

Article

Domesticating Women, Animals, the Environment, and Spiritual Entities: Navigating Boundaries in the Pastoral Community of Limi, Nepal

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Abstract: Through a case study of pastoralists in the Limi valley of north-western Nepal, this article revisits the notion of domestication with regards to Limey pastoral practice. Taken in its etymological sense, of “making part of one’s home” (*domus*), domestication could be seen to draw a line between the inside and the outside. Yet, in Limi, these lines are blurred and shifting in nature: those that are a part of the home are not defined ontologically but relationally. Beyond strictly human–animal relations, domestication is here extended to involve politics and moralities of human differences such as gender and age, politics of relations to spiritual entities, and politics of nature. In Limi, pastoral practice inserts humans in a constellation of relations of co-domestication governed by religious precepts and gender norms, conceived as foundational to multispecies coinhabitation. Domestication is not a solely anthropogenic process but a composition of multiple—including nonhuman—agencies. And yet, pastoralism, as it is practiced today, also contributes to creating a space of hybridity and fluidity of social and ontological boundaries—between women and men, humans and livestock, domestic and wild animals, land and spiritual entities. This article, through a case study of Limey pastoralists’ gendered relation with herds and an animated landscape, adds to the understanding of domestication as not merely the domination of the human over the non-human but as an art of multispecies coinhabitation.

Keywords: pastoralism; gender; ecology; religion; multispecies; Nepal; Himalayas; Buddhism; syncretism; domestication; ontology



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1. Introduction

Human civilization, progress and culture began with the domestication of animals¹ and plants (Lien et al. 2018, p. 1; Haudricourt 1962) some 10,000 to 12,000 years before our era (Cyrułnik et al. 2000), as the story goes. This is when, during the so-called Neolithic Revolution (see Childe [1936] 1951) in the Middle East,² human mastery over and domination of animals and nature through their incorporation into the *domus*, the home, paved the way to human hegemony in the world—leading to the era now termed the Anthropocene. This narrative naturalizes the process that led to the establishment of boundaries and hierarchies that appeared during this period: those between male and female, between culture and nature, and between human and animal, to mention a few. According to this narrative, domestication was the shift away from humans being subjected to the vicissitudes and anxieties of existence as animals and as prey, whose whole existence was spent making sure their basic needs were met and survival, achieved. According to this theory, the subjugation of others—women, animals, plants, landscapes—was a necessary move to ensure the improvement of the human species’ condition as a whole.

Since 2017, I have been conducting research in Limi, in the northwestern tip of Nepal, including nine months living with pastoralists in their high-altitude pastureland, within a total span of 11 months in the Humla region. After interviewing a total of 35 Limey³

herders and ex-herders (17 women and 17 men), as well as various other inhabitants of Limi and neighboring villages, this narrative appears to me a blatant mismatch with the reality of Limey pastoralists. For one, the highly anthropocentric undertone of the narrative summarized above is absent in Limey's conceptions of humans' interactions with non-humans. In Limi, life is made possible by the art of composing with different entities' needs and preferences, rather than by reordering the world in strictly human terms. Thus, boundaries are not where we expect them to be, judging by this storyline. Indeed, livestock in Limi is at once domestic, wild, and neither. Ontological lines shift according to context, escaping essentialization. Limey pastoralists' ways of conceiving alterity and commonality, as well as the place of the human in the matrix of relations, call for a revisitation of the story of domestication.⁴ This dominant narrative merely reflects a particular vision of the world, namely a modernist, colonial and oppressive one (particularly based on racial, gender and species hierarchies), and, as such, is "ripe for revision", as Lien et al. (2018, p. 3) put it. Tackling it is not yet another brick in the wall of the efforts towards "decolonialization of thought" (Viveiros de Castro 2011, p. 128). Such a narrative is foundational to how we perceive ourselves as human beings in relation to other beings and has "far-reaching consequences for colonial and postcolonial politics, nature management, scientific research, and technologies of control and [has] underpinned an agro-industrial trajectory that is not only socially and politically unjust but also ecologically unsustainable" (Lien et al. 2018, p. 3). Beyond strictly human–animal relations, domestication also has to do with the politics of human differences such as gender, age and socio-economic status, with the politics of relations to spiritual entities and with the politics of nature. In a nutshell, how humans relate to plants and animals matters cosmologically, socio-politically, and ecologically.

Taking into consideration Tsing's warning that "domestication" is sometimes used to engulf all multispecies relations (Tsing 2018, p. 232), this article asks what light the term can shed on the case of Limey pastoralists, and, reversely, how their case enables us to revisit the domestication narrative from the margins—where most of Anthropology takes place. I particularly build upon Stépanoff and Vigne's (2019) concept of domestication as a human-animal-environment triad, with varying degrees of agency, extending it to include spiritual entities, in line with the Limey context, and a focus on gender dynamics. Humans interact with spiritual entities through the vector of the landscape and animals, both domestic and wild. These interactions are fraught with gender dynamics, an aspect that is often neglected in studies of domestication, as Anna Tsing (2018) reminds us. I shed light on parallels between the domestication of women and that of animals, and what these reveal of Limey's political ontologies—namely, what each ought to do according to what each is. Paying attention to gender dynamics enables us to acknowledge the existing frictions and negotiations within these coinhabitations, avoiding the pitfall of depicting them as an entirely smooth and coherent process. Ultimately, the stakes this article grapples with are not solely semantical nor academic, since domestication is not just a narrative but a prescriptive, world-making process (Tsing 2018, p. 232; Blaser 2014, p. 54). In other words, stories "[shape] the worlds we inhabit, as well as our modes of cohabiting with fellow beings" (Lien et al. 2018, p. 2), and translate into modes of relating with other fellow "earth beings" (De la Cadena 2015).

The Limi Valley, located in Humla District in Karnali Province, Nepal, is right at the Nepali border with the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and hosts three villages: Til, Haltze, and Dzang⁵ (see Figures 1 and 2). Limi's villages are located between 3700 and 3900 m above sea level, and the highest pasturelands are at around 5000 m. A Tibetan dialect locally referred to as Limiekey is spoken there, and communities practice a syncretic mixture of Mahāyāna Buddhism of the Drikung Kagyu branch with Bön influences and local Animism. In the late 1950s to early 1960s, following the annexation of Tibet by the People's Republic of China, a border was drawn that cut off Limey herders from their pasturelands in Tibet. Following this massive loss of space and their de facto integration into Nepalese territory, most herding families sold off their flocks of sheep and goats, only keeping a few yaks (*bos grunniens*) for meat and transportation, and *dio* (their female counterparts) for dairy

products and progeny. Nowadays, most households rely on seasonal migration as wage workers in Purang (Np.⁶ *Taklakot*) and the Tibet Autonomous Region (Yeh 2019; Hovden 2016; Saxer 2013). Yet, most families still own a few yaks, *dio*, hybrids (usually bull-*dio*), and/or horses. All families still grow barley and a handful of vegetables, with women spearheading agricultural activities. In 2021, there were eight groups of transhumant pastoralists in Limi, a number that has been slowly declining since the closing of the border, across which herders previously brought their herds to graze during the winter (Bauer 2004; Ross 1983; Von Fürer-Haimendorf 1978, pp. 351–52).

Since 2017, I have been researching the contemporary dynamics of pastoralism in Limi and what they can tell us about the social, cultural, and environmental transformations in the region after herders lost access to their winter pasturelands in Tibet. In total, my fieldwork lasted 9 months in Limi, 11 within the Humla region, and 5 in Kathmandu. During most of this time, I camped with *dio* herders in their summer pasturelands, sharing daily life and chores. For my interviews, I used a questions guideline, asking mostly semi-directed and open-ended questions as well as a few closed-ended ones. I asked each of my interlocutors a few questions in a systematic way. I interviewed 35 Limey herders and ex-herders (17 women and 17 men), 9 commissioned Limey herders⁷ (non-professional herders: 2 women, 7 men), and 31 Yakpaa and Lagaa herders (inhabitants of the neighboring villages of Yakpa and Laga: 20 women and 11 men) from roughly 90 herding groups. Further, I interacted with roughly 36 non-herder Limey inhabitants (out of about 1070 inhabitants (Hovden 2016, pp. 90–2): half women and half men). I also questioned nine ethnically Nepalese (L. *Muhnpa*, Np. *Khas Arya*) shepherds rearing goats and sheep in the vicinity of Limi (all men).

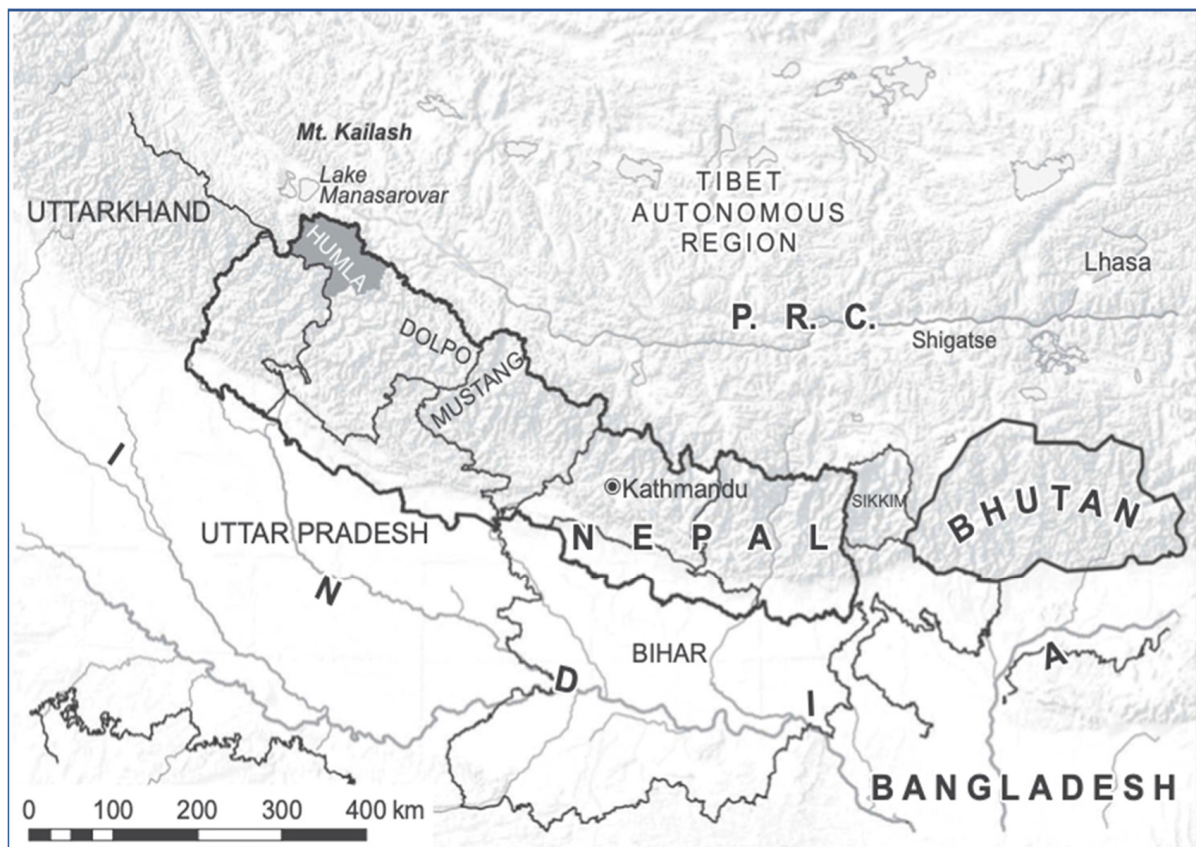


Figure 1. The regional context of Humla District. Digital cartography by Mark Henderson.

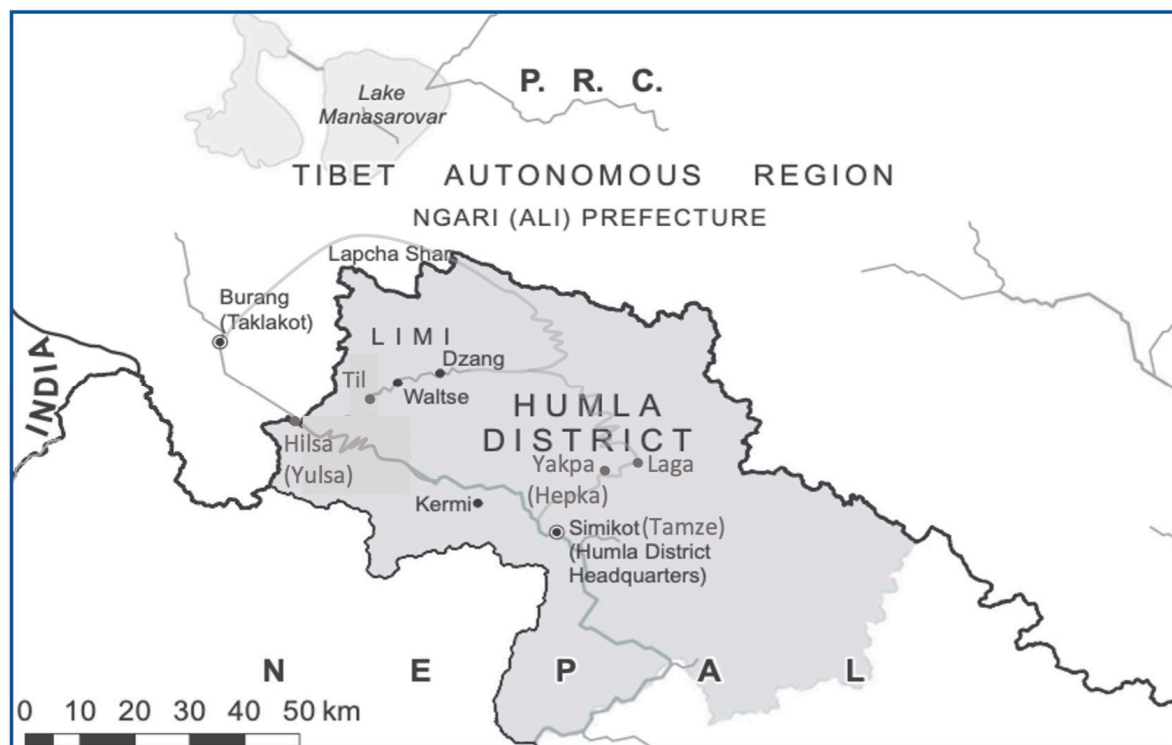


Figure 2. Limi in Humla District. Digital cartography by Mark Henderson, updated by the author. (Village names are provided in the language most spoken in each, with their Tibetan or Nepali equivalent into parentheses.).

2. Domesticating an Environment

2.1. Blurring Boundaries

What is a *domus*—a home? Where does it begin, where does it end? Limi, as the largest ward within Humla, itself the largest rural municipality of Nepal, stretches over 500 km² of land (Hovden 2016, p. 3), most of which is devoted to pasturelands. Herders spend half of the year in their yak-hair tents with their herds in settlements between the villages and the border with China. When asked whether they felt at home in these pasturelands, most responded positively. “I’ve been coming here for over 30 years with my animals. Of course, this is my home! I know every single rock around here”, confidently stated *ow*⁸ Konchok,⁹ now 53 years old. This environment has become home to humans through the vector of herds of yaks and *dio*, as it is their need for grazing that brings their human caretakers to these lands situated one to three days’ walk from their villages. These lands, though they may be traversed by other humans on their way to the border checkpoint or in search of medicinal herbs to be sold to Chinese buyers, are not inhabited by them the way that herders inhabit them. Herders, together with their herds, have made a home out of these mountains and have transformed the landscape with their presence. I, therefore, borrow Fijn’s (2011) term “co-domestic” to refer to what Stépanoff and Vigne identify as “a triadic perspective on the interactional dynamics which transform the human, the non-human, and their shared habitat” (Stépanoff and Vigne 2019, p. 13). This term additionally expands the notion of agency to include that of bovines, and, in the Limey perspective, of the gods and spirits that reside within the environment.

It is worth mentioning here that the Limey do not have a term for “nature”; the closest expression to the English word is *rangshing* (W. *rang byung*¹⁰), which literally translates to “self-made”, implying what is made without human intervention. However, they seldom use this term. Another is used much more commonly—*rida* (W. *ri bdag*), owner or ruler of the mountains. It is used to refer to wildlife, thus acknowledging them as the true owners of the mountains. Humans and their herds, then, are but guests in this realm—subjects in

a kingdom. The way they occupy this space reflects this philosophy: humans are mostly confined to the vicinity of their tents, and herds linger in specific areas, leaving the cliffs, rocky terrain, and peaks to *rida*, deities, and spirits (see Powers [1995] 2007, p. 500), whose residences overlap with those of bovines and humans). Stépanoff and Vigne's words reflect this situation well:

Domestication challenges our understanding of human-environment relationships because it blurs the dichotomy between what is artificial and what is natural. In domestication, biological evolution, environmental change, techniques and practices, anthropological trajectories and sociocultural choices are inextricably interconnected. Domestication is essentially a hybrid phenomenon. (Stépanoff and Vigne 2019, p. 2)

Budiansky before them made the same point when he wrote that “where domestication is concerned, the terms artificial and natural lose any sharp meaning” (Budiansky 1999, p. x). If Limey herders consider the mountains as their home, but first and foremost as the kingdom of wildlife, how do humans, their livestock and wildlife manage to share a home while not being on an equal footing?

2.2. Being Made a Guest by Wildlife

In 2015, a team of conservation biologists evidenced the return of a wild animal to Limi that had until then been reported extinct in Nepal: the wild yak (*bos mutus*). Since their return, several wild yaks have made appearances in Limi's pasturelands, proving less and less shy around humans, and increasingly tormenting herders by visiting their herds in search of mates. During my fieldwork in 2021, wild yaks' visits became a common occurrence. The initial awe, fear, and avoidance on the part of herders soon gave way to emboldened attempts to chase the lone intruders away. These failed attempts then changed to certain fatigue, surrender, and tolerance of the animals' presence. While the herders' surrender does not mark the advent of peaceful co-inhabitation, the encounters were a reminder to herders that the mountains, despite being shared by multiple species, do not provide equal rights of use to all. They are, after all, the kingdom of *rida*. When questioned why herders do not show the same compassion towards wild yaks as they do towards their own animals, *ow* Konchok answered:

Actually the wild yak has as much the right to be here as our own domestic animals; but we don't feel as much compassion towards him because we don't care for him like we care for our own animals. [...] What's more, the wild yak doesn't give us anything: no meat, no milk. Only trouble.

On another occasion, I asked *aw* Norbu, “Do you love wildlife and domestic animals equally?” He gave this particularly insightful answer: “I love our animals more because wild yaks belong to the mountains, not to us”.

Here, the notions of care and reciprocity are key to that of belonging. Those are established through the exchange of goods and services—milk, meat, hair, offspring, and help in carrying loads in exchange for humans' protection from the cold, hunger, diseases, and predators—and mark the boundary between the *domus* and the outside. However, when there is no “trouble”, herders extend their compassion beyond that line to wildlife, which earns them the spiritual benefits of doing good deeds.

Co-habitation is, therefore, easier with other species: blue sheep (*pseudois nayaur*) come very close to both Limey villages and herders' settlements, enticed by the salt that some Limey feed them. Unlike with Stépanoff's reindeer herders, for whom cooking and salt represent “the boundary between wild and domestic domains” (Stépanoff 2012, p. 293), the Limey feed salt to wildlife and their herds alike. Yet, while herds are part of the Limey *domus*, they also venture beyond its frontiers; they coinhabit with their human caretakers in “autonomy and intermittent coexistence” (Bureau et al. 2017), as they graze beyond humans' purview most of the time, fenceless. They form a part of the *domus* of Limey communities, but they also mingle with wildlife during the day, sharing space with marmots and other

rodents, wild ass, wild yak, and a number of predators. The herds are go-betweeners, constantly navigating both realms.

3. Domesticating Bovines

3.1. Multispecies Kinship

The Limey case contradicts the stance of a number of authors who conceive of domestication as the domination of the non-human by the human and envision a clear mental and physical separation between the wild and domestic realms (Cauvin 1994), which leads to the domination and oppression of non-humans, and the destruction of the environment, ultimately resulting in today's global ecological crisis (Scott 2017; Lestel 2015; Harari 2014; Shepard 1996; Diamond 1998; Cauvin 1994; Oelschlaeger 1991). In Limi, as in most herding societies, the domestication of animals and the landscape is the result of a process of co-inhabitation that enabled the creation of Limey as a community, of Limi as a territory, and the sustenance of life that would otherwise never have been possible. Stépanoff and Vigne speak of

the animals' slow familiarization with the humans, well before the advent of Neolithic agriculture and breeding, and the biocultural process spanning thousands of years which saw domestic animals and plants adapting to humans just as much as human societies were shaped on the basis of the animals and plants they incorporated. (Stépanoff and Vigne 2019, p. 2)

This is not to suggest that boundaries do not exist in Limi. There are strictly human spaces where bovines are not welcome: every now and then, when one attempts to enter the herders' tents to steal some food, he/she¹¹ is unequivocally reprimanded. However, the boundaries delimiting human spheres fail to create an important distance, as they are porous. Hence, mice foraging in sacks of food supplies are not perceived as pests, nor do herders prevent them from taking their share of food; indeed, herders seem unbothered by their presence. *Dio* are hosted the whole winter within their owners' homes, though their presence is restricted to the ground floor. Concerning forest-people relations, Anna Tsing writes about "the making of complex landscapes in which humans and diverse nonhumans share space without clear demarcations of separate spheres" (Tsing 2005, p. 175), echoing the Limey situation well. Yet, while bovines are considered a part of the Limey community, they are nevertheless treated like second-rate citizens.

Herders' ambivalence towards the status of their bovines within the community translates into paradoxical statements such as, for instance, that they are "only animals", while at the same time referring to them as family members. Herders affectionately address their animals as "little daughter" or "little son". Quoting *ippi* Kinzum: "There is mutual affection and understanding between you and them. Year after year, we go together to our summer pasturelands; they are like family. Feeding them soup is a way of showing them our affection". Following Janet Carsten's analysis of food-sharing as the substance of kinship (Carsten 1995), I identify soup as uniting animals with their human relatives. The Limey use the same term, *thukpa*, for both the soup prepared for themselves and the mixture they give to the *dio*, which is prepared with more or less the same ingredients. *Dio* are a "companion" species in the etymological sense of the word: individuals with whom one shares one's bread (*cum-pane* in Latin: with bread) (Haraway 2008, 2003). They are a "domesticated" species, in the etymological sense of the word: they are household members. And yet, they are also sold off or killed for meat—their karmic fate in this life—in contradiction with Haraway's conception of companion species as those humans will not eat. All herders, especially women, confessed that they "felt empty after selling" an animal and "couldn't sleep that night". Some even reported that they cried for days after selling an animal to be killed. When an animal is sold to another herder, its caretaker often expresses anxiety and worry: "Will he feed her/him enough soup, and on time?" One Limey even brought his old horse to spend what he believed was the animal's last summer on a plateau from which he could see holy Mount Kailash,¹² so that the horse could die with its blessing and protection.

Like the goats in Govindrajan's monograph on interspecies intimacies in Kumaon, India, animals in Limi are considered a part of the family—only, of a different species (Govindrajan 2018). It is noteworthy that only relatives can care for their kin's animals. Thus, the first circle of intimacy is constituted by the bovines and humans of the household. This circle falls within the larger circle of the village, where village belonging is pitted against village non-belonging, in which circumstances human–bovine boundaries are blurred. Hence, within their own villages, herders can recognize and name every household's animals. Each one is given a name based on its physical attributes: Grey-hornless, Blue, White-with-black-spots, Striped-face, White-mouth... One cow is even humorously named "America" because, as its owners explained, her breed (Jersey) gave her long legs and a white face, she produced more milk than the other local breeds, but was much more fragile and prone to illness. However, herders draw a line between their village's animals and other villages'. *Ow* Konchok, whom I have quoted about not treating the wild yak with the same care as one's bovines, stated: "It's the same with other villages' animals: we don't know them, so we don't care for them". And indeed, I once saw a Zangba¹³ herder chase away a *Halzia* yak with a curse: "Go away, you *Halzia* shit!"

Interestingly, bovines perpetuate this distinction as well. Animals from each village form affinities according to their owners' kinship relations, observable in the way they drift off into smaller groups within the herd during grazing. When I asked *meh* Kamne, a lifelong herder in his late 50s, about this phenomenon, he answered:

Like humans, they prefer to stay with those they already know. When they've been going to the pasturelands for many summers in a row with the same individuals, they prefer to stick with each other and not mingle with those they don't know so well. But by the end of the season, they might all stay a bit closer to each other.

This behavior has also been observed among sheep, described as a "socially intelligent animal" that can distinguish among individuals of their kind based on physical and facial features (Despret and Meuret 2016; Armstrong 2016). They are also said to be able to tell one human from another based on physical and facial attributes (Goncalves et al. 2017).

3.2. Making Domesticated Bovines Gendered Beings

Bovines are, I argue, intimate subjects of a multispecies community. They are distinguished less on the basis of their "bovineness" and more on the basis of specific individuals' "outsiderness" to one's home and one's village. A parallel can be drawn with gendered distinctions: just as men and women can be closely connected through family ties or marriage but are also separated by a hierarchy of value, so too are animals. Men are considered superior to women, themselves considered superior to non-human animals. Yet, since this is a scale of degree and not of kind, animals are equally caught up in gendered social structures. Hence, they are made to abide by Limi's norms and customs on the matter. Yaks are set free most of the year, only occasionally solicited to carry loads or killed for meat in the autumn. However, *dio* are milked once or twice a day, in the mornings and evenings, but are set free to graze all day, incentivized to stay near the camp at night by the presence of their tied offspring. Adrian Franklin observes that "social structures and morality are routinely extended into the 'animal world' to provide a logical ordering to this parallel [. . .] society" (Franklin 1999, p. 15). Radhika Govindrajan comes to a similar conclusion when she writes that, for her interlocutors in Kumaon, India, "human relatedness to animals [is] inflected by gender" (Govindrajan 2018, p. 29). Thus, the most common answers to the question, "Why do you put bells on *dio*?" was, "For decoration, like women wear ornaments", and, "To recognize whom they belong to". Other more elaborate answers included the following:

If some *dio* or yaks tend to lead the herd, we put a bell on them. But I have also put a bell with a high-pitched sound on one *dio* because she always manages to come into our tent to snatch food. That way, we can hear her coming and chase her away.

I interpret this practice of putting a bell and woolen earrings on bovines as a way of honoring, controlling, and protecting them, in the same way that women are supposedly honored, controlled, and protected by their fathers first and husbands later on. Similar to women in many other societies, married Limey women wear specific jewelry and a striped apron after getting married to publicly indicate their marital status. Likewise, young bovines have their ears pierced and are adorned with colorful earrings, where the color and shape indicate the household they are a part of. Traditional garments do not afford women sufficient freedom of movement to wander far. Similarly, the bells on *dio* indicate to their owners their location, even when they are out of sight, making them easy to find and bring back. Lastly, just like girls before they get married, *dio* without offspring are given much more freedom and are sometimes even left with herds of yaks to graze without human supervision. Equally, as soon as a *dio* has a calf, she, her offspring and her milk are kept under close control by patriarchal, human-made structures. Domestic animals are, like women, protected from the outside world: from predators, human thieves, and unwanted suitors, such as the wild yak; the progeny resulting from these unions are referred to as *nialu* (male) and *nialmo* (female), the same words used for illegitimate human children. In other words, bovines are very much enmeshed in the social fabric of humans, to the point of having to conform to patriarchal and kinship norms that structure both human and multispecies relations.

This echoes Radhika Govindarajan's (2015) reading of Anna Tsing (2012) as she frames human–animal relationships (specifically in the case of goat sacrifice) as “a realm of affective sociality characterized by the mingling of domination, domestication, and love”. Yet, I also believe that *dio* are not merely passive recipients of human social structures and narratives: their behaviors are shaped by their interactions with humans, a link Marchina hints at when she writes that “non-ecologically-determined factors also determine certain parameters such as animal behavior or human social structures” (Marchina 2019, p. 24; personal translation).

4. Domesticating Women

4.1. Enlarging the Domestic Sphere

To summarize the argument thus far, the concept of *domus* in Limi operates in circles of decreasing intensity around a core: the household unit. A herder's yak-hair tent, then, is a replica of the *domus*. As such, it is home to those members of the community who are more confined to the *domus* than (younger) men. Hence, today's herders in Limi are the elderly and single mothers.¹⁴ In this pastoral setting, each gender has its own work: milking, making dairy products, cooking, and cleaning are considered women's work; bringing the herd to graze and back, selling, buying, castrating, and killing animals once a year are considered men's work. However, each takes on the tasks conventionally assigned to the other gender in case of absences. As soon as a member of the other gender is present again, the traditional division of tasks is reestablished. However, there are two hard lines that are never crossed, no matter the extent of labor shortage: plowing and killing animals for meat. I will come back to the reasons for these rules later in the paper, as they have to do with religious prohibitions.

Though the tent is a replica of the *domus*, it is nevertheless an incomplete one, as today's herders do not stay there in family units but most often alone. Female herders, then, are put in an ambiguous position: they are taken far away from their space of predilection as women—the parents-in-law's and husband's house—and from the fields, to which all the other women in Limi are bound. When asked about the difference between female herders and female villagers, my female interlocutors often answered that the former do not know how to perform housework and agricultural work. When asked about what defines

a woman, their answers tended to refer to household work, agricultural work, and caring for dependents. Yet, these form only a marginal part of a female herder's daily chores for at least half of the year. In a setting where humans define their gendered identities according to the work they perform, one could argue that gender norms are subverted when female herders are removed from tightly knit gendered socialities and spaces. Female herders, by spending half the year in pasturelands, move through a far larger space than the village, while female villagers are confined to their in-laws' houses, villages, and fields (which lie within the village in Limi). Hence *aa* Tashi, a retired herder in her 40s, once tellingly exclaimed: "Whenever I see villagers going to the pasturelands, I think to myself, 'why I am stuck in one place while others get to travel to different places?'" However, being geographically outside the village for most of the year also comes with the price of a social "outsiderness": all female herders in Limi are single mothers or elderly widows.

4.2. Do Animal Intimacies Trump Gender?

Arguably, female herders do perform care work for their bovines and house chores—both forming the substance of home-making. As such, they do conform to gender roles. Many herders told me that women were gentler and more caring and hence developed a closer relationship with their animals because of their gender. Nevertheless, I observed some ambivalence in this gendered conception of care, as care does not preclude violence, a characteristic more readily attributed to men. I thus observed women sometimes performing care work "roughly"—unequivocally scolding an unruly toddler, frustratedly punching a misbehaving calf, or angrily throwing a stone and a curse at an undisciplined *dio*, were all contained within the maneuverable space of women's gendered identities. Jovian Parry's work on meat-eating as formative of (contested) gendered identities notes how "performance of [certain forms of socially acceptable] violence towards animal bodies [can serve as] a bold revision of traditional feminine gender norms, as well as performance of female empowerment" (Parry 2010, p. 383). And yet, as Govindrajan writes about her own field work in Kumaon, "any attempt to explore the complex relationships between humans and nonhumans will be poorer for not taking into account how, in the interstices of power and violence, spaces for love, care, and mutuality flourish" (Govindrajan 2015, p. 507).

Men also find leeway in their upholding of gendered identities within pastoral practice. It is thus not unusual for grandfathers to be the main caretakers of their grandchildren in summer settlements. As I asked *meh* Dundhup, a well-seasoned herder in his 60s, "Does it make a difference to the *dio* if it's a man or a woman milking her?" He said, "It doesn't. What matters is that she knows you. If she doesn't know you, she will not let you. She will kick you". What also matters is the gentleness of the herder's gestures towards the *dio* at the moment of milking. Caressing a *dio* on the neck, the back, or the rump while she is eating the soup the herder has prepared for her, and uttering in a reassuring voice, "Eat, little daughter, eat", is a daily ritual that strengthens herder-*dio* bonds. "If you are gentle with your animals, they will be gentle to you in return; if you are rough and hit them, they will treat you in the same way", *meh* Gyaltzen explained to me, echoing many other herders I interrogated on the matter.

These animal intimacies (to borrow Govindrajan's (2018) evocative phrase) trump divisions along gendered lines. Both men and women alike show aggression or affection towards their animals without being seen as subversive, which is how they would be perceived if they directed these emotions towards humans of the opposite gender. Relationships to animals, similar to those with children, thus serve as a buffer zone where one's gendered identity can occasionally be blurred and redefined. Pastoral work, therefore, creates a space within which gendered identities can be blurred, especially when herders are alone. When they are far from the village, female herders take up a man's role, as masculine identities suppose travelling far for work. The beings that dwell within these gendered spaces navigate gender norms, and, in doing so, blur these boundaries.

The creation of a space where care and violence sometimes coexist is made possible by the inequalities between men, women, and bovines. In this sense, this ambivalence is as integral a part of domestication as home sharing—since the majority of cases of violence take place within the family circle (Bonnet 2015, p. 268). However, humans' abuse of other beings is prevented by two religious frameworks: one that governs present life and one that applies to the afterlife. In the first one, humans have to be amenable to the requirements of spiritual entities that coinhabit the landscape. Humans' deeds bring about consequences felt in their present life. In the second one, humans must conform to Buddhist principles for leading a good life to ensure themselves a more favorable reincarnation: the consequences extend to the afterlife. Hence, moral norms are part and parcel of domestication, in that they constitute "house rules" to foster good co-inhabitation.

5. Spiritual Domestication

5.1. Domesticating Oneself: The Moral Dimension of Domestication

According to the local understanding of the Buddhist notion of Saṃsāric reincarnations, all species are organized in a hierarchy, where being born a human is the most desirable state, as it offers the possibility of attaining enlightenment and, thereby, escaping Saṃsāra and entering Nirvāna. However, the precept of compassion, one of the key principles of Buddhism, prevents the Limey from abusing their superiority and encourages them to treat their animals with the care and affection that their "joint commitment" requires (Bureau et al. 2017). However, the human–animal divide is more a question of degree than of kind. Indeed, the boundary is merely circumstantial: humans who commit many sins throughout their lives may be reincarnated as another kind of (lesser) animal. Being a human in this life has nothing to do with one's own doings, but with one's actions in a previous life, which may have been as an animal. There is a continuity between humans and other animals that connotes an inner equality despite outer differences. Buddhist practice in Limi thus seeks to dissolve the ontological borders between species. The "home", therefore, cannot be defined as a single-specie unit, in spite of the axiological differences between its constituents.

Religious norms also soften the borders between the wild (associated with the outside) and the domestic (associated with the inside), as in the case of the *tchatar* (W. *tshe thar*). The *tchatar* status is granted to a particularly beautiful animal that is set free as a gift or offering to the gods, in order to bring about auspiciousness to the (human) author of their freedom¹⁵ (see Holler 2002 or Tan 2016). These animals should not be milked or killed; however, in practice, they often stay with the herd they were born in, and hence with the herders, and are taken care of if they are sick, hurt, or hungry. They are in-betweeners or wild–domestic hybrids. Hence, there are no ontological foundations to domestication in Limi nor any clear-cut boundaries between the home and beyond. However, as we have seen, since the domestic sphere is not an egalitarian space but is hierarchically structured, moral precepts accordingly apply differentially, depending on one's social status.

Hence, the way that the Limey practice Buddhist principles reveals that sins, too, are organized in a hierarchy, which allows for certain calculations to be made and choices pondered accordingly. In the context of her study of Golok pastoralists, Sulek calls this an "economy of sinning" (Sulek 2016). Knowledge of the rules is pervasive and breaking them is sanctioned by both society and the concerned deities. Allison attributes the "tight feedback loops of cause and effect" to "small-scale societies" (Allison 2015, p. 494), an apt descriptor of the Limey with their 1000 or so inhabitants, spread across three villages. What's more, this mechanism whereby the Limey keep their "tab of sins" in check has strong gendered and generational aspects. It is revealing that only young men slaughter non-human animals, usually expressing reluctance to do so. Ippi Dolma, an experienced herder in her 70s, therefore, told me that a woman who kills or butchers an animal is "a bitch"; her condemnation of women engaging in this activity reflects the norm that prevents women from killing. When asked about the reason for this division of tasks, a 40-year-old Limey monk explained, "While women are collecting wood and working in the fields,

knowingly or unknowingly they kill some insects; so they bear those sins". Therefore, women should not add more sin to their tab, he continued, and instead, let men carry that responsibility by doing the plowing and killing. He went on to say, though, that the sin trickles down from the one who commits it to those who benefit from it. Therefore, collecting milk and eating dairy products are both sinful acts, but, in practice, the former is of lesser gravity than the latter. The Limey rarely consider this indirect responsibility while keeping track of their "tab of sins". They admit that certain activities are somewhat sinful, but they consider them relatively inconsequential on a scale of seriousness. This is the case with selling off animals to a buyer for meat or eating meat in restaurants without knowing the conditions under which the animals were killed, for instance. And yet, the norm was clearly formulated by the same monk: "You never know how many lives are in the dumplings you eat at the restaurant!"

Gender is not the only determining variable in one's assessment of religious-moral obligations: age adds an additional layer. Most elderly men in Limi have renounced killing on religious grounds. *Ippi Dolma*, the very same person who condemned the killing of an animal by women, was one day confronted with having to butcher an animal that had been killed by wolves. In doing so, she would be breaking the rule on two grounds: butchering an animal though she was a woman and elderly. Unlike other female herders who placed their tents near other male herders' tents, *ippi Dolma* could not rely on men to perform duties that were prohibited for her. Because the sin of killing is higher up than that of butchering, *ippi Dolma* was able to redeem herself by burning a butter lamp, which she indeed did that very evening. Despite all these precautions, sin, I was told repeatedly, is inescapable from the moment one enters the world in an earthly body. "Herding is full of sin!" *ow Mingmar*, a monk and a herder, uttered despondently before adding, "Anything we do to feed ourselves is a source of sin . . . but herding has more". I would argue that herding, rather than "having more sin", simply brings one into a direct confrontation with the link between deed and consequence and, hence, requires the herder to take responsibility for his/her actions—something one can avoid thinking about when eating dumplings at the restaurant. Though this sense of responsibility sometimes weighs heavily on herders' shoulders, one's sense of sin is what holds humans accountable towards animals and gods, through the vector of domestic animals. In that sense, it lays the conditions for sharing a home with spiritual entities.

5.2. Domesticating Gods and Spirits

In Limi, alongside conforming to Tibetan Buddhist precepts prescribed by the Drikung Kagyu school, humans are also subjected to "social and religious duties towards their local deities" (Blondeau and Steinkellner [1996] 1998, p. 433). Similar to the Khampa Tibetans studied by Gillian Tan, the Limey "interact with [these deities] according to similar principles as they would with humans" (Tan 2016, p. 2). Though they have a higher status, local deities are members of a Limey multispecies community, and, as such, participate in dynamics of co-domestication. In the words of *ow Mingmar*, whom I asked where the deities were, "Deities are everywhere! Even in barren lands. On your shoulders alone, there are 16 deities". In the same vein, it is revealing that, just as there is no single word in Limiekhey to refer to "animals"—*turu* refers to domestic animals and *semdjen* to sentient beings at large—there is no one word for "spiritual entities". I interpret this as spiritual entities not forming a separate category but mingling with other inhabitants of the environment: the religious sphere is encompassed within the domestic sphere and suffused within a shared environment. Other authors have made similar observations, such as Ziegler Remme in Ifugao, a highland province of Northern Luzon, Philippines: "the various plant and animal domestication practices are here always embedded in multispecies assemblages that include spirits in one way or another" (Ziegler Remme 2018, p. 52).

In this context, animals sometimes serve as a vector of deities' wills, sent either to test humans or to deliver punishments. Deities can thus take the form of wild animals that cause harm to humans or afflict animals with illness to punish their human owners for

their misdoings. It could therefore be said that domestic animals are seen as an extension of their human owners, while wild animals are seen as extensions of deities. “Wildlife are attracted to those with pure hearts”, *ow* Phurbu once told me, adding that “If you have nothing to reproach yourself with, and if you have attained an inner peace, they will not harm you”. Hence, even domestic animals are conceived of as liminal creatures or go-betweeners connecting humans and spiritual entities. On another occasion, *ippi* Palmo explained how the wild yak is gods’ yak and visits humans to express deities’ wrath or test humans. According to her, this is happening on an increasingly regular basis as deities are benefiting from fewer rituals and offerings compared to when the pasturelands were more populated. She said, “Deities are unhappy with the roads being built and the herders’ absence from the mountains. So, they come to claim their due and express their dissatisfaction”. By mentioning the road as a cause for deities’ wrath, *ippi* Palmo points to the Limey’s fading relationship with the land as a home shared with a variety of spiritual entities: water springs’ spirits, deities, devils, fire spirits, and a variety of ghosts and spirits. Their presence makes it a moral duty for humans to coinhabit it and perform their worshipping obligations. It is starting to become clear how “the presence of mountain and territorial deities and water spirits further reveal configurations that intermingle ‘religion’ and ‘environment’” (Tan 2016, p. 2), through relations of co-domestication.

5.3. Domesticating the Land through Gods and Spirits

The link between ecology and religion is nothing new. In the 1960s, historian Lynn White Jr. observed that “what people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. [It] is deeply conditioned by our beliefs about nature and [. . .] religion” (White 1967, p. 1205); the notable difference in the case of the Limey is that they don’t think of “things around them” as “things” nor as merely “around them”. Animals, humans, and perhaps even some formless beings are *semdjen*, understood in Limi as “possessing a soul or mind”.¹⁶ The subtle life essence or soul, rather than being contained within a human body, can travel from a human to an animal host, depending on the strength of one’s vital energy. This roaming “soul” can be called back through Bön rituals, which are also practiced in Limi (Karmay [1987] 1998). Interestingly, there seems to be a historical convergence of *lha* (deities) and *la* (subtle life essence), pointing towards the sacred origin of the “subtle life essence” within all *semdjen* and, thus, their interconnectedness through their most essential component: “in early sources the terms *lha* (‘deity’), and *bla* seem to be used synonymously”, writes Gerke ([2003] 2007, p. 193).

Like many other agro-pastoral societies, there is in Limi a strong sense of the interdependencies that bind different agents together. This is constituted by a syncretic combination of Tibetan Buddhism, Bön religion,¹⁷ and Animism, leading to syncretic practices that can hardly be untangled and traced back to a single origin. The relationship the Limey share with spiritual entities is not an abstract one but is very much emplaced, as suggested by a conversation I had with *meh* Tashi Lhakpa. “Do you know the deities that reside in Kathmandu?” I asked, to which he said, “I never stayed there so I don’t know them”. This short exchange points to the fact that, in Limi, there is a strong relation between place and spirituality: any relationship between a human and a given spiritual entity takes place in a shared environment. What’s more, some features of the environment can be both the abode of and the deity itself (see Blondeau and Steinkellner [1996] 1998, pp. 432–35; Allison 2015, p. 493). This is the case with certain natural water springs or snow-capped mountain tops, such as the Yulsa Tagyung Karbu in Limi.

On arriving in a new settlement, herders perform a set of rituals to honor the deities and spirits inhabiting the area, thereby protecting their animals and themselves. It could be said that these practices are domesticative: they lay the ground for a respectful and peaceful coinhabitation. Incense¹⁸ made of roasted barley flour and juniper is burnt to feed the spirits of the deceased. Whenever juniper or *waldheimia glabra* (a high-altitude plant used as incense) are available, fumigation can be performed as a purification ritual. “The butter lamp is for deities, lamas, [. . .] and all the mighty spirits”, *ow* Wangchuk explained

to me, echoing Samuel who writes that “local deities also receive offerings in Buddhist ritual” (Samuel 2013, p. 84). If one has not memorized whole prayers, reciting *om mane padme om* during an ordinary ritual is considered sufficient. Some herders perform either fumigation or incense offerings daily. All of them place seven cups of water at an altar in front of religious icons; this water is offered to both local deities and those of the Buddhist pantheon. It is sometimes accompanied by an offering of “the best food you have [to offer] on that day” (dixit *ow* Tashi Lhakpa)—usually curd or barley flour shaped as an egg.

Since the shared *domus* is the mountainscape at large, devotional practice is not confined to the inside of the tent but spread throughout the land. It takes the form of multiple Buddhist shrines (*chorten* or *stūpa* in Sanskrit), numerous engravings of prayers on the stones that form them and on rocks and cliffs, extending the *Dharma* to all beings—from insects to beings endowed with a soul, deities, and spirits. While these practices are confined to the house’s prayer room or the monastery back in the villages, they are performed in the open by herders in the pasturelands, who thereby recognize an extended, wall-less *domus* within which multiple beings coexist. Good human conduct within the territory of deities keeps at bay the latter’s wrath, which would otherwise manifest as extreme weather events, natural catastrophes, human or bovine illnesses, or predators’ attacks (Nyima and Hopping 2019; Bauer et al. 2012; Huber and Pedersen 1997). Therefore, these syncretic rituals stemming from a combination of Tibetan Buddhist and Bön rituals serve the dual purpose of enabling a peaceful coexistence between humans, herds, and spiritual entities in the mountainscape they coinhabit and of ensuring good karma for one’s next life. They are the prerequisites for the co-domestication of land-animals-deities and humans.

Though religious rituals are the most obvious form of worship of spiritual entities, herders also practice lay forms of worship through daily pastoral activities. This furthers the idea that religion and livelihood are not strictly separate spheres (Tan 2016, 2014; Powers [1995] 2007). They practice what I call an “ecological ethics of care” when they nourish the earth by fertilizing it with animal manure and ashes, by making sure they do not overgraze in an area, and by not polluting natural springs. In turn, the earth nourishes humans through the animals they take care of. Thus, the benefit the humans yield is not direct; instead, it goes through domestic animals, emphasizing interdependence. And, as such, the misbehavior of humans towards the environment can cause illness in humans as well as in animals, the latter of which also impacts humans. Working as a herder in Limi reminds humans of their dependence on other co-inhabitants of the land, which can in turn benefit from human presence: it helps bring one to the awareness of “an ethically and spiritually interdependent relationship for all parties involved” (Smyer-Yü 2017, p. 123). It is by taking good care of all the constituents of the *domus* that humans nurture themselves, as benefits cycle through a system of reciprocity and mutuality, in the present and the afterlife.

6. Conclusions

Throughout this article, I have teased out the possible meanings and implications of the concept of domestication as an ontological and political process of multispecies co-inhabitation in Limi. By analyzing humans’ interactions with each other and with non-humans in the pastoral context, I have shown that, in Limi, domestication is better understood in its etymological sense—as making something or someone part of one’s home (*domus*). Domestication is also a dialectic process that entails being a part of other beings’ homes—in the Limey case, the home of wildlife and spiritual entities in the mountains. Therefore, domestication in Limi is the art of multispecies co-inhabitation, rather than the domination of humans over animals, as some authors claim (Cauvin 1994; Cyrułnik et al. 2000), or of men over women. Pastoralism, then, as a practice of domestication (of bovines, women, the environment and spiritual entities), paradoxically also creates a space of hybridity and fluidity of social and ontological boundaries. In this liminal space of blurred frontiers and ambivalence, multispecies coexistence thrives, resisting clear-cut

categorizations that fail to fully contain the fluidity of relations, identities, and of existences. Hence, domestication is not a unilaterally anthropogenic practice; this case study of Limey herders shows that humans, too, are domesticated by bovines, wildlife, and spiritual entities within a land and made to conform to certain “house rules”. This approach of pastoralism, as a human–land–deities–animals constellation, where none truly has precedence over the other, is in line with Plumwood’s call to rehabilitate “the denied space of our hybridity, continuity and kinship” (Plumwood 2002, p. 16). The practice of pastoralism in Limi creates this space of hybridity, continuity, and kinship, where herders navigate the boundaries between men, women, bovines, wildlife, spiritual entities, the home, and beyond.

More broadly, the Limey case is a powerful reminder that “the idea [according to which] domestication is a monstrous cohabitation [and] our relations to animals [and to women and the land] only refer to the register of exploitation and violence” is not only flawed and ethnocentric, but also dangerous (Nicod and Porcher 2019, p. 253). Indeed, it leads some to “defend the end of livestock breeding, the ‘liberation’ of animals and the return of animals to wildlife” (idem), namely, to segregate species for their protection. Stépanoff and Vigne’s rhetorical question powerfully calls into question these current trends: “Is this not, in fact, a way to absolve ourselves of a relationship with animals whose either roots and causes, or consequences and goals, we no longer understand?” (Stépanoff and Vigne 2019, p. 2; see also Lestel 2015). Limey pastoralism shows how “humans [can] form an integral and critical part of biodiversity” (Haywood 1999, p. xiii), alongside non-human beings. This supposes to reconceive domestication as a co-domestication (Fijn 2011), where the human *composes with* rather than *orchestrates* the terms of multispecies relations. In the current context of an acute global ecological crisis, humans could gain from focusing less on ontological boundaries and more on interdependences to mitigate our anthropocentric tendencies and make a genuine effort to coinhabit our world in more equitable terms.

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Notes

- ¹ Throughout this article, I will shorten the phrase “non-human animal” to “animal” for convenience’s sake, which does not imply that humans are not animals too nor that I ignore the literature’s debates on the matter.
- ² Some argue it even happened before the Neolithic Era, at the end of the Paleolithic Era, with the domestication of the wolf. See Cyrulnik et al. (2000, pp. 97–102). Others argue that it had multiple origins rather than a single core in the Middle East (Allaby et al. 2011).
- ³ As my interlocutors explained, “Limi” is derived from “*ley*” (*sle*), a land surrounded by two rivers, and “*mey*” (*mi*), person or people. The ancient settlement of Limi, Tsamtso (also called Gumbayok), was indeed located between two rivers. Hence, the term its inhabitants use to refer to themselves (Limey) takes on its etymology, which already includes “inhabitants”. The inhabitants of Limi are often referred to in the literature as Limiwas, according to Tibetan logic. However, my interlocutors repeatedly confirmed referring to themselves as Limey, not Limiwas. Hence, I adopt their preferred self-appellation in my writing.
- ⁴ The closest Tibetan term would be ‘*dul ba*’ (in the Wylie transliteration), which Samuel defines as “taming, disciplining, and bringing under cultivation” (Samuel 2013, p. 77). But it is not used in Limi; hence, I choose not to turn to it here. However, my analysis echoes that of Samuel’s in his study of the dualities of tame and wild/disciplined and uncontrolled in Tibetan societies, and the place of Buddhist lamas in undertaking the taming (Samuel 1993, pp. 217–22).
- ⁵ There are other possible transliterations for these village names, such as Halji, Walze or Halje, and Zhang or Jang. I have chosen those that seem to be closest to how they sound in Limiekey.

- 6 Most village names in Humla and neighboring regions have both a Tibetan version and a Nepalese one, the latter of which I represent here with the abbreviation Np.
- 7 More on this in my doctoral dissertation, forthcoming.
- 8 *Ow* in Limiekey means father and is used to refer to men old enough to be one's father. *Aa* (nasal, $\tilde{\varepsilon}$ in the phonetic alphabet) or *ama* means mother and is used to refer to women old enough to be one's mother. *Ay* means elder sister and is used to refer to women slightly older than oneself. *Aw* means elder brother and is used to refer to men slightly older than oneself. *Ippi* means grandmother and is used to refer to women old enough to be one's grandmother. *Meh* means grandfather and is used to refer to women old enough to be one's grandfather.
- 9 I have consistently changed my interlocutors' names to pseudonyms in order to preserve their anonymity.
- 10 Throughout this article, for readability's sake, I will avoid the local lexicon, unless judged necessary. In that case, the transliterated word in Limiekey will be accompanied by its equivalent in standard Tibetan in the Wylie transliteration, signaled by the abbreviation W.
- 11 Throughout the article, I resort to he/him/his and she/her for animals instead of "it" in order to reflect the local linguistic use of he/she for animals and humans alike.
- 12 Kaang Rinpoche in Limiekey: literally "most precious snow".
- 13 Inhabitants of Zang are called Zangba, those of Haltze, Halzia and of Til, Tilwa or Tilba.
- 14 Single mothers in Limi are often doomed to celibacy, as they can no longer marry. As such, they do not have in-laws to care for back in the village, nor sufficient fields, as those are inherited patrilinearily.
- 15 According to Tan (2016, p. 4) quoting Holler (2002, pp. 207, 218): "Freeing life (*tshe thar*) refers to the practice of liberating animals and occurs throughout Buddhist Asia (Holler 2002, p. 207). According to Holler, *tshe thar* refers both to the overall category of animal liberation that, nonetheless, involves different practices and motivations and to the specific practice of releasing one's domestic animal intended for slaughter in order to gain merit".
- 16 Tan writes in this regard: "Worldly deities and not-humans (*mi ma yin*) have *la* ["subtle life essence", sometimes translated as "soul"] [. . .] *La* attached to the principle of consciousness allows for an interpretation of expanded consciousness that can properly belong not only to humans but also to animals and worldly deities" (Tan 2016, pp. 8, 10).
- 17 For more on Bön religion, see Samuel (2013, p. 80); Kværne (1995, pp. 9–10); Ramble (2008, 2019).
- 18 W. *gsur* or maybe W. *bsur*, sizzling, searing human flesh, perhaps a remnant of past practices of "red offerings", i.e., blood offerings (Asboe 1936, pp. 75–76; Ramble 2008, p. 228; Dalton 2011, pp. 77–109, 219; Coblin and Li 2013, p. 127) now replaced by "white offerings", namely bloodless offerings.

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