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Strange Intersections: Humans, Technology and Insects in a Himalayan Valley

By IMTFI Fellow [Kabir Mansingh Heimsath](#)

I study the complex material, technological, and financial practices surrounding the yartsa market as a case study of human-nature-technology relations in Manang, Nepal. "Yartsa gunbu" is an inter-species medicinal fungus. In my work it acts as a touchstone for understanding the transitional nature of life in the high Himalaya, illuminating the interdependence of technology, economy and place. In this ethnographic essay drawn from my fieldwork, I recount the experience of one day of the harvesting season.

Manang, Nepal

We crossed the 15,000ft pass without problems, the rain comes and goes, and the valley stretches out for hours. We don't know how far it is to Naar and our companion is slow. I decide to move ahead, with thoughts of getting a horse in the village to come back for Poonam if it gets too late. I enjoy the rhythm of walking alone and it's an easy trail through meadows dusted with wildflowers. Softly humming, and watching clouds move across the peak opposite, it takes me a several moments to realize that the village has materialized on an unexpected ridge directly in front of me.



photo by Kabir Mansingh Heimsath

Naar is one of the two major villages in the most remote region of upper Manang called, eponymously, Naar-Phu. It's a special-permit zone with restricted access for tourists (\$90 fee, trekking guide required, 7 day maximum stay) and limited proprietary rights for non-residents. Some forty families stay there now and, refreshingly, it bustles with a domestic energy missing in the easier access and more tourist-oriented villages elsewhere in the region. The fields suspended below the village in a wide basin are brilliant green with ripening barley. Two young men and an older woman with bright eyes herd a bunch of goats towards me and they stop to say hello. I ask for "Tiger," the contact given by a friend in the last town, and the woman breaks off from her companions to show me the way. We dodge the remaining goats, stop to chat with a horse-rider, pass several houses and then she directs me up a ladder carved from a tree trunk. I climb onto a neighboring family's porch, over their roof, and then back down via the roof of Tiger's house to his open porch. Before I can explain the situation about my friends coming slowly Tiger's wife insists I put down my pack, come inside, relax and have some tea. She is nursing

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an infant as she talks and prepares the wood stove. Tiger comes in, yes, he's heard we're coming, and will go out to find my friends in case they don't reach the village before dark.

The hospitality continues during the four days we stay in Tiger's sister's lodge. The kitchen functions as an informal meeting point for villagers throughout the day and evening. Drolma, Tiger's niece, has been out of school for only two years, but already manages the place, and all those who visit, with capable authority. She prepares bread, tea, liquor, snacks and full meals for the eclectic guests. Teenage friends of her brother back from school in Kathmandu for the monsoon holidays spend the evening watching Justin Bieber videos downloaded to their smartphones; elderly grandparents who while away the day exchanging stories; several young men waiting around for the yartsa picking season to open; and many of her own contemporaries who drop by to chat in between chores at their own homes. It takes me a full day of hanging out to realize that she is actually running a business with all this socializing. The payments are infrequent and informal, but Drolma keeps a running tab for everyone involved.



photo by Kabir Mansingh Heimsath

Tirtha is a regular visitor. He looks like someone from South India, a round face with an open smile. He recognizes us from when we walked through the district town of Chame, almost a week ago. He came a more direct route up the valley and is waiting for the picking season to begin. He's come early the last several years to be amongst the first to buy from the local harvest, which has a reputation for being of very high quality and corresponding intensity. In 2012 several people were murdered in a conflict over access to territory. Tirtha is clearly an outsider here, but he has many friends and seems to be well liked and trusted by the villagers. Nevertheless, he and several other young men involved with yartsa dealing in Naar-Phu, insist that the picking season is a dangerous time and they are careful never to walk the trails alone or do anything unexpected that might arouse suspicion. When he's not out buying yartsa, Tirtha runs a guesthouse in Chame and also works at the Honda motorcycle dealership in Pokhara (he received a complementary motorcycle last year for having the highest sales). He bought between 8-9kilos of yartsa from Naar-Phu last year - that is roughly half a million dollar's worth of cash and/or worms he carries around in a backpack. He tries to buy and sell early because the prices are usually higher at the beginning of the season, then they drop. Three years ago he lost some 32 lakh NRs (approximately US\$32,000) but shrugged it off with a smile, "Usually I do OK." He deals with buyers in Kathmandu that he already knows, negotiates the deal over the phone with pictures and descriptions of provenance and quality, and takes his supply down once the deal is verbally confirmed.

The full-on picking season when everyone migrates to the upper pastures is delayed by a few days because of a funerary ceremony. They say it's been a bad year, with ten deaths already by the fifth month. With ceremonies generally carried out every week for seven weeks, and the entire village participating, I wonder when they have time for much else. Today we all spend time in one of the three village temples, and there are at least fifty people there at any given time saying prayers. The family is responsible for feeding all of us.



photo by Kabir Mansingh Heimsath

We make donations. In between prayer recitations a young lay-lama reads out a teaching on death from his smart phone. I meet an ex-monk who was responsible for arranging logistics for the escape of the Karmapa from Tibet back in 2000, propitiously during my first visit to Manang. I remember a helicopter flying overhead and an old woman bowing, "there is the Karmapa." I had visited him at his monastery outside Lhasa two months earlier and thought I didn't understand correctly; two days later I heard an announcement come through on BBC shortwave. This was the most high-level escape from Tibet since the mass exodus accompanying the Dalai Lama in 1959; the man I was speaking to had arranged the helicopter. He had the bloodshot eyes and dazed look of an alcoholic, the rugged body and sinewy arms of a pastoralist; they said he had been in prison, had a price on his head, gone into hiding and had "problems" since the escape.

We're waiting in the same kitchen for an announcement from the village committee - will the exodus to the upper meadows take place tomorrow, or later in the week?



photo by Kabir Mansingh Heimsath

Finally, well past 8pm, there is a call out of the darkness, "Attention, attention..." The voice carries over the suddenly quiet village without the help of any amplification. Tiger cocks his head to listen better - they announce the opening of a lower, more accessible, picking area for two days, and then the primary upper meadows three days hence. There was some consternation over me accompanying the villagers on the big trek, so Tiger is happy to take me picking to the more accessible grounds instead. We leave relatively late at 7am (the village starts moving around dawn, at 5am), but quickly scramble past other pickers on the lower slopes to join three of his cousins in the upper reaches of the range across from the village. Short alpine grass clings to the ravines between rocky ridgelines. The slope is crisscrossed with goat and yak grazing paths and scattered with wildflowers. Our group of five men wander up and down the steep slope, four of them looking intently at the ground, myself trying hard to frame photographs with the harsh backlight and struggling to keep-up without tripping. Only occasionally is there an exclamation, "alloooh-ah!" and we all scramble over to check the discovery. The forager uses his hand-axe for a quick swipe at the soil, and pulls the worm with its fruiting grass

out of the extracted lump. The worms are certainly bigger than those I was seeing near Manang, but every other one is limp, mushy - as if the fungus has not fully occupied the caterpillar larvae. The cousins do not seem surprised or overly discouraged by the poor finds, they already know not to expect much from this season. There had been hardly any snow over the winter, and the many deaths in village were foreboding of a hard year to come.

Despite the poor yartsa showing, the group seems to enjoy the outing. We spend plenty of time snacking on wild herbs and shared food, chatting with other groups on the hill, and simply sitting, breathing, and staring across the valley. Even the few pieces each member has found counts for several thousands of rupees more than they would otherwise have. Despite two decades of extremely profitable harvests, the yartsa is still viewed as a boon, a symptom of luck and good fortune, rather than a factor of subsistence or necessity.



photo by Kabir Mansingh Heimsath

Read Kabir Mansingh Heimsath's Final Report [here](#)

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