

'Kyidug Manyom': Transnational Migration, Belonging and Social Change in Mustang, Nepal

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This paper explores transnational migration in and from Mustang, Nepal, a high-altitude region of the Himalayas, to understand how people who migrate and return reconstruct a sense of belonging to their birthplace. Narrative ethnography forms the core of this paper as we discuss the stories of four individuals from Mustang to explore the complex decision making around migration and the act of returning, permanently and cyclically. We build on theories of 'transnationalism' and 'belonging' and emphasize the circular nature of migration, to argue that migratory journeys involve a continued evaluation of the social and economic realities of contemporary life at 'home'—highlighting intergenerational tensions, ideas around cultural preservation, and a dynamic understanding of belonging in the context of a transnational community. Although financial need continues to be a primary driving force behind migration trends in Mustang, this paper acknowledges other factors that shape migration such as, family

pressure and intergenerational tensions, and the infrastructural and technological developments that have made travel and communication easier and more reliable. Despite the widespread depopulation of Nepal's highlands, we argue that many Mustangis who migrate remain committed to Mustang's socioeconomic future, and nurture a connection to their ancestral homeland even as their transnational aspirations pull them away.

Keywords: migration, transnationalism, belonging, social change, Mustang, Nepal

Introduction

How does migration transform the lives of those who stay behind, and those who seek to build a different future for themselves—bridging transnational aspirations with the desire to remain connected to their ancestral homelands? Situated along the western massif of the Annapurna mountain range, mobility has been an ubiquitous part of people's lives in Mustang, from the time the region was part of a key trading route for salts moving south from Tibet and grain moving north from India, up to contemporary tourism, commodity trade and more recent waves of transnational labor migration, particularly to New York City where a relatively large number of people from Mustang now live (Craig 2020). While different forms of migration have long shaped livelihoods in Mustang, studies show the region is experiencing one of the highest rates of depopulation among mountainous regions in Nepal, with implications for political representation, elderly care, linguistic diversity, land use and religious practices (Childs et al. 2014; Craig 2020). We build on existing research to explore the socio-economic impacts of migration at a local level, and to better understand how transnational migration reshapes social, economic, and environmental dynamics in Mustang.

Narrative ethnography (Gubrium and Holstein 2008) forms the core of this paper as we explore the migration stories of four individuals who have returned to Mustang, some permanently and others cyclically, to show how they remain attentive to the changes their mobilities produce. We explore how migratory journeys involve a continued evaluation of the social and economic realities of contemporary life at 'home,' highlighting intergenerational tensions, ideas around cultural preservation, and a dynamic understanding of belonging in the context of a transnational global community. Throughout our fieldwork, many of our research collaborators described the migratory trends using the phrase in Nepali '*manis haru ko lagi euta paristithi ho*' which roughly translated signifies migration as a 'condition of the people.' Others used the phrase in the local variant of Tibetan '*kyidug manyom*'¹ from which the title of this paper emerged, to indicate an imbalance of happiness and suffering that characterizes their mobile livelihoods and the burdensome work that falls to those who stay behind. This paper acknowledges the hardships families face when younger members leave and begin a new life abroad, and also explores the ways migratory pathways have offered many families in Mustang the ability to invest in higher education for their children, purchase land and own homes in Kathmandu, pay for elderly care, and attain a better standard of living that, for the older generations, once seemed inconceivable.

We begin with the personal narrative of one co-author, Yungdrung Tsewang Gurung, to foreground the core issues of this paper including the difficulties young people face when they are educated outside of their natal villages, the pressure to migrate, and the burdens that fall on those who stay. We then move to a theoretical discussion where we outline our use of 'transnationalism' and 'belonging' as key concepts (Ahmed and Fortier 2003; Appadurai 1995; Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc 1994; Castles 2010; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Vertovec 2003) with a focus on how migration as a global process produces and is produced by change at a local level. We build on theories that emphasize the circular nature of migratory pathways (Craig 2020; Craig and Gurung 2018; Hausner and Sharma 2013; King and Christou 2011; Shneiderman 2015a; 2015b; 2013), particularly Craig's (2020) '*khora* of migration,' and support the flexible and multi-placed framing of identity and belonging (Conradson and McKay 2007; Komarnisky 2018; Ong 1999; Sorge and Padwe 2015). We briefly trace the history of migration in and from Nepal and situate these broader national trends in relation to Mustang's particular experience to show the varied impacts increased mobility has in the context of high-altitude Himalayan communities. We then share the stories of four individuals whose lives abroad altered their connection to Mustang as their sense of belonging and understanding of the broader cultural dynamics at play shifted over time and in and through multiple localities.

Yungdrung Tsewang Gurung

I, Yungdrung Tsewang Gurung, was born in the village of Lubrak, a settlement of fourteen households in the southern part of Mustang, in the spring of 1989. My mother gave birth to two daughters and seven sons, three of whom passed away prematurely due to health complications. Life was difficult for many people in Mustang back then and children were often sent away from the village to school at an early age. My mind often wanders back to the memory of traveling to India along with sixteen other children in the winter of 1993, when I was just four years old, as my father led us to a Tibetan boarding school, an underfunded hostel for children of poor families in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh. As the days, months and years passed, me and many of my friends would dream about our homes and families wishing that one day we could return. For me, my hopes of reconnecting with my family grew fainter after I learned of my father's passing in 1997. When I finally did return to visit in 1998, I vividly remember reading scriptures on the roof with *Chomo* Khandru², the only nun in my natal village; these memories are beautiful and ones I will never forget.

In the summer of 2014, twenty-one years after I left, I moved home to Mustang and witnessed the massive changes that had taken place in my absence. I was forced to relearn my position within the community as I grappled with how increasing rates of outmigration had permanently changed my home. In Mustang, youth are from a very early age conditioned to migrate abroad in order to earn a higher income and attain status within their natal communities. Even though I was able to secure a salaried position with the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) in Mustang, my friends and relatives continue to ask me about my future career goals: “When are you leaving for the US? Are you applying for a visa?” I reply, “Not soon, and maybe never.” Given the immense social pressure to migrate, particularly to the US which many people see as the ultimate goal, I often imagine myself standing on an old wooden bridge of misfortune and dilemma, unable to reach either side of the river and unsure of any coming floods or disasters. Although I have long dreamed of studying and working abroad, like many of my friends, I think about the unique land of Mustang and the significance it holds. Despite making sense of the need for economic growth and an improved lifestyle, I often imagine a Mustang with opportunities for youth, care for elderly, and a resilient culture. I worry that younger generations will not learn our traditions and that their will to learn our language grows weak with the passing of time. As more people make the decision to leave, suffering great personal and financial burdens along the way, what they believe to be the ‘American dream’ remains far out of reach.

Research Context and Methodology

Situated high in the Himalaya, Mustang has been part of the nation-state of Nepal since the mid-18th century (Dhungel 2002). The lower part of Mustang where this research was conducted is referred to in Nepali as ‘*baragon*’ (misleadingly translating to ‘twelve villages’) where nineteen villages are nested alongside the Kali Gandaki river flowing through the Tibetan Plateau south to the Bay of Bengal. Setting Mustang apart from the rest of the country, “these citizens of Nepal speak Tibetan dialects, practice forms of Tibetan Buddhism and Bön, and often identify with the contours of Tibetan political history as well as more locally grounded conceptions of politics and identity” (Craig 2011: 196; see also Ramble 2008). People from Mustang have for centuries relied on agriculture, animal husbandry, trade and wage labor, as well as the relatively recent growth of the tourism industry, and transnational labor migration to other parts of South and Southeast Asia, as well as to the United States, France and other countries.

The idea that younger generations will find better opportunities abroad is a shared notion among communities in Mustang, and one that is not unfounded. The recent effects of climate change and the frequent occurrence of landslides, flooding and unpredictable rainfall have made agricultural work less productive and not an attractive opportunity for younger generations—many of whom attended school outside their natal village and are not familiar with this form of labor. Coupled with improving transportation systems and communication technologies over the past few decades, migration and remittances have emerged in new articulations and changed life for many people, increasing residents’ capacity to build new houses and cater to the growing tourism industry while also exacerbating socio-economic inequalities between households. The diversification and intensification of mobility in Mustang has over a relatively short period of time—two to three generations—shaped the way Mustangis identify and belong to their birthplace, and transformed livelihood strategies so that families who used to rely on agriculture, animal husbandry, and seasonal trade now rely more heavily on remittances from abroad. Migration is now perceived as a necessary step in one’s life course—a decision that weighs heavily on the minds of those who leave, and one that transforms the daily lives of everyone who remains (Childs et al. 2014; Craig 2020; Sharma 2018).

The ideas and evidence for this paper initially emerged as part of a larger ethnographic study³ concentrated on the transformation of ethnic identities in the newly federal democratic republic of Nepal, carried out in the fall of 2016 in what were then referred to as Village Development Committees (VDCs) in the southern half of Nepal’s Mustang district.⁴ The research included semi-structured interviews, participant observations, focus groups and a PhotoVoice project.⁵ Although migration was not part of this initial study, it became the focus of subsequent research collaborations in the summer of 2018 and the winter of 2019/2020. At present, we, the co-authors, are in the middle of a two-year ethnographic study exploring migration between Mustang and New York City, and how rapid depopulation and the worsening effects of climate change have impacted local livelihood strategies.⁶

Theoretical Framework

The themes of ‘transnationalism’ and ‘belonging’ form the basis of our theoretical framework. We follow in the footsteps of scholars who developed the concept of transnationalism (Appadurai 1995; Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc 1994; Smith and Guarnizo 1998; Vertovec 2003; Glick Schiller and Fouron 1999; Portes, Guarnizo and

Landolt 1999), recognizing two decades ago that migration studies must “broaden and deepen because migrants are often embedded in multi-layered multi-sited transnational social fields, encompassing those who move and those who stay behind” (Basch, Glick Schiller, Szanton Blanc 1994: 1003). This article builds on these theories while emphasizing how people’s experiences abroad have a profound effect on the local, rather than diminishing its importance. We align our work with a ‘transnational social field’ approach to engage with literature that draws attention to “simultaneity, or living lives that incorporate daily activities, routines, and institutions located both in a destination country and transnationally...” (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004: 1003). Our use of a ‘transnational social field’ as a theoretical foundation assumes that “assimilation and enduring transnational ties are neither incompatible nor binary opposites” (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004: 1009; see also Sunam 2020; Zharkevich 2019).

Our intent to focus on transnationality does not take for granted the assumed ease with which people move (Agamben 2005; De León 2015; Friedman 2015; Tsing 2005). Rather, we acknowledge at the start what Massey (1994) refers to as ‘differentiated mobility’—the uneven and unequal positioning of people in relation to movement. The nature of belonging, whether through a formal political recognition of citizenship or in relation to community-driven forms of social recognition, is “...only flexible to the extent that people find themselves obliged to shape their lives, and their trajectories of migration, around and through dense networks of constraints; not only legal and bureaucratic constraints, but also social, economic, geographic, and gendered” (Dennis 2018). The narratives highlighted in this paper explore how formalized categories of identity legislated by the Nepali state overlap and contradict practices of community-driven belonging in a transnational social field by looking at how people rely on their ‘Nepali’ and ‘Tibetan’ identities to maintain a plural sense of belonging.

Our emphasis on belonging within the frame of transnational life is inspired by work that advocates for a fluid understanding of place-making and identity. As Sara Komarnisky (2018) argues, “transnational lives and communities are constructed and sustained along the lines, routes, trajectories, and corridors that connect them across distance, difference, and borderline...” (73). Taking a critical stance to the common production of boundaries, both symbolic and literal, we build on this concept of multiplicity to challenge what it means to be ‘mobile’ and ‘home’ (Ahmed and Fortier 2003) and suggest that the two are not mutually exclusive. King and Christou (2011)

similarly draw attention to the inadequacy of binaries of ‘home/abroad’ or ‘origin/destination’ as they explore the return movement of people to their ancestral homeland using the term ‘counter-diaspora’ to propose a framework for return mobilities. We extend the multiplicity of place to the concept of belonging as a fluid and moving social identifier to consider migration in terms of a plurality of experiences, histories, and the workings of institutional structures (Anthias 2006; Pfaff-Czarnecka and Toffin eds. 2011).

In the context of recent ethnographic literature within Nepal and Himalayan studies, we build on Shneiderman’s (2015b) analysis of the flexible nature of identity within the long-term circular migration of Thangmi communities in and between Nepal, India and China’s Tibet Autonomous Region. Recognizing the importance of belonging in a transnational network of migration, Shneiderman (2015b) emphasizes that “neither complete citizenship nor total belonging is ever attained within the borders of a single state; rather, circular citizenship entails regular movement across nation-state borders in order to piece together the differentiated prospects for belonging that each national framework offers” (Shneiderman 2015b: 125). Other scholars have referred to this cyclical movement across borders as ‘rituals of mobility’ (Hausner and Sharma 2013) or the ‘*khora* of migration’ (Craig 2020; Craig and Gurung 2018) to mark the passing of people from one nation-state to another status-state, and address the ways people move through different stages of life in distinct contexts across time and space. In the context of Mustang, we find the concept of ‘*khora*’ (Craig 2020) a helpful way to view the cyclical nature of migration and explore “its legal obstacles and economic prospects to the ways it reshapes families and communities, including their connections to land and lineage, to language and culture” (Craig 2020: 9). Viewing migration in this way also reveals the range of circumstances and emotions that people find themselves embedded in as they move through new social and political contexts (Craig 2020; Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2003; Shah 2006).

Our focus on transnationalism and mobility does not erase the importance of locality. Multi-sited research on a global scale has meant that, in some instances, locality has been “...bypassed by a focus on transnational processes and the kinds of movements and flows they entail” (Sorge and Padwe 2015: 242; see also Hage 2005). We take this issue seriously as we direct attention to the ways migration has indelibly changed life in Mustang and altered the perspectives and daily lives of those who return; it is not just about mobile people and stable homelands but about the need to address the ‘co-mobility of home and diaspora’

(Vasantkumar 2017: 120). Shah and Lerche (2020) similarly explore ‘economies of care’ as the productive and reproductive work of kin across spatiotemporally divided households that makes the act of migrating possible and enables the maintenance of livelihoods back ‘home.’ Viewing the production and reproduction of migrant labor as inseparable processes to the functioning of transnational households requires a fluid understanding of place and identity (Shneiderman 2015a).

The ethnographic narratives in this paper expand upon this framing of subjectivity and place as multiply-located, flexible and at times materially and emotionally demanding. Viewing migration as a cyclical process by which transnational ties and connections can be both nurtured and undone, this paper explores how migration is a way a life for many households in Mustang, with an estimated quarter of the population now residing in New York (Craig 2020). The title of this paper, ‘*kyidug manyom*,’ speaks to this vast demographic shift occurring over the last two decades whereby younger generations are relocating to urban areas in Nepal and abroad. The imbalance of happiness and suffering that ‘*kyidug manyom*’ suggests does not only speak to the consequences of rapid depopulation in Nepal’s highlands, but to the way migration is a vital means of living. This is especially the case as alternative modes of earning including agriculture, animal husbandry, and regional trade become less desirable and more unpredictable as a result of contemporary demographic and environmental changes.

Migration Trends and Impacts in Mustang

Migration is certainly not new to the Tibeto-Burman language speaking populations living along the trans-Himalayan borderland of Nepal and China’s TAR (Bauer 2004; Watkins 1996). Residents of Mustang have long survived on their ability to migrate and travel, and the incentives behind such movements are diverse, including “Nepal’s decade long (1996–2006) civil war, and related socioeconomic uncertainty; educational opportunities; the imagined appeal of ‘America’; real pressures to meet rising costs of living in Nepal; and the possibilities for Mustangis to ‘pass’ as Tibetans” (Craig 2011: 197). Although Mustang was left relatively unharmed by the earthquakes of 2015 and experienced little direct violence in the earlier period of civil unrest during the Maoist-state conflict, the area has experienced one of the largest population declines of any district in Nepal. Different from Nepal’s hill and Tarai migratory flows to places like Doha, Dubai, or Bahrain as construction workers or domestic servants, the experiences of Mustangis who migrate are closely aligned with

that of other Himalayan communities like the Sherpa and Manangi/Nyeshangte, or exile Tibetans living in India and New York (McGranahan 2016; Sherpa 2019). Mustangis abroad typically find work as nannies, nail salon technicians, cooks, in hospitality, or as drivers for Uber and Lyft (Craig & Gurung 2018), and, like many other immigrant communities in the US, often confront financial insecurity, linguistic and technological barriers, and a lack of access to healthcare. Migration is not a short-term or permanent solution to financial and social vulnerability—though this may certainly be a major underlying motivation. Rather, rooted in acute understandings of the constraints of employment and educational opportunities in Nepal, migration has become a “normative step in the life course and a defining feature of...society” (Childs and Choedup 2018: 4), and one that, for many people in and from Mustang, symbolizes status, wealth, coming-of-age and stable opportunities.

Outmigration from Mustang increased notably in the past decade due to the influx of development projects that have made travel and communication far more affordable and reliable. Gyalsten,⁸ a Tibetan medical practitioner in his forties, shares his perspective on the social and economic shifts he witnessed throughout this life.

In the past, there was no electricity, phone, or motor roads in Mustang. We used to light firewood to light the room. Some people would use butter lamps if they could afford. Matches were difficult to get so at night we used to put the fire to sleep so that we would not have to make a new fire. Now, everything has changed. Development has been rapid. There has been a high shift in prosperity on the basis of economic change. People who have property along the main road have been able to progress and those who are isolated are still poor due to lack of income. The rich have become richer, but the poor are still poor. In the past, we all used to work equally. Poor and rich people both worked in the fields. But now the types of work have changed and created new opportunities abroad. Migration has resulted in social and economic changes. People used to work together and there were so many happy moments, but now it feels sad and lonely due to relatives being scattered around the world. This is due to the high demand to earn money. People have migrated to foreign lands because of the lack of opportunities in the village. There is now an imbalance of happiness and suffering. Along with increased development comes pain in the hearts of our people.

Easier modes of travel to and from urban locales, the introduction of a cash economy, and growing migration trends have transformed livelihood strategies in Mustang. Earlier trends of migrating seasonally for trade to Northeast India, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, and Thailand have evolved into much longer and more permanent journeys to places like New York City where a growing number of Mustangis now reside in neighborhoods of Queens and Brooklyn. Despite the improving market conditions in Mustang that allow households to sell apples and other goods at more competitive prices, road construction and new communication technologies are paving the way for many to seek out educational and employment opportunities abroad. Rinzin, an elderly man whose family runs a guesthouse in the village of Jomsom, points out that development in Mustang has not only shifted more traditional means of earning a living through agriculture and seasonal trade towards transnational migration, but has opened up new possibilities for educating children.

There used to be no opportunities to grow vegetables and fruits to sell due to the lack of transportation services. To make ends meet people used to migrate to the south of Nepal and India for seasonal business. Especially in the winter when the weather in Mustang becomes unbearably cold. Now with more development here, people think about the different possibilities by educating children abroad so they can compete at an international level. Older generations now believe that just having knowledge of English brings more opportunity.

Educational migration from the highlands of Nepal is linked to the flight of Tibetans from their homelands in the 1950s and 1960s and the subsequent proliferation of monasteries and schools throughout lower parts of the country and India. High mountain communities in Nepal, which up until the 1980s had little to no local educational opportunities, saw the outmigration of children rapidly increase through the 1990s, a trend which continues today (Childs and Choedup 2018; Childs et al. 2014). As Rinzin notes above, the ability to earn an education outside of Mustang remains a top priority for families who can afford to send their children to schools in places like Pokhara, Kathmandu and parts of India, as well as for many young people who seek a life beyond the village. Social change in Mustang and other Himalayan communities today is driven by the younger generations' desire to leave the village and the older generations' desire to give their children a better future. Jamyang, a religious figure and teacher at a local monastery, elaborates on the disconnect between the educational opportunities young people now have access to and available jobs.

In Nepal, there is a limited chance that people can earn an income and the government is not working hard enough to help the situation. My brother worked to get his MA here in Nepal and struggled to find a job in his field. If the government can work effectively to improve the situation, then educated people who finish 12 grades or earn a BA could choose to work here as opposed to migrating. In my opinion, people should stay in Nepal and find jobs in various fields. There are chances of getting jobs in various fields here that might not be related to their studies but slowly they can find work and earn higher incomes. There are many NGO and INGO offices within Mustang and people can find work here. Part of the problem is that everybody is eyeing big money, like earning in USD, but if one is satisfied with less money, Nepal could be a much better place.

Our research findings suggest that along with educational outmigration the emphasis on earning "big money," as Jamyang notes, has played a large role in creating a culture of migration in Mustang, generating concerns over the effects rapid depopulation will have on religious and political domains of life. Tenzin, a local religious leader of the Bön tradition, explained that "migration will make it very difficult to preserve old customs and traditions. Now there are no more than two children in a house." Tenzin is not alone in this assertion, and many community members believe it will be difficult to reconcile the ways migration has created a generational gap whereby the elderly are left to care for the house and agricultural fields while tending to their own needs as they enter into the final stage of life. Although many Mustangis abroad send remittances home to their relatives, their desire to care for the elderly and take part in important community decisions is limited.

In a political sense, the outmigration of youth poses a challenge for recognition and representation at a local level. In 2018, a newly-elected official of the rural municipality, Dawa, disclosed that despite there being more opportunities for political engagement under Nepal's new federal structure, leadership roles remain vacant throughout Mustang. The shift from VDCs to rural municipalities which has taken place over the course of our research sparked concern among Dawa and many others who worry that migration will weaken Mustang's identity within the nation-state.

Migration has impacted the development of our community. In one way, development has been hindered due to the outmigration of more educated

people, but people have also been able to earn a good income and construct houses and purchase land which has led to a better way of living here. However, if we consider the identity of local people, in the event that we want to raise our voice for proper recognition, we face problems and cannot call on individuals to fight for our identity. So, the question is do we have enough people to gain representation on a national level? Although people in foreign countries might try to send money or help, they cannot participate at a local level.

Our findings suggest that people in Mustang very often perceive development⁹ as playing a pivotal role in driving outmigration with implications for labor markets, political representation, elderly care, and the passing on of important cultural knowledge to younger generations. Dawa's comment above highlights these tensions well and raises an important question that is central to this paper: How do people who spend a significant portion of their lives outside of Mustang recreate their perception of and connection to their ancestral homeland? We share the stories of four individuals who were born in Mustang, migrated, and returned in various capacities to highlight how their mobilities challenge assumptions about the emplacement of identity and community.

Pasang

Pasang, a local political representative and hotel owner in Jomsom, now in his mid-40s, spoke to us about the paradox of migration as, on the one hand, an opportunity to increase economic prosperity of a household and community while, on the other hand, drastically limiting the potential to pass along vital cultural knowledge to younger generations.

Our people are going to the USA, Japan, Korea and so many more places. I went to a foreign country thinking that everybody goes abroad and earns money. I worked in construction and as a dishwasher and suffered a lot. After all that suffering, there is nothing I could be proud of. After working abroad for a long time, I saw things differently. I began to think nostalgically about the wind, water and soil of Mustang. I thought about eating apples and local foods. Memories of the kids playing with my community members became stronger. While working abroad, my heart roamed in my village like a dream. There were no possibilities for success abroad because I never truly belonged. So, I decided to do something of my own and I had an idea to open a hotel. My heart kept reaching back home, so

I came back to Mustang and opened my business. Here, you can open your own business and work for the community by choice. It will bring recognition to the community and you can live with your family. We can raise our own children. Although we cannot earn the same amount of money as those living abroad, we can eat local flour and learn about so many things that dying will feel like a blessing, to die in our own village and on our own land.

At present, Pasang manages multiple hotels and restaurants and remains politically active in the newly formed rural municipality; his success story being demonstrative of the possibilities migration offers those who can access foreign labor markets—an opportunity that is not available to everyone. As other scholars have noted (Chatterji 2017; Massey 1993; Rogaly 2015), structural inequalities, race, class, gender and other relations of power impact people's ability to migrate.¹⁰ This is certainly the case in Mustang as some families do not have the financial resources from tourism and other means of earning a living or the established kinship networks that make migratory journeys possible. Although the choice to migrate and return is one that few people are able or choose to make, Pasang was able to acquire enough money abroad to return to Mustang and start his own business.

We encountered other young Mustangis, like Pasang, whose experiences elsewhere reshaped their connection to Mustang and prompted them to envision a different future for themselves and their families in Nepal. The affective dimensions of these migration stories echo Shneiderman's (2015a) framing of "the village" that "serves not only as a site of nostalgia for those who have left it, but rather as an organizing principle that may possess a range of emotional and pragmatic valences" (319). The following three vignettes of individuals between the ages of twenty and thirty portray the awareness many young people convey when it comes to understanding how their mobile lives drive social change in Mustang, and serve as an important reminder that migration journeys are cyclical and transformative in nature (Craig 2020).

Pema

Raised in the village of Kag, Pema is the second son in his family and, as is customary, he was sent to study as a monk at the local monastery. Pema shared with us that he expected to remain in Mustang, playing with his young friends and fellow monks under the shadow of the Annapurna mountains, but his family had other plans. At the suggestion of a high-ranking monk, Pema's family made arrangements to send him to a more prestigious

Tibetan Buddhist monastic school in Kathmandu where Pema stayed for nearly eighteen years. In his early twenties, Pema left his life as a monk and decided to pursue job opportunities as a young entrepreneur in the cities of Pokhara and Kathmandu. We spoke with Pema during one of his annual visits to assist his family during the fall harvest season in Mustang. When we asked about migration trends in Mustang, he replied,

I don't like that people in Mustang say so many good things about people who go abroad and earn money. They don't really acknowledge people who are working and making money locally. Let's say there are two people: one is working in Mustang and earning in Nepali rupees, and the other one is abroad and making foreign currency. Even if the actual monetary value is equal, people in the village would give more respect or they would say better things about the person who works abroad. I think that's a really bad thing that people do here. I feel sad that everyone is leaving and no one my age wants to wear the cultural dress anymore. For me, being Buddhist is important. I would really love for my kids to practice Buddhism. I would say I have been influenced by Nepali culture now that I have moved [to Kathmandu] and I have been meeting Nepali people, talking and eating with them. I have been doing everything with Nepali people and I feel that influences me in some ways, but my ties to Tibetan culture will stay the same. It will not affect my values, religion and culture. When people ask me if I am Nepali, I say no, I am Tibetan. The way I dress, the language I speak, the cultural things, everything about me is Tibetan so I would say that I am Tibetan, but my citizenship is Nepali.

As theories on belonging have shown, identities are indeed multiple and contradictory (Mouffe 1993; Ong 1999). People may belong to a group while feeling a sense of allegiance to another (Anthias 2006). Pema's story highlights both. Pema is proud of his 'Tibetaness' but admits that living in Kathmandu has meant he is now more comfortable speaking in Nepali or English. He further explained, "I now prefer to talk in English, because I can express myself comfortably and it is the language I speak when I speak to myself and in my head." Pema's comments are indicative of the tension between the different identities he holds which overlap and shift according to time and space, and support Conradson and McKay's (2007) argument that "that the formation of migrant selfhood is usually more closely related to localities within nations than to nation-states" (169). Pema's attempts to stay rooted in his identity

as a Buddhist and a Mustangi are common notions held by many in Mustang and speaks to the ways many people from Mustang maintain a plural sense of belonging. Pema speaks passionately about his Tibetan identity and the importance of maintaining a sense of cultural belonging to Mustang as he simultaneously comes to terms with the ways living in Kathmandu has changed him.

I prefer to live in Kathmandu rather than in Mustang because I feel like here [Mustang] there is not much to do and I am wasting my time. Of course, if I come here for one or two weeks that is fine. But I could not stay more. The youth are leaving because our elders think the youth staying here is bad. First, they are wasting their time and second, when they are wasting time, they don't have anything to do. So, they start drinking and smoking from such a young age. That worries the elders and most of them send their kids abroad or to Kathmandu for that reason. I chose to go to Kathmandu to get a better education, a better job and higher status within my community.

Notions of status, reputation, and financial success also weigh heavily on the minds of young Mustangis. As Pema states above, the perception that money earned abroad is of higher value speaks to Jamyang's earlier comment that migration from Mustang is driven by the prospect of earning large sums of money, particularly in foreign currencies, and being able to send remittances home to family members. Craig (2020) similarly notes that, "beyond identity, economic expectations run high in households. Remittances are expected. The specter of returning to village life prompts narratives of failure and nostalgia, by turns" (84). The higher status that many in Mustang associate with migration means that Pema must carefully navigate the external pressure to leave, and certainly his own aspirations to live in Kathmandu, as he attempts to reconcile his strong allegiance to his 'Tibetaness' while adapting to new socio-political contexts in the nation-state of Nepal.

Tashi

During a local cultural festival in 2016, we met a young man named Tashi who was born in Mustang and brought up at a boarding school in India—a decision made by his parents when Tashi was three years old with the hopes that he would receive a better education. Tashi's trip to Mustang marked the first time he had returned since he left nearly twenty years ago. Tashi had come to spend his school break volunteering at a local educational facility in Jomsom which aims to educate local children and preserve

the cultural traditions of Mustang to prevent families from sending their children away; Tashi's nephew, in the fourth grade at the time, is also a student at the center. Tashi lamented the linguistic changes he encountered upon his return home and the fact that his nephew may grow up only speaking Nepali and English, and would perhaps never speak the local variant of Tibetan. When we asked about the changes he encountered upon returning to Nepal, Tashi admitted that he "really cares about Tibetan music and culture, not politics" and felt obligated to help educate his nephew and other children in Mustang. We continued to talk throughout the festival, eating a mixture of dried vegetables and spices which he dismissed as "basically Indian" and watched the procession of children in wigs and baseball caps participate in costumed tug-o-war contests as an Olympic flag flew high over the procession. Starting our walk back Tashi admitted he felt ashamed that the festival had largely resembled a sporting event as opposed to an expression of local cultural identity. Tashi explained, "development has had a definite impact on identity. People are all adapting to modern clothing. People used to sing folk songs of traditional importance in festivals but now it is more Nepali and western songs, and they have forgotten the importance of culture and tradition."

Tashi's story is a common one among young people from Mustang whose parents sent them away for schooling at an early age and whose return is fraught with concern over the rapid social and political changes that occurred in their absence. As King and Christou (2011) suggest, "whether the homecoming is liberating and empowering, leading to satisfaction and self-discovery, or, on the other hand, an experience of disenchantment, culture shock and new displacement very much depends on the contextual circumstances and individual reaction..." (461). Our research suggests that people like Tashi who are enculturated outside their natal village do indeed face difficulties returning, and when or if they do, it is difficult to comprehend the contemporary social context in which they find themselves as they move through different stages of life (Craig 2020). Tashi's disappointment regarding linguistic and cultural change, of which he himself is a part, is also representative of the ways the village remains an important point of orientation for those who move away, and a site of nostalgia for an idealized notion of the village that assumes those who remain at 'home' are responsible for safeguarding traditional ways of life (Sorge and Padwe 2015; Shneiderman 2015a). Despite Tashi's willingness to contribute to and remain part of his community, along with his disapproval of the cultural changes, he ultimately returned to India to finish his education and is currently in the process of migrating to New York City.

Tsering

I was in New York at the time, it was in 2005, when the daughter [Lee Yoon-hyung] of Samsung [South Korean Samsung Group chief Lee Kun-hee], committed suicide in her nice East Village apartment. Why did she have everything one could have thought, and still she was so sad? How did no one around her notice?

Tsering, a young woman born in the southern part of Mustang near Jomsom, left for the United States over fifteen years ago and periodically returns to assist her parents at their guesthouse during peak tourist seasons. Our conversation centered around the disillusionment that many migratory youth are forced to confront. Tsering spoke in fluent English of the surprises she encountered upon arriving in the United States, of her initial perceptions that migrating abroad would give her and her family an easier life, and her disapproval of Americans who spent too much time thinking about themselves. Using the example of Lee Yoon-hyung's suicide, Tsering explained how shocked she was to find that her foreign lifestyle was lonely and stressful, nothing like she had dreamed of as a young girl. The allure of life in the United States, the glamorous appeal of which attracted her and many of her friends, was met with disappointment. Moreover, she exclaimed, "This story [Lee Yoon-hyung's death] would not happen here [in Mustang] because people care for each other. It is very different there [in the United States] as people just care about money." Tsering explained that many of her friends want to go abroad to make money, but what they don't realize is that the conditions under which migrant workers work is often worse than what they would encounter in Nepal. Tsering feels certain that one day she will return to Mustang as life "here has been improving over the past decade, in terms of better opportunities in tourism, and the road construction has helped with supplies and travel time. People are able to start their own businesses, and make money off of what they grow in the fields." She laughed and admitted life in her village changed so much since her last visit that she sometimes felt like a foreigner herself. Earlier that same day, she was scolded by her mother for selling a bag of dried apples for 30 rupees, the price when she last visited in 2011, which is less than a third of what they sell for today.

Tsering's story represents the range of experiences and emotions people endure as they navigate the appeal of living abroad, their enculturation in different sociopolitical settings, and the difficulties associated with returning. Tsering's migration story, similar to Tashi's above, demonstrates the fluid and moving nature of identity that lies

beyond the boundaries of a single nation-state or locality. Tsering moves through different life stages witnessing the social changes occurring in Mustang, and grows unmoored from her life in the United States as she looks to the future with hope that there will be better economic opportunities for young, educated people like herself in Nepal. As Craig and Gurung (2018) suggest, belonging depends on how one is situated; whether one literally ‘walks *khora*’ (circumambulation) around religious sites in Mustang, or does so as part of their migration between Mustang and elsewhere, people stay grounded through the routines, movements and networks of their mobile lives. At the time of writing, Tsering remains in the United States and continues her personal ‘*khora* of migration,’ maintaining a sense of belonging to Mustang and imagining that one day she will return to start a family of her own.

Conclusion

This paper focused on the stories of those who have migrated within and outside of Nepal and the challenges outmigration and social change present in the context of a transnational global community like Mustang. Networks of social relations in and between Mustang and other nodes of Mustangi communities elsewhere show how theories of cyclical migration are helpful ways to understand how mobile livelihoods transgress nation-state borders, and cultural and geographic boundaries. Understanding these dynamics means moving beyond the frameworks of ‘host/sending communities,’ ‘home/abroad’ or ‘immobile/mobile’ to recognize that transnational livelihoods are constructed and sustained through the affective and material contributions of global kinship networks that encompass those who leave, stay, and return. This paper has focused on the stories of people from Mustang who have left and returned to explore how the cyclical nature of migration allows for an in-depth understanding of a transnational global community without deemphasizing the fluidity of locality, belonging and identity. Following in the footsteps of Craig (2020) who shows how “the *khora* of migration interweaves threads of care and belonging as lives are stitched together through time and space” (9), the narratives in this paper illustrate how experiences of migration are rooted in kinship and a shared connection to a homeland even as these processes reshape social, economic, and environmental dynamics in Mustang.

Although financial need continues to be a primary driving factor behind migration trends in Mustang, with many families relying on remittances to sustain them for the better part of the year, this paper also explored the emphasis on status and the social pressure associated with

migration. This trend was apparent during a conversation we had in early 2020 with Pema Dorjee, a young man from Mustang who has lived in Kathmandu for the past twenty years.

I am not proud to live in Kathmandu. I have grown used to the pollution and people, but I am not proud. My heart and soul are still in Mustang. My parents never supported my ideas to start a business in Nepal. They only wanted me to migrate to the United States like my three siblings and refused to financially help me if I stayed. I will raise my daughter so she understands that she doesn’t have to migrate to have a good life. I will support all her ideas. We need more people that think like this.

Pema Dorjee’s comment above, like Yungdrung Tsewang Gurung’s narrative at the beginning of the paper, point to a related and important theme of this paper: that the social pressure to migrate means those who wish to stay in Nepal must reconcile their own aspirations with the financial and social expectations that uphold and sustain transnational migration. Furthermore, for Mustangis abroad who wish to return to Nepal, like Pasang and Tsering, there is always the risk that this decision will be met with dissatisfaction and judgement from family and community members. Either way, we argue that the decision to migrate (and return) is one that is dictated not only by financial obligations, but by a growing sentiment in Mustang that migration, and earning in foreign currencies, supersedes alternative forms of success or personal fulfillment that one may find in Nepal.

To conclude, the narratives presented here reveal the complex and varied negotiations that play into decisions around migration, the commitment younger generations demonstrate to Mustang’s future, and the ways individuals nurture a connection to their ancestral homeland even as their transnational aspirations pull them away. This paper has shown that while it is certainly the case that migration poses many challenges for those who stay in Mustang, migration is an important source of income for many households, and a transformative experience that gives way to new understandings of selfhood and community. The stories of Pasang, Pema, Tsering and Tashi also reveal myriad ways migrants foster a sense of connection to Mustang: to educate children and maintain agricultural practices, to preserve Tibetan Buddhism and Bön traditions, to keep the local variant of spoken Tibetan alive, or to raise a family on their ancestral lands. Although it is not always the case that those who migrate from Mustang retain strong ties to their kin in Nepal, it is our finding that

a significantly strong sense of community remains, and whether people return to Mustang permanently, cyclically or nostalgically, the bonds of kinship and community provide support and refuge, especially in times of political and economic precarity (Gurung et al. 2021). In this sense, 'kyidug manyom' is a reflection of both the burdens those who stay behind must carry as they confront demographic and environmental changes, and the challenges those who migrate face when they begin a new life elsewhere. 'Kyidug manyom' is also an important statement of fact: that contemporary livelihood strategies in Mustang rely on the possibilities that circular and long-term migratory pathways offer even as these dynamics redefine families and communities in fundamental ways.

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Endnotes

1. A phrase in the local variant of Tibetan spoken in Mustang signifying an imbalance of happiness (*kyi*) and suffering (*dug*).
2. *Chomo* Khandru was a female religious practitioner of the Bön tradition in the village of Lubrak in southern Mustang where she passed away in 2002. The religious authority she gained throughout her life was as uncommon among women then as it is today. Although a large part of her life was spent working as a trader in the salt, wool and grain trade with her male relatives in upper Mustang (until China's occupation of Tibet in 1959 shut down the trade route), *Chomo* Khandru devoted the later part of her life to the *dharmā* (religious practice). As the border conflict weakened Lubrak's access to Tibetan lamas, and led to the emergence of a Nepali secular education, younger generations began to shift their priorities away from religious lifestyles (Shneiderman 2006).
3. The results of this project were published as part of Emily Amburgey's MSc thesis at the University of Amsterdam, Netherlands: <https://scripties.uba.uva.nl/search?id=636403>
4. VDCs: Jomsom, Kagbeni, Jhong, Muktinath. The VDC structure was in place during the time of this research in 2016 and has since been replaced in 2017 with new

municipalities and rural municipalities, referred to in Nepali as 'gaunpalikas.'

5. The PhotoVoice project is viewable online at: www.emilyamburgey.com. Other images culminating from this research project were published online by HIMALAYA Journal: <https://himalayajournal.org/photo-gallery/belonging-transformation-mustang-nepal/>

6. This study is part of my doctoral research under the supervision of Dr. Sara Shneiderman (UBC) and committee members Dr. Sienna Craig (Dartmouth College), Dr. Gaston Gordillo (UBC) and Dr. Geraldine Pratt (UBC) at the University of British Columbia, Canada, and is funded by the Public Scholars Initiative and Department of Anthropology at UBC. Ethics approval was obtained from the Behavioural Research Ethics Board in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement (H19-01092).

7. We follow Craig's (2020) use of the term 'khorā' that links the Buddhist concept of 'khorwa,' the nature of cyclic existence, and 'kora,' the act of circumambulating around a sacred space.

8. The identities of research participants have been anonymized and pseudonyms are used throughout the article with the exception of the two authors.

9. The discourses and practices related to development in Nepal, like elsewhere, reifies social categories and guides social interactions (Pigg 1992). Development for many of our interlocutors signifies the material and technological advances that make Mustang a more livable place while acknowledging the negative consequences of such change. In the context of this project, we look at development in relation to the ongoing road construction and 'power corridors' (Murton and Lord 2020) forming across the Tibetan plateau, the rising numbers of tourists and building of new hotels and restaurants, and the improving communication infrastructures that make it possible for Mustangis to connect around the world.

10. We are currently carrying out a research project that looks more in-depth at the gendered and structural dimensions of migration in Mustang that make it possible for some individuals and families to migrate more so than others, and impact the ways in which people experience migration and the opportunities available to them abroad.

11. See a forthcoming article that explores the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on communities from Mustang in New York City and Nepal: Gurung, Tashi; Amburgey, Emily; Craig, Sienna. "Unsettling the American Dream: Mobility, Migration, and Precarity among Translocal Himalayan Communities during COVID-19." *Development and Change*, forthcoming.

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