place of hybridity, one that is particularly propitious for revealing the entanglements of

Animal Intimacies

Regarding the proximity Ippi (grand-mother) Dolma has to her bovines, she exclaimed: "I grew up with them: they're like family!" She has been doing this work for over 50 years. Ippi Dolma calmly calls her dio (female yak) to give her the soup she made for her. Her body is very close to those of her dio, who look in the same direction as her. Her proximity is not only natural, but comforting for these dio who seek her presence, which they associate with care, pleasure and protection. Ippi Dolma's proximity, love and care were the most visible I observed amongst all Limey herders. The trust her animals have in her is obvious; her bovines were particularly calm and cooperative in her presence.

That Ippi Dolma calls her animals family is not unique. Dio in Limi are "companion species" (Haraway 2008), a species that humans share their bread with (Latin: cum pane). Hence, inhabitants of Limi call the soup made for humans and the soup made for bovines the same word (thukpa), with little variations in the ingredients. Thukpa for dio is made of whey, roasted barley flour or cooked barley, salt and dried turnip. A lactating dio needs a richer diet to sustain offspring and a herder's needs for milk, hence the supplement.

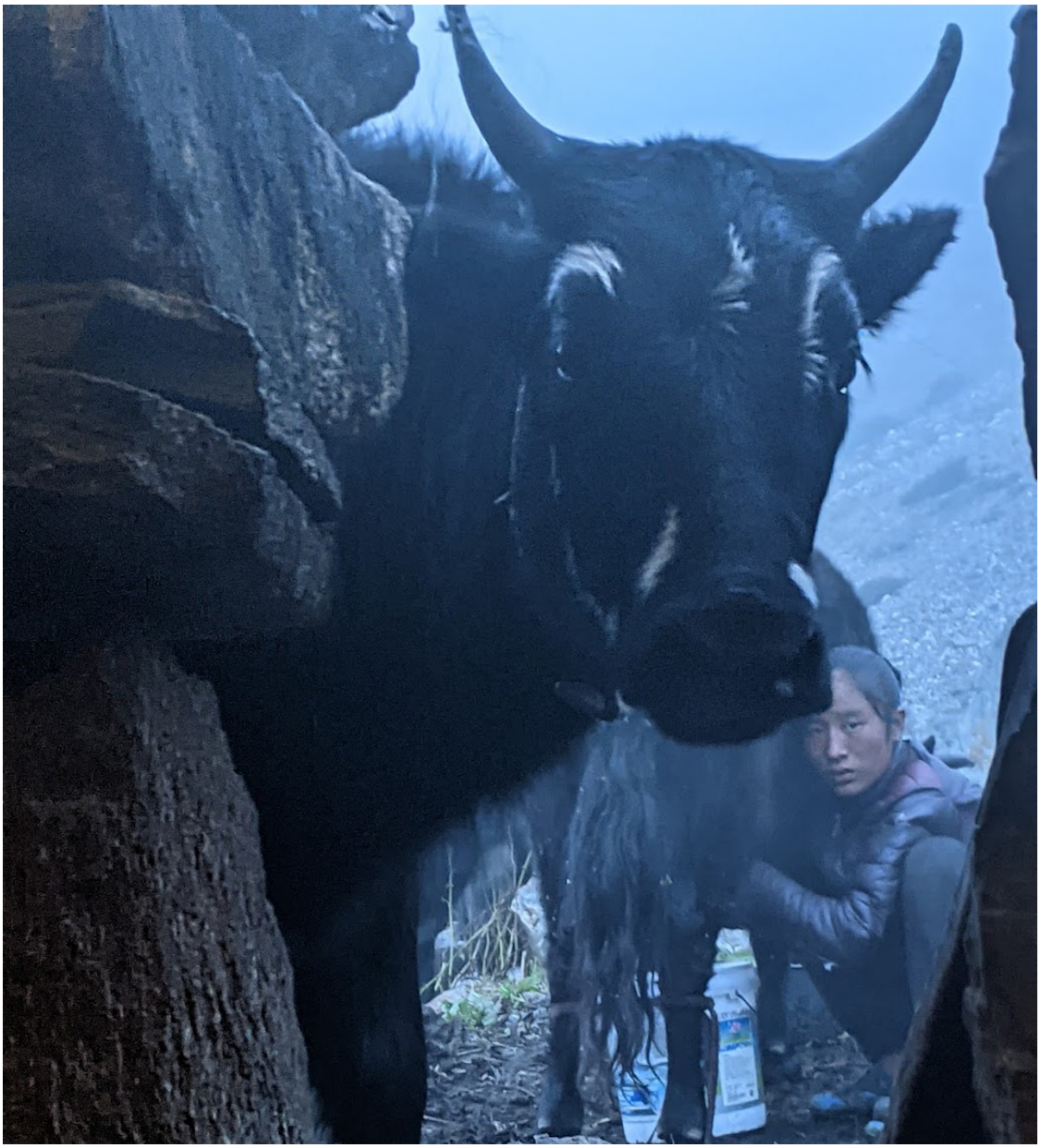
humans with non-humans. I discuss the implications of co-labouring with herders as ethnographic method, one I have myself been practicing in France and in Nepal. I use photography as a way of rendering my arguments as sensory ethnography. Pictures punctuate this mainly theoretical text as vignettes would, formulating ideas as images when words fall short. During fieldwork, capturing images avoided interruptions when jotting down notes was not an option. Post-fieldwork, pictures helped me notice details that had first eluded my attention, and later helped refine the analysis in ways I couldn't have, had I relied only on written notes. More broadly, this paper touches upon the question of what anthropology has to gain from including non-human subjects, and how photography – as one sensory way of communicating amongst others – can contribute to this endeavour.

1. Meeting Mid-Way

Porcher and Lécrivain open their 2012 article on the partnership in labour between shepherds, dogs and ewes with the following sentence: "One of the most promising, and yet most unknown, ways to overcome the gap between the natural and the social sciences, is work" (2012, 121). Work is what constructs, they argue, the "nature-culture" (Haraway 2010) of each party involved, in other words, their hybridity, their becoming with each other. Studying interspecies relations through pastoral practice is a first step towards blurring the artificial lines between the natural and the cultural, the animal and the human.

Humans have indeed co-evolved with many other species. Bacteria in and on a human body, for example, "outnumber human cells 10 to one and account for 99.9 percent of the unique genes in the body." (Brody 2014 referring to Blaser 2014) These organisms thrive on humans while humans thrive thanks to these organisms' effects, such as on our digestive system, which entirely depends on bacteria to be healthy. While breeds of dogs, cattle, sheep or horses would not exist without humans' intervention. Pastoralism is precisely about two species meeting each other mid-way: in exchange for herders' care, protection (from the cold, predators, hunger), comfort, grazing areas for animals and their progeny, herders reap all the benefits derived from animals in return: meat, hair, skin, dairy products, warmth, manure, a workforce, sacrificial offerings, new generations of animals and economic safety. Not to suggest this is an entirely equitable exchange; but it is a reciprocal exchange nevertheless, the modalities of which vary from one herder to the next.

There are varying degrees of separation between species in different contexts. Some urban spaces bring (visible) interspecies interactions to a minimum; similarly, wildlife in some parts of the world can have close to zero interaction with humans. But from these situations must not be inferred as the "naturalness" of species boundedness or the desirability of species' segregation from each other. Even the most self-sufficient species – humans included – thrive on the effects of other species' presence and actions. If we are to study the lives of human beings who heavily rely on interspecies partnerships to thrive, we cannot import a segregationist bias; we cannot assume the impermeability of each species if we want to adequately grasp our interlocutors' experience of the world. Hence, anthropology has much to gain from discarding its segregationist assumptions and embracing the reality of interspecies co-dependence by considering other animals as rightful subjects of the ethnographic endeavour. Plumwood insists on the importance of (re)habilitating "the denied space of our hybridity, continuity and kinship" (2002, 16).



Eye(-level) contact

Milking is one of the epitomic acts of trust and intimacy that is built on a long-term personal relationship between a herder and her bovines. The herder rests her head against the belly of the dio, placing herself in a vulnerable and intimate position, that of the calf. Dio cannot be coerced; their approval has to be earned. Aside from kicking, one of their strategies for refusing cooperation is to retain the milk, giving the impression that they have no more to give, so as to keep it for their offspring. As an apprentice herder, I never managed to collect as much milk as experienced herders did, no matter how long I milked a dio, because she never agreed to dispense all her milk to me, a stranger – when she even let me approach her.

The height at which this photograph is taken puts the herder, the photographer and the viewer at the dio's eye level. It suggests a horizontality of relations where humans and bovines meet mid-way to cooperate and live with each other and enables mutual observation, rather than the overarching (supposedly external and objective) gaze of the scientist. Studying pastoralism calls for interactions with all species and environments involved, founded in trust and respect.

A herder is, in a way, a "hybrid" or a hyphen: she serves as a link between the animal world and the human world. Similarly, an ethnographer is also a hyphenated being, often serving as the link between at least two worlds which seldom communicate. From there, I suggest that one way for the ethnographer to account for the multispecies nature of humans is to train to be a herder herself, in order to learn to understand non-human participants' perspectives and logics. I will now summarize what this approach consists of and warn against a few challenges of the method.

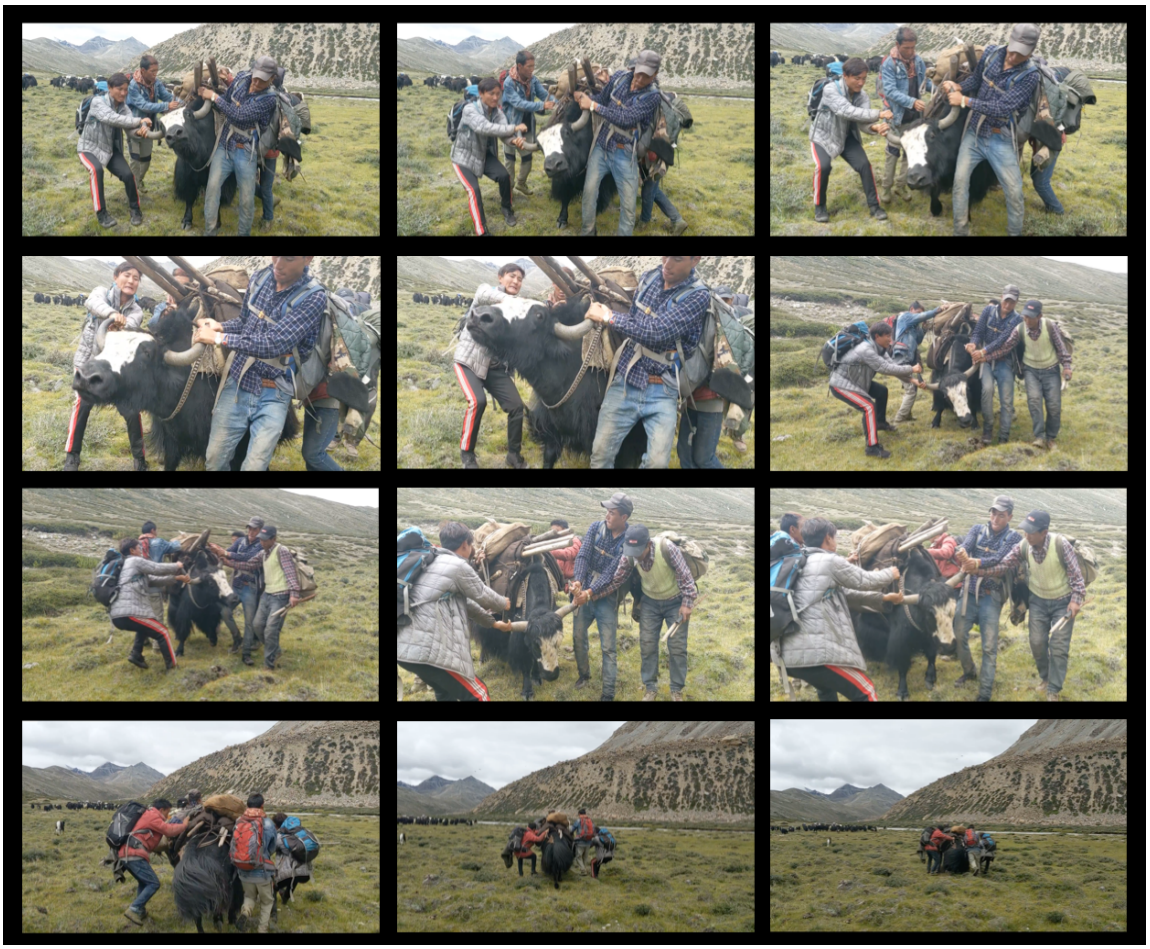
2. Entering Animals' Worlds

Acquiring a hyphenated identity, both in terms of a herder-ethnographer and in terms of human-animal interactions, is conditioned by our willingness to "think like a sheep" (Despret and Meuret 2016; Tuor 2016) – or in our case, like a *dio* (female yak). In a shepherd's own words:

> The best thing [for learning to herd sheep] is to go with a herder and stay attentive, look and listen. But you can also learn everything by yourself, directly from the animals. Your body will become fit and adapt to [the sheep's] world of habits, a world that will also become yours if you want. (Tuor 2016, 1805 translated by Rebekka Sutter).

Thinking like a sheep supposes a willingness to embrace sheeps' logics, not to make them fit our own. The same author adds: "working with fences means that you want to follow your [own] mind and not learn from the sheep. You must know their minds; no need to know what is in your mind" (idem). This quote echoes Plumwood's call to engage with the other on its own terms (2002, 15). This also suggests approaching subjects with a non-judgemental, "beginner's mind" (to borrow the term from the Zen master Shunryu Suzuki 1970), clear from any prejudice. We must apply the same ethics of respect and openness that we deem an absolute prerequisite towards human subjects to any other animals we include in our ethnographies by taking them seriously and approaching them with the belief that we have something to learn from them.

This also entails not taking humans as a unique reference point of comparison, since the prevalent human stance is to focus on what animals do not have that humans do have. The result of that stance is the justification of a separation between humans and animals, and a domination of the former over the latter. The other consequence is a hierarchisation between animals themselves, some being judged as stupid, gregarious, machine-like, intelligent, powerful, or dangerous, all the way down to plants and trees which are discarded as devoid of sensitivity, defined as the smallest common denominator between animal species, and thus as unworthy of human attention beyond it being instrumental. This judgement has recently been refuted by anthropologists (Gagliano and Afeisa 2018; Baluska et al. 2018; Kohn 2018) in the wake of a growing number of biologists (Trewavas 2017; Calvo et al. 2017; Fournier and Moulia 2018; Mancuso and Viola 2018; Chamillard 2018; Synowiecki 2020; Calvo et al. 2020) who have evidenced not only sensitivity in plants but also a specific form of intelligence. One of the reasons for this deeply rooted disregard is our species' fierce anthropocentrism: sheep (or even more so, plants), are perceived as radically different to us; as such, we refuse to extend our empathy to them. Hence, the invitations of authors to "think like a plant" (Gagliano 2018) or to "think like a sheep" (Despret and Meuret 2016) still seem laughable to many, inconceivable to most. However, in the words of Williams: "an animal's 'dumbness' is really the measure of our 'deafness'."



Tug of war

During the shifting from one settlement area to another, some luggage sometimes slides off a yak's back. However, as a herd animal, isolating him from the rest of the herd causes distress and resistance. Hence, rearranging the loads on a yak can be a tricky and dangerous affair. Experienced herders never isolate an animal from the herd, as they know their animals' need to remain within the herd.

But either because they did not know about this behaviour, wanted to save time, or believed that they would be able to handle the animal together, these inexperienced herders tried to rearrange the loads on this yak's back without immobilizing the whole herd. This led to a bit of a rodeo…

(Williams 2000, 33). Nevertheless, in spite of the difficulty of imagining such different experiences of the world, anthropologists ought to try it because refraining from our anthropocentrism allows us to recognize that "other species perceive their worlds in their own unique ways" (Balcombe 2011, 282).

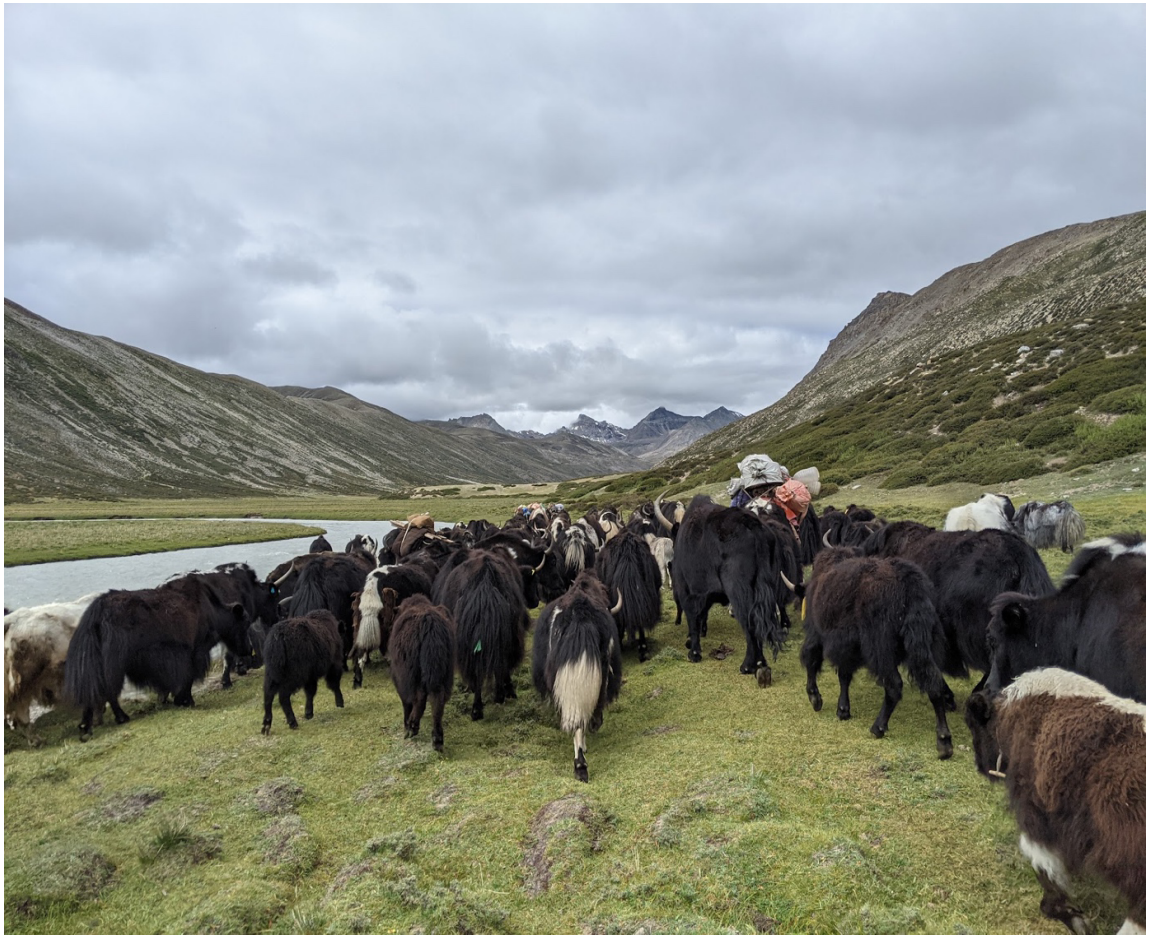
3. The Apprentice Herder-Ethnographer: A Specific Positionality

When analysing interspecies interactions from our new standpoint, we should be wary of not over-generalizing our own relationship with the herd, as a newly trained herder, nor the professional herder's relationship, to that of "all humans" with "all sheep". Just as there is a particular relationship between a given herder and a given sheep, there is a particular relationship between a given herder and a given flock determined by shared experiences, mutual knowledge, different personalities and group dynamics. This also supposes to not essentialize all sheep, for instance, namely not generalise a behaviour to the whole specie's. For example, ethologists have established the existence of different cultures and languages within a species living in different contexts (Balcombe 2011; Kendal, Kendal and Laland 2009), from dialects of birds in Manhattan to the "nineteen clearly defined cultural traditions" of orangutans (Balcombe 2011, 284), while others have talked about the different personalities of different livestock.

Moreover, the role of a herder-ethnographer is not the same as that of a professional herder, nor does taking on that role entitle me to speak in the name of all herders. Rather, it is a useful role to acquire because it opens a new methodological toolbox for understanding another species' ways and how to communicate with individuals of that species. It is also a privileged means of interacting with individuals of another species and building a relationship of one's own with them. Moments of exclusive interaction with the herder are just as important as moments of exclusive interaction with the herd and its individuals, as are moments of witnessing how the herder herself interacts with her animals.

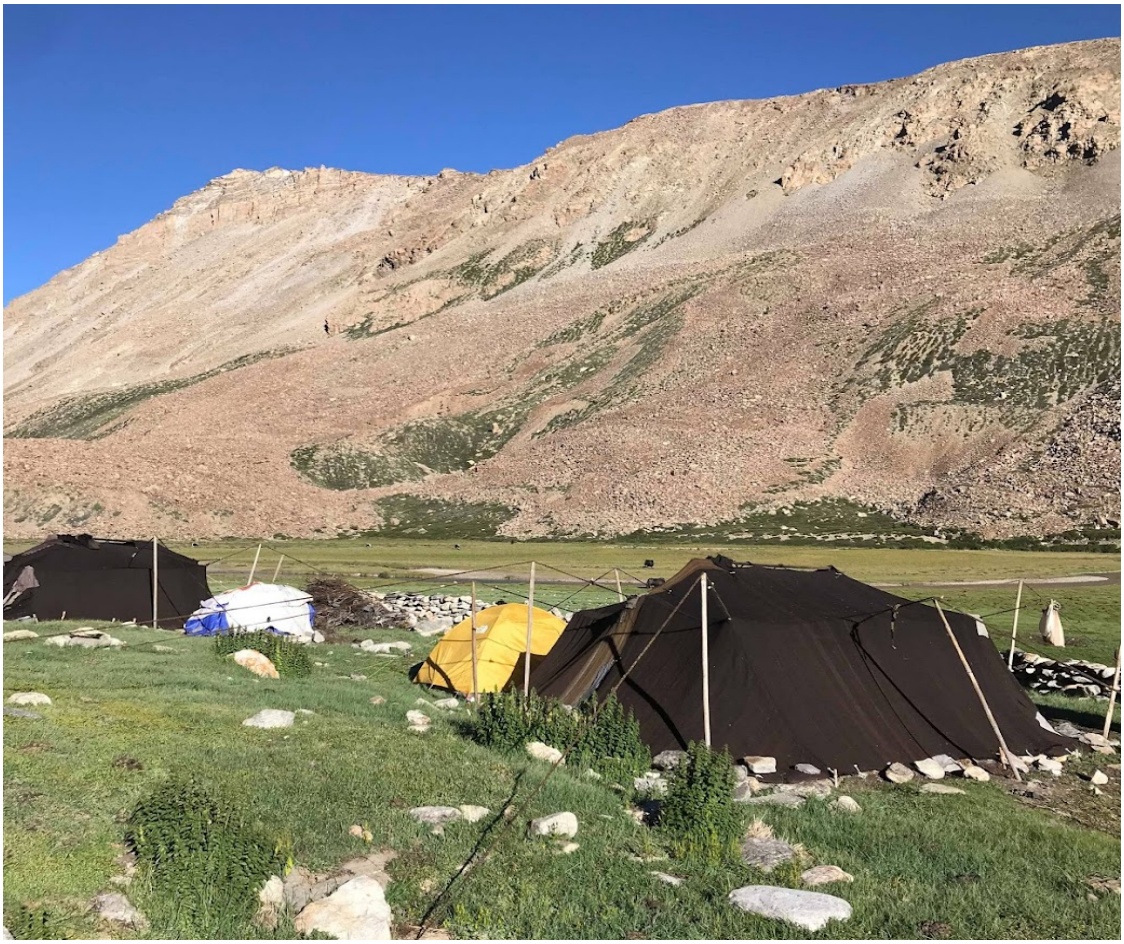
4. What's in it for Anthropology?

Learning a herder's skills brings one to a better quality of attention. Human language is not the main means of acquiring knowledge, and different means of acquisition often yield different natures of knowledge. It is an attention to the trivial, to the slightest details, when patiently observing and trying to "think like a *dió*" that is key: Why does she stop eating this patch of grass and move on to the next one? And why that one? Why this direction? Which plants is she eating exactly and why could that be? How does rain, cold, wind or heat change her food choices, her preferred grazing areas? What does she eat at different times of the day? Why does she eat differently when her stomach is full than when she is hungry? Why does she call her calf in this moment? How does each animal communicate and interact with each other? And with me? Tuning our bodies in with the herd and with the environment helps answer many of these questions. Pull on that grass and you'll see how hard it feels and why your animals don't want it; be wet and cold under the rain with them, with grass sticking to your skin and see why they are fidgety and want to get moving; feel the anxiety of being wrapped in thick fog, not knowing where the danger could come from, pricking your ears and starting to the slightest sudden sound or movement; feel also the comfort of a mild sun and a cooling breeze, the smell of fresh grass, the buzzing of insects, the openness of the landscape, and see how calmly your herd is grazing.



Shared decision-making

Shifting to the next settlement area is not solely the herder's decision: "We are shifting because the animals are not willing to stay here anymore. There is not enough grass left, so they won't stay. They are going further and further every day", once explained aw (elder brother) Wangchuk. This has been observed in other herding societies, such as amongst the Komi and the Nenet reindeer pastoralists of southern Siberia: "The herders move when reindeer no longer want to stay on the pasture. […] The herders react to the behaviour of reindeer rather than to the abundance of forage" (Istomin and Dwyer 2008, 530). Hence, the decision process is a shared one, where ecological factors are assessed by the reindeer, not directly by the herders. In Limi, a certain degree of autonomy is encouraged amongst bovines, in that it enables them "to play an active role in the relationship with humans and the environment" (Stépanoff 2012, 308). Bovines know the landscape in Limi better than any other human, having learnt from the older herd members. On this picture, they knew very well where to go and, once they reached, started dispersing and grazing even before their human caretakers had all arrived.



Immersive participant observation

Participant observation is a signature method of anthropology. It supposes to immerse oneself, as a researcher, into the lives of the people whom one wishes to understand by assisting in day-to-day work, observing, interviewing, and learning the local language. In total, I spent nine months in this little yellow tent, learning the basics of herding dio: transforming milk into various dairy products, collecting wild herbs and mushrooms, cooking on a small portable furnace with dried dung, washing in the icy river, collecting fresh spring water, sometimes having to put aside my vegetarianism, etc. Whatever electronics I brought with me – a satellite phone, an e-book and a camera – I had to charge with my own solar panel.

Echoing Van Wolputte's words: "Among these herders, [...] 'bodiliness' also implies the bodies of the animals in one's herd, [...] it implies a body-self that originates in 'outer' fields of meaning and extends in space and place, in material culture, in animals, and in the bodies of others" (Wolputte 2004, 252).

Ogden, Hall and Tanita (2013, 17) also evoke other ethnographers' move beyond humans' usual semiotic systems as the sole reference point:

> In a beautiful account of Runa relations with other species, Kohn (2012) questions the primacy of human symbolic systems, such as language, to capture the multiple nonverbal signs that circulate among multiple species. In doing so, Kohn is able to "provincialize" language, treating it as just one sign system in a broader semiotic universe.

What's more, getting into the nitty gritty, experiencing in a direct way what it means to work with animals, can help us tailor our questions to our human interlocutors better. It helps make the questions more specific – and as working guests, we cease being perceived as bothersome with our incessant questions, as we take on a new purpose: we need to understand how the work is done to do it properly ourselves. Being a herder, in that sense, is very similar to the practice of ethnography, as it helps us to access and comprehend other lived realities and put our own into perspective.

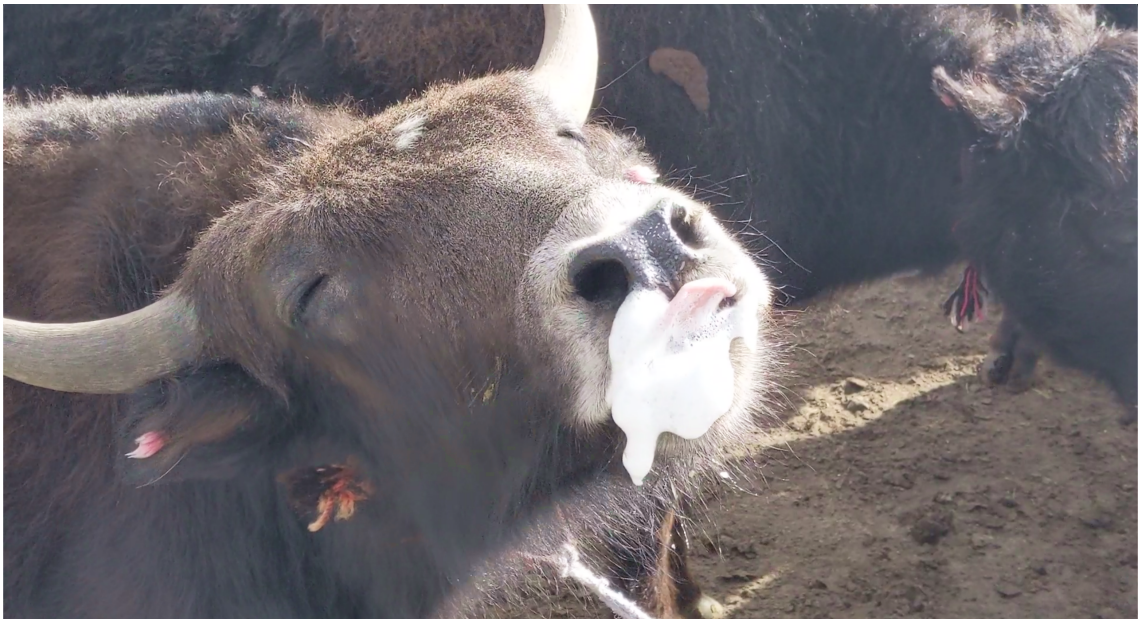
5. Beyond Body and Mind

The embodied aspect of knowledge is but one aspect of the method. I would not fully be doing my interlocutors justice if I were suggesting that body and mind are the only way they apprehend reality. Seldom do herders I met, in France or Nepal, not speak of having developed senses beyond those which the body affords. Tuor speaks in this regard of "mindfulness" and "animal spirit":

> How many do you have? [...] How do you count them? Always the same questions. How to count. "To count" is a completely new term in the alpine farmers' jargon, the old folks said "to appeal". The new ones say "to count". Those who don't know the animals, have to do math. Skilled herders, grown up with the animals, know a herd of 120 to 150 animals within two weeks, every single animal. They observe. [...] Mindfulness instead of mathematical grasping. "To appeal" means checking whether all [animals] of each farmer are present. But with sheep you can neither do appeal nor count, you have to start trusting your feeling and instinct and that's where the fascinating aspect of herding sheep starts. (Tuor 2016, 98, translated by Rebekka Sutter)

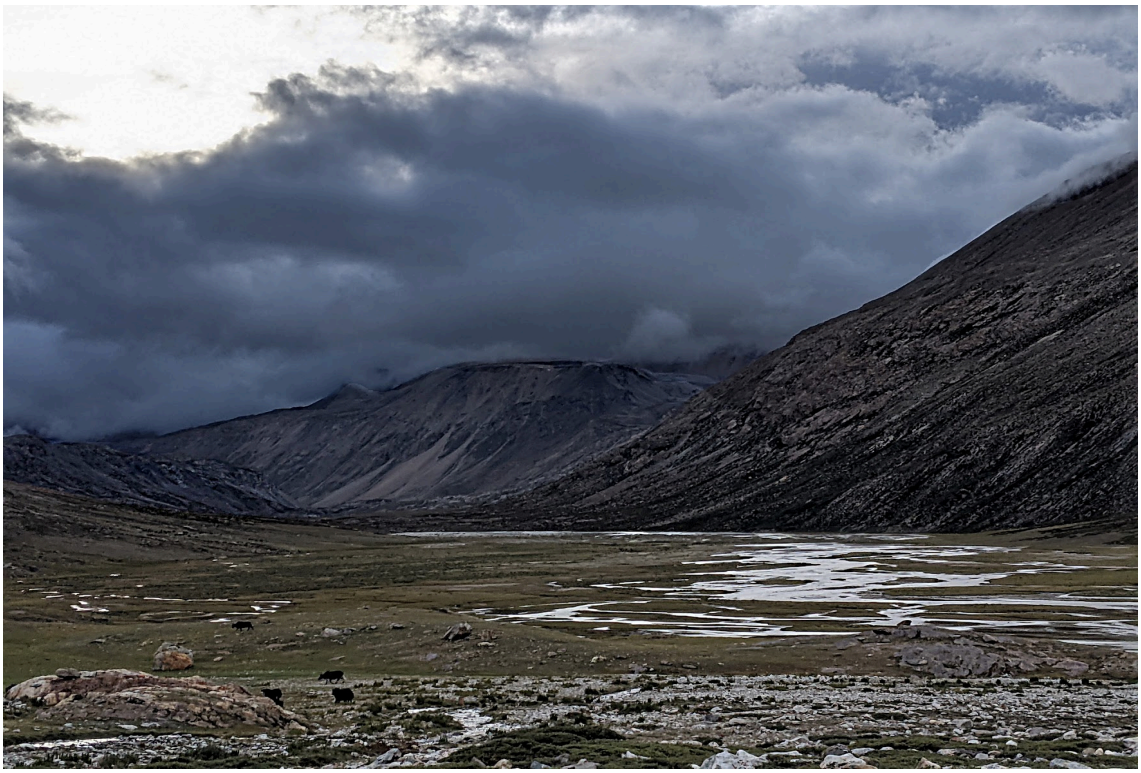
Interestingly, these words resonate with Govindrajan's concept of "kinship of spirit" as she describes the entanglement of interspecies bodies and minds:

> In the villages of the Central Himalayas, the kinship of spirit between human and animal is fostered by practices of domestication that rely on the embodied participation of one being in the life of another. It is through the everyday process of going "in and out of each other's minds and bodies," to borrow Maurice Bloch's (2012) evocative turn of phrase, that humans and animals come to be constituted as kin. (Govindrajan 2015, 506)



Clouds of milk

This two-year-old calf just drank milk from his mother and is still sucking on the foaming milk remaining on and in his mouth. He closes his eyes with delight and tilts his head in various positions. As a weaned adult, he might still make this suction sound and tilt his head from time to time, reminiscent of the comforting feelings of drinking his mother's milk. Herders say these adults "drink the clouds" to quench their thirst.



The animal-human-landscape triad

Though the immense landscapes in the harsh climate of Limi may seem uninhabited, they are home to humans and herds for half of the year. The concept of "wilderness" in Limi would not do justice to the way humans and herds have interacted and shaped landscapes over generations to make them what they are today. In this picture, the first impression of a barren, wild land is mitigated by the discreet presence of yaks and dio on the slope in the lower part of the image. Appearing tiny in relation to the vastness of the plain, they are a good reminder of the possibility of sharing "a world of many worlds" (Blaser and de la Caneda 2018) with other beings without hegemonically subsuming all other worlds in a human world:

"Humans form an integral and critical part of biodiversity" wrote Haywood in 1999, a claim taken up again in 2021 by some biologists: "Recognizing this deep cultural connection with biodiversity will therefore be essential to resolve the crisis" (Bliege-Bird et al. 2021, 1).

From feeling the presence of predators to feeling the pain of one sheep amongst the flock or sensing an avalanche in a neighbouring valley, most of the herders I worked with spoke of having developed, over years of practice and connectedness with the mountain, elements, animals, or spirits, a sixth sense of sorts. It seems to me that these kinds of experiences will always be out of reach for us, apprentice herders. But at least we can withhold our spontaneous scepticism to the evocation of matters we may judge as esoteric, and create the conditions to get as close as possible to our interlocutors' experience. This, for us ethnographers, is a fundamental epistemological question that ought to be engaged with.

Tara Bate is pursuing a PhD at the Institute for Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Zurich. Before that, she worked as a shepherd in the French Alps after having completed a Masters in Development Studies at the Graduate Institute in Geneva, another in Gender Studies in Paris and a Bachelor in Political Science in Paris as well. Today, she is increasingly experimenting with visual methods and is currently working on two films, one on experiences of raising children while working as shepherds in the French Alps, and another on the Limey's perceptions of the landscape through pastoral practice.

Photographs: All photographs were taken by the author between July and September 2021 in the pasturelands of Limi, Humla, Nepal. The pictures on p. 2, 6 and 11 are stills from video footage shot with a smartphone, the others are pictures taken with a smartphone. Oral consent was given by each human interlocutor at the time of filming or taking the picture.

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