

# *Ceremonial Activities in Development: the Spiritual 'Problems' for Ladakh's Secular Encounter*<sup>1</sup>

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## **Introduction**

Capitalising on the Occident's fascination with Buddhist thought in general, and Tibetan Buddhism specifically, Ladakh is a haven for travellers seeking the quintessential 'Shangri La' or an 'authentic' Tibetan Buddhist experience. The popular construction of Ladakhi identity owes much to writers like John Crook (1980) and Helena Norberg-Hodge (1991), early visitors to the region who were instrumental in reifying Ladakh as a model of Buddhist spirituality and environmental sustainability according to an external ideal of what Tibetan Buddhist societies should embody. Tibet's exiled government, along with academic scholarship and key high-profile supporters in the West, also influence how Tibetan Buddhist societies are presented on the global stage. Central to this presentation are the ethical discourses transmitted through the Mahayana Buddhist teachings as the 'essence' of Himalayan Buddhist cultural identity, and the teachings' compatibility with democratic governance and sustainable development; thus reifying an identity that Toni Huber has labelled "green Tibetans" (1997).

Ladakh's tourism, development and religious institutions make good use of this reification; development activities at the level of local administration and NGO sector are expressed through a commitment to principles of sustainability, self-sufficiency, and cooperation: core values that emphasise as the 'essence' of Ladakhi culture. As a result, Ladakh's development sector is the recipient of considerable overseas financial support. In addition, as part of the Indian Union, Ladakh's development administration is obliged to conform to the Union's constitutional secularity, based upon a normative and hegemonic definition of the secular that emerged from the European Enlightenment in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Developing alongside the modern nation-state and a representative system of democratic governance, secularism emerged as a political doctrine that postulated the separation of the political and religious into public and private domains (Asad 2003). Thus, taken together, Ladakh's development administration appropriates an ideology and a method of development delivery that is heavily influenced by sustainable development on the one hand, and global normative ideals of secularism on the other.

However, the development programmes represent a rationalising of society that conflicts with an older model of governance, built upon a model of merit collection and divine kingship that include rule by geomancy and consultation with worldly deities. In this older model, a sacred domain conducive to the flourishing of the Buddha's teachings is created through ritual ceremony and the construction of devotional architecture. Such ceremonial activity aims to balance negative geomantic forces and pacify local numina—the mountain deities and weather guardians (*yüllha* [yul lha]),<sup>2</sup> the landlords of the soil (*sadag* [sa bdag] and *zhidag* [gzhi bdag]), and the water spirits (*lu* [klu])—who appear as active participants in Ladakh's political landscape. Modernity's metanarrative theoretically asserts that magical practice will decline as a society transforms into a modern, secular nation-state. By extension, world religions are increasingly discussed in terms of rationalised philosophical and ethical systems contained in doctrine, with the worship of spirit cults viewed as deviant cultural accretions. Thus, rationalised and ideologically reformed Buddhist approaches that are appearing in Ladakh significantly downplay the role of ritual ceremony in society. However, recent ethnographic analysis in Ladakh highlights the continued importance of ritual ceremony and protection to ensure the success of worldly or secular endeavours. What this analysis reveals is a political situation in which the need to consult supernatural agents or pacify negative forces remains. Thus they create 'problems' for those attempting to deliver development based upon prevailing legal systems of bureaucratic management and normative ideologies of the secular. In this article, I explore elements of Himalayan Buddhist secularity and democracy in which ceremony, magical performance, and consultation with supernatural agents continue to form part of public life, both implicitly and explicitly, in a region popularly defined according to a spiritual rationality rather than sociological or ethnographic realities (e.g. Crook 1980; Norberg-Hodge 1991). Ladakh is divided into the two districts of Leh and Kargil, with dominant Buddhist and Muslim populations respectively. I conducted my research in Buddhist-dominated Leh, and the evidence for this paper is taken from chapters of my doctoral thesis (Butcher 2013b).<sup>3</sup> My methods are primarily ethnographic; thus the article considers Ladakh's experience of development management from an anthropological perspective.

Through an examination of Leh's development administration, the article discusses how the competing constitutional forms of the modern Indian state and ancient models of ceremony and sacralisation encounter each other in the development context. Central to the encounter are diverse constitutional elements: the normative definition of the secular (that which is based on reason, and thus rational); and divine or ceremonial rule (that which is constructed in opposition to the secular, and thus considered irrational).<sup>4</sup> Some anthropologists

are becoming increasingly concerned with the validity of this definition of ‘secular’, however. As part of this concern, they seek to examine the practical uses and consequences of magic and ritual ceremony in the ‘secular’ domain of political or constitutional discourse (Asad 2003; Bubandt & van Beek 2012; Comaroff & Comaroff 1994; Mills 2006, 2009). Bubandt & van Beek (2012) consider magical encounters in political systems as problematisations for secularism in the Foucauldian sense. Just as Foucault saw madness, crime and ‘deviant’ sexuality as moments that disrupt the stability of the modern art of government (or “governmentality” to apply Foucault’s technical term) thus requiring disciplining (1979), Bubandt and van Beek treat events, practices and concepts associated with the magical or other-worldly as disruptions for the normative secular project (2012: 4).

In this essay, I deal with two definitions of ‘problem’: the ‘problem’ for modern governance paradigms when they encounter and attempt to discipline what they consider to be deviant conduct; and the ‘problem’ for anthropologists and sociologists who question the empirical validity of the normative construction of the secular. Through an examination of the nature of the secular in Ladakh’s Leh district, I follow the scholarship mentioned above, which takes the position that ‘religion’ and ‘secular’ are not fixed or separate categories (Asad 2003: 25), and argue the presence of magical ceremony in secular democracies creates a space within which we can analyse modernity and secularity as culturally and historically contingent *processes*—rather than teleological or structural absolutes.

### **Secularity and anthropology**

Before I examine the nature of Ladakhi secularity, I first discuss the normative secularity that underpins the contemporary democratic project and associated constitutional forms, and its emergence from a system of political thought that scholars argue sought to rationalise political, economic, and religious life. Modernity’s metanarrative (as defined by categories that emerged from Europe’s intellectual ‘Enlightenment’ since the 18<sup>th</sup> century) predicted a ‘disenchantment’ of the social world characterised by ‘traditional’ modes of social organisation and dominated by divine systems of belief and authority, which were to be replaced by a system of representative government that recognised the legitimacy of scientific belief based upon empirical validation. Thus, magical or ritual elements—deemed irrational, superstitious, or deviant—were to be removed with modernisation, accompanied by the establishment of the nation-state, and a form of government based upon a secular ascendancy believed to restrain religious delusion and ensure peace and tolerance (Asad 2003: 21). It is this point that the article sets out to problematize.

Asad (2003: 181) cites Jose Casanova's emphasis upon three key elements of normative secularity: the separation of religion from the political, economic and scientific domains; the increasing privatisation of religion and disenchantment of public space; and a decline in the significance of religious belief and the power of religious institutions. This involved the separation of political and religious institutions—what has now come to be understood as 'secularity' in the constitutional sense. A normative secularism is also related to the increasingly hegemonic notion of 'good governance', characterised by economic rationality and liberal democratic reform (Bubandt & van Beek 2012: 12). This has enabled particular forms of power that exclude the spiritual and the mythical. There are those, however, that discuss the "myth of reason" (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991: xiv). In particular, there are criticisms directed against the conviction, or what is termed the "myth of secular redemption" (Asad 2003: 26): the belief that the adoption of a rational liberal-democratic state would end intolerance and ensure peace. Such literature confronts the assumption of modernity's metanarrative that previous 'enchantments' would vanish as societies moved along the path to 'progress'. Instead, this body of literature approaches ideas of 'progress', 'rationality', 'development' and 'modernity' as cultural, historical, and contextual *processes*, arguing ritual, magic and witchcraft to be modern, historical and prolific rather than traditional, static, and irrational.

### *The Myth of Modernity*

I have mentioned elsewhere (Butcher 2013b) how Marisol de la Cadena (2010) asserts the inability of the liberal democratic states and scientific classifications to accommodate the presence of other-than-human beings, considering them instead to be part of traditional culture or 'folk' belief that has no place in public discourse. De la Cadena takes as her point of departure Bruno Latour's analysis of the creation of the "modern Constitution" (1993). I discuss this briefly here as it contributes to arguments of a 'myth of modernity'. Latour describes a process he calls a "purification" of scientific and religious discourse that resulted in the nature / human separation. Latour is concerned with identifying the historical and political invention of scientific discourse on the one hand, and political language on the other. Like others before him (Shapin and Schaffer 1985), Latour analyses a dispute between Thomas Hobbes and Robert Boyle that created what Latour asserts to be the historical moment when political discourse (that which explains the social, or humanity) was separated from scientific discourse (that which explains the mechanics of nature), a view of the modern political theory that has spread globally. Latour calls this the "modern Constitution"<sup>5</sup> (1993: 29). It was this modern Constitution, he argues, which created an ontological distinction

between humans and the natural world, and created “our modern world, a world in which the representation of things through the intermediary of the laboratory is forever dissociated from the representation of the citizens through the intermediary of the social contract” (ibid: 27).

De la Cadena takes up this problem when she examines “the political theory that banned earth-beings from politics” (ibid: 241), in which non-scientific relations with beings or forces not empirically observable were reinterpreted as folk belief: “a far cry from a method to ascertain truth, yet perhaps worthy of preservation as long as they did not claim their right to define reality” (ibid: 345-346). De la Cadena’s criticism of this position is analogous to my consideration of the character of Leh’s development administration. She uses the term “cosmopolitics” to describe the presence of supernatural beings as actors in the political sphere, a pertinent term to describe the Himalayan Buddhist version of secularity as we shall come to see.

However, whilst describing modernity in terms of purification (the separation of nature from society through scientific apprehension, or the separation of the non-human from the human), Latour also considers the simultaneous process of “hybridisation” that results from processes of mediation that occur between the purified realms of nature and society, human and non-human (for example: the artificial recreation of the natural world in science laboratories for the purposes of controlled experiment; and the production of man-made rules that govern correct scientific experiment). However, Latour argues, the modern Constitution cannot acknowledge these processes of mediation without ceasing to be modern and reverting to a former ethnographic matrix that acknowledged a harmonisation between nature and culture, between the human and the non-human (ibid: 46-47). Thus, the modern Constitution denies the existence of hybrids even as it allows them to proliferate. Within this an interesting field emerges where it is possible to recognise the existence of non-scientific relations between nature and society: a field of investigation which has been taken up by anthropologists searching for the existence of multiple modernities, or multiple secularities.

### *Spiritual politics*

As stated in the introduction, the resilience of religious ideology and ritual in contemporary global democracies has led anthropologists to rethink the terms of modernity and of the secular (Asad 2003; Bubandt & van Beek 2012; Comaroff & Comaroff 1993; De la Cadena 2010; Moore & Sanders 2001). As Bubandt & van Beek highlight, rather than resulting in disenchantment, democratic reform has resulted in new entanglements of the spiritual and political (2012: 6). Thus, a significant body of anthropological scholarship is engaged in the examination of both magical practice and the participation of chthonic numina and other types

of deity in framing local explanations for the consequences of modernisation and development processes. They seek to explore how political activity and the secular are vernacularized in local discourse and how the values and intentions of democratic governance are recalibrated according to their particular histories (Bubandt & van Beek 2012: 6-7; Comaroff & Comaroff 1991: xii). These various studies analyse ritual and magic as phenomena that function to either critique or to assert a measure of control over capitalism and development (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991: xiv), whilst others use ritual and magic to highlight the plurality and heterogeneity of democratic or secular forms (Bubandt & van Beek 2012; Moore & Sanders 2001). Others still analyse magic and ceremony as constitutive of state power and legal process (Lan 1985; Mills 2009). Echoing Latour, Bubandt & van Beek use the term ‘spiritual’ to refer to dimensions of reality that “cut across the normative and purified divide between the proper domains of politics and religion within a given formation of secularism” (2012: 4). These are the dimensions of reality that this article is concerned with, and which I consider as ‘problems’ for Ladakh’s normative development project—based upon a rationalised discourse of sustainability, spirituality, and constitutional secularity—which require disciplining.

### **The ‘problem’ for Ladakhi development**

#### *Buddhist modernism and the economy of merit*

Asad suggests that, for historians of progress, pre-modern secular life (here defined as all that was related to the worldly and the profane) resulted in superstitious and oppressive religion, and that the modern present produced enlightened and tolerant religion (2003: 193). Such an interpretation exists in discussions of Buddhist modernism, and its criticism of ceremonial forms of Buddhist practice that it considers deviant and worldly.

Doctrinally and discursively, the Buddhist path to liberation expresses a certain atheism, individualism and universality that is emphasised in its modern and ideologically reformed incarnations. Heinz Bechert (1984) coined the term “Buddhist modernism” to describe the rationalisation of Buddhist thought and practice. Buddhist modernists emphasise Buddhism’s compatibility with the empirical sciences, describing Buddhism as a philosophy and code of ethics for individual liberation as opposed to a religion in which social life is reproduced through ceremony (ibid). It is this rationalisation of Buddhist practice that underpins the dominant discourses of democracy and sustainability in Leh District and its approaches to development activity.

However, Buddhism as a religion is performed rather differently. Central to practice is the ability to create merit by performing virtuous action in one’s

present life, the benefits of which extend to all sentient beings now and in future lives. Merit creation developed into ceremonies of offering between spiritual leaders, and their temporal rulers and lay subjects, which were eventually to come under criticism by ideologically reformed Buddhism as worldly and incorrect. I apply the concept of an ‘economy of merit’ to describe the practices of merit-creation and the field of exchange between spiritual leaders, monks, and their lay patrons.

In addition, the Mahayana Sanskrit teachings allow for the presence of divine beings in the world who reincarnate to assist those still suffering in *samsara* (the phenomenal world of birth, rebirth, and suffering) along the path to enlightenment. In the Himalayan form of Tantric Buddhism, these divine beings are the *tulku* (sprul sku), the human manifestations of celestial bodhisattvas or enlightened teachers. Merit is collected through the performances of religion, or *chos* (chos). These include: the collection of *mani* prayers (ma ni)<sup>6</sup>; circumambulation (*skora* [skor ba]); and the building of architectural schemes that geomantically heal or sacralise the physical domain, its human and non-human inhabitants, and their households. As well as producing merit, these activities aim to protect the inhabitants within the ritual domain and ensure success in worldly activities. Fortune and misfortune were determined by the presence of blessing (*chinlab* [byin rlabs]) and pollution (*dip* [grib]), and ceremonial activities are directed toward ensuring that blessing is maintained and pollution removed. Thus, the human relationship with the environment is determined by the ability of ritual specialists to examine and manipulate the landscape, allowing positive elements to arise, therefore establishing a sacred domain (Maurer 2012).

Non-human agents also have to be taken into consideration. As guardians of the weather, the *yüllha*’s homes need to be regularly purified through performances of *sangs* (bsangs), smoke offerings of burnt juniper that remove the pollution, or *dip*, caused by everyday human activity. Failure to do so results in the mountain deities removing their protection (see Day 1989). They withhold snow, send disasters such as flooding and earthquakes, and allow the lesser deities over which they have control to wreak havoc. This is significant, as it suggests a qualitative difference in how the relationship with the landscape is understood from a rationalised sustainable perspective.

From the perspective of governance, ancient Tibetan performances of statehood operated a system of “rule as geomancy” (Mills 2007: 6). The pre-1950 Lhasa government, the Ganden Podrang (dGa’ ldan pho ’brang), modelled its governance upon Tibet’s imperial period of divine kingship. In this ancient model, a royal religious space as the foundation for auspicious rule was created by positioning geomantic architectural schemes throughout the domain,

defining the boundaries of ceremonial rule and establishing a sacred landscape conducive to the creation of merit and maintenance of blessing (ibid: 30).

These performances of kingly statehood continue to be observed by the exiled government. Whilst some observers discuss the Fourteenth Dalai Lama's attempts to separate the religious and the political (eg, Brox 2012; Frechette 2007), other scholars highlight the ceremonial aspects of the exiled government's rule that are founded upon the conventional elements of ancient kingly sovereignty and the continued protection of transcendental and worldly supernatural guardians (Dreyfus 2005; Mills 2006; 2009b). This form of statecraft involves geomantic healing through the strategic placing of stupas or *chorten* (mchod rten), ceremonial vases (*bumpa* [bum pa] or *sachu* [sa chu]) or statues in the landscape (Mills 2006, 2009; Samuel 1993: 159). Such divine architectural schemes function to ensure that the worldly or 'secular' aims of peace, health, and prosperity result. The exiled government's Department for Religion and Culture (part of the Central Tibetan Administration [CTA] in Dharamsala) takes responsibility for such ritual practices (Mills 2006: 200). Also a matter of statecraft is the use of deity consultation—specific to the former Lhasa art of government—in which powerful worldly deities are utilised by spiritual and temporal rulers to assist in maintaining the peace of the domain by controlling the lesser spirits beneath them. The transcendental protector deities such as Palden Lhamo (dPal ldan lha mo), maintain an integral role within the ceremonial structure of Tibetan governance, in which they continue to defend the government and protect the exiled inhabitants and Buddhist temples, and act as guarantors of legal oaths (French 1995: 131-132; Mills 2006: 199; 2009b: 252). Pehar (Pe har), the possessing deity of the oracle-monk of Nechung (gNas chung) Monastery, continues to be consulted regarding matters of state.

#### *Modern transformation in Ladakh*

Ladakh, the high-altitude desert in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), was formerly an independent Buddhist kingdom until its annexation by Dogra rulers in the 1830s. The region joined the Indian Union together with J&K in 1947. As stated in the introduction, the region is divided into the two districts of Leh and Kargil. Each district has an autonomous Hill Development Council; Leh was granted Hill Council Status in September 1995, whilst Kargil elected its first Hill Council in 2003.

Up until Tibet's invasion by Chinese forces in 1950, Ladakh's monasteries were involved in relations of patronage with the Buddhist monastic colleges of central Tibet, who held great influence in matters of culture and religion. The relationships of patronage have been revived since the colleges have been



re-established in Indian exile. Prior to its annexation, Ladakhi governance was characterised by kingly patronage of religion, in which the royal dynasties acted as patrons of Buddhism in an economy of merit to ensure the peace and good fortune of the kingdom. Like Tibet, the kingdom's ceremonial system of governance included rule by geomancy and the ritual intervention of various technical specialists, and consultation with local deities. Whilst Ladakh's divine kingship has been replaced by a modern democracy, these older constitutional forms remain influential today. However, the continued use of magical practices falls outside the constitutional boundaries of India's modern democratic government, which tends to view them as a 'problem' in the Foucauldian sense, thus requiring disciplining.

Despite its religious links to Tibet's exiled monastic colleges, political discourse in Leh District downplays the significant role of ritual ceremony, instead emphasising sustainability, contentment and spirituality as the foundation of Ladakhi Buddhist identity. As stated in the introduction, Himalayan Buddhist identities have undergone a process of 'greening' (Huber 1997), with their particular variety of Buddhist practice being aligned with Western discourses and technologies of ecology and biodiversity protection, and sustainable development. External observers have been influential in shaping these identities. Norberg-Hodge (1991) in particular constructed Ladakh as the quintessential sustainable society, founded upon 'Buddhist' principles of ecological sustainability, community cooperation, and spiritual harmony. The first half of her book is devoted to constructing Ladakhis (read Buddhist) as possessing an almost transcendent awareness of ecological and social interdependence:

The rich fabric of ceremony and ritual in Ladakh, though an important part of religious practice, is not as central to the Buddhist teachings as it might appear. For me, the most profound expression of Buddhism in Ladakh lies in the more subtle values and attitudes of the people, from the simplest farmer to the most educated monk. (Norberg-Hodge 1991: 81)

Again, the qualitative difference in how the human relationship with the landscape is understood is visible; throughout her book Norberg-Hodge describes ceremony as a secondary element, foregrounding instead an ecological awareness in rationalised, scientific terms.

Ladakh's modern transformation and integration into the regimes of bureaucratic management has been well documented (Bertelsen 1997; van Beek 1996), and I summarise them only briefly here. In the first half of the

20<sup>th</sup> century, Ladakh was constructed as ‘backward’ and ‘impoverished’ by Kashmiri neo-Buddhists and Indian administrative officials alike. The reasons cited for this ‘impoverishment’ were, among other things, a society steeped in ignorance and devotion to superstitious practices (Bertelsen 1997; Van Beek 1996). Once assimilated into the Indian Union, Ladakh became a target for the Indian Union’s planned development programmes based upon the above estimation. For the next 50 years Ladakh was (and continues to be) the target of state-led development programmes. State intervention has altered the nature of Ladakh’s economy and society, and the introduction of a market economy and democratic models of governance have altered the relationships of patronage the laity had with the monasteries. However, as will be seen, modern transformation has allowed for a recalibration, rather than an eradication, of the older economy of merit.

Following years of campaigning for greater autonomy in decision-making, Leh District received autonomy in matters of development with the establishment of the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council in September 1995. At present, a core network of around ten non-governmental organisations (NGOs) assist the Hill Council in delivering state rural development, sustainable energy, and health and education programmes. Together, they make up Leh’s development administration. The influence of Norberg-Hodge’s sustainability thesis, discussed above, is evident in statements contained in the Hill Council’s Vision Document, which incorporates the principles of sustainability based upon rational resource use and ecological conservation, and community participation:

In addition, Ladakh’s traditional heritage constitutes a unique and irreplaceable resource for the global community. Endowed with such precious value systems as secularism (Buddhist, Muslims, Christians and others have all stayed harmoniously in Ladakh for centuries), respect for human rights and a sense of responsibility that transcends merely the interest of the self, personal space and contemporary time, there is much that Ladakh can teach the world today. For this reason too, there is great potency in the argument that Ladakh’s culture and social values should be sustained. . .Ladakh was traditionally an egalitarian society, where peace and social justice were accorded a higher status than economic prosperity. Ethics were upheld in everyday life. People cooperated with each other and lived in harmony with their natural surroundings. In recent times, this code of life that Ladakh was famous for seems to be unravelling right before our eyes. (LAHDC 2005: 59-60)

Once again, the qualitative difference between the ancient regime and a modern, rationalised and bureaucratic system of government is evident; once again, Ladakhi identity is reified according to definitions of spirituality and harmonious sustainability created externally to the region.

Norberg-Hodge's influence is also visible in the procedures of Leh's NGOs, who see themselves as the champions of small-scale, sustainable technology that attempts to build upon pre-existing social structure and organisation, in order to support environmental sustainability and self-reliance. In his sustainable economic study *Small is Beautiful*, Ernst Schumacher (1973: 43) devotes a chapter to his formulation of a "Buddhist Economics" in which he discusses "Right Livelihood", the fifth requirement of the Buddha's Eightfold Path, according to the production of economic life based upon a sustainable rationalisation of resource use. Influenced by Schumacher's study (as stated by Tashi Rabgias, 2004: 92), The Ladakh Ecology and Development Group (LEDeG) states its primary mission to be the promotion of ecologically and socially sustainable development which harmonises and builds upon traditional Ladakhi culture.<sup>7</sup>

Significant in Norberg-Hodge's statement, quoted above, is that ritual and ceremony are not central to religious and social practice. The influence of Buddhist Modernism is evident in both her, and the development administration's, construction of Ladakhi identity. Buddhist modernism is increasingly gaining popularity amongst the urban youth and education migrants, keen to learn rationalised moral principles of Buddhism imparted through organisations such as the Students Education and Cultural Movement of Ladakh (SECMOL), or through texts provided by modernist organisations such as the Mahabodhi Society, affiliated with one of the most prominent Buddhist Modernist organisations globally.<sup>8</sup>

### *Constitutional secularity*

The Preamble to the Indian Constitution states that the Indian Union is a "sovereign socialist secular democratic republic", built on the principle of unity in diversity. Rights of citizenship guarantee the rights of the individual vis-à-vis the state. The constitution guarantees the individual freedom of religion, but constitutionally allows intervention, regulation, and/or restriction of "any economic, financial, political or other secular activity which may be associated with religious practice".<sup>9</sup> The extent to which this is the case in practice has been covered extensively in the literature discussing the existence of Hindu nationalism (Hindutva) and the communal nature of Indian politics, and I will not repeat it here. Instead I highlight how the Indian constitution states, in principle at least, that religion in the public sphere needs to be regulated.

Conspicuous by its absence in the Leh administration's development discourse is any engagement with the religious and symbolic elements of Ladakhi social life. During my fieldwork, I found that development employees were reluctant to acknowledge engagement in actual religious or ritual activities of protection at the village level. NGO mission statements and PR materials do not discuss Ladakh's culture and values in terms of ritual symbolism or practice, and during interviews the NGO leaders and personnel took pains to reinforce the secular nature of their projects, expressing neutrality with regard to religious engagement. In addition, development personnel are trained—either through Masters level degrees or through capacity building and training received through foreign partners—according to the normative frameworks for development intervention in which religious persuasion tends to be privatised or considered a matter of individual choice, and in which assisting a community on religious grounds could be considered unprofessional and even corrupt. I include excerpts of conversations with development personnel below:<sup>10</sup>

DE I don't think we have a policy of consulting with religious organisations for development work...We would rather be neutral to religious organisations. (Development employee, interview transcript, 03/01/2011)

AB *Do you ever consult local monks or religious organisations?*

DE No, no. Never, never. Because as you know, in our development projects, we don't take any activities that cover religious sides or religious areas. Normally our own development activities are not religious.

(Development employee, interview transcript, 27/12/2010)

However, modern development in Ladakh is still accompanied by the operation of the older economy of merit, with which development agencies have to engage whilst simultaneously denying that they do so, in order to protect their professional identities and to ensure the integrity of the development ideology. This could be an example of hybridity that Latour discusses in his theory of the modern Constitution. Development anthropologist David Mosse found, in his ethnographic examination of DfID-funded rural development projects in Rajasthan, that professional identities committed to the scientifically demonstrated benefits of a development project can disappear when re-embedded in social practice and networks of patronage or obligation (2011: 54). In the same way, when Ladakh's development experts discuss development, there is a tendency to deny the role of religious

activity in order to maintain the legitimacy of the project ideology and governance. Such an ideology is not necessarily shared at village level, where religious ceremony aimed at maintaining blessing continues to define village level sociology (of which development intervention now forms a part); and in practice maintaining a distance from religious concerns is not so simple for development personnel to achieve. Occasions arise when development personnel are required to depart from their professional identities and participate in ritual processes and performances in order to ensure a project's success.

### **Cosmopolitics and economies of merit**

In her examination of indigenous political movements in the Andes, De la Cadena notes how the urban educated dismiss indigenous engagement with the sentient landscape (2010: 336). She uses the term “cosmopolitics” to analyse the presence of supernatural beings in the political sphere, a term that I find useful when examining the character of development activity in Ladakh. I now turn to an examination of this cosmopolitical landscape, and the persistence of an older economy of merit in the political field.

The activities of Leh District's monastic rulers and religious social movements perform similar functions to the CTA's Department of Religion and Culture, mentioned above. For example, in his autobiography Kushok Bakula Rinpoche (Ladakh's first democratic representative in the post-independence J&K state government) discusses the use of Buddhist architecture to geomantically heal the physical and social domain in order to ensure a favourable climate and the avoidance of military conflict:

I got this sacred Buddha statue made for several reasons. It was to help prevent destructive wars, for the well being [sic] of all sentient being [sic] and well being [sic], and to ensure that Ladakh would receive timely rainfall and its people be prosperous and content. It also was to make sure that the monasteries in Ladakh would thrive, with harmony among monks who would faithfully adhere to their monastic rules of discipline and conduct, and study in great centres of learning so that the Buddhist faith would forever flourish in all directions. (Kushok Bakula Rinpoche 2006: 37-38)

Whilst such an activity was undertaken separately from his political responsibilities, its worldly benefits feature in the statement. A further example is the construction of the statue of the Maitreya or Chamba (byams pa), the future Buddha, in the Nubra valley: this was built to generate merit, establish blessing, to protect the people of the valley from natural disaster, and to counter

threats of armed conflict along India's disputed borders. In 2005 the young men of Deskit village, Nubra Valley decided to build a one-hundred foot gold-plated statue of the Maitreya Buddha. They formed a committee to solicit sponsorship and administer construction, which began in April in 2005. The statue was consecrated by the Dalai Lama during a large-scale prayer festival, empowerment and teaching of the five major texts of Maitreya at Deskit Monastery in July 2010. Local residents testify to the pacifying effects the presence of the statue has had for the wider domain:

Now we have the statue there will be no loss in property, no more disease, no flood. There will be more prosperity and happiness. Before Chamba was consecrated there was strong wind. Now that is less. If I make a wish in front of Chamba it will definitely come true. I wish for my family to be prosperous. The government did the right thing, spending money on the statue, as the statue will benefit the government also. (Local resident interview transcript, 15/06/2012)



Fig. 1. Maitreya Statue at Deskit, Nubra Valley

However, the Hill Council's contribution to the project was minimal; the administration assisted only by constructing the link road and providing the marble tiles for the platform. The local hill councillor incumbent at the time came under pressure to divert council funding towards the building of the statue. The councillor was concerned that he should be seen to conduct his duties in the correct manner; redirecting money to finance the statue would have amounted to a misappropriation of public funds, thus what he considered to be a corrupt activity and not one he was prepared to undertake as councillor in a secular administration. He was aware how, for the majority of Ladakhis, the diversion of public funds for the construction of the statue was seen as an act of devotion ensuring continued protection, which contributed to the spiritual wellbeing of the district and for all sentient beings; however did not believe it was the administration's responsibility to contribute, stating instead that it was a matter of choice on the part of individual households.

Rigzin Spalbar, the incumbent Chief Executive Councillor at the time of writing, expressed the same concerns when discussing the Hill Council's contribution:

We must support and fund ancient architecture, traditional heritages, [but] not to build new statues and other things. That is not our concern. We cannot do that. This is public sector money... They [the Nubra residents] are trying to accumulate merit... They are doing for future life and benefit and prosperity and many things... Government people *do* contribute, they *do*, but out of their own pocket, I *also* give through my own earnings. But I cannot spend government money on these things. (Rigzin Spalbar, Interview Transcript, 20/06/2012)

For those in the local administration, supporting religious architecture is a matter of private faith. However, for the public (and not discounting the influence and intervention of monastic authorities, who were active in soliciting funds for statue's construction), diversion of public funds for the construction of the statue was seen as an act of devotion and merit-generation, ensuring continued protection and contributing to the spiritual wellbeing of the district.

The majority of respondents that I consulted in the Nubra valley—Buddhist and Muslim—felt that as long as the Hill Council supported all religions equally, the sponsoring of devotional architecture such as the Maitreya statue was a

legitimate use of public funds. Government officials disagreed however, maintaining their professional identities and commitment to constitutional secularity; redirecting money to finance the statue would have amounted to a misappropriation of public funds, and thus a corrupt activity, and not one a councillor was prepared to make in a secular administration. For those in the local administration, sponsoring religious architecture is a matter of private faith, not public function, demonstrating a discrepancy between the administration's and the voters' conception of political representation. On this occasion, the constitutional powers to regulate "any economic, financial, political or other secular activity which may be associated with religious practice"<sup>11</sup> were enforced. Others, however, would admit to some engagement:

AB *In terms of religious architecture and religious belief, what steps do you take to preserve these when you are working on development projects?*

DE In the development project, honestly I am saying we never tackle these kinds of ritual and religious things.

AB *Do villages ever take responsibility for ritual activities before you implement a project? Do they ever call a monk to perform rites?*

DE Oh, right. Yeah, yeah. That...in some cases they do that type of thing, yeah, yeah. Definitely. And when there is a good day or bad day and something like that. When we handed over...we consulted with the villagers, when is the good day for you to shift there, and all these things.

AB *Do you request ground breaking ceremonies prior to construction projects?*

DE Yeah, yeah. That we do sometimes.  
(Development employee, interview transcript, 28/12/2010)

However, the same informant made a distinction between development and ceremony, connecting ceremony more with environmental protection:

AB *Do you think that there is a Buddhist or religious development in Ladakh? Do you think that there are ethics, religious ethics when people are considering development in Ladakh?*

DE It's more ahhh...respect and concern for the protection of the environment. Usually, because we have the religious background, very strong religious background. It is really not a



development part, but a conservation part and harmony with the nature and all of that. We don't kill any insects. So these things are there also. So we can say are they related to development...

By separating the practices of development and ritual practices aimed at protecting nature—vernacular strategies of conservation management one could say—my informant was able to maintain his commitment to a constitutional secularity required for development activity whilst also acknowledging the significance of the religious performance for the contemporary sociology.

I also recorded instances whereby development organisations were unable to separate themselves so easily from the whims of the supernatural inhabitants. Employees of one local agency related the following story to me: a new school was being built in a village close to Hemis Monastery on the Indus River. The NGO had a project to establish a vocational training centre, and the villagers gave the NGO permission to use the old school. However, rumours began to circulate that the new school was inhabited by evil spirits and villagers would not permit the children to be transferred to the new building; not an uncommon situation from an ethnographic perspective, but a tricky one for Latour's modern Constitution and its denial of hybrids, and a 'problem' for the normative secular project as defined by Bubandt & van Beek. The NGO eventually approached the head lama at Hemis Monastery, who advised upon the correct texts to be recited and ceremonies to be performed to exorcise the spirits. The NGO then sponsored the Hemis monks, who performed the required ceremony. Only after the ceremony was complete did the villagers feel safe enough to agree to transfer the school, leaving the old building free.

Several NGOs also admitted to sponsoring small rituals; for example when constructing artificial glaciers (structures developed to store frozen water at a lower altitude than mountain glaciers, which then melt earlier to provide a timely supply of water for irrigation), a *bumpa* (ritual pots or a vases containing precious materials, which are placed at sites of construction as an offering to local deities) is placed at the site of the structure to beg forgiveness of the deities residing there for disturbing the flow of water and to request a continuous supply: "little things like this can be asked of the lama" (Development employee, interview transcript, 06/06/2012).

In this instance, there is some ambiguity between concepts of political and ritual representation, particularly where the successful outcome of a project may be contingent upon the successful completion of ritual performances. Once again, Latour's theory of hybridisation is visible.

Certain tourist agencies also engage directly with supernatural inhabitants to ensure their friendship and protection. For example, in June 2012 there were three vehicle accidents on the Khardzong La road crossing the 18,000 foot pass into the Nubra Valley, resulting in five fatalities and around six serious injuries. The head of the Taxi Union in Leh explained how the *yüillha* that inhabit the pass were angry due to the increased amount of human traffic. He explained how foreign or Indian visitors do not know how to behave on the pass, and now local people were neglecting to bring the required incense and prayer flags to keep the *yüillha* happy. As a result the deities that reside at the pass had become very polluted and demonic, causing the accidents. The taxi union, whose members travel the pass frequently, decided to sponsor *sangs*, which were performed by monks on the pass to remove the pollution and prevent more accidents. Thus, whilst local residents benefit from the income that tourism brings, they are unable to exclude supernatural beings from process of development and its impacts.

In these situations, the *yüillha* emerge as political actors according to De la Cadena's discussion of indigenous cosmopolitics. To engage in such activities puts the development organisations at risk of criticism, and may expose them to accusations of fuelling religious or communal bias, if external project funding is diverted for such ceremonial activity. This leads to questions about legitimacy: on the one hand legitimacy of ceremonial performance in development projects, frequently denied by normative development ideology and its understanding of 'progress' (ie, a disenchantment of public life); and on the other hand the legitimacy of the project locally if it has not received the blessings of the local deities.

### *The 2010 flood*

Despite their public commitment to professional procedures, development personnel would in private interview express concern that the supernatural agents were not being cared for properly, and that this was causing them to remove their favour and become increasingly demonic:

There is a concern that now there is more *dip* (pollution). There is less snow, and the glaciers are receding. Previously, for the smallest undertaking, ceremonies were performed, an oracle or *onpo* (dbon po, lay ritual specialist) was consulted, an auspicious date was given, and a monk invited to perform the required ceremony. The *sadag* are the landlords of the soil and they need to be kept happy.

(Development employee, Interview transcript, 21/12/2010)

These concerns became more pronounced following the August 2010 flood that devastated the region. On the nights of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> of August, Ladakh experienced a series of cloudbursts that triggered destructive mudslides and flash flooding, resulting in widespread damage to property and farmland, and a substantial loss of life. I have written about this event elsewhere (Butcher 2013a; 2013b) and will summarise just some of the points here. Much of the critical reflection that followed in the wake of the disaster concerned itself with the displeasure of the supernatural agents. The statement that I began to hear frequently was that the mountain deities, the *yiillha*, and the water spirits, the *lu*, sent the flood to protest against increasing ritual and environmental pollution, and a reduction in appropriate moral behaviour. Post-flood, the concern was that the gods had sent the disaster as punishment for unrestricted development and increasing pollution of their abodes. As a result, they removed their protection and became demonic. In one account that I have written about elsewhere (Butcher 2013a), Taklha Wangchuk, a mountain deity of Changthang, the high northern plain, was said to have warned local residents of impending disaster as a result of ritual neglect and a reduction in merit when he visited through his oracle. The residents sponsored the required *sangs*, performed by a high *tulku*, and the region was spared the devastation that occurred further down the valley.



Fig. 2. The chorten constructed on the road to Nubra to protect against disaster

Thus, in the months following the flood, local residents became increasingly concerned with the needs of the local deities. Upon instruction from the Nechung Oracle—the state oracle of the Tibetan exiled government—local residents began forming organisations to collect sponsorship to construct *chorten* in the landscape. The aim, as advised by Nechung, is to remove negative obstacles, pacify the local deities, restore blessing in the domain, and thus prevent further disaster such as flooding or earthquakes. Much of the sponsorship campaign was organised by the local Association of Travel Agencies, who were expected to contribute significant sums of money to the building of a *chorten* just outside Leh on the road to Nubra, demonstrating again how opportunities provided by social and economic transformation have stimulated the entanglement of the spiritual in the political. This returns us to one of the anthropological conundrums discussed above, which argues that rather than eradicating magic, the democratic project has instead created a space for its recalibration, and which argues magic to be “eminently modern” due to its ambivalence and reinvention in novel situations (Moore & Sanders 2001: 10).

### **Conclusion**

Bruno Latour (1993: 14) notes how anthropology is a useful discipline for demonstrating the “distribution of powers among human beings, gods, and nonhumans; the procedures for reaching agreements; the connections between religion and power...”. He notes how anthropologists do not constitutionally separate the branches of government and the scientific exploration of nature; instead anthropological texts account for the “multiple arrangements that bring them together” (ibid: 15). Bubandt & van Beek (2012: 15) have called for the need to study what is considered to be “irrational” ethnographically whenever and wherever it emerges as an emic political problem. Asad (2003: 25) discusses the possibility of an anthropology of the secular, and how it overlaps with, or stimulates, the religious. De la Cadena (2010: 342) campaigns for the need to take seriously the public presence of non-human beings in the field of political activity, notably in indigenous political activism and resistance to neoliberal expansion and resource exploitation.

What I have aimed to do in this article is to contribute to such reasoning by highlighting one of the multiple versions of modernity, or varieties of secularism, available. Publically, Ladakh’s development administration expresses a commitment to delivering sustainable development paradigms through the current prevailing legal technologies of power that underpin India’s constitutional secularism. They appropriate a narrative of Ladakhi identity constructed either by external observers, or Buddhist modernist ideals, in which Ladakhi society

is reified as the quintessential spiritual, sustainable society in scientifically rationalised terms. Leh's development administration describes its approach to development as a harmonisation of nature and culture, but this harmonisation rests on a rationalised discussion of what constitutes sustainable development, in which nature and culture continue to be purified and separated (if we are to follow Latour's analysis), and as a result are not discussed according to the vernacular idioms of sacred space.

As Petra Maurer (2012: 72-73) notes, in secondary literature, there is an idealisation of Tibetan culture's harmonious relationship with nature, or the environment. However, in devotional literature, the relationship is framed somewhat differently. The landscape itself is sanctified through human activity in the form of expert geomantic and elemental analysis and manipulation, rather than being considered sacred in and of itself. In the Ladakhi political landscape, spiritual beings continue to engage as political actors in the new era of development management; thus they function as a 'problem' for Ladakhi development that the local administration—committed to a sustainable and spiritual rationality according to the institutions and scientific philosophies of modernity—attempts to discipline, but cannot quite ignore. This is an example of hybridity that Latour discusses in his theory of the modern Constitution, and is something which development agencies have to confront whilst simultaneously having to deny.

As scholars of multiple modernities or varieties of secularism emphasise, modernity, democracy, and secularity are cultural rather than normative constructs. Whilst modernity's metanarrative seeks to destabilise older forms of religious belief and practice, the presence of multiple modernities results from the alternatives available within cultural inventories (van Beek 2012: 78). Whether such concerns continue in the long-term remains to be seen, but it demonstrates how the older economy of merit, and its associated performances of *chos*, continues to operate in a liberal-democracy. Democracy and development in Ladakh are defined by both the constitution of the Indian Union and the ancient constitutional forms of divine kingship. The result is a hybridity of the kind Latour discusses: mediation between nature and society that the modern Constitution proliferates, but has to deny if it is to remain 'modern'. What I have attempted in this article is a portrayal of a specifically local form of democracy and secularity that functions as a *process*: contingent rather than complete, cultural rather than teleological, and significant in highlighting the importance of a sentient, agentive landscape in the construction of a Ladakhi, and a wider Himalayan, contemporary identity.

### Notes

1. This research was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and the Fredrick Williamson Memorial Fund.
2. Throughout I have transcribed indigenous terms according to Ladakhi pronunciation. I italicise nouns, but not personal names. Indigenous pronunciations are transcribed in the main body of text, with written transcription as Turrel Wylie's (1959) "A Standard System of Tibetan Transcription" *HJAS*, 22: 261-267 included in brackets.
3. My thesis focused upon the encounter between global development ideologies and interventions, and Tibetan Buddhist ethics and practice in Leh District. Thus, the voices of Leh's significant Muslim population remain silent in this article. This is not to say that I did not speak with Leh's Muslims about some of the themes covered in the article. However, my analysis of their contribution is not fully developed, and thus I am unable to include it. This is regrettable, and is something that I hope to remedy in future research.
4. See Talal Asad's critique of the normative ideology and enquiry into secular formations.
5. Latour uses a capital C to distinguish his theory of the modern "Constitution" from political ones.
6. For example, "Om ma ni pad me hung", the six syllable offering to the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, or Chenresig (sPyan ras gzigs), the Bodhisattva of Compassion.
7. <http://LEDeG.org/pages/about-us/our-mission.php>, accessed 15/03/2012.
8. See also Pirie (2002:116).
9. <http://www.indiankanoon.org/doc/631708/>, accessed 30/03/2014
10. For the purposes of anonymity, I refer to my informants in development as 'development employee'.
11. <http://www.indiankanoon.org/doc/631708/>, accessed 30/03/2014

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