

Lindsay A. Skog
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Preliminary reflections on *Producing the Sacred: A spatial analysis of articulations between global discourses and the sacred landscape of Khumbu, Nepal*

Increasingly, non-governmental organizations and social movements, ranging from the local to global in scale, are mobilizing sacred landscapes—intimate, yet contested and politically charged lifeworlds and expressions of beliefs—to support environmental conservation programs, development agendas, and indigenous peoples’ territorial claims. Such is the case in Khumbu, Nepal, where the concept of the region as a *beyul*, a sacred hidden valley in the Nyingma Tibetan Buddhist tradition, has been mobilized to promote environmental conservation, economic development through tourism, and claims to statehood in proposals for federalist states in Nepal’s new constitution. Indeed, elsewhere, evidence demonstrates that such mobilizations of sacred landscapes by global environmental conservation, indigenous rights, and development movements are often effective in meeting these goals. Yet, despite the seemingly fertile ground for articulations between the concept of Khumbu as a sacred landscape and global discourses of environmental conservation, development, and indigenous politics, the *beyul* concept has failed to take hold among Khumbu residents. This raises the question: Why did the *beyul* concept fail to be successfully articulated in Khumbu? More specifically, taking space as a central analytic in understanding articulation: In what ways was the *beyul* concept productive of space? What role did such space(s) play in the *beyul* concept’s failure to enunciate in Khumbu?

Khumbu, located in northeastern Nepal, is Sagarmatha (Mt. Everest) National Park and a UNESCO World Heritage site. It is also the homeland of nearly 4,000 Sherpa people, some of whom believe the region to be a *beyul*. Responding to an observed loss of knowledge about the *beyul* concept among Sherpas under the age of 50, The Mountain Institute initiated the *Building Livelihoods Along the Beyul Trail* project (henceforth the Beyul Campaign) in 2006. The Beyul Campaign produced a documentary, a cultural guide, and an educational display in order to re-educate Sherpas about the significance of the *beyul* as a Sherpa homeland, as well as promote environmental stewardship by reinforcing environmental taboos and conservation practices associated with the *beyul* concept both inside and outside of the Sherpa community. Further, the Beyul Campaign worked to promote economic development in the region by drawing trekkers

and other visitors to Khumbu off the well-trodden main trekking route to Everest Base Camp and toward less-visited Khumbu villages.

Concomitant to the initiation of the *Beyul* Campaign, Nepal, a nascent democratic republic at the time, began the process of writing a new constitution and reorganizing the country into federalist states. To date, this process is still underway and highly contentious. While some political parties advocate for the creation of ethnic states, others support multi-ethnic states. In this context, and drawing on the support of the global indigenous rights movement, minority ethnic groups throughout Nepal are mobilizing claims of indigeneity in order to secure territory and authority in Nepal's permanent constitution. Thus, some Khumbu Sherpas have come to understand the *beyul* concept as supporting Sherpa nationalism and a claim to Sherpa statehood in the new Nepali constitution (Sherpa 2003, 2005; Spoon and Sherpa 2008).

However, despite the ways in which the *beyul* concept offers support for environmental conservation, economic development, and territory claims in Khumbu, my preliminary analysis indicates that the *beyul* concept has failed to articulate in Khumbu. My preliminary research in 2009-2010 among Khumbu Sherpas over the age of 50 revealed that while some older Sherpas embrace the notion of Khumbu as a *beyul*, others reject the idea and instead hold to localized pre-Buddhist beliefs in place-based deities and spirits that dwell in the rivers, lakes, trees, rocks, and mountains (Skog 2010). Some Sherpas combine these two sets of beliefs, yet others hold them to be mutually exclusive. Yet, such differences in beliefs are insufficient in explaining the failure of the *beyul* concept to successfully articulate in Khumbu. Indeed, given the potential benefits of increased environmental protection in a fragile ecosystem and increased economic development through a 'sacred sites' trail, as well as the potential for a formidable claim to statehood, it is unclear why Khumbu Sherpas have rejected the *beyul* concept. Indeed, perplexed by the failure of the *beyul* concept, a key interlocutor recently argued, "the *beyul* was a perfect package for Sherpas" (personal communication, April 5, 2013, Kathmandu, Nepal).

My preliminary analysis of the data collected during fieldwork funded by a SRA fellowship indicates that the success of the *beyul* campaign in Khumbu was dependent on the development of a strong ethnic and territorial consciousness among Khumbu Sherpas; however, despite being the 'perfect package' (i.e. Sacred territory that could be connected to environmental conservation practices and indigenous rights), the *beyul* campaign failed to achieve its stated goal of improving conservation practices, or to be taken up as the basis of a

claim to statehood in Nepal because the space produced by the beyul campaign was not compatible with the spaces produced both by Sherpas everyday religious and economic practices, and the state. That is to say that the multiple spaces produced in the Khumbu—the national park, political economic/tourist/mountaineering space, and sacred space have worked to *disrupt* the development of a distinct ethnic and territorial consciousness that would have allowed for the space of the beyul to be enunciated in Khumbu.

This dissertation research brings together and contributes to geographic literature on religion and sacred landscapes, environmental conservation, development, and indigenous politics. Through a conceptual framework built on Lefebvre's ([1974] 1991) theory of the production of space and Hall's (1996) theory of articulation, I argue that the *beyul* concept and its failure to articulate in Khumbu is best understood through a Lefebvrian spatial analysis. In doing so, my research contributes an explicit spatial analysis to the literature on processes of articulation.

References

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