

Territorialisation, Ambivalence, and Representational Spaces in Gilgit-Baltistan

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Introduction

The dispute over the former territories of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir—the so-called Kashmir dispute—represents a complex case of spatial politics at the intersection of Central-South Asian regions. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, boundary-making—the political and administrative organisation of territory—was particularly intense and dynamic in this area, impacting people’s identification with a larger social group as well as their subject status as members of the princely state. The first war between India and Pakistan was fought over Kashmir in 1947, dividing the princely state. However, far from incorporating the Kashmir territories into modern nation states and opening the way to democratic participation, the conflict set the resulting territories—Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) and Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan, and the state of Jammu and Kashmir in India—aside under distinct constitutional and administrative arrangements with the respective countries that currently claim them. For some, “Kashmir” evokes notions of identity and territoriality located in the homonymous valley that is controlled by the Republic of India, but it is problematic for others, such as people inhabiting the territory of the administrative entity known as Gilgit-Baltistan, on the Pakistani side. To this day, Gilgit-Baltistan has an ill-defined semi-autonomous status in Pakistan, with more negative than positive consequences for the local inhabitants.

The present article examines how processes of territorialisation (new meanings of territorial control) in Gilgit-Baltistan by the Pakistani state, as well as the association of the region with the Kashmir dispute, are being challenged by local groups through representations of its transregional linkages. The focus is on Baltistan, a former sub-division of Ladakh *wazarat* (one of the provinces of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir) that became practically a landlocked territory after the drawing of the ceasefire



Fig. 1: Map of the disputed territories of Kashmir including important settlements. **Source:** Design Hermann Kreuzmann 2015, reproduced with permission.

line in 1949.¹ During the events that led to the division of the princely state, an indigenous movement arose at the northern periphery centred in the town of Gilgit. As it spread south, it incorporated armed groups from Baltistan in an effort to displace the maharaja’s and Indian forces that were controlling it.² These armed groups finally came close to Leh (the capital of Ladakh) but despite support from the Pakistani army, they were later

1 Although the war had officially ended on January 1, 1949, the conflict continued for about half a year in the Ladakh *wazarat* (today’s Baltistan and Ladakh) after the UN Security Council failed to extend the ceasefire. At the time, a number of platoons from different parts of Hunza, Baltistan, and Chitral under the umbrella of the Gilgit Scouts were still fighting in some parts of present Ladakh but they were pushed back to the north by Indian troops.

2 The most relevant work is perhaps the account by Major Brown, the British commandant of the Scouts: William Brown, *The Gilgit Rebellion* (London: Ibex, 1998). Other works include F.M. Khan, *The Story of Gilgit, Baltistan and Chitral: A Short History of Two Millenniums AD 7–1999* (Islamabad: Eejaz, 2002), 82–176; Ahmad Hasan Dani, *History of Northern Areas of Pakistan (Up to 2000 AD)* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel, 2007), 321–398; Martin Sökefeld, “From Colonialism to Postcolonial Colonialism: Changing Modes of Domination in the Northern Areas of Pakistan,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 64 (2005): 939–973.

forced to retreat back north to the area around Kargil (today a border town in Ladakh, on the Indian side).³ In this process of shifting territorial control, Baltistan was cut off from the rest of Ladakh, a territory with which it shared historic, economic, and cultural ties (primarily language and a similar ethnic identity), and more importantly, from the adjacent area of Kargil, with which connections had been even stronger. Later, in the aftermath of the 1971 India-Pakistan war, India also seized several villages in the Chorbat La region close to Khaplu, the largest village in Baltistan. The ceasefire line, renamed the Line of Control in 1972 (hereafter LoC), formalised the separation of Baltistan from both the territories of the princely state on the Indian side, and from AJK on the Pakistani side, to create a new territorial entity in Pakistan known as the Northern Areas (renamed in 2009 as Gilgit-Baltistan). Subsequently, Baltistan was linked administratively to the “regional” centre located in Gilgit in the north, an area with which it had next to no previous economic relations.⁴

As part of the collective endeavour to explore emerging notions of belonging in the South-Central Asian borderlands in this issue of *Transcultural Studies*, this paper describes how processes of territorialisation have produced Gilgit-Baltistan as a distinct space that cannot be qualified as state space.⁵ The link between Gilgit-Baltistan and the Kashmir dispute further highlights inconsistencies that promoted a shift in the sense of belonging among the people of Baltistan. I propose that this shift is due to the ill-defined political status of Gilgit-Baltistan in general, being neither fully part of Pakistan nor separate from it, and this instability is further accentuated by the territory’s peripheral position at a border zone

3 Accounts of the presence of “Pakistanis” (specified as people from Gilgit, Hunza, and Baltistan) in 1947–49 are not limited to the predominantly Muslim border areas of northern Ladakh, but also include Buddhist villages to the south (in the direction of Leh), where, I was informed during my fieldwork in July 2012, repression of Buddhists took place. For a view on Zangskar, which is a predominantly Buddhist area of Kargil’s district, see: Kim Gutschow, “The Politics of Being Buddhist in Zangskar: Partition and Today,” *India Review* 3–4 (2006): 473–478.

4 See Andreas Dittman, “The Development of City and Bazaar in Baltistan,” *Ladakh Studies* 8 (1996): 13–15; Pierpaolo Faggi and Mario Ginestri, “La rete dei bazaar nell’alta valle dell’Indo,” *Rivista Geografica Italiana* 84, no. 3 (1977): 315–349.

5 “Space” is understood here in the Lefebvrian sense as socially produced. See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991). By state space I am referring to the logic of territorialisation of political authority implied in state making, which involves processes of differentiation at various levels (political, juridical, economic, and others), and the mobilization of state institutions in specific scales in order to organize social and economic relations and the formation of spatial imaginaries. Following this, it is not possible to consider Gilgit-Baltistan as proper part of the Pakistani state. For a detailed analysis of the dimensions of the state space see: Neil Brenner, Bob Jessop, Martin Jones and Gordon McLeod, eds., *State/Space: A Reader* (Malden: Blackwell, 2003), 6–11.

with a high risk of confrontation. In response, a transregional sense of belonging emerges that tries to overcome the resulting instability and isolation through attempts to reposition Baltistan within a broader context in which it had hitherto been marginalised.

This essay discusses how Gilgit-Baltistan has been conceptualised by the Pakistani state as having an ambiguous relationship with the Kashmir dispute, which in turn has justified interventions to prevent the development of representative politics in the region. This has resulted in shifting representations of the space⁶ of Gilgit-Baltistan by the dominant Pakistani civil-military bureaucracy on maps and in political discourses as a disputed territory, to which exceptional rules must be applied that limit people's rights and sustain military-autocratic forms of control.

In an indirect challenge to these state measures, a number of individual activists and other social groups (cultural associations, NGOs) in the area have recently revived symbolic and cultural manifestations of a different belonging. In Baltistan, these mostly emphasise cultural ties with Tibet. Taking the forms of language revival, the protection of Buddhist sites, and the preservation of old folk and musical practices that have been fast disappearing, they offered new modes of self-identification. Attaching alternative meanings (or imaginaries) connected to ideas of the past to their representational spaces,⁷ these groups aim at countering the external control and uncertainty that defines their environment. While these manifestations do not take the form of openly political demands (such as calls for independence), they do reconfigure the sense of belonging in this disrupted borderland. They also demonstrate the potential to break up the existing order, as they expose its inconsistencies. In other

6 Here "representation of space" is understood through the work of Henri Lefebvre as a conceptualised space that is dominant in any society. "Representations of space are certainly abstract, but they also play a part in social and political practice: established relations between objects and people in represented space are subordinate to a logic which will sooner or later break them up because of their lack of consistency." Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 38–41. The continued representation of Gilgit-Baltistan as part of Kashmir, to which inhabitants of the region object, has had specific implications for Pakistan's control of this territory through legal and security measures. However, this association has become untenable owing to local and regional developments. As an alternative, Pakistan has sought to represent Gilgit-Baltistan in a new way, mainly after 2001, as a multi-cultural region where development is crucial to improve people's lives and serves to address Pakistan's negative international reputation in dealing with minorities. Brochures to attract foreign tourists and support for programmes to develop indigenous traditions are part of the creation of this multi-ethnic imaginary. Local expressions of belonging, however, point to a critique of this dominant representation.

7 "Representational space," as understood by Lefebvre, refers to "space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols." (see Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 39).

words, instead of Pakistan or Kashmir, such border-related cultural manifestations promote the alternative of Tibet as a transregional space—and in principle a non-controversial sense of belonging as a way to challenge the narrowing of political space.

The arguments discussed here are based on field research I conducted between 2009 and 2014. My fieldwork was primarily carried out in Baltistan and included a visit to Gilgit. In the course of several trips to Islamabad, I also conducted interviews, mostly with people from the Baltistan area and some Pakistani government officials. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, unless names were explicitly mentioned with the consent of the interviewees, I opted for maintaining the anonymity of those I met. Additional field research was carried out in the area of Kargil and Leh on the Indian side. The field research was part of a project that focused on local understandings of the Kashmir dispute and the manner in which the views of the local population relate to general explanations of the dispute by the government and in scholarship.

The first section of this article discusses the conceptualisation of (spatial) expressions of territoriality in the South Asian context. The second part addresses the case of Gilgit-Baltistan as part of the Kashmir dispute by looking at how this area has been produced as an ambivalent space (as understood in terms of production of space by Lefebvre) through its exceptional legal status. The last section focuses on the ways in which Baltistan's marginalisation within Pakistan is being challenged by several social groups through appeals to the transregional character of this territory with the help of cultural symbols.

The problem of spatial conceptualisation in the disputed South Asian borderlands

The issue of territoriality and the understanding of social space in South Asia emerge, as elsewhere, in relation to the exercise of political power and control in different historical periods. Scholarly works that have addressed the question in the Asian context underscore the spatial dimension of different historical trajectories, which indicate alternative experiences of space.⁸ They also point to the problems accompanying a conceptual terminology mainly based on Western European experience and its application to non-Western societies. The expansion of

8 See for example the discussion on Siam by Tongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of a Geo-body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), 33–36.

the nation-state model as a form of political organisation, mainly after decolonisation in the second half of the twentieth century, has accentuated the inconsistencies between the form/shape (the state) and the content (the spatial practice). With its emphasis on the struggle for freedom at the domestic level, and for equal treatment at the international level (under the principle of equal sovereignty of states), the modern nation-state paradigm became the only alternative for the organisation of political life in non-Western societies. However, this also meant a new imposition on peoples with a long history of avoiding the state or struggling against similar forms of dominance. This can be seen in some of today's disputed contexts such as Kashmir⁹ and in India's northeast, two areas which show that aspects of this conceptualisation remain contested.¹⁰

Definitions of "region," "regional identity," "borderland," and "border" often fail to grasp the particular relationship between people, territory, and mobility in the South Asian context. The territorial politics of the nation-state and the abrupt establishment of international boundaries were superimposed on areas that were used to the less rigid territorial politics prevalent in the pre-colonial and colonial periods. As a consequence, this boundary-making was highly contested on the periphery, resulting in the creation of differentiated, ambiguous zones.

Although Kashmir is often defined as a region, it refers more to a geographical area that roughly coincides with past political boundaries, rather than a modern administrative unit. Going beyond cartographic representations, Anssi Paasi argues that regions are characterised by an element of cohesiveness that is discernible in shared administrative/historical aspects; the economic functions and formal qualities of the inhabitants are associated with their territories and physical space.¹¹ In other words, regions present distinct forms of territorial practices. As Michael Keating points out, their role and

9 Hermann Kreutzmann, "Kashmir and the Northern Areas of Pakistan: Boundary-Making along Contested Frontiers," *Erdkunde* 62, no. 3 (2008): 204–209.

10 Perhaps the most remarkable work on this is Willem van Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia* (London: Anthem Press, 2005), 1–23. See also Ravina Aggarwal, *Beyond Lines of Control: Performance and Politics on the Disputed Borders of Ladakh, India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Chitrallekha Zutshi, "Rethinking Kashmir's History from a Borderlands Perspective," *History Compass* 8, no. 7 (2012): 594–608; David Ludden, "Spatial Inequality and National Territory: Remapping 1905 in Bengal and Assam," *Modern Asian Studies* 46, no. 3 (2012): 483–525.

11 Anssi Paasi, "The Resurgence of the 'Region' and 'Regional Identity': Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Observations on Regional Dynamics in Europe," *Review of International Studies* 35 (2009), 131.

importance varies over time, depending on the level of institutionalisation; it can diminish for a period and later re-emerge, as in the case of Euroregions as a consequence of processes of European integration.¹² What makes Kashmir a region is not always clear, but territorial practice has brought together the different disputed territories, although actual cohesion among them has been marginal. Moreover, the characteristics pointed out by Paasi and Keating in the understanding of regions imply a degree of equality between the different territories of a region (at least in the contemporary period), a need for mutual benefit, or a fair share in the resources. These elements are highly contested when it comes to issues of conquest and exploitation of resources, as is the case in Kashmir's disputed territories. Paasi suggests that regions (as sub-state categories) "should be seen as complicated constellations of agency, social relations and power."¹³ This rather broad definition opens up possibilities for including non-Western experiences, although scholarly debates about the need for alternative conceptualisations continue. James C. Scott's provocative work on the history of peoples living in the upland territories in Southeast Asia argues for a distinct geographical realm where penetration by the nation-state has been marginal. He maintains that this realm, which he names "Zomia" following the work of Willem van Schendel,¹⁴ constitutes a distinct region of knowledge based on certain ecological patterns and the resistance of its peoples to the expansion of the state. Van Schendel has included Kashmir as a constitutive element of "Zomia," despite the fact that the territory has a significant history of state involvement.¹⁵

Boundaries and borders tend to be used as interchangeable terms in the discipline of geography, while boundaries in the scholarly works of the social sciences are often identified with "lines" and borders with a "distinct

12 Michael Keating, "The Invention of 'Regions'," in *State/Space: A Reader*, ed. Neil Brenner et al. (Berlin: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 261–263.

13 Anssi Paasi, "The Resurgence of the 'Region'," 133.

14 James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Willem van Schendel, "Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 20, no. 6 (2002): 647–688.

15 Van Schendel, "Geographies of Knowing," 653–656.

edge,” embodying social and spatial functions.¹⁶ In this context, the borderland represents a territory affected by the existence of the boundary/ies and its/their associated specific social dynamics, which can boost interaction or separation. The emergence of borderlands as understood in this article is related to the territorial process of historical expansion by different polities (e.g., empires, kingdoms, and states) and the creation of middle grounds, peripheries, or buffer zones between them. However, as the case of Kashmir, and more specifically of Gilgit-Baltistan, illustrates, the emergence of some such borderlands cannot be dissociated from the element of legal exceptionalism that defines everyday life in these territories.

In South Asia, borderlands are located notably in the northern belt that stretches from Afghanistan to northeast India and the neighbouring states of Bangladesh and Myanmar. Even today, South Asian borderlands are largely regarded as the product of imperial policies, at times negotiated, at times imposed. Above all, as van Schendel has put it, they constitute fissures resulting from the convulsive shake of tectonic plates in 1947.¹⁷ The creation of nation-states after decolonisation and the establishment of international boundaries—albeit frequently contested—have also had an impact on those who live in these territories, now crisscrossed by new lines and new political and administrative arrangements. The border groups affected have either ignored the new boundaries, subverted them, or looked for alternative forms of identification.

The challenge of conceptualisation when examining cases such as Kashmir seems to lie in properly addressing the cultural and human realm of territoriality and the need for different scales of analysis, quite apart from highlighting shared affinities across borders and nation-states. Constructivist approaches in the field of international relations and political science focusing on conflicts in South Asia have tended to put identity issues at the fore, whether based on shared cultural, religious, or ethnic features or referring to political mobilisation by groups with a specific idea of “nation,” “region,” or

16 David Newman, “Boundaries, Borders and Barriers,” *Identities, Borders, Orders: Rethinking International Relations Theory*, ed. M. Albert et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 150–151. For a sociological conceptual approach see Richard Jenkins, “Boundaries and Borders,” in *Nationalism, Ethnicity and Boundaries: Conceptualising and Understanding Identity through Boundary Approaches*, ed. Jenifer Jackson and Lina Molokotos-Liederma (London: Routledge, 2015).

17 Van Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland*, 2.

“regional identity.”¹⁸ Rather than exploring the production of these spaces, a number of studies have emphasised both the extraordinary and the negative character of bordering practices as being the result of a “cartographic anxiety”¹⁹ defined by power relations between states. Moreover, little thought has been given to what constitutes the “community” that still brings people together despite the politics involved in their division.²⁰ Further research on societal formation and belonging—a more slippery category to analyse—and the impact of boundaries on processes of developing attachment may therefore be necessary.

The Kashmir conflict following the 1947–49 war exemplifies this case well. With the rise of Kashmiri nationalism and the separatist struggle, explanations of the Kashmir conflict (with particular reference to Indian Kashmir) generally took the approach of analysing the state (India) as a “natural” spatial container in relation to processes of territorial decentralisation. This occurred without significant consideration of other groups (non-Kashmiris) constitutive of the former princely state, their consciousness, or their different historical legacies. The Jammu and Kashmir princely state was constructed historically as a borderland²¹ and has remained as such after partition. Rather than creating “national boundaries,” the LoC has reinforced this specific character of being a distinct zone and—since it generally prevented movement—produced new territories with diverse symbolic meanings.²²

18 Amitav Acharya and Arabinda Acharya, “Kashmir in the International System,” in *Kashmir: New Voices, New Approaches*, ed. Waheguru Pal Singh Sidhu et al. (London: Lynne Rienner, 2006), 157–170; Vali Nars, “National Identities and the India-Pakistan Conflict,” in *The India and Pakistan Conflict: An Enduring Rivalry*, ed., T.V. Paul (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 178–201; Navnita Chadha Behera, *Demystifying Kashmir* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2006).

19 Sankaran Krishna, “Cartographic Anxiety: Mapping the Political Body of India,” *Alternatives* 19, no. 4 (Fall: 1994): 507–521.

20 An interesting reflection on this is provided in Zygmunt Bauman and Benedetto Vecchi, eds., *Identity: Conversations with Benedetto Vecchi* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004). Also, on understandings of identity see: Colombo, “Decostruire L’identità individuazione e identificazione in un mondo globale,” *Dossier Studi Culturali e Identità* 19 (2007): 11–35. On the question of community as a social group, its cohesion, and boundness see: Jenkins, “Boundaries and Borders,” 18–19; Roger Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Ethnic Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

21 Zutshi, “Rethinking Kashmir’s History,” 594–608.

22 I refer to the role of the LoC as creating a separation between the divided parts (Azad Jammu and Kashmir, Gilgit-Baltistan, and the state of Jammu and Kashmir) of the princely state; that is, the “disputed” character of the LoC prevents normal interaction movement across this line. This does not exclude the fact that some groups, such as displaced people (mainly until 1990), smugglers, and militants, have moved back and forth, but they are the exception rather than the norm.

These policy interventions notwithstanding, people living on both sides of the LoC have sought to overcome the separation and division in different ways—symbolically and materially—to meet their need to be part of a larger community. The state is likewise a key agent here, either by intervening in border territory affairs (e.g., at the political, military or infrastructural level) or by the lack of such interventions. Actors position themselves within this scenario, ultimately contributing to the transformation of borderland territories. Claims to representational spaces that have previously disappeared due to state boundary-making may emerge to satisfy the claims and expectations of certain groups or political agents to cope with situations where border people have little leeway for action.²³ With regard to Kashmir, this seems to be the case for the Balti and Pahari groups across the LoC. They claim common cultural ties with a larger community—expressed in the form of “Tibetanness” in the case of the Baltis and “Kashmiriness” for the Paharis. The resulting representational spaces serve to counter the relatively marginal or peripheral role of these groups in the conflict, but they are also intrinsically linked to the condition of these two groups as “borderlanders” of the larger postcolonial states of India and Pakistan.

The problem of spatial conceptualisation in South Asian disputed borderlands can be better dealt with by combining different scales of analysis in empirical research and by focusing on processes of spatial transformation and appropriation. In this regard, the question is not whether it is necessary to change perspectives—from state-centred approaches to the experiences of border people, for example—but to unfold, as proposed by this article, the complexities of different spatial processes involved in boundary-making and spatial transformation and to show how they are intertwined. This could enrich the larger conceptual debate as well as provide a better insight into ongoing territorial processes.

Bordering processes and regional formation in Gilgit-Baltistan: The creation of new spatialities

Still trapped in the Kashmir dispute but formally controlled by the Pakistani state, the constitutional status of Gilgit-Baltistan remains uncertain, despite

23 Kenneth Iain MacDonald, “Memories of Tibet: Transnationalism, Transcultural and the Cultural Politics of Identity Production in Northern Pakistan,” *Indian Review* 5, no. 2 (2006): 190–219; Antia Mato Bouzas, “Mixed Legacies in Contested Borderlands: Skardu and the Kashmir Dispute,” *Geopolitics* 17, no. 4 (2012): 867–886.

occasional rumours about its full integration with Pakistan.²⁴ This legal ambivalence has consequences for the inhabitants of the territory, ranging from their inability to cast a vote in Pakistani national elections to constraints on their basic legal and political rights. Up until 2009, the area was loosely referred to as the Northern Areas. Continuing the colonial form of administration, it was controlled by the Pakistani Ministry of Kashmir Affairs and the Northern Areas.

Previously, the reforms introduced in September 1974 by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto replaced the agency system and created five districts, removing the powers of the local *rajās* or rulers (known as *jagirdari* system) and abolishing the colonial Frontier Crimes Regulation that had been in force until then. Bhutto also introduced a form of regional representation, a legislative assembly that was further developed by successive reforms. These reforms also eliminated the State Subject Order, promulgated in 1927 by Hari Singh, the Maharaja of Kashmir, in response to increasing local demands for representation and for participation in the state bureaucracy. This subject status had its origins in the princely state of Kashmir and led to the introduction of a form of citizenship based on territoriality to define those who were entitled to live and work within the princely state.²⁵ As a consequence, unlike the rest of the residents of the territories of the former princely state, those of Gilgit-Baltistan have ceased to have a legal connection to the Kashmir dispute as their “citizenship” status has changed, despite the Pakistani government maintaining otherwise. From the legal point of view, the application of the Pakistani Citizenship Act of 1951 makes residents of Gilgit-Baltistan Pakistani citizens to a certain extent. In fact, while the residents of AJK have identification cards specific to that territory, those in Gilgit-Baltistan carry Pakistani national identity cards. The ambivalent constitutional framework and disputed status mean that, from a legal perspective, the situation of Gilgit-Baltistan can be described as liminal within the existing legal-political orders.²⁶

I was able to access internal documents from the Pakistani administration that deal with the constitutional status of Gilgit-Baltistan; I assume the documents were prepared between September 2009 and April 2012. Filed

24 “Pakistan mulls elevating status of Gilgit-Baltistan on Chinese insistence,” *Dawn*, January 8, 2016. [Accessed on 28. March 2016]. <http://www.dawn.com/news/1231394>.

25 Cabeiri deBergh Robinson, *Refugees, Political Subjectivity and the Morality of Violence: From Hijarat to Jihad in Azad Kashmir* (PhD Diss, University of Michigan, 2005), 151–155.

26 Caitlee Hong, “Liminality and Resistance in Gilgit-Baltistan,” *Legal Working Paper Series on Legal Empowerment for Sustainable Development* (Montreal: CISDL, 2012): 8–10.

under the title “Constitutional Status of Gilgit-Baltistan,” they reflect the debates within the Pakistani bureaucracy and the key actors in the region on the subject. An interview with a high-ranking bureaucrat of the Gilgit-Baltistan administration in Islamabad helped me determine the actual legal and economic status of the region. He referred to the documents in the aforementioned file, which he discussed with me, by acknowledging that, in the end, “everything concerning the budget of Gilgit-Baltistan is decided here [in Islamabad].”²⁷

The second page in this file, in point five, states that:

The constitutional status of Gilgit-Baltistan Northern Areas was examined several times in the past by the Ministries of Law & Justice, Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Kashmir Affairs and Gilgit-Baltistan, taking into consideration the following alternatives: (i) An independent political entity, (ii) merger with Azad Kashmir, (iii) complete (de jure) merger with Pakistan, (iv) maintenance of status quo.

The document however, rules out the first three options on the grounds that Gilgit-Baltistan already enjoys great autonomy under the 2009 Empowerment and Self-Governance Order,²⁸ that the merger with AJK is not recommended due to the absence of viable links between the two territories, and that it is “not advisable to extend the jurisdiction of the Government of Azad Kashmir to the borders of China in view of the serious risks involved.” Therefore, the maintenance of the existing status quo was suggested. It is noticeable, however, that despite the interest of the Pakistani state to have Gilgit-Baltistan treated similarly to AJK in terms of being part of the Kashmir dispute, Pakistan does not favour the merger of AJK with Gilgit-Baltistan into one single administrative unit on geostrategic grounds. The document in the file “Constitutional Status of Gilgit-Baltistan” that I accessed is unclear whether this was due to the possible rejection of such a merger by the

27 Interview, Islamabad, 2. May 2012.

28 The 2009 Empowerment and Self-Governance Order was approved by the executive branch of the federal government of Pakistan and is meant for the self-rule of Gilgit-Baltistan.

people of Gilgit-Baltistan²⁹ or the fact that the merger would cause China to share a border with AJK, which could be a concern for India. Indeed, in the beginning of 2016, when news came out that the Pakistani government was debating the change of Gilgit-Baltistan's status, it was suggested that Chinese pressure might be behind the initiative. Concretely, China, which had already invested in the upgrade of the Karakoram Highway, might be unwilling to continue to finance projects in Gilgit-Baltistan because of its disputed condition. If the latter were the case, it would also affect China's strong economic links with Pakistan, as the Karakoram Highway acts as the main link between the two countries.

Gilgit-Baltistan is part of a dispute, but not itself a disputed territory in the sense that its people opted for Pakistan in 1947 and Pakistan does not contest this fact. At the same time, its present legal status resembles that of a province, but it is not constitutionally a province of Pakistan like the rest of the Pakistani provinces. Due to this ambiguous condition, the language describing the political status of Gilgit-Baltistan within the Pakistani state is confusing and can be misleading. Pakistani newspapers, such as the reputed English daily *Dawn*, which were reporting on the possible integration of Gilgit-Baltistan into Pakistan in January 2016, also referred to it as "disputed." However, in the unofficial documents mentioned above, a page titled "Opening Remarks by Secretary KANA"³⁰ states: "the Northern Areas are not strictly disputed as the then Maharajah of Kashmir did not have strong administrative control over the Northern Areas, except for presence of few military contingents." This means that the Pakistani state distinguishes between parts of Gilgit-Baltistan whose local rajas formalised the accession to Pakistan (such as Hunza and Nagar), and territories liberated by local guerrillas and paramilitary forces in 1947–49 such as the Gilgit Agency (the surrounding areas of today's Gilgit and Bunji) and Baltistan.³¹ Both territories, those that acceded as well as those that were liberated, were formally

29 This has been acknowledged in a report to which the author had access and which was elaborated on in November 2015 by a committee formed by local historians, journalists, and activists from Gilgit-Baltistan with the title "Historical Perspective of Gilgit-Baltistan." The report was to be submitted to the Pakistani authorities who were deciding on the future constitutional status of Gilgit-Baltistan. Information about this report appeared in the online press: "Committee Submits Report on History and Aspirations of the People of Gilgit-Baltistan," *Pamir Times*. [Accessed on 20. April 2016]. <http://pamirtimes.net/2015/12/05/committee-submits-report-on-history-and-aspirations-of-the-people-gilgit-baltistan/>.

30 KANA stands for the Ministry of Kashmir Affairs and Northern Areas. Following the change in the denomination of Northern Areas for Gilgit-Baltistan, the Ministry's new name is Ministry of Kashmir Affairs and Gilgit-Baltistan.

31 This has also been the subject of an international controversy after a resolution of the European Parliament on Kashmir in 2007. See A. Mato Bouzas, "Mixed Legacies," note 22.

under the princely state but political control over them was loose as it was exercised mostly by the local rajas or, in Gilgit, by the British political agents. In this respect, from Pakistan's point of view, Gilgit-Baltistan is disputed due to its former legal link with the princely state, but not contested in itself. As a consequence, Pakistan assumes that sooner or later Gilgit-Baltistan will be an integral part of this state, and the only open issue is to decide the status of the other Kashmiri territories in accordance with UN resolutions, including AJK. However, if the UN resolutions are considered and a referendum for the whole of Kashmir is a real option, it would imply that Pakistan does not contemplate the possibility of independence for Kashmir, or at least not for Gilgit-Baltistan.

Apart from the disputed character of Gilgit-Baltistan, similar confusion prevails concerning its provincial status since the 2009 reform. The 2009 Order created and filled a number of administrative posts in line with the federal structure of the provinces, reinforcing (at least formally) the link between the centre, the executive, and the region, as compared to the previously pre-eminent role of the ministry of KANA. This has led some to conclude mistakenly: "It is expected that the new Province of Gilgit-Baltistan will have more decision-making powers for matters that directly affect the local economy."³² However, despite being like a province in name, Gilgit-Baltistan is not a Pakistani province in legal-constitutional terms. Pakistani jurisdiction applies there in a limited manner but residents do not enjoy the legal safeguards available in the other Pakistani provinces. This means that while a resident of Punjab or Balochistan can appeal to the Supreme Court of Pakistan and cast her/his vote to the National Assembly, a resident of Gilgit-Baltistan cannot. Their "sovereign roof" is limited to the territorial extent of Gilgit-Baltistan. Like other Pakistanis, those in Gilgit-Baltistan face no restrictions on movement and work within Pakistan, but there are a number of legal restrictions based on their place of residence. It is when they travel abroad that they carry Pakistani passports and become clearly identified with Pakistan. In other words, they become Pakistanis when they are outside of Pakistan's territory, while they are "Others" within the territory under state control.

The legal-political status of Gilgit-Baltistan reflects the ambivalent way in which the Pakistani state has dealt with this territory (as territorialisation) since Partition by differentiating it from the other provinces under its control. Its exceptional legal character responds, however, to a specific

32 Jurgen van der Tas, "Foreword." In "Preservation of Built Environment and its Impact on Community Development in Gilgit-Baltistan," *Berlin Geographical Papers* 42, ed. Hermann Kreutzmann (Berlin: ZELF, 2013), iii.

state strategy that relies on the premise of Gilgit-Baltistan's condition of "waiting-to-be-part-of-Pakistan" and the question of national identity. The latter has to do with how to incorporate a territory without a clear dominant linguistic or ethnic group that is furthermore populated by peoples with more links to Central Asian traditions than to the South Asian mainland.³³ It is this "exceptional" status of Gilgit-Baltistan that, under conditions of globalization, allows for the transformation of this space and for local interventions to achieve it. In this sense, Gilgit-Baltistan's importance for Pakistan lies in its transregional character, as a crossroads of multiple influences between South and Central Asia. Lacking any significant majority in socio-cultural terms, Gilgit-Baltistan, as may be the case of Xinjiang, is a rapidly vanishing cultural space.

Gilgit-Baltistan has no single "majority group," although the majority of its population are followers of the Twelver Shia branch of Islam. This shared religious identity, however, does not bring a majority of people together because language and local differences have a more important role in mobilizing common sentiments. For example, while some scholars have pointed out that in the city of Gilgit, differences between Shias and Sunnis have created a sectarianised urban landscape,³⁴ in Skardu, the capital of the Baltistan division,³⁵ interreligious relations are generally more fluid.³⁶ The sociologists Norbert Elias and John Scotson have pointed to the abuse of terms like "racial" or "ethnic"—to which "religious" could be added in the present case—in sociology and in society at large because

33 Certainly, some South Asian traditions are present in Gilgit-Baltistan—in terms of language and some religious traditions, for example—but I refer to the fact that the territory is perceived and portrayed (in the media) differently in Pakistan. Compared to the plains of the mainland, it is a mountainous area and this affects ecological, economic, and social patterns. Gilgit-Baltistan lacks major urban development and the social stratification of Pakistani society (and South Asian society in general under the caste system) does not apply there. It can be considered a relatively more egalitarian society as compared to the prevailing caste system of the Indian subcontinent. Moreover, most of the significant cultural, economic, and religious traditions have their origins in other "Central Asian" territories located in Tajikistan, Tibet, and Xinjiang and with important connections in parts of present Iran. It is not unusual for people from Gilgit-Baltistan to be considered "foreigners" by mainland Pakistanis.

34 Anna Grieser and Martin Sökefeld, "Intersections of Sectarian Dynamics and Spatial Mobility in Gilgit-Baltistan," in *Mobilizing Religion: Networks and Mobility*, eds. S. Conermann and E. Smolarz (Berlin: EB Verlag), 83–110.

35 The use of "Baltistan division" or "Gilgit division" refers to the administrative separation of Gilgit-Baltistan above the district level.

36 Mato Bouzas, "Mixed Legacies," 880.

they reflect “an ideological avoidance action.”³⁷ These authors employed the figuration of “the established and the outsiders” to study differences among working-class residents of a city district in England’s Midlands and noted that:

the socio-dynamics of the relationship of groups bonded to each other as established and outsiders are determined by the manner of their bonding, not by any characteristics possessed by the groups concerned independently of it.³⁸

This approach can also be illustrative to explain the dynamics of sectarian conflict in Gilgit-Baltistan, as has been pointed out by other scholars working in the region.³⁹

Managing a state that emerged out of and survives by handling partition and dissent, the Pakistani bureaucratic-military leadership is not inclined to address issues of difference.⁴⁰ Furthermore, the case of Gilgit-Baltistan echoes that of Balochistan with regard to its cultural and social plurality, but unlike the latter, Gilgit-Baltistan lacks a strong territorial identity, and memories of coming from or being related to other places are highlighted by the various groups living there, such as the Shina, Wakhi, and Balti speakers. In other words, the local sense of identity is expressed by multiple references to belonging, which challenge the territorialised borders of the postcolonial nation state.

Hence, the exceptional legal status does not imply a situation of unchanging status quo, but is the condition for interventions which constitute “peripheralization” processes.⁴¹ Transformations in recent years show that

37 Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson, *The Collected Works of Norbert Elias. Vol 4. The Established and the Outsiders*, ed. Cas Wouters (Dublin: University College Press, 2008): 16.

38 Ibid.

39 See the interesting ethnographic work of Mathias Weinreich, *Pashtun Migrants in the Northern Areas of Pakistan* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011).

40 This can also be seen in the policies designed by this dominant bureaucracy in many fields such as decentralization, recognition of regional diversity, education, etc. This has an impact on many levels of the society, where differences are underplayed for the sake of national unity and never addressed for what they represent. A case in point is the study by Nelson on religious responses by parents sending their children for religious education to the question of religious and sectarian differences. See Matthew J. Nelson, “Dealing with Difference: Religious Education and the Challenge of Democracy in Pakistan,” *Modern Asian Studies* 43, no. 3 (2009): 615–616.

41 On the concept of peripheralization see: Andrea Fisher-Tahir & Matthias Naumann, eds, *Peripheralization: The Making of Spatial Dependencies and Social Injustice* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2013), 10–22.

Pakistan no longer keeps a status quo in Gilgit-Baltistan, if it ever did. Strong state interventions in infrastructure development—such as the widening of the Karakoram Highway, carried out by a Chinese state-owned company, and the much awaited and controversial Diamer-Basha Dam (situated on the shared border between Gilgit-Baltistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, KPK)—will not improve the residents' life conditions but are connected with the state's larger economic interests and needs. This is also the case for the ambitious China-Pakistan Economic Corridor,⁴² which involves a series of projects suiting China's geopolitical interests (gaining access to the Gulf and connecting Xinjiang economically with the south-west), and also benefitting Pakistan economically. The same can be said of the Diamer-Basha Dam. On August 2009, I held meetings in Skardu with members of the Marafie Foundation, who were focusing on vocational training, and two local politicians to discuss their views on the possible impact of the Diamer-Basha Dam for Gilgit-Baltistan. Their answers showed concern for the large-scale relocation of people that such a project implied: both the resettlement of those from the affected areas and the arrival at the construction site of a significant labour force from other parts of Pakistan. The dam's location at the border between Gilgit-Baltistan and KPK also led to concerns among local politicians about Gilgit-Baltistan's share in the royalties earned from the dam's power generation in the future. In fact, ordinary people in the region are aware that water is a precious resource, and that the Pakistani state is interested in it. Views on the aforementioned infrastructural interventions are related to the potential economic benefits they can bring for the region. Interviewees explained this by giving the example of the initial construction of the Karakoram Highway and its offshoot connecting Gilgit with Skardu in the eighties,⁴³ which is referred to by some in Baltistan as "the Revolution." However, in other conversations, local men with more critical views said (under conditions of strict anonymity) that large infrastructure projects were not meant to benefit the locals, but to bring the territory under Pakistan's control through geostrategic and economic dependence.

Similarly, transformations are going on at the symbolic level. Although Gilgit-Baltistan is constitutionally not part of the state, after 2010 the government of Pakistan started to advertise Gilgit-Baltistan as the

42 Zofeen T. Ibrahim, "The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor Winds through Gilgit-Baltistan," *The Third Pole*. 28. January 2016. [Accessed on 18. April 2016]. <https://www.thethirdpole.net/2016/01/28/the-china-pakistan-economic-corridor-winds-through-gilgit-baltistan/>.

43 Interview, Skardu, 26. August 2009.

“Jewel of Pakistan” for tourism and for economic purposes.⁴⁴ This move has to be seen in the context of the widespread internal violence in Pakistan after 2001 that contrasted with the fact that Gilgit-Baltistan remained one of the most stable regions—perhaps the only one that could project a positive image of the country abroad. With the exception of occasional episodes of sectarian violence in Gilgit, the entire territory remains peaceful and offers numerous leisure opportunities to visitors. This includes the almost untouched natural beauty of the region, the adventure of climbing some of the highest peaks in the world, and the possibility of learning about the region’s human and cultural diversity along the Karakoram Range. There is no room in the official portrayal of Gilgit-Baltistan for the disputed character of the territory and the acknowledgment of its location in one of the world’s most militarised areas.

Bordering processes in Gilgit-Baltistan illustrate how the “exceptional character” of the territory is the result of the Pakistani (post-colonial) state’s inability to incorporate it into the nation building process. This is due to Pakistan’s claim on the Indian-administered Kashmir, its inability to deal with its social diversity and, more recently, its pressing economic needs. Gilgit-Baltistan’s “liminal” condition is not, however, static in time, but constantly shifting. This creates dislocation and confusion, in that it is at times treated as a Pakistani province, at times not, and that its residents only become Pakistanis once out of Gilgit-Baltistan. Ongoing government interventions on both the material and symbolic levels underline Gilgit-Baltistan’s geostrategic importance and its transregional character. The ensuing peripheralisation processes result in the gradual disappearance of Gilgit-Baltistan as a space characterised by social diversity. It is becoming something else, a space of connectedness whose residents paradoxically do not have the power to decide to whom they want to be related.

Baltistan’s representation as a transregional space

The division of Baltistan lies in the southern part of Gilgit-Baltistan, bordering the LoC with Kargil (administered by India). It is connected to mainland Pakistan by air (subject to weather conditions) and by roads, of which the main route links it to the Karakoram Highway. A secondary route through the Kaghan Valley operates in summer only. Baltistan is a peripheral space, not merely in terms of location, but also in the manner in which it has been developed economically and administratively since its inception

44 See <http://www.visitgilgitbaltistan.gov.pk> and http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2jmsxv_gilgit-baltistan-the-jewel-of-pakistan_travel. [Accessed on 18. April 2016.]

in relation to the Pakistani state and its claims to Kashmir.⁴⁵

There is a marked difference between the Gilgit division in the north and the Baltistan division. Baltistan's proximity to the LoC has affected developments there because of security and strategic concerns and the need to secure the loyalty of the local population. The border character of Baltistan has been utterly neglected by the Pakistani state since 1947, despite the fact that local people have not objected to the LoC becoming a border, as Kashmiris and Paharis did in AJK. No major population displacement has occurred in the border areas of Baltistan and Ladakh since 1947–1949.⁴⁶ Instead, it has been the LoC itself that has shifted positions in the aftermath of the India–Pakistan wars, at least until 1971. As a result of these territorial changes, some border villages passed from the control of one country to the other. In general, Pakistan lost territory during the war, as a consequence of which some border villages of a few hundred inhabitants (sometimes fewer) became part of India.

Despite not being challenged, this border tract has produced its own victims. These are mostly divided families who were living in different places when the conflict erupted and who cannot reunite.⁴⁷ For example, the people from villages of Karmang sub-district (now in Baltistan) were part of the Kargil *tehsil* (or sub-district, now in India), and many lived in the town of Kargil. After the ceasefire line was established, Karmang went to the Pakistani side, while Kargil remained on the Indian side, and inhabitants could no longer return to their former villages. This border tract has been increasingly sealed off by military force, but the people of Kargil still have memories from two decades ago of locals from villages on the Pakistani side crossing at night to engage in petty smuggling activities with their counterparts in Kargil.⁴⁸

45 Antía Mato Bouzas, "Securitization and Development as Modes of Peripheralization in North-Eastern Pakistan," in *Peripheralization: The Making of Spatial Dependencies and Social Injustice*, ed. Andrea Fisher-Tahir and Matthias Naumann (Berlin: Springer, 2013), 77–98.

46 Here, I refer mainly to Skardu and Khaplu towns, and the border villages located in the district of Karmang on the Pakistani side, as well as the Kargil District in Ladakh, and the Muslim villages of the Nubra Valley on the Indian side. The Nubra villages captured by India during the 1971 war were identified as part of the Chorbat La area by locals. As compared with the border context between AJK and the Kashmir Valley, where tens of thousands have crossed the LoC over decades, mostly from the Kashmir Valley to AJK as displaced populations, movement across the Baltistan–Ladakh border has been negligible.

47 Interviews with divided families were conducted in Kargil town in May 2011 and July 2012.

48 This was explained to the author in some detail in June 2011, during a meeting with some elderly men in Kargil.

As this is a border area, many in Baltistan have ties across the LoC, especially divided families. Due to the sensitive political situation, they are generally cautious in discussing these ties. Members of such divided families told me that if they were to articulate their views openly, they could be considered as “anti-national” (the English term as used here means anti-Pakistani) and that this could harm relatives living across the border. Such fears are also seen in the presence of and the coexistence with the military. The resulting socio-economic relations have impacted people’s consciousness. While expressing dissent on Pakistan’s Kashmir policy is not rare in Gilgit, in Baltistan this tends to be more of an exception because of these relations with the military.

Images of Baltis being described as “lambs” (implying that they will never revolt), as passive people who can only work as “peasants” and “shopkeepers,” are not uncommon. The word “lamb” was used by an educated Balti man working in the non-profit sector in Islamabad, whom I interviewed,⁴⁹ but similar views have been expressed in meetings with middle-aged men in Gilgit and also in Baltistan (by those critical of the current situation) to explain the Baltis’ attitude toward the current state of affairs. Besides, there is an implicit assumption that Baltis are happy because of the benefits they receive. As this Balti interviewee told me:

Baltis will not do anything to open the LoC. The people in Khaplu [Baltistan’s largest village in the eastern part] are very happy with the current situation because they receive rations, subsidised products, and kerosene from the army, and many also work for them. Why they should stop this?⁵⁰

Although such opinions are difficult to verify, they undoubtedly hint at a situation which is perceived in places such as Skardu: that of a people that has long been dependent on the local war economy. The military did not confine itself to securing the disputed borders, but used the territory of Baltistan as a launching pad for military operations, both in the Siachen (on the eastern side) and the Kargil border areas, as was evidenced in the conflict in 1999. Ongoing conflicts reconfirmed the disputed status of the entire region. In this context, the military cultivated a specific relationship with the local inhabitants of border villages, partly out of necessity—they are familiar with the terrain, are more acclimatised, and constitute a labour force—and partly to gain their support. However, at least

49 Interview, Islamabad, 4. May 2012.

50 Ibid.

since 2010, there were several demonstrations by divided families demanding the opening of the LoC. This shows that despite the militarised context, people highlight their plight.

Conflict has served to keep the dispute alive, but has perpetuated the separation of Baltistan from the territories across the LoC and particularly affected the divided families. Besides the fact that no cross-LoC initiatives have been established at the time of writing in 2017—while bus services and meeting points have operated between the Kashmir Valley and AJK since 2005—there is also the cost of travelling long distances from Baltistan to Ladakh via the Wagah-Attari border. The Indian government, furthermore, has placed restrictions on Baltis visiting ancestral homes across the LoC. Since they are fewer in number,⁵¹ compared to the larger number of divided families in the Kashmir Valley and AJK, and their demands attract less political attention, divided families in Baltistan have little clout. Their cause, in my opinion, is subsumed under strategic issues arising from the proximity of the disputed Siachen Glacier (another front of India-Pakistan rivalry) and lacks the importance that Kashmir (the Kashmir Valley and its displaced population in AJK) has for political gains.⁵²

Baltistan could be considered an almost landlocked territory, except for its communication links with the Gilgit division. Before 1947, its relations were oriented mostly toward Ladakh and Kashmir, and it only became administratively linked to Gilgit later, with the capital in the city of Gilgit. This has shaped a new spatiality (as a set of relations). In this relationship, the Gilgit administration has played a dominant role in regional affairs and, generally, groups there have been more vocal in their political demands towards Pakistan.⁵³ Although Gilgit and Baltistan are administratively and economically connected, cultural and social exchange between them remains low. Even the Karakoram Highway, which has had a definitive impact in connecting the area, has not produced a noticeable increase of exchange and interaction between the Baltistan and Gilgit divisions.

51 Mr. Asghar Ali Karbalai, a politician from Kargil working on the issue of divided families, maintains that there are around 3000 affected families on the Ladakh side of the border. Interview, Kargil, 20. June 2012.

52 Local officials and activists lobbying for opening the Skardu-Kargil road and for the establishment of border points for the separated families to meet have pointed out their limited capacity to influence the government. The strategic interests of the Pakistani army and their presence in the Siachen have been mentioned often in interviews and informal conversations as the explanation for this present status quo.

53 See Aziz Ali Dad, "Boundaries and Identities: The Case of Gilgit-Baltistan," *Crossroads Asia Working Papers* 34, June 2016.

Various interventions, however, are at work to transform the relatively isolated character of Baltistan. Flight connections to Gilgit have recently been established, although without great success. The expected widening and improvement of the road between Skardu and Gilgit by a Chinese company will significantly reduce the 7–8 hour trip between the two towns, although it has been repeatedly delayed.⁵⁴ Indeed, some people living in Skardu, mainly businessmen and travel agents associated with the tourist industry, look with hope on these Chinese interventions. “China does not do things for free, but at least it is better than others, such as the United States or Pakistan. If they want to take things from us, I do not care. At least, we can do business with them.” These words came from a middle-aged hotel owner who had begun to receive Chinese tourists and Chinese skilled workers (such as engineers, contractors, and companies’ personnel in general) during the previous years (before July 2014). Their arrival was a new development for him, as well as for others working in the tourist and business sectors, an opportunity after years of decline in the local tourist industry. Many see the “new Chinese presence” in Baltistan as a sign that the economic situation will improve. Apart from the construction of roads, Chinese companies have shown an interest in the mining industry, which still relies predominantly on manual labour. At the time of my visit in July 2014, Chinese engineers were conducting surveys for opportunities in the mining sector. A risky activity, the search for gemstones is often carried out under precarious conditions in mountainous locations.⁵⁵ Although the marketing is now mostly routed through Pakistani middlemen, local dealers I interviewed mentioned that the Chinese market could provide more competition and better prices. The imaginary of China—as a projected future rather than a materialised reality—is perceived by various groups in Skardu as a sign that Baltistan is opening up, which will bring economic benefits and closer connections with the wider world. However, the overall consequences are yet unknown.

Along with the interests of opening the region as a connecting point between Pakistan and China, forms of self-appropriation emerge that emphasise other senses of belonging. These senses of belonging go back to the multiple historical influences that have crisscrossed the area. They reconfigure the transregional character of Baltistan toward the east and the south, with

54 Jamil Nagri, “Gilgit-Skardu Road Faces Delay Despite PM’s Orders,” *Dawn*, 14. September 2015. [Accessed on 28. April 2016]. <http://www.dawn.com/news/1206857>.

55 Simón Elías, “Las Gemas del Abismo,” *El País*, 2. December 2012. http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2012/11/30/actualidad/1354287740_191229.html [Accessed on 2. December 2012].



Fig. 2: Shop sign in Tibetan and Urdu script

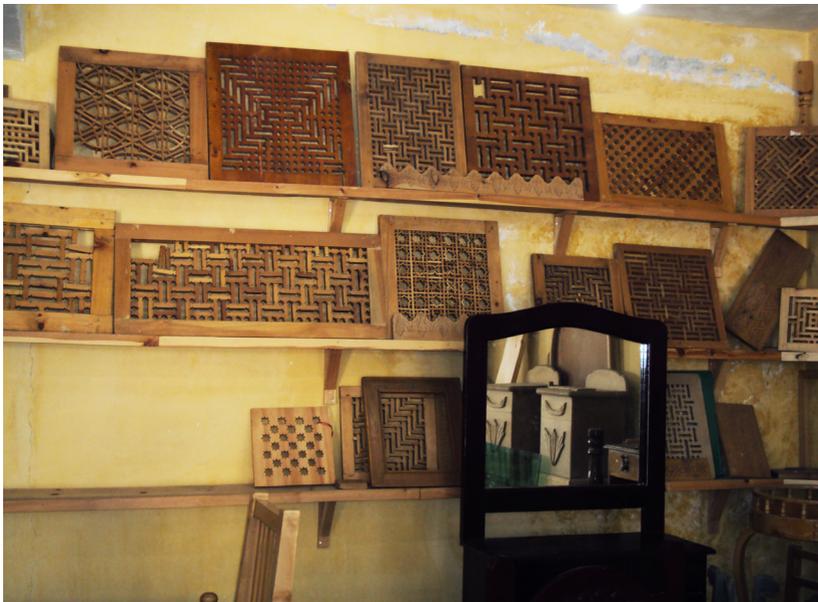


Fig. 3: Latticework at BEADAR

specific forms of identification. In short, the production of Baltistan into a peripheral space—whether of Kashmir or of Pakistan—is being challenged by a number of people in Baltistan. They mainly work in the cultural sphere as local intellectuals (historians, writers, and journalists), entrepreneurs, members of associations such as the Baltistan Cultural & Development Foundation (BCDF), and as members of their families, including divided families. Forms of self-identification are emerging that hint at a shared past across different borders (not only between Baltistan and Ladakh, but also between Baltistan and Tibet). This phenomenon may be due to strategic considerations, such as changing economic and political conditions in Pakistan, but it shows the possibility of local agency in territories that are under surveillance and highly militarised. Parallel to the gradual recasting of Gilgit-Baltistan within the Pakistani state as an area of resources and economic opportunities—because of its transborder character—an alternative representation of space emerges, namely its “Tibetanness” rather than “Kashmiriness.” This representation may be characterised as a response to the securitised (militarised) status of the territory due to the Kashmir dispute, but it is also a reaction to Baltistan’s marginalisation in the major economic processes mentioned above that cause the local space to disappear.

When I first conducted fieldwork in Skardu in late August and September 2009, I came across several cultural activities whose primary aim was the revival of the Tibetan cultural heritage. In interviews with local associations, such as the BCDF, I was informed about activities that included the preservation of Buddhist sites, such as the Buddha carved in a rock at Satpara (near Skardu), support for the use of Tibetan script in shop signs (fig. 2), and the promotion of Tibetan names for children.⁵⁶ BCDF has also supported BEADAR (Baltistan Enterprise Development and Arts Revival Programme), a project focused on training young people in traditional architectural forms, including the revival of ancient latticework (fig. 3)—itself a blend of Kashmiri and Tibetan influences in Islamic architecture. Moreover, I learned from local historians and teachers of an interest in introducing the Balti language, written in both Tibetan and Perso-Arabic scripts, in primary schools. When I repeatedly inquired about these activities in informal conversations, the answer was invariably: “You know, we were Buddhist in the past.” Although some cultural activists involved in the project were eager to dissociate the cultural initiative from any political manifestation, I learned years later that the interest

56 Interview at the Baltistan Cultural Foundation (later renamed the Baltistan Cultural & Development Foundation), Skardu, August 26, 2009.

in the past—not only the Buddhist but also the pre-Buddhist past, such as the Bon belief system (fig. 4)⁵⁷—was very much connected with the present search for identity and the limits on more overt political manifestations.

Apart from the marketing of Baltistan as “Little Tibet” by NGOs such as the Agha Khan Rural Support Programme (the main NGO working in Baltistan), other initiatives included the use of Tibetan script in shop signs, the publication of several schoolbooks in the Balti language, in both Arab-Persian and Tibetan script, to be used in the primary schools (see fig. 5). The claim to the Buddhist past is connected with a revival of the Balti “local” language with its LoC-crossing character. This revival is realised through still rare cultural exchanges between local male intellectuals, who have travelled to the Indian side or met Ladakhi scholars in international fora, sometimes auspicated by Tibetan cultural associations and, as some of these authors have told me, through the exchange of published material.

The sociologist Kenneth Iain MacDonald addressed the phenomenon of this “Tibetan” revival earlier, pointing to the strategic cultural production in border areas.⁵⁸ He related this development to the wider context of the negative international image of Pakistan—and the need for local people to separate themselves from the conflict-ridden situation in other parts of the country—but also to possible expectations across the border, where people with similar cultural affinities reside.⁵⁹ This may be true for strategic or economic issues. The revival of a Tibetan heritage also denotes, however, a form of local agency by social groups to find firm ground in the present uncertainty, under conditions where it is not possible to make open political claims and where participation in such activities is only permitted within the parameters of the controlled political scenario.⁶⁰ Those living in Baltistan are caught “in-between” two spaces—Kashmir and Pakistan—neither of which fully represents them and both of which deprive them of better living conditions. By crossing the LoC through a culturally specific representational space, these social groups challenge their most recent conflictive borders and return to a more distant, albeit

57 Bon was the religion of pre-Buddhist Tibet. I met a local intellectual who showed me parts of a book he was writing, and he explained the importance of this heritage in today’s Baltistan. However, interest in the Bon religion is also connected with economic issues. I have been told of private excavations to find archaeological artefacts to be sold to middlemen, normally Pashtun traders who regularly visit the area. Most of these artefacts are from the pre-Buddhist period. This plundering of the local heritage is a lucrative business.

58 MacDonald, “Memories of Tibet,” 213.

59 *Ibid.*, 192.

60 Mato Bouzas, “Mixed Legacies,” 867–886.

not ideal, past, with which they can be more reconciled. Tracing their sense of belonging to a Tibetan milieu, they claim a larger cultural realm where they might feel more secure and react to historical processes of bordering that have made Baltistan a distant and marginal territory, either within the state of Jammu and Kashmir or within Pakistan.

Conclusions

Territorialisation processes by the Pakistani state in Gilgit-Baltistan have emphasised the undefined legal status of this region. This representation of space would seem to imply a minimum of interference in the territory. In practice, however, the authoritarian side of the state, vested in the military, has intervened significantly in border territories, mostly in Baltistan, and promoted an economy of dependence under the pretext of security. Moreover, in recent years, the construction and planning of major infrastructure projects in Gilgit-Baltistan have further highlighted the larger geo-strategic importance of the area. These interventions are focused on the creation and growth of connections with Pakistan and China. They promote new representations of space that are detached from the Kashmir conflict and highlight the transregional character of the area in the sense of its connectivity. As a reaction to the undefined character of the region, as well as the ongoing large-scale interventions, local claims are emerging that articulate a different sense of belonging. These claims try to tackle the question of the displacement and disruption of familial and group ties, but also to disentangle the spatial narratives about the dispute and address the plurality of places and spaces contained within “Kashmir.” From this perspective, it is also possible to observe how border inhabitants overcome these boundary constructs, either by widening their territorial and cultural scope or by recreating ties through material exchanges among intellectuals and divided families.

The emergence of cultural transregional sub-identities in the Gilgit-Baltistan borderland, such as in Baltistan, with its identification with a “Balti culture” linked to Tibet, is both a product of and a reaction to the establishment of the LoC and the attendant border regime. It is also the result of Pakistan’s refusal to recognise border groups in the constitutional structure of the state and the exercise of democratic politics. In this context, border groups redraw their boundaries under forms of identification that tend to pass as non-controversial for the state and, in that process, redefine the community. These transregional dynamics constitute forms of re-appropriation of a space that is otherwise threatened with losing its unique character.