SHARED SACRED LANDSCAPES
STORIES FROM MOUNT KAILAS,
TISE & KANG RINPOCHE

Edited & Retold by
Kamla K. Kapur
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You hold in your hand a unique book of stories about a very special shared sacred landscape. This book celebrates and acknowledges the power of folk stories, which are amongst the most valuable treasures that one generation can pass onto the next. Folk stories inscribe collective meanings, give credence to cultural beliefs, and are an integral part of how a community understands not only its history and traditions, but also articulates its future goals and aspirations.

In publishing this book we wanted to draw attention to the uniqueness of this remote yet intensely revered region. This particular Himalayan sacred landscape is of equal importance to Bönpos, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, and Jains. For example, Hindus refer to the most significant mountain within this sacred landscape as Kailas, the abode of Lord Shiva; Bönpos refer to it as Tise, and Tibetan Buddhist refer to it as Kang Rinpoche.

By bringing the narratives, peoples, and sacred landscapes together, we want this collection of short stories to convey to the reader some of the significance of the holy mountain and its surrounding regions. We also want to show how local knowledge illuminates the multiple connections and various traditions between religion and ecology, time and space, the past and the future. By making these stories available – both in print and digitally – we want to ensure that the folk traditions of this unique region are voiced, preserved and made accessible for future generations. This volume, as well as the online depository of many more collected folk stories, are available on the website of the India China Institute (www.indiachinainstitute.org).
The original versions gathered from this shared sacred region were often quite short in length, and, as is often the case with folk stories, narrated with many variations. The primary sources of these stories — men and women, shamans, elders and priests in Humla, Ngari and Pithoragarh were informed that the material collected from them would be made freely available to readers and researchers around the world, and that their stories may be selected for retelling by writers, or for dissemination through the internet, or for educational purposes.

Because many of these stories transcend and overlap physical, spiritual, and cosmic boundaries, we invited two noted writers, Kamla K. Kapur and Prawin Adhikari, as special Editors to retell and situate the stories in the larger context of Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Jain and Bönpo traditions. We are grateful to these two writers whose amazing talents flow through the pages of this book. In addition to these retold versions, readers also have the opportunity to access the original stories, including additional audio and video material, on the website of the India China Institute. As a way to honor the places where they were collected and to also make them accessible in the vernacular, select stories appear in the English as well as in the Tibetan, Nepali, or Hindi language.

This book emerged out of a three-year project designed and led by the India China Institute (ICI) at The New School in New York City and based on collaboration between The New School and the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD). It is the product of a collaborative endeavor with ICIMOD’s Kailas Sacred Landscapes Conservation and Development Initiative (KSLCDI), a transboundary conservation and development initiative working to strengthen regional cooperation among China, India and Nepal. ICIMOD’s team Abhimanyu Pandey provided insight into the anthropology of the region, Rajan Kotru provided a platform to meet and interact with associated colleagues, and Swapnil Chaudhari coordinated with the team. Special thanks to Toby Alice Volkman at the Henry Luce Foundation for her intellectual contributions and support for the project. I want to use this opportunity to thank all of our supporters for their partnerships and generous contributions. Also a very special thanks to our fieldwork team: Sagar Lama, Himani Upadhyaya, Kelsang Chimee, Kunga
Yishe, Pasang Y. Sherpa, Sheetal Aitwal, Nabraj Lama, Abhimanyu Pandey, Shekhar Pathak, and Tshewang Lama (Chakka Bahadur) – for their crucial role in gathering stories from the region. Thanks to Tenzin Norbu Nangsal for editing the Tibetan and Shekhar Pathak for editing the Hindi. I also want to acknowledge our Grace Hou and the rest of the India China Institute staff for all their support. In addition to contributions from The New School, primary support for the project came from the Henry Luce Foundation and additional support from the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD).

This project involved a unique collaborative effort with over twenty scholars and experts from many parts of the world and different disciplinary backgrounds – anthropology, international development, history, geography, arts, and politics. Some members are from the Himalayan region and have a deep connection to our work of the Sacred Himalaya Initiative (Shekhar Pathak, Tshewang Lama). Others have had extensive professional engagement in the Himalayas (Mukta Lama, Kelsang Chimee, Ashmina Ranjit, Anil Chitrakar, Kunga, Pasang Y. Sherpa, Ashok Gurung, Kevin Bubriski, Srestha Rit Premnath, and Amanda Manandhar-Gurung). We also invited scholars with no prior work in the Himalayas, but who nevertheless have deep knowledge and interest in the relationships between ecology, culture and religion from a global perspective (Mark Larrimore, Rafi Youatt, Nitin Sawhney, Chris Crews, Liu Xiaoqing, and Marina Kaneti).

Over the course of three years, between 2014 and 2016, members of our group engaged in several pilgrimages and field trips in and around the Kailas Sacred Landscape of India, Nepal, and Tibet. We spent many weeks hiking through the Himalayas at an average elevation of over 3,800 meters (12,500 feet). Encounters with the natural landscape, pilgrims of various faiths, and travelers drawn to the rugged beauty and serenity of the region shaped our understanding of this unique landscape as a shared sacred space. From the very start of designing this study in 2013, we were drawn to the significance of multiple and often overlapping meanings and imaginaries of this shared sacred mountain, both for people who inhabit the region as well as those who come from outside. We hope that our work will provide a glimpse into the unique traditions and
cultures of this region. As you will discover throughout this book, many aspects of these ancient stories continue to inform the socio-cultural traditions and everyday interactions of millions of people in the region. The stories allow us to better understand the revered past and the ways in which the Himalaya is connected to contemporary global questions of climate change, biodiversity, and sustainable futures. They show the various ways in which the past and the present, humans and nature, gods and animals are intricately and eternally connected. The stories inspire the reader with a yearning for meaning in life beyond one’s own desires and needs.

As this shared sacred region becomes more accessible – both physically and digitally – many important questions emerge about its future. As the principal investigator of a project so intricately involved with this region, I will always treasure this once in a lifetime learning opportunity. As a member of the Gurung ethnic group from the highlands of Nepal who was raised in the Indian Himalayas and worked in Tibet, and as somebody steeped in the diverse traditions of Buddhist lamas, Hindu priests, and Animists, this project also resonated for me on a personal level. It allowed me to revisit and rediscover stories about Lord Shiva, the Goddess Parvati, Mount Kailas, and Lake Manasarovar that I had heard about as a child. Finally, as an academic, the project broadened my understanding of the many-layered and often contested meanings of the shared sacred region. There is no substitute to experiencing firsthand the various ways in which the region itself transcends both physical and temporal boundaries.

My hope is that the stories in this book will similarly allow readers to discover, or perhaps rediscover, this region in all its human diversity and sacred timelessness.

In these varied ways, our project went beyond just storytelling and brought a sense of what connects the peoples and the traditions of this region. It inspired us to think beyond state and national boundaries and to submerge ourselves in the vast universe of complex co-existence between so many different peoples and cultures.

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