

Volume 4, Issue 2, Winter 2015

Langscape

The People's Issue Part II
At Home and in the World

*Langscape is an extension of the voice of Terralingua.
It supports our mission by educating the minds and hearts
about the importance and value of biocultural diversity.*

*We aim to promote a paradigm shift by illustrating
biocultural diversity through scientific and
traditional knowledge, within an appealing
sensory context of articles, stories and art.*

ABOUT THE COVER PHOTOS

Front: *The Gamaran Protected Forest, West Sumatra, Indonesia*

Minangkabau forest worker Ramly gazes high into the canopy. His skills and traditional knowledge of the Gamaran Forest are possibly unmatched.

Photo: J.J. Kohler, 2015

Back: *Bahía Solano, Chocó District, Colombia*

It is important to involve primary school students in researching and surveying the territory. Three children look over the municipal seat of Bahía Solano from one of the highest points found in this region.

Photo: Felipe Rodríguez Moreno, 2014

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Langscape

Magazine

LANGSCAPE VOLUME 4, ISSUE 2, Winter 2015
THE PEOPLE'S ISSUE PART II: AT HOME AND IN THE WORLD

Table of Contents

CONTRIBUTORS5

EDITORIAL.....7

IDEAS

Mirroring the Land:
Biocultural Diversity Embodied
Sonja Swift11

Country Minds
and the Age of Restoration
Bob Weeden.....16

At Home Between
Sciences and Humanities:
*Biocultural Diversity as Source
and Object of Interdisciplinary Dialogue*
Cristina Muru.....20

REFLECTIONS

It's Hard to Know
Mary Louise Pratt.....24

Edges of Transformation:
*Women Crossing Boundaries between
Ecological and Social Healing*
Jeanine M. Canty.....30

DISPATCHES

Cracked Earth:
*Indigenous Responses
to Nepal's Earthquakes*
Sara Shneiderman and Mark Turin.....34

When Home Becomes
a Protected Area:
*The Udege People and the Bikin River
Valley in the Russian Far East*
Aleksandra Bocharnikova39

Biocultural Diversity
Conservation Tourism:
*The Gamaran Protected Forest,
West Sumatra, Indonesia*
Tom Corcoran44

Fostering Well-being Through
Biocultural Diversity:

*The Las Nubes Project in a Biological
Corridor in Southern Costa Rica*

Felipe Montoya-Greenheck..... 48

Isafarn Nudrar:

*Flowerpots Help Preserve Biocultural
Diversity in the High Atlas, Morocco*

Irene Teixidor Toneu 53

Orpul as a Place of Mind:

*Integrating Local Ritual into School
Curriculum to Sustain Biocultural
Diversity in Tanzania*

Heidi Simper 57

ACTION

Decolonial Mapmaking:

Reclaiming Indigenous Places and Knowledge

Jordan Engel 62

Strengthening the Link Between Green
“Fights” and Language “Fights”:

A Proposal from Basque Country

Beñat Garaio Mendizabal 66

LOUDER THAN WORDS

Mangroves, Education,
and Recovery of the Territory:

*Biocultural Diversity
in Bahía Solano, Colombia*

Felipe Rodríguez Moreno and
Norma Constanza Castaño Cuéllar 71



Cracked EARTH:

INDIGENOUS RESPONSES to Nepal's Earthquakes

Sara Shneiderman & Mark Turin

“My heart is still shaking,” said Ram Bahadur when we spoke with him the day after the first massive earthquake—7.9 on the Richter Scale—struck Nepal on April 25, 2015. Almost five months later, he and other members of the Indigenous Thangmi community in Nepal are still coming to terms with their new and permanently altered reality following this brutal upheaval.

A second earthquake (technically only an aftershock—although it clocked in at 7.3—as it fell along the same fault line) struck Nepal on May 12. It was epicentered in the districts of western Dolakha and eastern Sindhupalchok, the heartland of the traditional and ancestral territories of the Thangmi community. It caused massive devastation: nearly every house in every village was leveled, as were the district headquarters. As Bir Bahadur, a Thangmi

intellectual and language activist put it, *“Our houses are no longer useful things.”* The same could be said for community buildings, schools, hospitals, temples and grain stores.

The loss to lives and livelihoods brought about by the earthquakes that ravaged Nepal in April and May 2015 has been immense, but the full impact—what we may refer to as the political, social, economic and emotional aftershocks—is only now beginning to be understood. Here we ask: how has the Thangmi community, one of Nepal's Indigenous and historically marginalized groups, been affected and impacted by this natural disaster? How have the Thangmi responded and begun to rebuild their lives? How has the earthquake challenged traditional understandings of land, territory, family and the environment?



A traditional mud, stone, and wood house destroyed by the earthquakes, along the main road between Charikot and Dolakha. Photo: Mark Turin, May 2015

The first reports from the Thangmi homeland—where we have lived and worked in partnership with the community for almost 20 years—were sporadic. Many of the higher-altitude northern villages, which lie just south of the Tibetan border, were entirely cut off following the disaster. As is so often the case, the international media took notice of the region only after a US military helicopter carrying Nepali and US troops on a relief mission tragically crashed into the side of Kalinchok, a mountain sacred to many local communities, killing all military personnel on board as well as several Nepali civilians who were being evacuated.

Photos of the general destruction shared via social media showed that traditional architecture—constructions in wood, brick and mud—lay in ruins, while the concrete landscape in the district capital looked to have stood up surprisingly well. Yet, cracked concrete cannot be easily repaired and would have to be torn down, as rips and tears in the material render it unstable. Older buildings, while collapsing more visibly and sometimes quite catastrophically, had been constructed out of more traditional materials that could be salvaged and reused: beams, window frames, doors and grills. Even unbroken bricks could be recovered from the debris.

"How has the earthquake challenged traditional understandings of land, territory, family and the environment?"

Following the earthquakes, in the rush to build temporary shelters, demand for galvanized corrugated tin roofs exceeded supply. The product was cheap, light and reusable, and if it fell on your head, you might get a cut but would not be seriously hurt. No one was buying bricks from the shuttered kilns and brick farms that encircle Kathmandu. Their smoke stacks were broken and silent, many had collapsed entirely, and their staff—predominantly rural workers, including many Thangmi community members—were heading back to their families in rural districts, their earnings in hand.

The first images that came out of Dolakha were heart-wrenching: some houses had simply snapped in two, others had slid down a ridge, folded in on themselves, or been relieved of their façade as it sheered off. "If only the second earthquake had brought our house down completely!" Bir Bahadur lamented. "We've had to spend so many hours doing demolition, it's such a waste of time." He spoke of praying for a third earthquake, so that he and his community would be spared the emotionally and



A bare lightbulb affixed to a tree next to a temporary shelter. A more aspirational than functional statement, as power had not returned after the earthquake. Dolakha, Nepal. Photo: Mark Turin, May 2015

physically draining work of leveling the houses that they had built with their own hands. Komintal, a Thangmi community member who lives in Kathmandu, where he manages the Digital Himalaya Project, let out a big sigh: "The earth has played Candy Crush with us!"—referring to a popular game for cell phones.

Thangmi community members in the village of Suspa were exhausted by the uncertainty and fear of not knowing whether the earthquakes were now finally over. Living in an earthquake zone entails managing a stress that is hard to imagine: could you start to rebuild your life, or was another quake coming just around the corner? Indeed, by the end of September Nepal's National Seismological Centre had registered almost 400 aftershocks over 4.0 on the Richter Scale, many of which were epicentered in Dolakha.

By the time one of us (Mark) visited in May, our hosts in Suspa—Kedar and his father Mangal—had filleted their old house, removing not only tin roofing but reusing each nail that could be salvaged. They had relocated a steep 10-minute climb up the hill, in the middle of a small terrace planted with turmeric. They would have to pay their relative back for the cost of the crops that their shelter had trampled. Mangal, an expert carpenter, had worked night and day to ensure that their extended family had a

reliable water supply and weather-resistant if temporary housing. He had rigged up a lightbulb on a post outside the shelter to keep away the jackals that threatened to eat their chickens at night. There had been no electricity for weeks, so the electricity pole with the bare bulb attached to it was more aspirational than functional—but he was prepared for when the grid would be repaired and turned back on.

The women in the household had been relentless in their salvaging and foraging for food to keep the family fed. Much of their grain stock had been lost, contaminated with mud or debris, and what had survived was quickly soaked beyond use in the heavy rains that followed the first quake. Everyone's creativity was being pushed to the limits, making do with less, prioritizing the children and the old, and falling back on traditional staples from the forest (such as ferns and wild yams), using ashes from the fire to scrub pots clean and tender branches of *neem* (*Azadirachta indica*) as a toothbrush, known to have strong Ayurvedic properties.

"We were lucky that there was no power that Saturday so the kids were outside playing in the sun. If we'd had electricity on the day of the quake it would have been a lot worse, as the kids love to watch cartoons and DVDs on weekends when they're not in school. They would have been crushed as everything came down on top of them,"

continued Bir Bahadur, who had kept careful notes of all that had transpired since the earthquake. Shaking his head, he explained how the first relief supplies that arrived included unhusked rice that they couldn't eat, as all of the three technologies they had at their disposal to husk the rice (diesel mill, water mill, and hand mills) were broken and beyond repair. Bir Bahadur was tending his buffalo when the quake started, and looked down the valley to see a rising wall of dust. *"It was just as if someone had blown on the embers of a fire that raised a cloud of smoke across the whole village."* While the ground shook and wood started falling off his house, he ran inside to rescue his laptop and his phone charger. Then he watched his home collapse in on itself.

Bir Bahadur's younger brother, Nare, had been demolishing, rebuilding, and re-rebuilding every day since the first earthquake. As he and his family salvaged more from the rubble of their home, they had to extend the size of their temporary shelter to accommodate their rescued belongings. He hadn't had a day off for over a month, and his hands were raw. He spoke of his disbelief at what had survived in his house: while his two goats had been crushed, the 13 freshly laid eggs that lay in a bowl in the kitchen were miraculously unbroken. His family had eaten one a day since the quake.

Wheat drying on the remains of houses, all of which will have to be threshed by hand before the monsoon rains come. Dolakha, Nepal. Photo: Mark Turin, May 2015



Nare spoke of people who were not too happy with the way that the army had “helped”. Army platoons had come to the village to assist, but they worked so roughly—dragging belongings out of houses so that bags of grain became mixed with mud rendering everything useless, or breaking cabinets and boxes that were not damaged in order to rescue documents—that people wished that they would return to their barracks.

The children of Suspa village had watched everything that they knew crumble around them. Their school, their community centre and their homes were all gone. All public and communal spaces where they could meet, play and study had been destroyed in the successive waves of earthquakes.

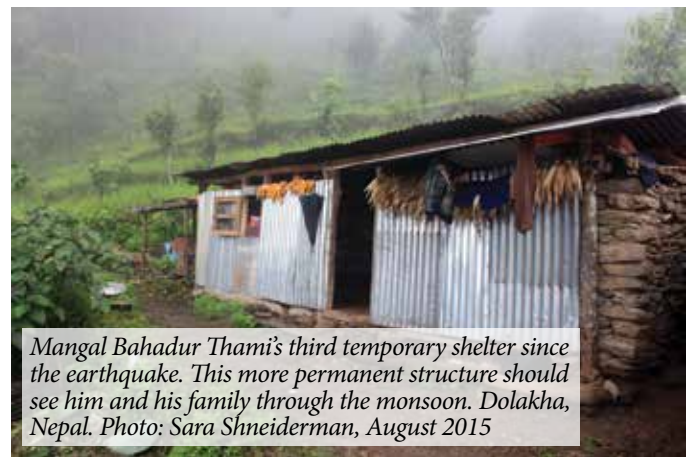
Bir Bahadur’s niece Pikin had been at home resting when the first quake hit, as she hadn’t been feeling very well. She had the presence of mind to cut the ropes to free the goats on the ground floor of her house before escaping through the roof as it collapsed around her. Her mouth quivered as she explained how it took her over a week to be able to sleep. Her elder cousin Anjali was at the hearth inside as her home crumbled. Remembering what she had been taught in school, she dove under a bed, but the bed frame was weak and collapsed on top of her, pinning her to the ground. Her brother Sagar freed her by digging her out with his bare hands. Their father

**“The earthquake may alter
broader social patterns of kinship
and residence in lasting ways.”**

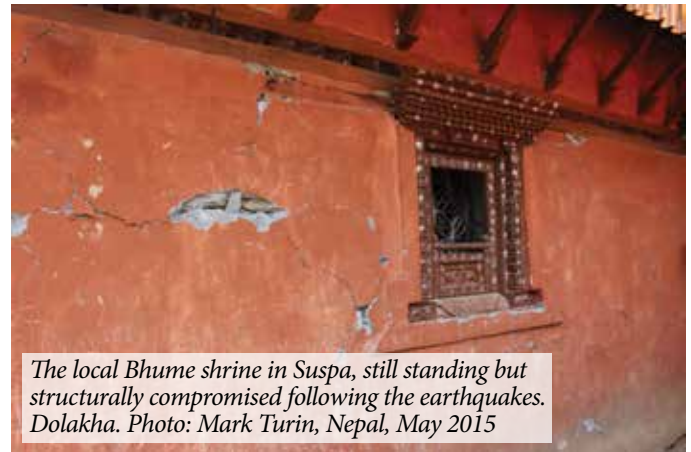
Ram shook his head as he told the story: *“That advice about taking refuge under beds and in doorframes may be suitable in a city made of concrete, but it’s of no use here in this village of stone houses.”*

We asked Kedar when and where he hoped to rebuild. He replied calmly: *“We’ll wait until after the monsoon to decide where to build. If the monsoon landslides wash us away, then we won’t need a house anyway, and we’ll build a chautara instead.”* A *chautara* is a roadside resting place, built as a memorial to those who have passed away.

Kedar, like many other young men and women, had taken the opportunity the quake offered to set up a new home with his nuclear family, separating from the joint family set-up in which he, his wife, and two young sons had previously lived. The terraced field in which they built their tin shelter was simply too narrow to accommodate a full-size home suitable for the joint family; so instead parents and son built separate, smaller shelters. Kedar was not unhappy



Mangal Bahadur Thami’s third temporary shelter since the earthquake. This more permanent structure should see him and his family through the monsoon. Dolakha, Nepal. Photo: Sara Shneiderman, August 2015



The local Bhume shrine in Suspa, still standing but structurally compromised following the earthquakes. Dolakha. Photo: Mark Turin, Nepal, May 2015

with this outcome, suggesting that he and his family might choose to continue living apart when they would rebuild permanently.

This is just one of the many ways in which the earthquake may alter broader social patterns of kinship and residence in lasting ways. Another important dynamic to watch will be how the earthquake affects people’s religious and ritual practices. For members of the Thangmi community, *Bhume* is the key territorial deity, embodied in rocks and other natural features that are embedded in the landscape. While *Bhume* shrines were traditionally open to the elements, several *Bhume* “temples” had been constructed across the region over the last decade, all of which were destroyed or damaged in the earthquakes.

Although community members were relieved, even proud, that *Bhume*—embodied in local rock and stone—was unharmed, in many cases they were unable to remove the sacred stone from the collapsed temple to worship it elsewhere. Were these earthquakes to be read as a manifestation of *Bhume*’s anger? No, Thangmi friends assured us: theirs is not a wrathful deity. Yet they would need *Bhume*’s help in the coming months—and lots of it. As the embodiment of environmental forces, *Bhume* would determine how plentiful key resources for rebuilding—wood and water—would be in the coming months.

A meeting of the officers of Faselung Samajik Sewa (FSS) an Indigenous-run and local non-profit social welfare organization, to discuss the community response and priorities for reconstruction. Dolakha, Nepal. Photo: Sara Shneiderman, August 2015



The community was waiting. They would be watching the heavy rains of the monsoon that typically would last into October to see whether the local landscape and topography would be reshaped once again after landslides and floods. As individuals, families, households, and as a community, they were making careful decisions, informed by detailed local and traditional environmental knowledge, to wait out the rains and decide where to rebuild their lives only once the skies have dried.

Locally based organizations supporting Thangmi communities and their neighbors to rebuild:

CORE International (a registered Canadian charity): <http://www.core-international.org/>

Educate the Children Nepal (a registered US non-profit): <http://www.etc-nepal.org/>

Nepali Heritage Charity Foundation (a registered Canadian charity): <http://www.nhcfbc.org/>

Trans-Himalayan Aid Society: <http://tras.ca>

Additional photos complementing this article are available as a member-only feature on the Langscape website. Please visit www.terralinguaubuntu.org and become a member.

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