

3 Ritualized meshworks in landscape and pharmacy

Harvest and production alongside amchi from Spiti and Kinnaur

Mridul Surbhi  and Jan M.A. van der Valk¹ 

Abstract Inspired by Tim Ingold's phenomenological approach towards materials, skill and dwelling, this chapter shares and discusses fine-grained and first-person sensorial descriptions of herbal harvest and manual medicine making processes alongside Spitipa and Kinnauri family lineage practitioners (amchi) of the Tibeto-Himalayan science of healing (Sowa Rigpa). Responding to Ingold's critique of Actor-Network Theory as a framework that ignores the dynamism of organisms as well as land-based and meteorological phenomena, we show how the work of amchi is embedded in living meshworks of beings-in-environments. In particular, Surbhi's extensive apprenticeship alongside amchi and her close engagements with weathered mountains, healing mantras, land protectors, medicinal plants and grinding tools illustrate crucial linkages between taskscape and the temporality of landscape. This chapter is therefore a call for closer attention to be paid to the embeddedness of practices, and a proof of principle for the utility of an Ingoldian dwelling perspective for Tibetan (medical) and Buddhist Studies more broadly—a perspective that pushes us to read the world and not only text by thinking *with* as well as *about* materials. In recognition of ritual as skilled practice and in light of the pervasiveness of Buddhist religious praxis in Sowa Rigpa pharmacy, we also introduce the term 'ritualized meshwork'.

Keywords Sowa Rigpa (Tibetan medicine), taskscape, more-than-human landscape, Tim Ingold, medicinal plant collection, Western Himalayas

-
- 1 The ethnographic fieldwork that constitutes the core of this chapter was conducted as part of Surbhi's doctoral research. Van der Valk mainly developed the theoretical framework, writing in close collaboration with Surbhi.

Introduction

Since the initial colonial prospection by William Edmund Hay (1805–1879) (Hay 1850) and the fascist orientalist Giuseppe Tucci's (1894–1984) expedition to Spiti and Western Tibet in 1933, the history, literature and culture of this sparsely populated Trans-Himalayan cold desert region has received considerable scholarly attention (Heller and Orofino 2007; Jahoda 2015; Klimburg-Salter, Jahoda and Tropper 2007; Laurent 2023). Although far from comprehensive, material-focused studies are available on Spiti's prehistoric rock carvings, early Buddhist archaeological layers, religious architecture and art history across Tibeto-Indian pilgrimage routes (Laurent and Pritzker 2017; Mc Allister, Scherer-Schaub and Krasser 2015). Otherwise known for their Siberian ibex and blue sheep, hunted by snow leopards often perceived to be in competition with the livestock of local agropastoralists, the peripheral Himachal Pradesh districts of Lahaul-Spiti and Kinnaur are nowadays facing a boom in domestic adventure (eco)tourism, a sprawl of proposed and opposed hydroelectric projects and the disruptive effects of climate change (Bodh and Mehta 2018; Gagné 2019, 2020).

Regarding traditional medicine in Spiti, several Indian researchers have undertaken ethnobotanical and ethnomedical surveys of remedies for various ailments (e.g. Singh et al. 2008). However, only the work of anthropologist Florian Besch (2006, 2007; see also Singh and Gerke, this volume) has so far focused in depth on Sowa Rigpa—regionally known as amchi medicine, after its practitioners. Many parallels can be drawn with research from the adjacent territory of Ladakh, including the prevalence of family-lineage based rural practitioners who manufacture medicines themselves and the increasing regulatory influence of the Indian state (Pordié and Kloos 2022). Such medical lineages or *menpé gyü* (*smān pa'i rgyud*), known simply as *gyüpa* (*rgyud pa*), represent a mode of knowledge-practice transmission that operates through intensive hereditary and/or master-disciple affinities. Although marginalized and partially incorporated in state-led professionalization efforts, *gyüpa* transmission—along with the related 'medical houses' (*smān grong*)—continues to hold sway in localized rural settings across Tibet and the Himalayas (Pordié and Blaikie 2014; see also Hofer 2018: 33–7).² There also appear to be parallels in the

2 As laid out by Pordié and Blaikie (2014: 345–50), this long-term training generally consists of guided memorization and exegesis of the *Four Tantras*

narrative of a declining tradition. Chandra Prakash Kala's (2005) field surveys in Ladakh, Lahaul and Spiti between 1998 and 2001 found that nearly half of the eighty-three amchi surveyed were over forty-six years old, and more than 60 per cent were without a disciple. Calum Blaikie (2014: 72–3) confirms that there were probably more Ladakhi amchi in the 1950s than four to five decades later, but complicates the implications of this by noting that their distribution has been and is becoming more and more concentrated in wealthier and more accessible regions.

Situated within the broader context sketched out here, this chapter aims to provide materially sensitive sensorial descriptions of plant collection and medicine making by Spitipa and Kinnauri amchi. As far as we know, this is the first time that Kinnauri amchi have been given a voice in the ethnographic literature on Sowa Rigpa.³ Earlier research has been exemplary in mapping out the broader implications of development projects, state policies, and social and economic change on multiple facets of Sowa Rigpa,⁴ but these analyses leave little room for thick descriptions of actual medicine making. Notable, albeit rather brief, exceptions include Besch (2006: 126–31) and Blaikie (2014: 300–3, 310–12). Blaikie explicitly notes the paucity of fine-grained anthropological studies on pharmacy (*sman sbyor*; lit. compounding medicine): 'There is almost nothing available on the dynamics of *sman jor* knowledge transmission, the daily routines, bodily habits, techniques and decisions it involves, its social organization, or the thoughts of those concerned' (2014: 262). His trailblazing publications have indeed addressed much of this lacuna. However, listing and discussing generalized steps of the pharmaceutical taskscape is not equivalent to narrating specific instances experienced and observed alongside practitioners, especially when it comes to the rich sensorial tapestry of

(*rgyud bzhi*), the sharing of closely-guarded pith instructions and practical procedures over an extended period, a public examination involving textual recitation and practical aspects, and ritually conferred oral transmissions and empowerments (the latter usually by religious authorities).

- 3 Surbhi documented twenty amchi in Spiti (including one female, one inactive practitioner and two apprentices) and four in Kinnaur (one female, one inactive). See Millard 2009 for some relevant historical details on the legacy of the renowned Bönpo lama, pilgrim and Tibetan medical physician Khyungrul Jikme Namkhe Dorje (1897–1955) in Kinnaur.
- 4 On Spiti, see Besch 2006, 2007; on Ladakhi Sowa Rigpa, see e.g. Blaikie 2018, 2019; Pordié 2016; Tsewang Smanla and Millard 2013.

hands-on learning, the following of materials in dynamic processes, and the development and execution of embodied skill through dexterity, care and playful experimentation.

In what follows, we argue that Tim Ingold's (2000, 2011a, 2012) phenomenologically inspired approach towards materials, making and dwelling presents a fruitful avenue for better understanding amchi activities of harvest and production. We see practitioners of Sowa Rigpa as immersed in responsive environments or 'lifeworlds', skillfully finding their way through landscapes in the search for plants and dealing with the properties of 'things' in 'taskscape' that gradually transform ingredients into medicine. Ingold (2000) defines a taskscape as a field of practice-in-environment, a resonating 'pattern of dwelling activities' that ultimately constitutes the landscape itself as a temporally dynamic phenomenon (190). In this sense, the taskscape exists as 'interactivity' and the landscape as 'the congealed form of the taskscape' (199). Applying this framework to Surbhi's extensive fieldwork experiences,⁵ we expand on Blaikie's (2014; see also Pordié and Blaikie 2014) exploration of the Ladakhi amchi taskscape by paying particular attention to landscape.

We also engage with James Gentry's (2017) *Power Objects in Tibetan Buddhism*. In this monograph, Gentry successfully draws on Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT) in order to challenge the disparagement of the material aspects of tantric rituals in earlier Tibetological textual studies. He takes seriously the agency of 'non-humans' such as Brahmin flesh pills, amulets with protective diagrams and initiation implements by analysing how the material 'object', social power and representational discourse come together across the writings of the infamous enemy-repelling ritual proponent, Great Perfection master and physician Sokdokpa Lodro Gyeltsen (1552–1624). Apart from demonstrating that 'material culture has been a topic of theoretical, philosophical speculation for Tibetans themselves' (6), Gentry methodologically follows Latour in treating agency as performed on a level playing field and distributed across assemblages of heterogeneous

5 Between 2019 and 2023, Surbhi spent a total of twenty-five months in Spiti and Kinnaur during the summer, autumn and winter seasons. The bulk of her doctoral fieldwork was conducted over thirteen months since 2021. Surbhi mainly communicated with amchi in Hindi, at times with the kind help of Lama Lobsang Yeshe, a monk from Key Monastery who acted as Spitian–Hindi translator. She became conversant in Spiti Tibetan by late 2022.

‘actants’ (22–6). His aim is to move beyond the privileging of human intentionality and representation while not neglecting ‘subjective language’ and intellectual technologies such as written documents. Gentry’s work is relevant to our argument partly because medicine and religion are deeply interrelated in the sensibilities of Sowa Rigpa physicians as we will illustrate below (see also Adams, Schrempf and Craig 2011), but also because Ingold has developed a sustained critique of ANT (2011a: 89–94; 2012, 2013).

Latour and Ingold are both philosophically-inclined white male anthropologists with an idiosyncratic yet influential transdisciplinary oeuvre that foregrounds relationality and interactivity, and that aims to move beyond human exceptionalism and the nature/culture dichotomy. However, they hold very different views when it comes to agency and materiality. As already indicated, Ingold (2011a) envisions ‘meshworks’ of perceptive-responsive organisms acting skillfully along entangled line-like trajectories of life while immersed in the currents of material media such as air and water. In contrast, according to Ingold, ANT’s hybrid networks of actants consist of an assortment of dead, self-contained objects juxtaposed with other objects, seemingly resurrected ‘by sprinkling a magical dust of “agency” around the fragments’ (93). At the core of Ingold’s critique of Latourian material semiotics and related trends in material culture studies is that they ignore the aliveness of organisms under the common denominator of non-humans and prioritize finished artifacts over things that are ‘gatherings of materials in movement’ (Ingold 2012: 439). These issues, he argues, unwittingly reinforce the sovereignty of human subjecthood over and above ‘becoming *with*’ other be(com)ings (Ingold 2013: 21).

In this chapter, we apply Ingold’s task/landscape dyad to plant collection journeys on the rugged slopes of the Pir Panjal mountain range, and then to the making of multi-compound medicines in pharmacy rooms at the homes of medical lineage practitioners from Spiti and Kinnaur. In addition to showing how both processes are embedded in ritualized and more-than-human meshworks of potency—putting Ingold’s approach to the test—we also reflect on how our findings relate to Gentry’s ANT-inspired work. How, we ask, can we attend to landscape and the meteorological currents that shape it, if not as object-actants? And what could be the place of ritual practices, spirit beings and Buddhist cosmology in Ingoldian lifeworlds?

Harvesting from animated landscapes

Encountering Kunzum La with Amchi Nawang Tsering

As the temperature drops to below -20°C, the winter months in Spiti present ample opportunity for lengthy indoor conversation. In 2022, Amchi Nawang Tsering, Lama Lobsang Yeshe and I (Mridul Surbhi) sat together in the glasshouse—the warmest room during the day—while grinding raw materials into powder. Nawang Tsering (born in 1960?) hails from a family lineage, but his renowned father Amchi Sonam died when he was fifteen years old, and his grandfather Amchi Tsultrim had already passed away by that time. Enduring many hardships, he managed to complete his training between 1977 and 1985 at a small state-supported Sowa Rigpa institute in Manali, founded by the Lahauli tulku and amchi Sundar Singh who graduated from Chakpori in Lhasa.⁶ Over a hot cup of butter tea, Amchi Tsering recalled the arduous journeys he undertook from his native village Kibber to Manali almost three decades ago, crossing Kunzum Pass (elevation 4,555 m) and Rohtang Pass (3,978 m) on foot to collect herbs and to procure essential necessities to survive the long isolation of winter. Nowadays, that trip can be done in eight hours by car, but back then it easily took six or seven days and effectively took the form of a pilgrimage, with people travelling together in groups of about a dozen. Kunzum La (Figure 3.1) is not just a stop for tourists to take selfies, Amchi-la asserted, it is the land of Mother Kunzum (kun 'dzom lha mo): 'If we do not pray to her before undertaking the journey, we are invoking the wrath of the mountains. She is a protector of the land, her presence has to be acknowledged.' Along the way, they more frequently encountered wolves and wild horses than other people. Human contact was mostly with Gaddi shepherds accompanied by their large flocks of sheep and a few donkeys, or with fellow travellers in tea stalls at fixed junctures along the route where Tibetan-style soup (*thug pa*) was on offer for 2 rupees. On the ascent to Rohtang Pass everyone had to tie a black cloth with two small holes in it around their heads to prevent snow blindness

6 This was confirmed by Amchi Tsering (from Kibber), Amchi Lhotsey (Zanskar) and Amchi Norbu (Kullu), all of whom attended Sundar Singh's institute in Manali. According to Besch, however, Singh graduated from Mentsikhang in Lhasa (Besch 2006: 95).



Figure 3.1 Kunzum Pass and some of the surrounding peaks, which are also known as the Glorious Goddess (*dpal lha mo*). Photograph by Mridul Surbhi.

whilst hiking up the foot trails.⁷ When Amchi Tsering started to practice Sowa Rigpa on his own, he and his peers from Lahaul would camp for four days near Gramphu, the final hamlet before Rohtang. Rain would bring more fog, further decreasing visibility; after they waited for it to pass they explored the area in every direction. Each eventually carried down a few sacks of raw materials to Manali, where the shared harvest provided enough stock for three or four years.

Traversing the same landscape in 2019 with Amchi Tsering, some aspects remained unchanged while others differed. ‘Twenty years ago, we cared much more about packing food for another four or five days along with offerings of roasted barley flour (*rtsam pa*), butter and beer (*chang*) for Kunzum La’, he recalled. ‘We focused on mantra recitation

7 Amchi Tsering told Surbhi that during an ascent to Rohtang Pass in the early 1990s, his mother’s sister, who was also an amchi, performed emergency eye surgery on a fellow traveler, draining a blood clot that was obstructing the cornea. The traveler reached Manali, performed the suggested purification rituals, and his eyes fully recovered.



Figure 3.2 Kunzum Temple (right) with stupa and prayer flags. Photograph by Mridul Surbhi.

and made offerings so that our journey ahead would be safe and productive.’ Although nowadays he and other amchi do not have to worry so much about provisioning, Mother Kunzum’s presence remains unquestioned and they offer a white ceremonial scarf (*kha btags*) to her at the temple at Kunzum La (Figure 3.2). Amchi-la explained:

Mother Kunzum feels, expressing her wrath in the form of avalanches or landslides at times even though her love for the people of Spiti is still there. If it was not for the deities that overlook and protect the land, who knows if the medicines we need would be found. It is not like somebody went to these places to plant herbs; the land and its deities offer these to us. ... This is why praying to them not only protects our human selves, but also generates life-giving healing materials.

This brief vignette serves as a first introduction to an amchi’s particular way of dwelling. It shows that when traversing a dynamic Himalayan environment permeated by aliveness, praying and making offerings to personified land features are an integral part of the harvesting

taskscape. Amchi Tsering's musings resonate with Ingold's (2000) approach to storied places: 'To perceive the landscape is ... to carry out an act of remembrance, and remembering is not so much a matter of calling up an internal image, stored in the mind, as of engaging perceptually with an environment that is itself pregnant with the past' (189). The land-shaping quest for herbs constitutes a becoming-with through lines of skilled movement and reciprocity that blur the boundaries with pilgrimage. As such we would like to call this entanglement a 'ritualized meshwork'. Yet, the surveillance of these politically sensitive border areas, involving patrols, permits and checkpoints, has deeply transformed the experiential reality of engaging with these places in tandem with the continual construction and maintenance of motorable roads. 'Who has the energy these days to negotiate with the army?', Amchi Tsering asked.

Collecting herbs with Amchi Dorje Yongma in Pin Valley

In the summer of 2019, Lobsang Yeshe and I went on another plant collection trip to Pin Valley with Amchi Dorje Yongma (born in 1958?) and two locals. Amchi Dorje was born into a family of tantric householders or *jowa* in Chango, Kinnaur.⁸ He studied Buddhism for three years at Banaras Hindu University but was forced to return to the village because of his father's ailing health, and eventually took up the practice of Sowa Rigpa after a decade-long tutelage under Tsering Lhotey from Dangkhar. Amchi-la had also done numerous retreats in mountain caves to practice *chö* (*gcod*, lit. 'severance'), for instance, and some patients visited him specifically for ritual healing. Two days before the scheduled departure, we were requested to abstain from alcohol, meat, sexual contact and overstimulation of the senses through our mobile phones (which would hamper our ability to spot the medicinal herbs). Following a three-hour drive from Chango to the end of the gravel road, we hiked for another two hours carrying our rucksacks, bags, utensils and flasks containing sweet and butter tea. We halted at a suitable site to set up camp near bushes that would provide some shelter against the wind. A white scarf and incense were offered to the

8 *Jowa* (*jo ba*, also spelled *cho wa*; see Besch 2006: 22n26) is the local name for *ngakpa* (*sngags pa*), literate ritualists who in Spiti often equally act as astrologers. See Joffe 2019: 37–49 for an exploration of *ngakpa* identity and expertise, especially in relation to monasticism.

local deities (*yul lha*) and land spirits (*sa bdag*) for suitable weather and auspiciousness along with prayers: ‘The wisdom of these deities guides collectors. We ask them to come, to be at our side and guide us. Our aim should be the benefit of others, not business or leisure.’ Homage was also paid in the direction of a monastery perched on a distant mountaintop, to the Medicine Buddha (*sangs rgyas sman bla*), and finally to all beings inhabiting the area. While collecting, I was instructed to recite the mantras of the Buddhas of Medicine and Compassion as much as possible to overcome mental afflictions. Moreover, I was specifically asked where I would be relieving myself; to do so in the wrong place would upset the serpentine naga spirits (*klu*), which could provoke harm (*gnod pa*) in the form of illness or accidents.

The second day of harvest began with prayers and the preparation of tea on our portable stove. Amchi Dorje left early for the higher plains to collect *ukchö* (*ug chos*; *Eriophyton wallichii*), returning later with less than fifteen small woolly-leaved specimens that were left to dry in the shade. My task for the day was to collect *achak* (*a cag*; *Gynura bicolor*) from riverbeds together with another villager who had accompanied us. We were instructed not to pull up the roots, and succeeded in gathering a considerable amount—half a sack—by the end of the day. A decoction would be made of the bright yellow-orange flowers while the rest of the plant would be ground into powder. Both support the healing of weak or fractured bones and stimulate blood circulation, the powder being stronger but less ideal for children and the elderly, and both are locally in high demand. Over the course of the next three days, work conditions fluctuated along with the weather: clouds protected us from the penetrating sunrays but also reduced visibility and the temperature. Some of us gathered dry wood or cattle dung for the fire, on which we boiled potato momos or pea soup in the evenings. We wandered further and further from camp to collect *triyangku* (*pri yang ku*; *Dracocephalum tanguticum*), *jakangpa* (*bya rkang pa*; *Epilobium latifolium*) and *trönbu* (*khron bu*; *Melanoseris macrorrhiza*).⁹ The latter prefers rocky crevices, making it hard to find. It is a cooling ingredient which counteracts excessive bile heat that usually flows upwards in the body. Amchi-la explained that there is a general correspondence

9 Jakang is commonly identified on the Tibetan Plateau as *Delphinium caeruleum*, and trönbu as *Euphorbia stracheyi* (Dga’ ba’i rdo rje 1995). Both of these species are also found in the West Himalayas. Our findings attest to the importance of local identifications.

between plant and body: the lower parts of the former, such as roots and rosette leaves, tend to have a downward cooling potency (*nus pa*) whereas the buds and flowers generate an upward motion that is relatively warming. The top parts are lighter, the bottom ones heavier, like sky and earth. This is one of the ways in which the morphology of ingredients-in-environments resonates with patients; even after the ingredients have been processed, their elemental signatures endure.

As the days progressed, I became aware of a kind of sensory shift. From the start, we shared with each other our perceptions of shifts in flowering times and species abundance. Yet as our phone batteries died, and experience and mantras accumulated, the eyes, nose, tongue, ears and sense of touch were increasingly attuned to the taskscape of collection, leading to a long-lasting habit of scanning the landscape for medicinals. Amchi Dorje later told me that

the art of an artist and the ability to heal only increase with age. It is not like doing a job that has a retirement age. The more amchis practice, the more their craft will benefit not only themselves but also their lineage and surroundings.

On our way back to Chango we paid a visit to Chango Gompa to make offerings and were given a wholesome meal. Exhausted, none of us spoke while taking in the sounds of ritual and the sights of butter lamps being lit. We only returned home with our harvest the next day because everyone from the area knows that driving the rocky, icy track leading down from the monastery at night would be life-threatening.

The medical and ritual taskscapes of pharmacy work

Whereas both the landscape and the taskscape presuppose the presence of an agent who watches and listens, the taskscape must be populated with beings who are themselves agents, and who reciprocally ‘act back’ in the process of their own dwelling. In other words, the taskscape exists not just as activity but as interactivity. (Ingold 2000: 199)

In order to illustrate some of the pharmacy processes in which this interactive ‘acting back’ takes place, we return to Amchi Nawang Tsering, with whom Surbhi spent several weeks during the winter of

2022–3. In the midst of participating in these processes and later while describing them in a few words, we strongly relied on material properties and media but did not feel the need to interpret these further through the lens of ‘materiality’. This aligns with Ingold’s (2007, 2012) critique of the focus on conceptualizations of materiality in material culture studies as founded on a nature/culture dichotomy, leading to a problematic distinction between ‘brute matter’ and social (i.e. human) relations as well as a concomittant prioritization of ‘finished’ artefact-objects over flows and frictions. Instead, we center medicine makers as craftpersons and things such as ingredients as transient gatherings of materials in our descriptions.

Amchi Tsering had consulted the jowa of Rangrik village to select an astrologically auspicious starting time for the medicine making season, for which the glasshouse was then prepared by sweeping the floor and setting up all necessary tools whilst reciting the Medicine Buddha mantra. The next morning, Amchi-la lit incense, did prostrations dedicated to his teachers in the direction of Key Monastery, and then consecrated the implements we were about to use with a brief prayer and a rosary round of murmured mantras. I was then asked to separate dried *kyuru* (*skyu ru*; *Phyllanthus emblica*) berries from their seeds and to pick out inferior pieces based on color. I was instructed to taste three blackish-brown pieces to notice how each had a different taste profile. Although it was impossible to taste each subsequent piece, I was assured that a better sense of the appearance-taste correlation would soon develop through experimentation. A few hours later, I was beginning to make astute visual judgements. ‘What would happen if I don’t separate properly and we use all pieces?’, I asked. ‘Then my medicines will not work and patient health will not improve’, the amchi swiftly replied. ‘Plant parts are not uniformly potent; sorting and processing plants is like preparing a good foundation to build a house on.’ He later added: ‘Though using the plant directly without sorting would not be poisonous or fatal, it will certainly harm the digestive heat and bodily constituents.’

Sitting in a corner repeating mantras, Amchi Tsering checked the results of my sorting, directing my attention again and again to slight variations: the way the flesh sticks to the seed, or the hollow sound a withered fruit makes when tapping it compared to fruits that retain potency. This embodied knowledge is gradually acquired through participation in these time-consuming, deceptively simple tasks that need to be adapted to each ingredient. Amchi Tsering ensured that nothing was wasted along the way, not even the less useful fraction that was

sorted from the rest. The discarded plant parts were collected in a cloth bag, to be later dispersed across the pastures around the house or on mountain passes. This material act of reciprocity with the land again shows deep respect for the preciousness and life-supporting potential of these scarce natural resources, as well as being a recognition of the amount of labour and care required in the making of medicine.

After sorting ingredients for several days, we proceeded to the first stage of grinding, which entailed beating the materials into a granular powder using a mortar and pestle set on top of a thick stone slate (see Figure 3.3). This technique involved repetitive cycles of hammer-like beats. Performed the wrong way, blisters quickly appear on the hands. Amchi Tsering demonstrated: 'Beating the mortar with all your strength will not break down the plants; the materials will slip away from under the pestle. Instead, following the rhythm of the movement and pressing down slightly will do the trick.' As I proceeded, the air of the room became infused with the rhythmic sounds of beating and mantras, and with fragrant minute herbal particles that eventually saturated the taste buds. Apart from when it was too cold or there was snow, we worked for five hours a day on average over the next two



Figure 3.3 Iron mortar and pestle. Courtesy Mridul Surbhi.

weeks, grinding batches of *trasang* (*skra bzang*; *Corydalis govaniana*), yellow-flowered *chaktik* (*lcags tig*; *Scorzonera virgata*), *nyalo* (*snya lo*; *Koenigia tortuosa*) and the purple flower heads of *nyenmayül* (local name with uncertain spelling, unidentified) in multiple rounds interspersed with sieving.¹⁰

The second stage of grinding, which transforms the coarse granulate into a fine powder, is carried out by rubbing a rounded stone across a large, slightly hollowed-out slab (see Figure 3.4). This flat stone (*rdo leh*, *H. mandah*) is often passed down through the lineage as a sacralized possession that is emblematic of years of accumulated hard work, skill and merit (see Singh and Gerke, this volume). Fine grinding is an arduous process, even more so for a novice. It involves sitting cross-legged on the floor for hours, and relies on muscles and joints in the entire upper body—especially hands and shoulders—to generate friction through a circular movement. Whereas Amchi Tsering positioned the slab in front of him, he suggested I place it closer to my thighs as women generally have more strength in that area. This position was indeed much more effective when combined with a straightened spine and a rather loose grip on the grinding stone (a tight hold makes the powder stick to it). Each granulated ingredient required roughly twenty repetitions of grinding and fine sieving to finish an entire batch. The contrast between the rhythmic sounds of grinding and recitation and the piercing silence of the surrounding snow-capped mountains gradually induced a seemingly timeless state of flow in which nothing else mattered; a meditative concentration strived for by dedicated medicine makers. For Amchi-la, this experience leads to insight into emptiness, which together with the driving force of his religious vows on compassionate behaviour lays out the path towards liberation. During the relaxing breaks, nearby villagers took turns cooking meals for us and serving tea.

None of the amchi I met in Spiti or Kinnaur currently produces medicine in pill form (*ril bu*) even though some purchase and prescribe readymade ones—including precious pills (*rin chen ril bu*)—from Men-Tsee-Khang. Since each ingredient is ground individually and therefore not immediately compounded into a formula with fixed proportions, the practitioner retains greater flexibility to create medicinal powders

10 *Corydalis govaniana* is more generally called *tongri zilpa* (*stong ri zil pa*), whereas *chaktik* is identified as *Halenia elliptica* and *nyalo* as *Polygonum* spp. (Dga' ba'i rdo rje 1995).



Figure 3.4 Amchi Nawang Tsering grinding rapeseed (*nyungs ma*) into fine powder, March 2023. Photograph by Mridul Surbhi.

(*phye ma*) adapted to a patient's body constitution, disease, and other circumstances such as seasonality and lifestyle.¹¹ By way of example, Amchi Tsering mentioned that excessive alcohol intake in Spiti needed to be taken into account. For some chronic illnesses he would give a certain formula for seven days and then adjust it depending on the result: 'When the disease changes its character, the medicine has to be changed as well.' This is also why we did not finalize a single medicine during this period. For each specific formulation, Amchi-la would estimate the required amounts on sight using different measuring spoons. A batch that would ideally last for a year weighs three to five kilograms and is stored in sealed glass jars. Once a year he lays out all his medicines in front of the Medicine Buddha and other scroll paintings in a locked room for several consecutive days to absorb blessings. During that period he only enters in the mornings and evenings to replace

11 See Besch 2006: 147–51 on the powder versus pill efficacy debate in Spiti, and Blaikie 2014: 308–13 on the economic, technical and urban institutional factors that have driven a shift towards pills in Ladakh.

the water and butter lamp offerings. This element of the ritualized pharmacy taskscape is part of a specialized retreat (*snyen mtshams*) in which amchi are expected to complete at least ten thousand Medicine Buddha mantra recitations and renew their religious vows. No recurring communal ‘medicine accomplishment’ rituals (*sman sgrub*) involving multiple physicians have been observed in the area (cf. Blaikie 2013: 431–6). Instead, some individual amchi would request blessings at local monasteries or even in Bodhgaya. However, amchi did often add a pinch of powder from a previous batch of the same medicine to the next, which implies continuity of blessings.

Concluding discussion

Responding to Ingold’s (2000: 189) call ‘to move beyond the sterile opposition between the naturalistic view of the landscape as a neutral, external backdrop to human activities, and the culturalistic view that every landscape is a particular cognitive or symbolic ordering of space’, this chapter has foregrounded a dwelling perspective in which the close encounters and form-(de)generating processes of medicinal harvest and production take precedence over the more prevalent interpretation of sociocultural ‘contexts’. Although analyses foregrounding the latter are certainly insightful, their tendency to ignore the temporality of landscapes and the embeddedness of taskscapes risks reducing vibrant ecologies of materials to either sets of dead objects or playgrounds for human-exceptionalist conceptualizations of materiality (Ingold 2012). We do not wish to overstate our point, being aware of several rather vehement criticisms—along with strong counterarguments—unleashed by Ingold’s iconoclastic interventions in material culture studies (Miller 2007; Tilley 2007) and anthropology of the senses (Howes 2011a, 2011b). A burgeoning literature of what could be termed more-than-human ecological approaches to Tibetan, Himalayan and Buddhist lifeworlds also attests to an increasing attention to these entanglements through analyses of indigeneity, sacred sites, mountain deities, climate change and apocalyptic narratives.¹²

12 For recent contributions, see e.g. Smyer Yü and de Maaker 2021; Kuyakanon, Diemberger and Sneath 2022. Refer to Gagné 2019 for relevant work on Ladakh; on Sowa Rigpa see Chudakova 2017, Van der Valk 2024 and Vargas-O’Bryan 2013.

Nevertheless, Ingold pushes us to ask ourselves: ‘Are there contexts that are *not* social, or worlds that are *not* material?’ (2007: 32). Can we think outside the boxes of representationalist knowledge production and cultural constructivism (2011b)?

We have explored these questions through descriptions of Surbhi’s intimate engagements with windswept mountains, active deities, aromatic herbs and grinding tools alongside Spitipa and Kinnauri practitioners of Sowa Rigpa. On the arid slopes of Kunzum Pass we caught a glimpse of how recurring plant collection journeys inscribe memories into the landscape, and the ways in which infrastructural and military developments precipitate changes in modes of travel as well as in perceptions of the sacred. Nevertheless, Amchi Nawang Tsering and others continued to pay respect to the mother goddess that dwells there through acts of reciprocity that recognize her as a protector and the ultimate source of the potent ingredients that flourish on her land. Camping and harvesting in Pin Valley with Amchi Dorje Yongma equally left visible traces: footprints, a white offering scarf, charcoal, fertilising excrement, affected biota, exhausted yet satisfied bodies, and so forth. The perceptual attunement of ritual acts was an inextricable part of the transformative material processes that enliven beings-in-environments, including buddhas, nagas, plants and humans (try reciting mantra while out of breath!). Following Ingold (2000: 63), we approach these generative relational fields as meshworks: ‘entangled lines of life, growth and movement’. Expanding on this, we proposed the term ‘ritualized meshwork’ to unsettle *a priori* distinctions between medicine and religion in the case of Sowa Rigpa, and more specifically in recognition of the foundational roles played by Buddhist-inflected cosmology and religious praxis in our fieldsites. This meshwork repeatedly came to the fore, including in conversations on skill. A final example is the following reflection by Amchi Urgyen from Lalung Village: ‘There were times that I could not see medicinal plants right in front of my eyes while my grandfather would easily find them. Although his eyesight was quite poor, his skills, ethics and merit as an amchi were unmatched.’

Gentry’s work (2017; see also 2023) has much to offer along these lines. His exploration of the relations between revealed treasure texts and substances and the Tibetan landscape convincingly questions any spiritual/physical dichotomization of ‘indigenous non-human landscape entities’ (2017: 51–2), and he also notes the recurring relevance of ‘body-landscape homology’ (155–6, n. 277) for ritual intervention and sacred architecture. What is less satisfying from an Ingoldian

perspective, however, is how ANT conceptualizes land features, meteorological phenomena and organisms. Reflecting on the lived experiences we just recalled and realizing how the weather-world is in constant flux, what sense does it make to call a steep slope or a gust of icy wind during a hike up to camp an ‘actant’, or a group of *trönbu* flowers taking root in a rocky crevice an ‘object’? Such a reduction of the living complexity of things, media and other ‘non-humans’ to Latourian mediators ultimately goes hand in hand with the contradistinction of ‘brute materiality’ and meaning and the consecutive need for hybrid amalgams. Gentry (2017) argues that ANT provides a methodological solution for dealing with interactions between objects and discourse, and even that Sokdokpa’s writings themselves suggest such a ‘symmetrical’ stance (19–27).¹³ Nevertheless, we have hinted at some limitations of Gentry’s material semiotic approach which consciously restricts itself to ‘language about objects, and not objects themselves’ (435). While recognizing the pioneering value of his ‘re-materialization of textuality’ (440), we therefore suggest that Tibetan and Himalayan Studies could also benefit from Ingold’s phenomenology of dwelling, which pushes us to read the world and not only text, and to bring materials back into our analyses in a different way.¹⁴ This approach might come across as not sufficiently textual or Tibetological to some. Although we acknowledge more work is required to bridge this epistemological gap, it is worth emphasizing that the rural lineage amchis we engaged with did not embed their artisanship in elaborate Sowa Rigpa theorization—even when explicitly requested.

This still leaves open a question about the (inter)activities of seemingly more ethereal entities such as Mother Kunzum and nagas. If, as researchers, we choose not to sprinkle the fairy dust of agency across heterogeneous networks of connected-yet-distinct actants to decentralize Anthropos, how can we understand these usually unseen beings as

13 For an incisive critique of Latour’s symmetry, see Ingold 2012: 430–1; 2013: 12–14. See also Graeber 2015 on the pitfalls of the ontological turn and, in particular, Viveiros de Castro’s ‘many natures’ (on which Gentry also draws).

14 Gentry (2017: 438n7) reiterates Latour’s evaluation of phenomenology as narrowly focused on human consciousness and intentionality. However, Ingold’s approach (2000: 168–71; see also Ingold 2011b), which integrates the work of ecological psychologist James Gibson, decidedly moves beyond representational understandings of knowledge production and is applicable to any perceptive—and thus skilled—organism.

more than discourse, and not as signs of an unfathomable alternate reality? As anthropologists we should not be surprised that not all people agree on what is alive and why, or on whether life is thought of as an attribute of things at all. Thinking with Ingold (2011a: 67–75) once more, and opening up to an animic way of being and perceiving, we can comprehend aliveness as more than a projection of the imagination onto external objects, more than a belief about the world.

Animacy ... is the dynamic, transformative potential of the entire field of relations within which beings of all kinds, more or less person-like or thing-like, continually and reciprocally bring one another into existence. The animacy of the lifeworld, in short, is not the result of an infusion of spirit into substance, or of agency into materiality, but is rather ontologically prior to their differentiation. (Ingold 2011a: 68)

The implication of such an animic perception of the world is that ‘things *are* their relations’ (ibid., 70), just as all kinds of beings are becomings—open-ended entanglements that are better characterized with verbs than with nouns. In this sense, appeasing and enlisting the support of spirit owners and protectors of the land are truly reciprocal acts of coproduction, not just cultural constructs.¹⁵

Returning to the winter-time manual pharmacy work alongside Amchi Tsering, it became clear from the outset that the pharmaceutical taskscape is embedded in a close-knit nexus of medical, religious and astrological practices. Showing in particular that ‘skill is not an attribute of the individual body in isolation but of the whole system of relations constituted by the presence of the artisan in his or her environment’ (Ingold 2000: 291), we have pointed out the need to ground the taskscape in landscape and immerse it in the weather-world of sound, light and feeling. Spending weeks sorting, crushing and grinding dried fruits, stems and flowers in a glasshouse at more than 4,200 metres above sea level, Surbhi directly perceived how *materia medica* interacted with iron and stone tools and resonated with the body, the air in the room, the temperature, and the stillness of the surrounding mountains, facilitating a Himalayan Buddhist cultivation of concentration. In this chapter, we have not been able to offer much more

15 For nuanced analyses of human–nonhuman relationality in Tibetan lifeworlds, see Fjeld and Lindskog 2017; Tidwell, Niangajia and Fjeld 2023.

than a proof of principle of the value of attending to these ritualized meshworks. Our hope is that this will stimulate future work containing many more pages (and audiovisual documentation) of first-person and/or apprenticeship-based experiential descriptions.¹⁶ In this age of modern technology, climate breakdown and mass extinction, perhaps it is more important than ever to honor this interconnectedness and to overcome ‘a stifling division between academic study and observational practice’ (Ingold 2007: 36) by thinking *with* as well as *about* materials.

Acknowledgements

The ethnographic fieldwork that constitutes the core of this chapter was conducted as part of Surbhi’s doctoral research, funded by a fellowship provided by the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi. Surbhi gratefully acknowledges the continued support of Lama Lobsang Yeshe and the hospitality of all amchi she has worked with, as well as their families. Van der Valk was funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF project P30804) for co-authoring this chapter. We also wish to thank the editors of this volume for their generous invitation to contribute.

Note on the authors

Mridul Surbhi is a PhD Research Scholar and Teaching Assistant at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi. Her work explores Sowa Rigpa knowledge transmission and practice in the Western Himalayas. She holds a BA in philosophy and MA in cultural and social anthropology from the University of Delhi. Her doctoral project investigates intersections between traditional medicine, Science, Technology and Society (STS) studies and methodological pluralism. She is also part of the Self-Help Group of Amchis in Spiti and liaises between practitioners and government representatives of rural health and Indian systems of medicine in Himachal Pradesh, India.

16 Barbara Gerke, Jan van der Valk, Calum Blaikie and Tawni Tidwell are currently working on a collaborative volume, *Crafting Potency*, that seeks to answer this call.

Jan M. A. van der Valk is an independent scholar-practitioner working at the interface of Sowa Rigpa and western herbalism. Drawing on a multidisciplinary background in biology (MSc, KU Leuven), ethnobotany and anthropology (MSc and PhD, University of Kent), his interests revolve around Eurasian *materia medica*, traditional pharmacy and more-than-human ecologies. As a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of South Asian, Tibetan and Buddhist Studies (University of Vienna), he contributed to two Austrian Science Fund research projects: ‘Potent Substances’ (2018–23) and ‘Pandemic Narratives’ (2023–24).

ORCID®

Mridul Surbhi  <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-5261-5990>

Jan M. A. van der Valk  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7409-253X>

References

- Adams, V., M. Schrempf and S. Craig, eds (2011), *Medicine between Science and Religion: Explorations on Tibetan Grounds*, Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Besch, N. F. (2006), ‘Tibetan Medicine Off the Roads: Modernizing the Work of the Amchi in Spiti’, PhD Diss., Faculty of Behavioural and Cultural Studies, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg, Heidelberg.
- Besch, N. F. (2007), ‘Making a Medical Living: On the Monetisation of Tibetan Medicine in Spiti’, in M. Schrempf (ed), *Soundings in Tibetan Medicine: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives*, 155–70, Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Blaikie, C. (2013), ‘Currents of Tradition in Sowa Rigpa Pharmacy’, *East Asian Science, Technology and Society*, 7 (3): 425–51.
- Blaikie, C. (2014), ‘Making Medicine: Pharmacy, Exchange and the Production of Sowa Rigpa in Ladakh’, PhD Diss., School of Anthropology and Conservation, University of Kent, Canterbury.
- Blaikie, C. (2018), ‘Absence, Abundance, and Excess: Substances and Sowa Rigpa in Ladakh since the 1960s’, in R. D. Roy and G. N. A. Attewell (eds), *Locating the Medical: Explorations in South Asian History*, 169–99, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Blaikie, C. (2019), ‘Mainstreaming Marginality: Traditional Medicine and Primary Healthcare in Himalayan India’, *Asian Medicine*, 14 (1): 145–72.

- Bodh, V. K. and S. Mehta (2018), 'Rohtang Tunnel and Its Consequences in Lahaul and Spiti', *Economic & Political Weekly*, LIII (20): 61–7.
- Chudakova, T. (2017), 'Plant Matters: Buddhist Medicine and Economies of Attention in Postsocialist Siberia', *American Ethnologist*, 44 (2): 341–54.
- Dga' ba'i rdo rje (1995), *'khrung dpe dri med shel gyi me long*, Beijing: Mi rigs dpe skrun khang.
- Fjeld, H. and B. V. Lindskog (2017), 'Connectedness through Separation: Human–Nonhuman Relations in Tibet and Mongolia', in J. H. Z. Remme and K. Sillander (eds), *Human Nature and Social Life: Perspectives on Extended Sociality*, 68–82, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gagné, K. (2019), *Caring for Glaciers: Land, Animals, and Humanity in the Himalayas*, Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Gagné, K. (2020), 'The Materiality of Ethics: Perspectives on Water and Reciprocity in a Himalayan Anthropocene', *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews, Water*, 7 (4): e1444.
- Gentry, J. D. (2017), *Power Objects in Tibetan Buddhism*, Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Gentry, J. (2023), "'May It Meet with a Karmically Destined Mahākāruṇika Yogin!'"—Ratna Lingpa's Renewal of the Maṇi-Pill Tradition in Fifteenth Century Tibet', *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, 66: 94–229.
- Graeber, D. (2015), 'Radical Alterity Is Just Another Way of Saying "Reality": A Reply to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro', *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 5 (2): 1–41.
- Hay, W. E. (1850), 'Report on the Valley of Spiti', *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, XLII (VI): 429–51.
- Heller, A. and G. Orofino, eds (2007), *Discoveries in Western Tibet and the Western Himalayas: Essays on History, Literature, Archaeology and Art*, Leiden: Brill.
- Hofer, T. (2019), *Medicine and Memory in Tibet: Amchi Physicians in an Age of Reform*, Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Howes, D. (2011a), 'Reply to Tim Ingold', *Social Anthropology*, 19 (3): 318–22.
- Howes, D. (2011b), 'Reply to Tim Ingold', *Social Anthropology*, 19 (3): 328–31.
- Ingold, T. (2000), *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Ingold, T. (2007), 'Writing Texts, Reading Materials: A Response to My Critics', *Archaeological Dialogues*, 14 (1): 31–8.
- Ingold, T. (2011a), *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge.
- Ingold, T. (2011b), 'Worlds of Sense and Sensing the World: A Response to Sarah Pink and David Howes', *Social Anthropology*, 19 (3): 313–17.
- Ingold, T. (2012), 'Toward an Ecology of Materials', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 41 (1): 427–42.

- Ingold, T. (2013), 'Anthropology beyond Humanity', *Suomen Antropologi: Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society*, 38 (3): 5–23.
- Jahoda, C. (2015), *Socio-Economic Organisation in a Border Area of Tibetan Culture: Tabo, Spiti Valley, Himachal Pradesh, India*, Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press.
- Joffe, B. P. (2019), 'White Robes, Matted Hair: Tibetan Tantric Householders, Moral Sexuality, and the Ambiguities of Esoteric Buddhist Expertise in Exile', PhD Diss., University of Colorado, Boulder.
- Kala, C. P. (2005), 'Health Traditions of Buddhist Community and Role of *Amchis* in Trans-Himalayan Region of India', *Current Science*, 89 (8): 1331–8.
- Klimburg-Salter, D., C. Jahoda and K. Tropper, eds (2007), *Text, Image and Song in Transdisciplinary Dialogue*, Leiden: Brill.
- Kuyakanon, R., H. Diemberger and D. Sneath, eds (2022), *Cosmopolitical Ecologies Across Asia: Places and Practices of Power in Changing Environments*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Laurent, Y. (2023), *Spiti - The Gigantic Valley of Many-Hued Strata: Archaeological and Historical Research in the Western Himalayas*, Kathmandu: Vajra Books.
- Laurent, Y. and D. Pritzker (2017), 'Introduction', in *The Spiti Valley: Recovering the Past and Exploring the Present: Proceedings of the First International Conference on Spiti*, special issue, *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, 41: i–ix.
- Mc Allister, P., C. Scherer-Schaub and H. Krasser, eds (2015), *Cultural Flows across the Western Himalaya*, Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.
- Millard, C. (2009), 'The Life and Medical Legacy of Khyung Sprul 'jigs Med Nam Mkha'i Rdo Rje (1897–1955)', *East and West*, 59 (1): 147–66.
- Miller, D. (2007), 'Stone Age or Plastic Age?', *Archaeological Dialogues*, 14 (1): 23–7.
- Pordié, L. (2016), 'The Vagaries of Therapeutic Globalization. Fame, Money and Social Relations in Tibetan Medicine', *International Journal of Social Science Studies*, 4 (2): 38–52.
- Pordié, L. and C. Blaikie (2014), 'Knowledge and Skill in Motion: Layers of Tibetan Medical Education in India', *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry*, 38 (3): 340–68.
- Pordié, L. and S. Kloos, eds. (2022), *Healing at the Periphery: Ethnographies of Tibetan Medicine in India*, Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Singh, K. N., Gopichand, A. Kumar, B. Lal and N. P. Todaria (2008), 'Species Diversity and Population Status of Threatened Plants in Different Landscape Elements of the Rohtang Pass, Western Himalaya', *Journal of Mountain Science*, 5 (1): 73–83.

- Smyer Yü, D. and E. de Maaker, eds (2021), *Environmental Humanities in the New Himalayas: Symbiotic Indigeneity, Commoning, Sustainability*, London: Routledge.
- Tidwell, T. L., Nianggajia, and H. E. Fjeld (2023), 'Chasing Dön Spirits in Tibetan Medical Encounters: Transcultural Affordances and Embodied Psychiatry in Amdo, Qinghai', *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 60 (5): 799–818.
- Tilley, C. (2007), 'Materiality in Materials', *Archaeological Dialogues*, 14 (1): 16–20.
- Tsewang Smanla and C. Millard (2013), 'The Preservation and Development of Amchi Medicine in Ladakh', *East Asian Science, Technology and Society*, 7 (3): 487–504.
- Van der Valk, J. M. A. (2024), 'The Resurgence of a Tibetan Medical Hauntology: Diagnosing COVID-19 as the Spectral "Revenge of Nature" during the Anthropause', *Environmental Humanities*, 16 (3): 807–25.
- Vargas-O'Bryan, I. (2013), 'Falling Rain, Reigning Power in Reptilian Affairs: The Balancing of Religion and the Environment', *Religions of South Asia*, 7 (1–3): 110–25.