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"In the past, we ate from one plate": Memory and the border in Leh, Ladakh

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A B S T R A C T

In India's Jammu and Kashmir State (J&K), the politicization of religious identity over the course of the twentieth century has become part of life in complex and contradictory ways tied to geopolitical uncertainty and contested borders. In this case study set in J&K's Leh District, I argue that border life and attendant vulnerability have charged both bodies and buildings with territorial potential. Fraught relations between Leh District's Buddhist majority and Muslim minority reproduce a border sensibility in the center of Leh town: restrictions on inter-religious marriage and fears of demographic change play out against a backdrop of religious structures being remodeled in ways that stake out territory at the heart of town and reference globally-identifiable religious architectural styles. How are inter-religious boundaries between people re-imagined to fit a shifting geopolitical context? What remains of an embodied past of inter-religious family ties? Through this case, I argue for attention to when and how political borders are recalled and embodied in relationships between people, in the spaces that we inhabit, and in the interpretation of those spaces. This article draws on seventeen months of research conducted during 2004, 2007–2008, and 2010, including a survey of 192 women's family decision-making, interviews, and youth photography and oral history projects to trace the interplay of memory, monumentalized religion in the built environment, and intimate life.

Spalzes: In the past, if a Buddhist woman married a Muslim, the Buddhist family would go to the house, and they would ask her to come back home, and the woman would just say, "I like this person, I like this family. It is my decision." When the woman said that, the family could do nothing…These days no one will accept the woman's decision. They will force her to come back, and she will end up being stigmatized (2004).

Sara: What is the relationship like between Buddhists and Muslims?

Tsering: Nowadays, it is ok. In the distant past, it was nice. The relationship was very *zangpo* [pure, clean]. Now, it's a little…we're more into our own religion. But today it's ok.

Sara: When there is conflict, why does it happen?

Tsering: They take some small thing and make it big. The Muslims do it and the Buddhists do it. And then, in the mosque and in the temple, they make problems (2007).

Introduction

In the interviews above, Buddhist women in their fifties and sixties recollect the changing relationship between members of different religions in Leh town. Spalzes describes the regulation of women's lives; Tsering depicts religious structures as sites at which conflict is produced (these, and all other names have been replaced with pseudonyms). Leh town is the capital of India's Leh District, in the Ladakh region of troubled Jammu and Kashmir State (J&K). A high altitude desert, Ladakh is geographically and politically on the margins of India, framed by disputed borders, and populated by people of minority religions, most of whom hold Scheduled Tribe status – an officially recognized status for disadvantaged minority indigenous groups in India, entitling these groups to affirmative action in education and government employment. Ladakhis struggle with political-religious identities that are simultaneously materialized in and contradicted by Leh's streets and religious architecture. Divided into two districts in 1979, Ladakh's Leh District, where this research takes place, has a Buddhist majority population, and Kargil District has a Shia Muslim majority (see Fig. 1). In the context of disputed borders with Pakistan and China, this article addresses the interplay between urban space, indexed by Tsering, and intimate geopolitics, described by Spalzes. Intimate geopolitics,

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Fig. 1. Context map.

the ways that the geopolitical impinges upon and is constituted through intimate life (Smith, 2012) play out in the reframing of Buddhist–Muslim relationships as a political problem. Borders, particularly the contested border with Pakistan and related Kashmir conflict, are remembered in political discourse and daily life as a threat to security that underwrites communal politics and the constant remembrance of marginality and difference, even as more fluid inter-religious relationships are remembered in family histories and in the landscape of Leh town. This intimate and architectural geopolitics is contingent upon the unresolved border, the perceived vulnerability of J&K to territorial dissolution, and the anticipation of religious nationalist conflict that has haunted South Asia, particularly since partition.

Through this case, I argue for attention to when and how political borders are recalled and embodied in relationships between people, in the spaces that we inhabit, and in the interpretation of those spaces, and describe this as a border sensibility. I build on Jones (2009) and Mountz (2010, 2011) to understand how border effects shift geographically and are part of other bounding processes. In Leh, borders are remembered as vulnerable and volatile presences in the built and embodied spaces of daily life: materialized in newly grandiose religious architecture, and felt in the policing of inter-religious intimacies. The militarization and securitization of the border (described in Aggarwal & Bhan, 2009), including significant military presence in Leh and economic dependence on the military, serve as reminders of the ceasefire line separating India and Pakistan. The border sensibility includes a drive to fix boundaries through management of relationships between people and through reinterpretations of urban space. By attending to the embodied ways that identities are bounded in an echo of national borders, I follow Jones's (2009, p. 175) argument highlighting the "inchoate process of bounding".

Leh's position on the disputed edge of India has allowed this border sensibility to seep into everyday bodily practices. Intimacy between Buddhist and Muslim Ladakhis has been reconfigured, with a ban on inter-religious marriages, and a movement asking Buddhist women to give up family planning to determine the district's demography. A social boycott of Muslim Ladakhis from 1989 to 1992 institutionalized the policing of public space, through sanctions against those who continued interaction. The boycott ended more than 20 years ago, but the ban on inter-religious marriages means that romantic relationships between Buddhists and Muslims are now hidden from view, and relations are bordered in everyday space (Smith, 2011). As the national border has become part of political practices that link religion and the nation, bodies have themselves become a territory to be defended, as elucidated by Das (1995) and Chatterji and Mehta (2007) in South Asia, and by Mayer (2004) and others (e.g., Morokvasic-Müller, 2004; Yuval-Davis, 1989) elsewhere.

The majority of Indian J&K's population is Muslim, but at the regional and district level there is religious and ethnic diversity among the population of over 12.5 million. J&K was tied together by conquest, treaty, and imperial sale, and entered India in 1947 as one of 565 semi-autonomous princely states ruled by local royalty, rather than directly administered by the British. The late 19th and early 20th century Dogra regime led by Hindu rulers in Jammu, coupled with colonial oversight, was a time of high taxes, forced labor, debt, and hunger. The 20th century has seen drastic improvements in living standards, but recurring frustration for Ladakhis, who still feel they lack representation in the state and at the national level. Beginning in the 1930s, increasing at India's independence and partition in 1947, and further escalating during the 1980s, religious identity has become a recurrent theme in Leh politics. From the 1980s onward, this frustration has been coupled with fear that violence in Kashmir might spread to Ladakh, or that decisions made about sovereignty in the state would not take into account the desires of Ladakhis. Multiply marginalized, Ladakhis are a linguistic, ethnic, and religious minorities within the lone Muslim-majority state in India. This marginal position is central to local political narratives and demands for autonomy, and underwrites a politics of numbers. A high altitude desert 3500 m above sea level, roads are blocked by snow from late October until May. Leh and Kargil districts combined contain only approximately