

WORK AS WORSHIP:

*A COMPARATIVE EXAMINATION OF THE RELIGIOUS/PHILOSOPHICAL MOTIVES
BEHIND THE INTEGRATED AGRICULTURE SYSTEMS PRACTICE IN YUKSOM AND
LINGEE-PAYONG, SIKKIM.*

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Table of Contents

Abstract	4
Introduction	
Agricultural Philosophy	5
Sustainable Sikkim	8
The Organic Mission	10
In Response to the Organic Mission	11
Religion in Sikkim	12
Hindu Religious Context	15
Buddhist Religious Context	18
Philosophical Farming	19
Methods	21
Findings	
Sustainable Livelihoods in Lingee-Payong	22
Religious and Philosophical Associations in Lingee-Payong	24
Yuksom Livelihoods and Eco-Tourism	28
Religious and Philosophical Associations in Yuksom	31
Discussions	
Religion and Tradition	32
Decoding the Organic Mission	36
Conclusions	37
A Way Forward	38
Recommendations for Further Studies	38
References	40

Abstract

Sustainable agriculture must hold as its goal both the successful preservation and efficient cultivation of the land. While working to produce crops in substantial quantities, farmers must continue to maintain a healthy, reciprocal relationship with the spaces in which they work. Integrated cropping systems, largely at play in the traditional mountain ecosystems of Sikkim, India, focus primarily on this conservationist approach to food production. With a particular attention to biodiversity, integrated farming aims to preserve all of the subsystems that coexist within a given environment to enhance natural interaction and productivity.

This project reflects an examination of the practice of integrated farming in Sikkim, India through the lens of its philosophical motivation. This attentiveness to maintaining a reciprocal, codependent relationship with nature through sustainable agriculture presents itself in a number of the pillars of Eastern religion. In a case study of a sample of two Sikkimese farming communities, this study evaluates the religious/philosophical motivation for such productive implementation of organic, integrated farming, ultimately illustrating the essentiality of a religious set of meaning in sustaining traditional, conservationist agricultural practice. Data has been collected in the form of qualitative information gathered through personal and collective interviews, discussions and my own participatory practice in local community farming tasks.

Introduction

Agricultural Philosophy

Aldo Leopold famously opens his “A Land Ethic” claiming, “Ethics, so far studied only by philosophers, is actually a process in ecological evolution” (Leopold, 1)¹. This notion of an environmental philosophy is one that is extraordinarily relevant in the present decade as the necessity to promote environmentalism and sustainable growth models continues to escalate. While a metaphysical, theoretical model can be implemented as a means of approaching environmental studies globally, there is a tradition within Eastern religion that seems, in particular, to uphold the sanctity of the natural world. Kurt Alan Ver Beek, in his essay, “Spirituality: A Development Taboo,” writes, “spirituality is integral to [our] understanding of the world and [our] place in it, and so is central to the decisions [we] make about development. Despite the evident centrality of spirituality to [our] decisions, the subject is conspicuously under-represented in the development discourse” (Beek, 38)², thus it is innately human to appeal to spirituality within the discourse of development. Religious scholar, Jenny Lunn adds to this, noting that religion, “plays a role in ensuring that future development is successful, sustainable and appropriate” (Lunn, 947)³. Religious tradition *must* be acknowledged in pursuit of a sustainable development model that can succeed on both a local and global level.

Sustainable development, according to the World Commission on Environment and Development, refers to “development that meets the need of the present without compromising the

¹ Leopold, Aldo “A Land Ethic” The Aldo Leopold Foundation, Baraboo, WI,1991. Web.

² Beek, Kurt Alan Ver. "Spirituality: A Development Taboo." *Development in Practice* 10.1 (2000): 31-43. Web.

³ Lunn, Jenny. "The Role of Religion, Spirituality and Faith in Development: A Critical Theory Approach." *Third World Quarterly* 30.5 (2009): 937-51. Web.

ability of future generations to meet their own needs”⁴. While of course the term “needs” allows for a great deal of interpretation, with respect to agriculture it means specifically the ability for a specific farm to produce substantial nutrition to the community it serves. In order to meet these needs *sustainably*, one must do so in a way that is environmentally responsible, remains attentive to persevering biodiversity, and furthermore, allows the individual or community to remain self-sufficient. Under these definitions, sustainable agriculture presents itself as an approach to farming that empowers both the farmer and the land itself - it is mutually beneficial with regard to the subsistence of both nature and humanity. The International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IITASD), formally credited as, “a multi-thematic, multi-spatial, multi-temporal intergovernmental process with a multi-stakeholder bureau”⁵ released a Synthesis Report in 2009 detailing the multi-faceted significance of supporting the agricultural market and community. The report states, specifically, that the goal of such a document is to outlay “options for action that meet development and sustainability goals” as well as to report “scientific information on a range of topics that are critically interlinked, but often addressed independently, i.e., agriculture, poverty, hunger, human health, natural resources, environment, development and innovation”⁶ Ultimately, there is a holistic need to renew an attentiveness to more sustainable agricultural systems and their modes of functionality as the impacts therein are widespread both geographically and categorically.

⁴ World Commission on Environment and Development. "IISD Home | IISD." IISD Home | IISD. W.C.E.D, n.d. Web. 17 Mar. 2015.

⁵ Kassam, Amir. "Agriculture at a Crossroads: Synthesis Report of the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science, and Technology for Development (IAASTD)." *Ex. Agric. Experimental Agriculture* 46.01 (2009): 115. Web.

⁶ *Ibid.*

However, the move towards a more commercialized brand of farming as well as the growing importance of agribusiness places less significance on the particularity of environmentally aware farming practices and a much greater weight on the export and income of food growth and distribution. According to Shiva V. in, “Sustainable Agriculture and Food Security”, local agrarian economies forced into larger commercial agricultural models will condemn “local communities and marginal farmers to perpetual poverty while seriously damaging the environment and biodiversity”⁷ in the spaces in which they operate. At present, less than 60% of the Indian population is involved in some sort of agricultural work and that number continues to decline steadily each year as commercialized farming in a globalized market grows more widespread⁸. The Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), in a case study on farmers in 18 Indian states, found that, “90 per cent of the farmers are doing farming because it is their ancestral occupation, while only 10 per cent are new farmers who have joined farming in recent years” and further, that “40% were of the opinion that, given a choice, they would take up some other career”⁹. Evidently, the willingness to farm as well as the credibility of an agricultural occupation have both declined steadily. In D. Narasimha Reddy’s article on the present crisis in agriculture, he notes that within the last two decades, “through a part of the neo-liberal wave of globalization aided by the revolution in information and communication technology (ICT), rural India too, somewhat rudely, has been exposed to the surge towards integration into the global

⁷ Shiva V., Sustainable Agriculture and Food Security” *The Impact of Globalization*, pp.582 CABI Direct, WY 2002. Web

⁸ Shrinivasan, Rukmini. "Farmer Population Falls by 9 Million in 10 Years - The Times of India." The Times of India. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Mar. 2015.

⁹ Kumar, Sanjay. "State of Indian Farmers: A Report." Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), Delhi (2014): n. pag. LOKNITI. Web

market economy” (Reddy, 40)¹⁰. As the forces of the globalized market infiltrate rural areas, they too move away from their long-standing, local practices which results in a decreasing adherence to environmental sustainability. Perhaps the only way to rectify the modern destruction of the agricultural tradition in India is to return to its philosophical or religious roots, in favor of backing away from this more modernized approach to commercial food production.

Sustainable Sikkim

Sikkim, a Himalayan state that borders both Bhutan and Nepal remains the least populous state in the entirety of India. It did not officially become a part of the Indian union until May of 1975 and is thus the newest of the Indian states¹¹. The Himalayan land of Sikkim is deemed a sacred space due its natural, expansive biodiversity and its long-standing philosophical tradition. Shonila Baghwat, in an examination of sacred forests and greater lands, writes that, “support for the continued practice of the tradition of sacred [land] is needed in order to provide a culturally sensitive model for community-based natural resource management”¹². As India’s youngest state, Sikkim remains somewhat untouched by the impending forces of industrialized, globalized farming and thus still holds a large stake in its agricultural production; 64% of the public is entirely dependent on local or family farming¹³. A form of farming known as “Integrated Farming” is the dominant system throughout the state. This is a form of farm management that aims itself to-

¹⁰ Reddy, D. Narasimha, “Crisis in Agriculture and Rural Distress in Post Reform India” *India Development Report*, pp. 41-53, 2012

¹¹ "Sikkim State History." Encyclopedia Britannica Online. Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d. Web. 17 Mar. 2015.

¹² Ormsby, Alison A. and Bhagwat, Shonil A. (2010). Sacred forests of India: a strong tradition of community-based natural resource management. *Environmental Conservation*, 37(3) pp. 320–326.

¹³ Dach, Susanne Wymann Von, Rosalaura Romeo, Alessia Vita, Maria Wurzinger, and Thomas Kohler. *Mountain Farming Is Family Farming: A Contribution from Mountain Areas to the International Year of Family Farming 2014*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. Print.

wards the maintenance of natural order. In *The Indian Journal of Traditional Knowledge*, a case study of Sikkim, states specifically, “The yield potential of any particular site is the result of the interaction of many growth factors such as light, air, rainfall, topography, temperature, humidity and soil types. The aim of the grower is to stimulate the conditions under which the crop can express its potential under the given environmental conditions”¹⁴. The natural diversity and lack of flat land in the Sikkimese region promotes a brand of farming that attempts to make use of the given agricultural conditions as well as the multiplicity of species capable of thriving. Varying crops, breeds of wildlife, flora, fauna and other forms of vegetation are used to aid production on a singular farm rather than eradicated in the formation of mono crop plots. Essentially, “these phenomenon are [all] combined in such a way and proportion that each element helps the other; the waste of one is recycled as resource for the other.”¹⁵ Integrated farming, in fact, steers directly away from any sort of single-crop cultivation - it emphasizes all brands of bio-diversity. There is no singular, universalized model, as its format adjusts itself to each individual farm it is applied to. The Agri-Cultures Network refers to it specifically as the attempt to “imitate nature’s principle” where we are attentive not only to the crops but to the various form of wildlife, flora and aquatic life therein¹⁶. Processes like crop rotation or inter-cropping prevent plants from competing for access to water, nutrition or available space. The positive integration of subsystems

¹⁴ Subba, J.R. "Indigenous Knowledge on Bio-resources for the Livelihood of the People's of Sikkim." *Indian Journal of Traditional Knowledge* 8.1 (2009): 56-64. Web.

¹⁵ Das, Anshuman. "Integrated Farming: An Approach to Boost up Family Farming." *Agri-Cultures. LEISA India* | Volume 15 No. 4, Dec. 2014.

¹⁶ Das, Anshuman. "Integrated Farming: An Approach to Boost up Family Farming." *Agri-Cultures. LEISA India* | Volume 15 No. 4, Dec. 2014.

allows the various entities to peacefully coexist- they recycle one another's waste and interact in such a way that enhances the growth of each individual species.

The Organic Mission

In 2010, the Sikkimese government passed a comprehensive policy directed towards establishing Sikkim as an entirely organic state by 2015 - the first policy passed of its kind. While the mountainous terrain is far from ideal agricultural ground, the Organic Mission served as a way to salvage what could be fruitful while keeping commercial farming forces at bay. According to an analysis of the policy in "Mountain Farming is Family Farming", the act was "meant to make farming more profitable by bringing premium prices for organic products, creating jobs and increasing self-reliance, but also help[ing] to preserve the fragile mountain environment."¹⁷ According to the text of the policy, the shift towards "an organic state", was meant to promote, "general well being, health of the populace, prosperity and Gross Happiness Index in the State"¹⁸ through the use of integrated farming. The local governments have banned synthetic pesticides and fertilizers, encouraged farmers to independently produce and use natural manures and offered financial and material support to local farmers for the maintenance of their farms as incentives to promote organic land use through bio-fertilizers and rural compost pits. The Sikkimese government has provided organic high yielding or hybrid seeds to the large majority of farming communities at no cost. Ultimately, the agricultural model is a closed one in which everything possible is produced internally. Furthermore, the government has established three "livelihood

¹⁷ Dach, Susanne Wymann Von, Rosalaura Romeo, Alessia Vita, Maria Wurzinger, and Thomas Kohler. Mountain Farming Is Family Farming: A Contribution from Mountain Areas to the International Year of Family Farming 2014. N.p.: n.p., n.d. Print.

¹⁸ Government of Sikkim, "Sikkim Organic Mission", *Organic Sikkim Mission Declaration and Action Plan 2010*

schools” in Tadong, Bermiok and Daramdin in order to better train farmers in the practice of agriculture in the organic sector¹⁹.

The text of the public policy distributed by the Sikkimese government with regard to the Organic Mission ends with an appeal. It reads, “This will not only be beneficial to all citizens of the state in terms of health and wealth but will also be beneficial for our precious land, water sources and ecology. We have not inherited this earth from our forefathers but have borrowed it from our future generations, it is our duty to protect it by living in complete harmony with nature and environment”²⁰. The policy holds philosophical weight in addition to its environmental, conservational resonance; it is built upon notions of reciprocity, positive integration, preservation and respect.

In Response to the Organic Mission

There are, of course, fundamental objections to the Sikkimese organic mission on the part of both the farmers and the politicians within the state. According to “Mountain Farming is Family Farming,” farmers are struggling with the lack of a substantial market for bio-fertilizers and bio-pesticides. Essentially, “The farmers are dissatisfied with previous marketing efforts for cash crops where, “organic products do not bring higher prices than conventional products”²¹. Ultimately there is little economic motivation to operate on an exclusively organic basis so, “Farmers resort to short-term measures such as continued use of synthetic inputs from outside the

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ Government of Sikkim, “Sikkim Organic Mission”, *Organic Sikkim Mission Declaration and Action Plan 2010*

²¹ Dach, Susanne Wymann Von, Rosalaura Romeo, Alessia Vita, Maria Wurzinger, and Thomas Kohler. *Mountain Farming Is Family Farming: A Contribution from Mountain Areas to the International Year of Family Farming 2014*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. Print.

state...they have an incentive to overlook such malpractices”²². This represents a growing distance on the part of the farmers from the traditional agricultural practices of the sacred state. Despite governing policy, it still remains the prerogative of individual land owners and cultivators to take a holistically organic approach to farming - the ideology must be personal. “Mountain Farming is Family Farming” explains, “Given their traditional knowledge and experience, local farmers are perfectly able to apply an integrated system.” Under the Organic Mission, however, farmers are not encouraged to maintain an adherence to their traditional methods but rather to this politically motivated means of organic production. In this way, farmers are losing site of the *significance* of sustainable, environmentally-conscious lifestyles. Farmers lose tradition in the face of this government defined, cash-crop driven brand of organic, and thus lose the motivating factors behind their environmentally-aware approach to cultivation. The Sikkimese public, then, would benefit from reestablishing their connection with their traditional religious and philosophical value sets in accordance with the cultivation of the land as a means of upholding truly sustainable livelihoods. Ultimately, the case of Sikkim calls for a renewed philosophical prerogative on the part of its farmers.

Religion in Sikkim

According to the 2001 census report, approximately 61% of the Sikkimese population identifies as Hindu and 28% as Buddhist²³. As Hinduism and Buddhism dominate the religious/philosophical climate in the region, it follows that the more philosophical aspects of the Organic mission stem from Hindu/Buddhist tradition. Within the sects of traditional Buddhism and Hin-

²² *ibid.*

²³ "Religious Composition." Census of India. Government of India Ministry of Home Affairs, 2011 n.d. Web.

duism within Sikkim, there are a number of prevalent traditional sub-groups. The most common of these throughout both Yuksom and Lingee-Payong are the Lepchas and the Bhutias. Both have been granted “scheduled tribe” status which according to The Constitution of India signifies that, among other things, they are a community possessing, “indications of primitive traits, distinctive culture, shyness of contact with the community at large and geographic isolation”.²⁴ Serving primarily as mountain communities, “The Bhutias and Lepchas are composed of a number of Ethnic communities with different languages/dialects, and social and cultural backgrounds. The cultural diversity attributes to a rich agro-biodiversity and traditional ecological knowledge.”²⁵ While the Lepchas and Bhutias generally fall under the religious category of Buddhism, they have particular cultural and philosophic practices, codes of dress, and ritualistic traditions. According to sociologist Kerry Little, “their traditional nature worship rituals and beliefs sit comfortably alongside the Buddhist doctrine they have followed since the Bhutias arrived from Tibet with Buddhism in the 13th century. They consider that nature’s gifts give them life in the form of food, medicine and prayer and many of their festivals and prayers pay homage to nature²⁶”. Within the framework of philosophical ecology, the Bhutia and Lepcha people have a specific religious dedication to the mountains and what they produce. Considering themselves to be, “the children of the Himalayas,²⁷” they hold a particular stake in preserving the natural state of their homeland as well as maintaining its sacred quality. Religious tradition, in the case

²⁴ Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India "Article 366" Constitution of India, india.gov.in, n.d. Web.

²⁵ Subba, J. R. History, Culture and Customs of Sikkim. New Delhi: Gyan, 2008. Print.

²⁶ Little, Kerry. "Lepcha Narratives of Their Threatened Sacred Landscapes." Transforming Cultures EJournal 3.1 (2008): n. pag. Web.

²⁷ *ibid.*

of these communities, allows for them to maintain an impressive bond with their natural environments, and to attribute a certain holy quality to the ecology and biodiversity of their mountain eco-systems.

According to Sikkimese historian Jash Raj Subba, “Supernatural phenomena are immanent in the material world of Sikkimese people...there are qualities of sacredness attached to space - mountain peaks, hills, rivers, lakes, etc. whether domestic or of the subcontinent itself. An enormous range of geographical features possesses sacred properties²⁸” Thus, while only a portion of the Sikkimese population falls into the categories of Bhutia and Lepcha, the population as a whole is somewhat connected to this philosophical notion of “nature worship”. Whether Hindu, Buddhist, Christian or more specifically Lepcha or Bhutia, the public of the state of Sikkim has a traditional inclination towards the maintenance and careful upkeep of the sacred mountain eco-system. Human manipulation of the Earth transcends its own basic physical implications - the metaphysics of a human relationship with nature implies some sort of religious tradition that accounts for a hierarchy, a codependence and a mutual respect between humanity and the natural world.

Ecology - the larger framework of an integrated community of beings - inevitably holds an underpinning that roots itself in religious or metaphysical tradition. According to A. Whitney Sanford in her text “Growing Stories From India,” there is inevitably a narrative that informs agricultural discourse in any given location. She notes that there are complex, “metaphors and narrative structures that underlie myth and story” where ultimately “these structures shape norms

²⁸ Subba, J. R. History, Culture and Customs of Sikkim. New Delhi: Gyan, 2008. Print.

that guide human action with regard to agriculture” (Sanford, 28)²⁹. It is this religious motivation, then, in Sikkim in particular, that seems to be the guiding narrative for the successful implementation of the integrated farming movement. This project reflects an attempt to understand the specificities of the religious and philosophical tradition in Sikkim and the ways in which this directs the farming community towards a more sustainable, agricultural ethic.

Hindu Religious Context

Within the Hindu religious tradition, there is a particular focus on respect for natural life forms that is necessarily upheld and acted upon. O.P Dwivedi in his essay, “Dharmic Ecology,” elaborates, writing that “The Hindu religion, with its vast storehouse of text, ritual and spirituality” can bear the responsibility of ameliorating “the great harm and difficulty inflicted by the inappropriate use of resources” (Dwivedi, 4)³⁰. He begins this argument by presenting the notion upheld throughout the Baghavat Gita, one of the primary Hindu texts, that the Supreme Being resides in all things. The Gita claims directly, “Ether, air, fire, water, Earth, palets, all creatures, directions, trees and plants, rivers and seas, they all are organs of God’s body; remembering this, a devotee respects all species” (Gita, 2.41)³¹. It is evident through both Dwivedi’s modernized reading and the original spiritual text that all products of the Earth hold an innate holy quality. It is thus the responsibility of the patrons of this Earth to respond accordingly. Prakrti, a term prevalent in Hinduism, translates most accurately in English to “nature” but within it’s philo-

²⁹ Sanford, A. Whitney. *Growing Stories from India: Religion and the Fate of Agriculture*. Lexington, KY: U of Kentucky, 2012. Print.

³⁰ Dwivedi, O.P. “Dharmic Ecology” *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water*. ed. Chapple, Christopher Key, Cambridge, MA: Distributed by Harvard UP for the Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School, 2000. N. pag. Print.

³¹ Edgerton, Franklin. *The Bhagavad Gita*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1977. Print.

sophical context, refers more specifically to the eternal, all-powerful *force* of nature³². In the Gita, when Lord Krishna speaks to Arjuna, he claims, “Of all that is material and all that is spiritual in this world, know for certain that I am both its origin and dissolution” (Gita,10.8)³³, ultimately clarifying the fact that Prakṛti, this natural force, is a manifestation of godliness - of the absolute. Seshagiri Rao, author of “The Five Great Elements” explains with regard to Prakṛti that, “the multiplicity and variety of things that we experience in ordinary life is traced to this single substance” (Rao, 25)³⁴. Ultimately, an attentiveness to biodiversity and thus to systems of agriculture that are fundamentally distinct from mono cropping and industrial farming is a direct response to Prakṛti - the Hindu tenant of multiplicity in nature.

In order to combat Samsara, the cycle of rebirths, one must continue to be born into greater modes of existence rather than the opposite, and one of the ways in which this can be achieved is through the just treatment of *all* living things. The notion of “Dharma” ensures positive development in the hierarchy of Samsara. The purpose of Dharma is ultimately, “to maintain and conserve society and the world” which is accomplished, “through only those actions which contribute to the welfare of the whole world, with all living beings in it” (Rao, 24)³⁵. The forces of Prakṛti demand right action on the part of the Earth’s inhabitants, for Prakṛti “needs to be looked after with affection and adoration...[it] serves us but reacts when abused. What nature

³² "Prakṛti, 6 Definition(s)." Wisdom Library. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Mar. 2015.

³³ Edgerton, Franklin. *The Bhagavad Gita*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1977. Print.

³⁴ Rao, K.L. Sheshagiri “The Five Great Elements” *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water*. ed. Chapple, Christopher Key, Cambridge, MA: Distributed by Harvard UP for the Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School, 2000. N. pag. Print.

³⁵ Rao, K.L. Sheshagiri “The Five Great Elements” *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water*. ed. Chapple, Christopher Key, Cambridge, MA: Distributed by Harvard UP for the Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School, 2000. N. pag. Print.

wants is a judicious use of its resources for progress and prosperity, not indiscriminate exploitation” (Rao, 25)³⁶. Rao, in his analysis of the role of Dharma and its function in relation to Prakriti and thus ecology as a whole, makes clear that in acting according to proper Dharmic fashion, one must not only respect the fruits of the Earth but furthermore, make wise and beneficial use of her resources in order to serve humanity and preserve nature’s ability to continually reproduce.

Among several other Hindu myths, there is in particular, a series of stories that depict the deity Prthu, an incarnation of Vishnu, who is, “responsible for the introduction of agriculture and settled culture upon the earth.³⁷” Prthu has several disagreements with the Earth throughout his reign as king, and eventually, upon threatening the Earth with his bow, she begs for mercy, offering flowers, crops and animals, as a peace offering. Ultimately, “as Prthu weds Prthvi, the earth goddess, the relationship between kingship and the earth incorporates the sustenance of fertility. Prthu levels the earth with his bow to make cultivation possible³⁸.” According to A. Whitney Sanford, this particular myth indicates the importance of, “the obligation of agricultural production within the specific narrative context of mutuality and reciprocity. Otherwise the need for production can be used to justify overriding ethical concerns³⁹”. This myth, among a battery of other Hindu myths of this sort, serves to highlight the inherent correlation between conservationist Hindu philosophy and agricultural practice.

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ ³⁷ Sanford, A. Whitney. *Growing Stories from India: Religion and the Fate of Agriculture*. Lexington, KY: U of Kentucky, 2012. Print.

³⁸ *ibid.*

³⁹ *ibid.*

Buddhist Religious Context

As with Hinduism, the Buddhist religious discourse pays great attention to notions of Dharma and Dharmic action. In her book, “Mutual Causality in Buddhism and General Systems Theory,” Joanna Macy explains the notion of Dharma with special regard to reciprocity, as this is the primary concern in sustainable development through an agricultural lens. She explains that Buddhism, through the specific teaching of Dharma, “reveals the existential, religious and ethical implications of the interaction of self-organizing systems” within the natural world, ultimately revealing the causes of suffering and the potential for liberation therein⁴⁰. As with Hinduism, in Buddhism Dharma is both the means and the end-goal with respect to truth and thus the cessation of human suffering. For Buddhists, the necessity to act selflessly is an essential aspect of transcending the material world. Dharma helps the individual put an end to suffering in that it is a means of creating a separation from desire and thus acting in the interest of the world without selfish motivation. Macy notes that Buddhism, “nourishes deep ecological consciousness in our world...in that it undermines the categorical distinctions between self and the other” (Macy, 297)⁴¹. Under the heading of Dharmic action, the attempt to act selflessly allows for a greater understanding of one’s position within the greater universe - it allows one the ability to be *one* with nature rather than viewing the self as its own very distinct being. In applying this principle to the natural world, Macy poetically states that she would not saw off her own leg because this would constitute an act of self-violence. It follows that, “so are the trees in the Amazon rain basin. They are our external lungs. And we are beginning to realize that the world is our

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ Macy, Joanna. *Mutual Causality in Buddhism and General Systems Theory: The Dharma of Natural Systems*. Albany: State U of New York, 1991. Print.

body” (Macy, 298)⁴². This metaphorical acknowledgement of the maintenance of the ecological self as a necessary aspect of Dharmic duty establishes the firm Buddhist underpinning to sustainable living and thus a livelihood that is produced out of a sustainable means of agricultural production. The Buddhist sects of Lepcha and Bhutia hold, throughout their mythological and theological history, a firm, “dependence on nature. The only possession they seemed to have was their faith in Mount Kenchenjungha as their mother⁴³”. The literature that underscores these particular sub-sets of Buddhist philosophies identifies a very substantial and humbling relationship between humanity and the Earth itself.

Philosophical Farming

The Sikkimese people are capable of preserving the holiness of all species present in an ecosystem through a denial of mono-cropping and commercial agriculture in favor of biodiversity and natural order. According to Satish Kumar’s *The Philosophy of Farming*, there are multiple farming frameworks present across India, the most philosophically inclined of which is referred to as Satvik farming. This is, “farming as a spiritual practice, using methods which are gentle, simple and subtle. The food produced in this way is nourishing, revitalizing and refreshing. When the act of working the land in itself is satisfying and fulfilling, then you know that you are practicing Satvik farming⁴⁴”. This spiritual farming mechanism maximizes the benefits for both the farmers and the land - they take only subsistence quantities and provide for the community with what is left over. They recycle and fertilize with the products of their own waste. In a proper

⁴² *ibid.*

⁴³ “Lepcha”, People of the North East, Eco-Adventurism, N.P., n.d, Web.

⁴⁴ Kumar, Satish. "The Philosophy of Farming." Resurgence & Ecologist. N.p., n.d. Web.

model of integrated farming, the farmer's consumption and growth are equal. Full of sacred, long-standing traditional practice, Sikkim represents, "a sacred landscape where the people are truly integrated within the landscape unit itself"⁴⁵. The agro-landscape of the state is "highly complex because of the interconnected ecosystem types in which [the population] is integrated."⁴⁶ Furthermore, "Maintenance of the overall sustainability of the system requires a mosaic that may be the best plan for biodiversity conservation in general."⁴⁷ It is ultimately this mosaic, this impressive maintenance of diversity and multiplicity, that allows for the systems to feed off of one another - to sustain themselves in a mutually beneficial way. While little research focuses itself on this specific sect of agricultural practice, the major philosophical ties are evident - a particular preservation of biodiversity is an attentiveness to the holiness of *all* species alike. Where spiritual Satvik farming prevails over Rajsik and Tamsik brands of farming in which "Farmers are forced to use land and crops as commodities"⁴⁸, there is evidence that an agricultural approach based on a religious set of meanings is the most sustainable and thus the most valuable.

As it is practiced, Sikkimese integrated farming primarily aims to uphold "the principle of enhancing natural biological processes above and below the ground"⁴⁹ while providing sustenance for farmers, their families, and their larger communities as a whole. This return to tradition

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁶ Ramakrishnan, P.S. "Ecology and Traditional Wisdom." *The Cultural Dimension of Ecology* (1998): n. pag. Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi. Web.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁸ Kumar, Satish. "The Philosophy of Farming." *Resurgence & Ecologist*. N.p., n.d. Web.

⁴⁹Rota, Antonio. "Integrated Crop-Livestock Farming Systems." *International Fund for Agricultural Development* (n.d.): n. pag. IFAD. Web.

is ultimately a major driving force for progression with regard to sustainable development. My research attempts to uncover the causative relationship between the principles of Hindu and Buddhist philosophy and the sustainable model of integrated mountain agriculture at play in Sikkim as understood by the farmers themselves.

Methods

My research methods were based entirely on an ethnographic model rather than a quantitative one. According to sociologist Brian Hoey, an ethnography is defined as research with, “the intent to provide a detailed, in-depth description of everyday life and practice” in the aim of decoding cultural webs of meaning⁵⁰. Through rural Sikkimese home stay experiences I was able to familiarize myself with the typical lifestyles of local farmers beyond simply their agricultural work. In these immersive living situations I was able to understand sustainable Sikkimese livelihoods from a more holistic perspective, complete with cooking practices, composting/recycling routines and daily chores. This allowed me to gain an understanding of the physical geography and social climate of each of the villages as well. My familial contacts and my local translator assisted me in contacting and reaching out to a number of local farmers, seed-savers and community members. My interview questions for these subjects were designed to discern the systems of meaning in place behind traditional Sikkimese mountain farming as interpreted by the farmers themselves.

I worked closely with the agricultural communities in both Yuksom and Lingee-Payong in order to receive a first-hand understanding of the methods in place to promote more sustainable and environmentalist farming practices as well as the rituals and traditions idiosyncratic to

⁵⁰ Hoey, Brian, "What Is Ethnography?" Brian A. Hoey, Ph.D. Brian A. Hoey, Ph.D, Nov. 2013. Web. 07 May 2015.

the specific farmers and farmer communities that inform those agricultural techniques. I spent a number of hours doing hands-on work to assist with weeding, tilling, planting and harvesting alongside the farmers themselves. My data is based on first-hand observation within the field (on the farms) as well as qualitative accounts from a wide range of local Sikkimese farmers. I have formally interviewed members of varying religious traditions in order to receive the widest possible scope of valid potential environmental philosophies as well as formally conversing with and working alongside a diverse sample of farmers and locals.

The data is almost entirely narrative based. I have not infringed upon the rights of any of my interview subjects nor have I pushed for any unnecessary personal information from any of the interviewees. I obtained consent from each interview subject for the use of their insight in the construction of this paper. I worked to develop substantial relationships as well as mutual respect with the subjects of my study in assisting with necessary agricultural work as well as spending a great deal of time interacting with the farming community as a whole through various meals, outdoor activities, and community projects. My findings reflect a number of subjective responses to questions of personal meaning and religious motivation in the framework of agricultural practice.

Findings

Sustainable Livelihoods in Lingee-Payong

Located several hours from Singtam, the closest city with a fully operational marketplace, the Lingee-Payong community is largely and impressively self-sufficient. Each individual's farm land has several terraced layers, and while there is a market for cash crops - a market dominated entirely by cardimom, ginger, and occasionally oranges - the large majority of the agricultural

work is sustenance farming. What is harvested that morning is what is consumed throughout the day. A variety of vegetables, potatoes, species of corn, patty, and beans are grown year round and cultivated with sustenance as the sole motivation. The altitude allows for rice and millet cultivation in only very small quantities and thus these things are often imported from the plains and purchased from the market. While complete and total sustenance farming is not possible due to the necessity for spices, oils, tools, and appliances which require access to a market place as well as a financial income, with this exception the farmers in Lingee-Payong hold livelihoods drawn from their own cultivation. Several members of the community will operate shared jeep services, teach in the government schools, make and sell handicrafts and import and export their minimal cash crop harvests for supplementary incomes but, as demonstrated throughout several interviews with local men and women, these Sikkimese citizens identify first and foremost as farmers despite their additional jobs or methods of meeting minimal, residual financial needs⁵¹.

Women have adopted several traditional practices in order to utilize waste in an effective way. There are several types of placemats, dolls, bowls and floor-seats woven out of dried corn husks, simply left to hang from the previous seasons maize harvest. Additionally, old saris are torn and braided into pieces of wall art as well as seat cushions and pot holders. Food waste - banana peels, jackfruit skins, carrot peels etc. - are flung from porches onto the expanses of terraced crops below as the simplest and most effective means of composting. Uneaten food is fed to the cows who produce all of the curd and milk consumed by the families. The women attend bi-weekly meetings for a self-help group promoted by the local panchayat and facilitated by Tikaram Sharma. Tikaram assists these women in establishing their own bank accounts in order

⁵¹ Gitanath Koirala. 2015. Personal Interview. 23 April.

to foster a sense of self-sufficiency in them. They learn the most fundamental economic principles as well as learning a variety of handicrafts. In addition, they gain the opportunity to be a part of a community outside of their own homes - a notion that is extraordinarily empowering for each of these women⁵². The discussion of conservation practice is a major aspect of these meetings and the women often spend time clearing trash in the local areas in order to utilize the materials for handicrafts, some of which are sold in the market place in Singtam but most of which are kept for use in the home.

Religious and Philosophical Associations in Lingee-Payong

The population of Lingee-Payong identifies primarily as Hindu and Buddhist-Lepcha. In 8 formal interviews with local farmers, 5 identified as Hindu and 3 identified as Buddhist-Lepcha. Throughout these interviews as well as a number of informal personal conversations and group discussions, this sampling of the Lingee-Payong community maintained that the specific traditions, prayers and necessary worship practices vary from family to family. While there are basic similarities, even within the same religious tradition, the particular practices are household-specific - there is no singular set of either Buddhist or Hindu holy practices that maintain local sustainability.

It is traditional practice that a minimum of once a year, Hindu men and women gather the fruits of their harvest and offer them to the Gods before consumption as a sign of gratitude for harvests past as well as harvests to come but the dates of this offering are at the family's personal discretion as are the prayers recited and the foods offered. Additionally, there is a yearly puja conducted in all traditional Hindu, Lingee-Payong homes in which Hindu priests come to read

⁵² Tikaram Sharma. 2014. Personal Interview. 18 April.

aloud the text of the Vedas in the original sanskrit. The practice typically lasts two days and begins with the cleaning of the floors within the sacred holy room. This must be done with raw manure, cow urine and holy water as cattle are held sacred within the Hindu tradition. Once the floors are clean, Puja continues with the assembly of an alter complete with several foods both cooked and raw, leaves and flowers (fig leaves in particular), rice and millets. It is important to provide milk, butter and sugar as well as bitter leaves, all served on a selection leaf plates crafted carefully by the women of the household⁵³. Incense is lit and the scent, chosen by the family, is aimed at cultivating “a sense of peace in both the head and the heart⁵⁴”. The Hindu priests sit cross-legged amongst the offerings ringing small bells as they recite the Sanskrit Hindu text. The bells are meant to signal the Gods to listen - to pay attention to the present offering. The primary intention of the entire ceremony is to rid the participants of impure thoughts and actions that plague them and instead to turn their energy towards conservation and right-mindedness. According to Nar Narayan Dhakal, the Hindu priest who facilitated the Puja ceremony I was fortunate enough to witness, “We wipe clean what we’ve done wrong and thought wrong and we attempt to reconnect with the Earth we rely on and the Gods who oversee this⁵⁵”. This very customary Hindu practice of Puja ensures an important, unbreakable connection between the mountain ecology and the religious affiliation of the people who maintain it. While this appeared the most ubiquitous Hindu ritual with regard to conservation, the date as well as the God who receives the

⁵³ Nar Narayan Dhakal. 2015. Personal Interview. 24 April.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

offering were the family's personal prerogative as was the wider selection of additional agricultural offerings.

Gitanath Koirala put the variation in religious tradition most simply, claiming, "everything is holy, but it is a different holy for all of us. Each family has a different God and a different way of showing them respect⁵⁶". Ultimately there was no thread that united all Hindus or identified all Buddhists as maintaining a particular agricultural method or set of ritualized activities. While the majority of my subjects acknowledged the sacred nature of conservation and the fundamental religious and philosophical tie to the right cultivation of the land, their practices and allegiances varied family to family rather than religious affiliation to affiliation. "My farming practices and the prayers I say came from my father, not from my religion. They are Hindu prayers but we say them because generations have tended *these* fields with them⁵⁷" Koirala clarified. Much of the overlap between Eastern philosophy and mountain agricultural practice in Lingee-Payong was based primarily on tradition within the families themselves and not an overarching principle of dharma, karma or reincarnation.

"The women all sing prayer songs their mothers taught them while they work⁵⁸" Tikaram Sharma explained. Ultimately these prayer songs could reflect any religion and any subset of religion, but they were different for each family. What remained a dependent variable for each of these families however was the necessity to use waste in a productive way - the active choice to make the most productive possible use of any and all leftover matter acquired in their homes and

⁵⁶ Gitanath Koirala. 2015. Personal Interview. 17 April.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

⁵⁸ Tikaram Sharma. 2014. Personal Interview. 18 April.

the surrounding areas. The women who attended the self help groups identified as Hindu, Buddhist, Lepcha and occasionally Christian but were united primarily by this singular discussion of conservation practice. With regard to seed saving, the people of Lingee-Payong were collectively standing behind the decision to avoid the government seeds provided for them by the Organic Mission. These seeds, while legally deemed organic, are often hybrid seeds or high yielding varieties, rather than the traditional seeds that have been cultivated in the area for several generations. The government seeds are provided at no cost but Narmaya Sharma, a Lingee-Payong local and an experienced seed saver explained, “these seeds we use have served us for several generations. I don’t know why the government wants us to use different ones, ours are organic. I wouldn’t know how to have it another way⁵⁹”. This allegiance to tradition and reverence for the holy character to their present methods of agricultural work which are *inherently organic* leaves no room for the necessity to rely on government aid. Additionally, the government seeds are primarily cardimom and ginger, thus developing a reliance on the high yielding varieties provided would allow for several other local crop species to die out in the area. This dependence on government seeds would take away from the sacred nature of the practice - it would allow for a more mechanized approach to farming rather than a tradition-based, spiritual one.

According to Tsherring Lepcha, a Lepcha farmer in Lingee-Payong, “we are all bringing our children up under different religions but we teach them all that these mountains are holy⁶⁰”. He explained that most families have a space in their home that they deem sacred - an alter, a separate room, an alcove. Here they make frequent offerings, but to a variety of different Gods

⁵⁹ Narmaya Sharma. 2015. Personal Interview. 17 April.

⁶⁰ Tsherring Lepcha. 2015. Personal Interview. 22 April.

facilitated by different prayers. There are several methods to providing such offerings and several ways to organize these spaces but as a part of conservation practice they exist ubiquitously throughout the region. Ultimately, the farming practices themselves in Lingee-Payong are not particularly spiritual. The methods are practical, careful and traditional. They are organic by nature, requiring no supplementary aid from government seeds or bio-fertilizers. The local farmers are believers in seed saving and in living waste-free. They believe in sustenance farming and rely heavily on their crops for their livelihoods, only seeking minimal additional financial aid through other outlets. The unifying philosophical/religious motivations as articulated through several interviews with local farmers lie in a reverence for the land and the crops it produces and thus the necessity to work towards a sustainable, conservationist approach to the fragile mountain ecosystem of Sikkim.

Yuksom Livelihoods and Eco-Tourism

Yuksom, Sikkim operates on a very different agricultural basis than Lingee-Payong. As a major trekking hub, located at the base of Kanchenjunga National Park, there is a far greater tourist industry present. The large majority of farmers in the area primarily grow cardamom, as this is the most fruitful of cash crops at Yuksom's altitude. There is a government cardimom collection agency located in the town that allows for farmers to bypass the transportation costs of exporting their cardamom harvests to Silguri or other nearby markets. While many farmers will have small kitchen gardens, they are importing a large majority of the vegetables and grains they consume from the plains. The altitude is not suitable for the cultivation of rice or millet and thus the community is entirely dependent on plain markets for these products. According to Kinzong Bhutia, founder of the Kanchenjunga Conservation Society based in Yuksom, there are several

Yuksom residents who “are choosing to leave their land bare and uncultivated because they would rather support tourism than farming⁶¹”. The farmers of Yuksom, Sikkim are not self-sustaining agriculturally - farming has lost its prestige as a profession throughout the area. The public no longer has a stake in the labor required to raise crops and those who do choose to work in such a way are engaged almost entirely in the cultivation of cash crops.

According to Brikhaman Suba, an old Yuksom farmer who is now reliant on running his tourist home-stay service and on the market place for his sustenance explained, “it was much simpler when we just grew things ourselves. We were less greedy then⁶²”. He made clear that this reliance on income rather than on the crops themselves has created and fostered a sense of desire in the public for more technology, more clothing, more diverse foods etc. - and this has led the population to stray farther and farther from its agricultural roots. “I know my children will not farm, and their children will definitely not farm” Suba explained, with regard to the declining interest or focus on agricultural work as a whole, “we rely on eco-tourists, not our own farms⁶³”.

Eco-tourism is a recent phenomenon throughout Sikkim as a whole. The initiative was founded in 1996 but has grown extremely prevalent in recent years with the success of the government organic mission⁶⁴. It intends to keep the major industrialized forces of tourism at bay, while still allowing for the Sikkimese public to benefit from the additional income of the tourist

⁶¹ Kinzong Bhutia. 2015. Personal Interview. 27 April.

⁶² Brikhaman Suba. 2015. Personal Interview. 27 April.

⁶³ *ibid.*

⁶⁴ Kinzong Bhutia. 2015. Personal Interview. 27 April.

industry. The system promotes local home stays rather than hotels, the maintenance of major trekking base camps void of guest houses or automobile access, and the opportunity to engage with locals and with the natural mountain ecology of the region. While this industry has yet to infiltrate areas like Lingee-Payong where tourism has not impacted the natural, traditional system of livelihood, the Yuksom area is entirely dominated by this constantly expanding industry.

According to Kinzong Bhutia, “we are already part of a system where tourism is inevitable. All we are doing with eco-tourism is creating a system where the *people* benefit from tourist dollars instead of a small collection of big businesses⁶⁵.” The ecotourism industry in Yuksom allows for the locals to interact with foreigners while promoting conservation rather than industry. Additionally, it benefits the more impoverished members of the community through the promotion of homestays, tours, treks and various other activities facilitated by locals rather than corporations or government projects. While this is positive from an economic standpoint, it poses a major threat to the agricultural sphere. Brikhaman Suba noted specifically, “I do not farm so much anymore because now I get money from my home stay.⁶⁶”. In serving these tourists, locals who would otherwise engage in a greater number of agricultural activities are now occupied with service to foreigners.

With regard to seeds, the Yuksom population relies heavily on government provided seeds. According to Ms. Tshering Uden Bhutia of the Kanchenjunga Conservation Society, there were a variety of crops grown throughout her childhood that have died out completely with farmers’ newfound reliance on government seeds and thus their discontinuation of the practice of

⁶⁵ Kinzong Bhutia. 2015. Personal Interview. 27 April.

⁶⁶ Brikhaman Suba. 2015. Personal Interview. 27 April.

seed saving. The people of Yuksom have placed an enormous distance between themselves and their long-standing, conservational and agricultural practice in favor of a system of meaning that gives value to capital income and modernization rather than tradition.

Religious and Philosophical Associations in Yuksom

The religious distribution in Yuksom is more heavily Buddhist/Bhutia than it is Hindu, Lepcha or Christian but all of these populations are present nonetheless. I formally interviewed 6 Buddhist-Bhutia farmers and 1 Hindu farmer. In inquiring about the Pujas I'd witnessed in Lingee-Payong as well as the prayer songs, the seed saving routines and the offerings made of harvests, I found that the majority of the farmers had lost touch with this brand of practice entirely. Ms. Tshering Uden Bhutia explained that, "with dependence on the market place comes a dependence on money which means everyone has stopped thinking that farming is an important thing⁶⁷." Ultimately, the population has lost touch with the sacred nature of their agricultural spaces. "There is no time for Puja" Birkhaman Suba explained, "we are too busy now⁶⁸." As a child, Suba engaged in the frequent practice of familial puja and the dedicated offering of each harvest to the Gods, but now, as he explained, he is far too busy. With the monetary necessity to send his children to universities outside of the state as well as the responsibility of up-keeping his ecotourist home stay service, Suba can no longer make time for the religious aspects of agricultural work.

⁶⁷ Ms. Tshering Uden Bhutia. 2015. Personal Interview. 29 April.

⁶⁸ Brikhaman Suba. 2015. Personal Interview. 27 April.

Kinzong Bhutia clarified that while there are families that still take care to perform these pujas, the frequency diminishes substantially each year⁶⁹. Additionally, with the primary cultivation of cash crops, there is a constantly narrowing crop variety available as offering to the Gods. In an interview with Yadu Ram Sharma, a teacher at the monastic school located alongside the Dubdi monastery in Yuksom, “these boys will never grow up to farm. They learn many holy things about the Earth but they will not farm⁷⁰.” Despite the fact that the monastic students were engaging in environmental studies as a fundamental part of their academic, monastic curriculum, their instructor still felt confident that none of them would veer towards the agricultural market in a professional capacity. “It is not the same holy thing you describe” Sharma continued, “we are cardamom farmers not livelihood farmers⁷¹.” He clarified that this farming was no longer a religious, traditional, or ritualistic practice in Yuksom, but rather, a means of income. With the transition to government seeds, the growing influence of ecotourism and the increased dependence on plain markets, the sacred nature of agricultural work in Yuksom has been lost. According to the local farmers as well as ex-farmers, it is now an occupation like any other, aimed primarily at the maximization of profit with minimal labor.

Discussions

Religion and Tradition

My research substantiated itself around the differentiation between traditional knowledge and religious practice. The more farmers with whom I discussed agricultural work, the more evi-

⁶⁹ Kinzong Bhutia. 2015. Personal Interview. 27 April.

⁷⁰ Yadu Ram Sharma. 2015. Personal Interview. 28 April.

⁷¹ *ibid.*

dent it became that the Sikkimese public attributed their attentiveness to sacred landscapes to tradition rather than religion, even if their traditional practices were religious by nature. As Tikaram most eloquently put it, “we know this land is holy, and we have been *raised* to worship it in a particular way⁷².” The sacred landscape and its cultivation are most prominently impacted by an individual’s upbringing and familial tradition. While this is naturally religious, its significance comes from its generations of practice and its lack of alteration despite the impending forces of globalization. Thus it is in places like Yuksom, where those forces of globalization are some of the strongest in Sikkim and the capitalist sway is extremely prevalent, that this tie to sacred farming is lost. As tradition continues to be replaced by these larger grander markets, the religious and philosophical ties to long-standing, old-fashioned farming practices disappear as well. Modernization grows more influential than history.

As articulated by Michael Karlberg in *Meaning, Religion and a Great Transition*, “religion is an evolving system of knowledge and practice that, like science, entails a collective human endeavor to generate insights into reality and apply those insights to the betterment of the human condition” whereby “religious systems of meaning, and the collective practices that derive from them, will either resist or propel efforts to construct a more just and sustainable social order.⁷³” Ultimately, religious significance and the codes of conduct that naturally follow serve as necessary social, organizational factors - they largely influence the customs and dynamics within a community. If a community centers itself around the religious appraisal of conservation and the fundamentally sacred quality to agricultural work, then that public as a whole maintains

⁷² Tikaram Sharma. 2014. Personal Interview. 24 April.

⁷³ Karlberg, Michael. "Meaning, Religion, and a Great Transition." Great Transition Initiative Towards a Transformative Vision and Praxis (2014): n. pag. Web.

that belief and acts accordingly. In Lingee-Payong, it was not a specific adherence to one particular religious construct but rather to the notion that religion and the land are inextricably intertwined - a notion that has been maintained through the course of several generations. Different means of worship are acceptable just so long as worship remains important. And where worship is important in accordance with traditional Sikkimese value sets, conservation and food production are maintained as valuable as well.

Systems of meaning are derived from an extraordinary number of things. They stem from religion, philosophical order and familial ties as well as from consumption, technology, economic standing, caste, race cultural background and several other constructions, all of which shape and give value to social orders. Karlberg argues that, “religion has proven to be an exceptionally powerful mobilizing force that can reach to the roots of human motivation by endowing human agency with a transcendent meaning and purpose⁷⁴,” thus it is this religiously motivated force that has maintained the traditional system of sustenance mountain farming in Lingee-Payong, where it has failed to thrive in Yuksom due to the replacement of that religious system of meaning with a more commercial, economic system. It is not that farming is simpler or more productive in Lingee-Payong but rather that the population therein has not lost their attachment to the fundamental holiness of sustainable agriculture. The loss of meaning, the altering of the set of traditional religious values in Yuksom has allowed for its people to lose their allegiance to traditional farming practices.

Lingee-Payong may have a variety of religious *expressions* of their devotion to the land, but they regard their work in cultivation as part of a system of religious meaning all the same. C.

⁷⁴ *ibid.*

Allerton, in his study of Spiritual landscapes, explains that kinship, geography, morality and codes of action are all extremely codependent concepts, whereby, “Kinship is geography⁷⁵”. Religion and kinship (which serves at the generational backbone of tradition), are inextricably tied. The sacred quality of agricultural work can be maintained where geographical kinship continues to be revered - where the traditions of farming work are passed down via religious familial tradition. Shared labor, and a beneficial and healthy relationship for both the land and the people that embody and cultivate it are parts of that religious and agricultural tradition. Rather than capitalistic self-interest these people are instead focused on a devotion to one another and the land they inhabit which in turn, serves them in a healthy, cyclical fashion. Within a modern context, “one of the dominant macro-social interpretive frames today builds on the aforementioned assumption that human nature is fundamentally self-interested and that the purpose of our lives is to pursue our material interests in an environment of scarce resources.⁷⁶” In a setting like Yuksom where the people are “too busy⁷⁷” to adhere to their traditional farming principles and their children are “too distracted⁷⁸” to hold an interest even in cash-cropping and they have already grown “too dependent⁷⁹” on the plain agriculture as well as the technological and fashionable trends encroaching on the younger generations, this self-interested mode of being has evidently taken over. It is in Lingee-Payong where community benefit still remains a crucial part of the religious

⁷⁵ Allerton, C. 2009. ‘Introduction: Spiritual Landscapes of Southeast Asia.’ *Anthropological Forum* 19(3): 235-251

⁷⁶ Karlberg, Michael. "Meaning, Religion, and a Great Transition." *Great Transition Initiative Towards a Transformative Vision and Praxis* (2014): n. pag. Web.

⁷⁷ Brikhaman Suba. 2015. Personal Interview. 27 April.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*

⁷⁹ *ibid.*

system of meaning that the capitalistic principles of self-service have not overshadowed those of traditional, sustainable sustenance farming.

Decoding the Organic Mission

The Organic Mission, as articulated by the Sikkimese government, makes the claim that “organic” and “traditional” are separate concepts. The traditional modes of farming throughout Sikkim are inherently organic and have been since their conception. At a time when access to high yielding varieties of seeds, chemical fertilizers and unnatural pesticides was non-existent, the public of Sikkim thrived as a mountain agricultural community. The introduction of the word “organic” as part of a goal that demands government certification relies on the assumption that farmers need to be re-taught means of producing organic food. According to M.K. Pradhan, the joint director of the organic mission stationed in Gangtok, “the difference between traditional farming and organic farming is knowledge. We must *teach* traditional farmers to adopt our brand of organic⁸⁰.” This is a positive notion in that it maintains the ban on all chemical pesticides and fertilizers and it boosts the necessity for an ecotourist economy rather than a big-business brand of tourism, but it simultaneously pushes for a detachment from the traditional knowledge that has been maintained for generations in favor of a very particular government defined brand of farming. In asserting that “organic” is not the same as “traditional”, the Sikkimese government is devaluing the beauty in a traditional system of agriculture and promoting their own model of industrial “organic” farming - a scientific model they claim is of greater value than a spiritual one.

⁸⁰ M.K. Pradhan. 2015. Personal Interview. 15 April.

Conclusions

In the attempt to identify the aspects of classical Eastern religion and philosophy that positively influence the sustainable, integrated system of mountain agriculture at play in Sikkim, I determined that the religious motivation comes not from a particular set of religious values or practices but rather from a collective adherence to a traditional, religious system of meaning as a whole. Because the population of Lingee-Payong communally identifies the mountains as a sacred space and their crops as holy products, they maintain a careful, conservational practice of farming backed by the same religious fervor they have grown accustomed to through years of tradition. The fact that this brand of religious fervor manifests itself in different prayers, different texts and different rituals is irrelevant to the greater scheme of sustenance farming in the area, as the public as a whole has found that they can pay homage and show respect to the land in a variety of ways. Conservation is holy and while that is maintained through an abundance of practices, it is unwaveringly maintained.

In Yuksom, the deviation from a religious set of meanings in the face of an economic, capitalistic collection of values allows for a diminishing public desire to maintain conservation practice or sustenance farming overall. It is not a *specific* lacking religious practice or belief that has led these farmers away from their traditional practices but rather a lacking religious practice overall. While sustainability remains a major aspect of the farming, and the agricultural workers still meet the demands of the organic mission, they are losing traditional breeds of seeds in the maximization of cash crops, younger generations are void of a desire to contribute to farms at all, and the public is entirely dependent on the import of goods from the plains for sustenance. While the Yuksom community *grows* organic food, they often consume food that is grown with the use

of genetically modified seeds or chemical pesticides. While they remain “organic” under the government’s terms, they do not maintain the same level of holistic sustainable, conservationism that the people of Lingee-Payong do.

A Way Forward

My study initially focused on a question that asked narrowly about the concepts within the framework of traditional Eastern religion and philosophy that contribute to sustainable agriculture. I quickly found, however, that the target of that question was somewhat irrelevant - the sustainable livelihoods of the Sikkimese people and their conservationist organic farming practices came from a traditional understanding that their spaces are sacred as are the crops they produce. While each family of Hindu, Buddhist, Lepcha, Christian or Bhutia affiliation performed different rituals and recited different prayer varieties at different times throughout the year according to their own familial tradition, they were united by the understanding that the natural, holy spaces they inhabited were deserving of their reverence. In extending my study to a less traditional agricultural area, I determined that this traditional religious motivation is crucial to the maintenance of a lifestyle built on organic sustenance farming, not because of any particular practice but rather, because of the power of that category of motivation as a whole.

Recommendations for Further Study

My studies in Yuksom produced a number of questions that I was not prepared to answer in reference to the nature of the organic mission itself and the impact it holds on sustainable farming systems in accordance with long-standing tradition. In the interest of eradicating a sense of tradition for a new definition of “organic” the government is intentionally distancing farmers from those traditional religious motivations and providing them with more practical ones. Fur-

ther studies would require a much closer analysis of the eco-linguistics of the organic mission itself and how that influences sustainable livelihoods not just in terms of cropping but in terms of broader lifestyle choices as well. I would like to have spent more time working to evaluate organic-trainings conducted by the government and the responses of experienced farmers towards these government implementations as a whole. Paired with ecotourism, the bill seems to look to change a way of life that was sustainable to begin with, and this could potentially cause great detriment to future generations. Further studies might asses the continued impact of the organic mission on market culture in Sikkim, as more and more Sikkimese people grow reliant on plane agriculture. Is a state organic if it imports an abundance of food that is grown with the usage of chemicals? What does this mean for the future of sustenance farming or agriculture as a whole in Sikkim? Perhaps the government's attempt to capitalize on an already successful, environmental-ly-aware system has destroyed the delicate sustainability of the system itself.

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