

**ANNUAL CONFERENCE ON SOUTH ASIA, MADISON WISCONSIN**

October 16-19, 2014

**Interrogating Infrastructure 2.0: Roads and the politics of development in the Himalaya**

In the past ten years, the development of transportation and energy infrastructure has proliferated across the Himalaya. From Tibet-Nepal trans-border roads to Chinese-financed hydropower plants, these infrastructure developments have complex cultural, social, environmental, and geopolitical implications for rural communities across High Asia. As everyday experiences are being disrupted and reshaped by international capital, this panel uses infrastructure as a conceptual lens to examine the ways in which roads are implicated in the contemporary transformation of social relations and rural livelihoods throughout the Trans Himalaya. Challenging the modernist notion of roads as a technical fix, this panel takes a critical approach to development studies and invites new and radical inquiries around the theme of “interrogating infrastructure.” Drawing from diverse methodological and theoretical approaches, we aim to generate new conversations on the social and political causes and effects of infrastructure development across the Himalaya.

As a double-session panel at the 2014 Annual Conference on South Asia, “Interrogating Infrastructure 2.0” deepens and diversifies discussions emerging from two recent meetings on infrastructure development in Nepal: a similarly named session at the 2013 Conference on South Asia and conversations and presentations at the 2014 Himalayan Studies Conference.

“Interrogating Infrastructure 2.0” is organized thematically and geographically. *Session 1: Historical and Geopolitical Contexts* includes: post-colonial critique of British Raj-era road development programs in the Northern Areas of present-day Pakistan (Shafqat Hussain); contemporary examination of internationally financed hydropower and road development projects in Rasuwa Ghadi, Nepal (Austin Lord); critical analysis of Chinese-financed road development in Mustang, Nepal (Galen Murton); and presentation (possible film screening) on cultural and religious implications of road development in Tsum, Nepal (Sonam Lama). *Session 2: The Disempowerment of Road Development* includes: theoretical/conceptual contribution to road development assessments in Mugu, Nepal based on a wide-ranging literature review across impact studies, mobility studies, anthropologies and geographies of infrastructure and critical pedagogy (Pushpa Hamal and Katharine Rankin); exploration of convergences and disjunctures between governmental actors’ and citizens’ aspirational geographies of roads and markets with respect to apple agriculture in Mugu, Nepal (Elsie Lewison and Jeff Masse); study of current social, ecological, and economic dynamics of development of Manang-Mustang road (Jagganath Adhikari); and paper on the unevenness of development and reinforcement of caste systems as a result of road expansion in Besisahar, Nepal (Steven Folmar). This double-session will conclude with a discussion on the relationship between transportation infrastructure and the disruptions of development in the Trans Himalaya region.

## SESSION I

### CHAIR:

First Name: Galen

Last Name: Murton

Affiliation: University of Colorado, Boulder

Department: Geography

### **Paper 1: Overcoming the “Friction of Distance**

Abstract: Road building projects have a long history in what is today called the Gilgit-Baltistan region of northern Pakistan. In the nineteenth century, the British built a road from Sri-Nagar all the way to the Chinese and Russian frontiers, through the territory of Hunza, an independent mountain state, at the Karakoram watershed. Literature on colonial sociology and European conceptions of non-Europeans shows that distance and ease of travel were important criteria in colonial/European categorization of space and of the people therein. Harsh landscape that hindered movement was considered part of the habitus of the people who lived there. They were, as a result, considered as intractable and intransigent. Against stiff resistance from the rulers of Hunza to any road-building projects, the British articulated it as a cultural project: to bring civilization to Hunza. In the 1970s, Pakistan and China built the “Friendship Highway” to connect this region with Kashgar in China and Islamabad in Pakistan. This project was framed as a nationalist project in which Pakistan sought to connect the minority community located at its geographical peripheries to its cultural core. How did these two road projects reconfigured the region in terms of its cultural and economic orientation - from Central Asia to South Asia – is the topic of this paper.

First Name: Shafqat

Last Name: Hussain

Affiliation: Trinity College

Department: Anthropology

### **Paper 2: Power Corridors, Changing Mobilities: Roads and Hydropower Development in Nepal**

Abstract: Hydropower development is intensifying in Nepal, as a complex array of environmental, political, and economic resources are being mobilized in response to recurrent social and spatial urgencies. Hydropower development brings roads to previously roadless areas, and road upgrades and commercial activity to areas that had only limited road access. The arrival of the road, and the processes of hydropower development that follow affect new patterns of mobility and circulation, that include layered patterns of connectedness and fragmentation, location and dislocation, coming and going. My research understands this frontier as a turbulent interface where differently placed and differently capable populations incorporate, participate, and refract the spatial logics of hydropower and roads within their own lived experience. Based on ethnographic research conducted in the developing ‘power corridors’ of the Trishuli and Tama Koshi rivers (in Nuwakot/Rasuwa and Dolakha respectively) my work focuses its attention on new landscapes of risk and opportunity created along the hydropower frontier, within borderlands, and across the imaginative spaces created as Nepal seeks to become a ‘hydropower nation.’

First Name: Austin

Last Name: Lord

Affiliation: Yale University

Department: School of Forestry and Environmental Science

**Paper 3: MANI, The Hidden Valley of Happiness at a Crossroads**

Abstract: 40 minutes long documentary is a first time portrait of architectural heritage, Buddhist sites and monuments in remote valleys of central Himalaya of Nepal, known as Tsum sbas-yul skid-mo-lung, a sacred and hidden lands of happiness. The documentary follows a sudden arrival of bulldozer (a heavy construction equipment) in the valley in September 2013 and construction of one of the eight North South Transit Route Developments (NSTRDs) aiming to connect Tibet Autonomous Region of China and India however, without any consideration of imminent threats on cultural fabric of the region.

Based on the documentary, I argue that Tsum communities hold rich oral histories to explain the local significance on spiritual underpinnings of cultural heritage and their opinions on impacts of bringing a motor road goes much deeper than whether or not the road should be built. By doing so, it proves that road in culturally sensitive region in the Himalaya in general and Tsum in particular poses back reciprocal challenges against engineering solution for transportation needs during the process of reconciliation between conservation and development.

First Name: Sonam

Last Name: Lama

Affiliation: International Migration and Development (CIM), German International Cooperation (giz), Nepal

Department: Nepal Transportation and Development Research Center

Co-Author First Name: Ella Chau

Co-Author Last Name: Yin Chi

**Paper 4: Cultivating Consumption: The cultural politics of trans-border road development in Mustang, Nepal**

Abstract: Chinese foreign aid to Nepal, or what I call “development with Chinese characteristics,” marks a contrast to past models of development in South Asia. Most aid programs in Nepal, predicated on the “will to improve” (Li 2007), have largely followed a distinctly Western model of development focused on “Third World” issues such as poverty eradication, women’s empowerment, and rural infrastructure (Lawson 2007). While rural poverty is also a target of Beijing’s aid to Nepal, Chinese development appears more strongly motivated by immediate economic and political interests. Exemplified by the recent expansion of Chinese financed road construction in Nepal, this Chinese development creates new markets for Chinese exports, circumvents protracted geopolitical conflicts with India, and generates political power that is leveraged over socially restive Tibetan exile populations. Although these geopolitical and socio-economic factors can be linked under the rubric of “security,” this “development with Chinese characteristics” is not adequately explained by the “development as security” literature that largely focuses on the militarized “development-security nexus” (Duffield 2013; Duffield and Hewitt 2013; Amer, Swain, and Öjendal 2012), human capabilities (Sen 2011; Beswick and Jackson 2013), and natural resource dependency (Smith 2012; Power, Mohan, and Tan-Mullins 2012). My research is motivated by the need to reconsider “development as security” in a unique Chinese context and broadly asks: what are the political-economic interests and socio-cultural effects of Chinese investment and road development in Nepal? This study specifically examines how Chinese roads and seasonal trade fairs have generated new consumption practices and patterns of dependency on Chinese commodities that are consequently transforming cultural identities in Nepal's Upper Mustang district.

First Name: Galen

Last Name: Murton

Affiliation: University of Colorado, Boulder

Department: Geography

## SESSION II

### CHAIR:

First Name: Katharine

Last Name: Rankin

Affiliation: University of Toronto

Department: Geography and Planning

### **Paper 1: Rural road construction: Why and how should we study it in Nepal?**

Abstract: This paper furnishes a theoretical/conceptual contribution based on a wide-ranging literature review across impact studies, mobility studies, anthropologies and geographies of infrastructure and (given the significance of road building for political subjectivity) critical pedagogy. The preponderance of existing literature on roads in the global South focuses on the social, economic, political, cultural or environmental impacts, but has given little attention to the context of road construction itself. This is problematic, because between the aspiration to construct roads and their eventual outcomes lies a much-contested process of road construction that articulates place-based cultural politics as well as wider political-economic and –ecological dynamics—and that inevitably shapes how roads intersect with the rural populations they serve. This paper takes road construction itself as an object of inquiry, engaging the literature and its gaps to argue that how roads are built, by whom, through what labor processes and with what capital inputs, is integral to ‘Interrogating infrastructure’.

First Name: Katharine

Last Name: Rankin

Affiliation: University of Toronto

Department: Geography and Planning

Co-Author First Name: Pushpa

Co-Author Last Name: Hamal

Co-Author Affiliation: University of Toronto

Department: OISE

### **Paper 2: A critical examination of social, economic and environmental imperatives of Himalayan roads.**

Abstract: By looking at two roads in the Himalayas –Mustang road Manang road, I examine what led people to demand these roads and perceptions of different groups of people on social, economic, cultural and environmental consequences of the roads. Based on the study, I came to a conclusion that the demand for road(s) has increased not only from economic reasons like improved livelihood, but also due to a perception of ‘backwardness’ in not being connected by road. The increased connectivity to outside world is further enticing people to have more demand on road. This has taken place in two ways – firstly, this increased connectivity to outside world is mostly negatively affecting the local ways of living (for example local food and local medical treatment) and, secondly, by providing access to non-local ways of living. In people’s perception, tourism transcends this local/non-local ways of living, there are varied perceptions on these categories and how these are affected by road.

First Name: Jagganath

Last Name: Adhikari

Affiliation: The Australian National University

**Paper 3: Apple cart before the horse: roads, markets and aspiration in the Nepali Karnali**

Abstract: In the 1970s new governmental programs encouraged farmers in Nepal's remote Karnali region to plant apple trees. Development agents and farmers hoped that planned road connection would enable participation in national and global markets. These dreams of market access have, however, been slow to bear fruit. The Karnali Highway to Jumla district was completed in 2008 and remains in poor condition during rainy months; an intermittently open dirt track reached Mugu district in 2012; and a motor road to Humla district remains a distant prospect. Many apples from the region are sold locally for nearly nothing, fed to animals or left to rot due to lack of reliable and affordable transportation. Nonetheless, state and non-state programmes, working within the paradigm of high value agriculture development, have intensified the promotion of apple production and commercialization in the Karnali since 2008. Apples are emerging as the largest form of market oriented farmland use in these districts, and apples figure prominently in imaginaries of development and remoteness in the Karnali. We draw on ethnographic fieldwork at offices, along roads, and in orchards to explore convergences and disjunctures between governmental actors' and citizens' aspirational geographies of roads and markets.

First Name: Elsie

Last Name: Lewison

Affiliation: University of Toronto

Department: Geography and Planning

Co-Author First Name: Jeff

Co-Author Last Name: Masse

Co-Author Affiliation: University of Washington

Co-Author Department: Geography

**Paper 4: Widening the Road and the Caste Divide**

Abstract: In this paper I argue, based on preliminary and ongoing ethnographic research conducted in Besisahar, Lamjung, that governmental actions taken to widen roads and to inform local citizenry of such plans, wittingly or not, serve to deepen existing status differentials between high and low caste people of Nepal. This occurs through complex pathways relating to the actions of the state to the material conditions and economic alternatives available to local citizens. Critical actions of the state include not only the road widening but the communicating of plans to do so, including how plans are announced and the sudden adherence to regulatory practices ignored in the past. Effects on locals vary according to new interpretations of regulations, how well locals' businesses and dwellings adhere to these new interpretations and to alternatives available to them. These effects weigh heavier on low castes than high castes because of systemic factors that disadvantage low castes and ongoing interpersonal discriminatory practices that reinforce those disadvantages. The findings of this project speak not only to the situation in Besisahar, but also to the numerous smaller communities along the Besisahar road and to communities on other roads currently planned or under construction in Nepal.

First Name: Steven

Last Name: Folmar

Affiliation: Wake Forest University

Department: Anthropology