Push and Shove: Spatial History and the Construction of a Portering Economy in Northern Pakistan

KENNETH IAIN MACDONALD

University of Toronto

Until recent years the weak have always been enslaved by the strong: indeed, it is only since the Great War that the strong man has bound his weak and ignorant brother upon his shoulder and attempted to carry him along with all his other burdens.¹

—B. Lubbock

We have to push the notion of hegemony into the lived space of realities in social relationships, in the give and take of social life as in the sweaty warm space between the arse of him who rides and the back of him who carries.²

—M. Taussig

The contemporary occupation of portering in mountain regions has largely been structured through transcultural contact, contact between two groups historically symbolized by the oppressive dialectic of power relations: master/servant, “sahib”/“coolie,” trekker/porter, “him who rides”/“him who carries.” The relative position of these groups within the power relations that characterize adventure tourism has altered through time. The oppression exercised by the superordinate group has likely lessened, while the status enjoyed by the subordinate group has likely increased.³ Nonetheless, these two groups still operate within radically asymmetrical relations of power. Invariably, “the porter” occupies the lower position; “the employer,” the upper. In this essay, I investigate

I would like to thank the editors and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments; Elizabeth Seres of the Bladen Library, University of Toronto for her diligence in tracking down historical materials; David Butz and Kathryn Besio for their always illuminating advice; Kanat Dixit and the organizers and participants of the Kathmandu meeting “Hard Livelihoods: Conference on the Himalayan Porter” at which this essay was presented in a nascent form; and, as always, friends and colleagues in the Karakoram for their insight, wisdom and hospitality. Research described in this essay was supported in part by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) and the American Institute for Pakistan Studies (AIPS).

¹ B. Lubbock, Coolie Ships and Oil Sailors (Glasgow 1923), 1.
² M. Taussig, Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man (Chicago 1987), 228.
³ Here I refer to portering, the carrying of person or baggage for others, specifically as it relates to the adventure travel industry (trekking, mountaineering, and so forth). There are, of course, circumstances in which the lot of the porter has not increased significantly over the past two centuries. A case that springs immediately to mind is the use of forced labour in the construction of a physical infrastructure in the interior of Burma.


287
the historical constitution and evolution of these relations in a region of the Karakoram mountain range of what is now northern Pakistan. 

Portering has a long history in the Baltistan region of northern Pakistan. However, over time the spatial organization of portering and its role in the regional economy have undergone significant changes. Trade routes through Baltistan have historically connected northern India with central Asia, and transport labour would, of necessity, have been an important element in that trade. Local villagers also supplied transport labour to feudal rulers as an apparently legitimate form of public work, but with the overthrow of the feudal rulers of Baltistan in the mid-nineteenth century by the Dogra rajputs, this form of public work was corrupted into corvée or begar. This conversion coincided with the start of regular visits to the region by European soldiers and “adventurers,” many of whom sought to “explore” these “remote” territories. As in most areas of the Himalaya, this exploration could only proceed with the assistance of porters; and the travellers’ absolute dependence on porters generated an aggravation that is exposed through a careful reading of their narratives.

Despite the gradual emergence of a more autonomous portering economy through the twentieth century, the contemporary portering economy retains elements of its origins in corvée and, as such, is subject to resistance from those who participate in it. Given evidence that the men involved in portering have consistently resisted the inequities involved in this form of servile labour, the construction of this economy cannot be interpreted simply as a function of colonial domination. Rather, it has emerged, within asymmetrical power relations, through a process of struggle and negotiation.

This article examines the historical constitution of that negotiation between Balti porters and external agents. In it I examine three components: the colonial conditions of production of the portering economy in Baltistan; the modes through which a coercive economy was maintained through external imposition and internal accommodation; and the forms of indigenous resistance against what are perceived to be exploitive labour practices and changes in the

4 Many of the insights upon which this essay are based stem from time spent in villages of the upper Braldu valley of Baltistan. These villages, particularly that of Askole, are strategically situated in relation to the adventure tourism industry. Askole, for example, is the last permanently inhabited village on the trail to K2 (8,611 meters). Despite a recent expansion in tourism, many Baltis have long been familiar with the hardships of carrying the baggage of others along mountain trails.

5 W. Finch, 1611, in S. Purchas, Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas His Pilgrimes: Containing a history of the world in sea voyages and lande travells by Englishmen and others (New York 1965); R. Shaw, Visit to High Tartary, Yarkand and Kashgar (formerly Chinese Tartary), and Return Journey over the Karakoram Pass (London, 1871); G. T. Vigne, Travels in Kashmir, Ladak, Iskando, the countries adjoining the mountain-course of the Indus, and the Himalaya, north of the Panjab (London 1844).

6 Taussig, Shamanism.

7 The term external agents includes any group that employs men for the purpose of carrying goods or baggage. While some local elites continue to employ porters to carry goods to outpost villages, the contemporary cost of employing porters prohibits their use by most. External agents, therefore, both in a historical and contemporary sense, refers primarily to Euro-Americans engaged in travel.
nature of resistance through time. I argue that these forms of resistance must be understood in relation to a repressive history of labour exploitation and that such an understanding is necessary if villagers who currently work either directly as porters, or who indirectly suffer the effects of such labour, are to regain full control over the right to dispose of their labour as they see fit.

In presenting such a bipolar scenario of power relations, there is a danger of essentializing two monolithic groups, each with specific features that characterize their constituents: the coolies and colonizers in the past, porters and adventure tourists in the present. This differentiation is not meant to reduce the heterogeneity of the colonial subject in Baltistan, any more than I mean to depict a “monolithic colonizing power.” Ultimately, in a myriad of direct and indirect ways, both strategically and unintentionally, the ongoing negotiations implicated in the construction of a portering economy have involved a web of relationships among and between such disparate subjects as Balti coolies, village headmen, local rajas, Indian traders, European explorers, European and Indian surveyors, British subalterns, European travellers, tour operators, mountaineers, and trekkers. Yet each of these groups has been, and some continue to be, differentially situated along a continuum of power. In this context then, I believe that it is legitimate to speak of the Balti people and “outsiders” as loosely cohesive groups that have members who share common authoritative traditions and who are self-consciously aware of cultural differences.

PUSH: THE COLONIAL CONSTRUCTION OF A PORTER ECONOMY

The Feudal Period, the Dogra Conquest, and the Implementation of Begar

The history of Baltistan prior to direct contact with Europeans is one of occasionally antagonistic relations between serf farmers and feudal-like overlords who were in a constant power struggle with the rulers of small neighbouring states. These periodic disputes were consolidated under the rule of the Dogra

---

8 These conditions of production, maintenance, and resistance are interactive and copresent. Where I give textual priority to conditions of production and maintenance, it is merely for the convenience of explanation.
12 Cf., S. Fleishacker The Ethics of Culture (Tucson 1994).
13 A. M. Hashmatullah Khan, Mukhtasar Tarikh-i-Jammu (Lucknow 1939); A. H. Francke, A
rajputs who forcibly annexed Baltistan in 1841 and were given nominal control over the area in 1846 by the Treaty of Amritsar. Prior to the annexation by the Dogras, public works duty seems to have been governed by a long-standing normative tradition of *ress* or turn taking. *Ress* governed the allocation of a labour supply to the state and was considered to be a legitimate form of taxation by the local populace. Indeed, *ress* still governs the allocation of responsibility in many spheres of village life. No doubt villagers covertly, and occasionally overtly, opposed the extraction of any labour considered to be excessive, but by most accounts village-based resistance seems to have been minimal. Under the feudal state, villagers could at least see some of the benefits of their public contribution.

With the annexation of Baltistan by the Dogras, *ress*, at least as a mechanism of state–village relations, was replaced by the more familiar system of forced labour in India—*begar*. When the Dogras took over, the needs and demands for porterage increased as the new administration attempted to maintain control over an expanded territory. The appropriation of agricultural produce also increased in order to supply Dogra garrisons throughout Kashmir. To facilitate this exaction, the Dogra administration created and relied upon an extensive and, by many accounts, corrupt bureaucracy. This hierarchical structure in-

---

*History of Western Tibet, One of the Unknown Empires* (London 1907); R. M. Emerson, “Charismatic Kingship: A Study of State Formation and Authority in Baltistan,” in A. S. Ahmad, ed., *Pakistan: the Social Science Perspective* (Karachi 1990), 100–45. It is a mistake to refer to the period before European contact as pre-colonial in Baltistan. Though Balti history is poorly documented, the region has been colonized by a series of invaders for at least 1,900 years. In this sense, then, Dogra occupation and the appearance of British explorers and adventurers represents merely another in a long chain of invaders.

---

14 Emerson, “Charismatic Kingship.”
16 In no way is this meant to suggest that tension did not exist between villagers and the state. Oral tradition in the Braldu villages, for example, suggests that any accumulated surplus was exacted by the state and records few tales of admiration for local rulers. There is no documentation that I know of which describes labour and taxation obligations imposed by feudal rulers in Baltistan. Indirect information collected in one Braldu village, however, suggests the existence of a complex system on feudal estates which included a land tax, irrigation tax, pasturage tax, and, for this outpost village at least, an obligation to collect customs duties and provide porterage. Although requirements likely varied from valley to valley, similar obligations existed in other regions of the Himalaya. Cf., M. C. Regmi, “Fiscal and Labor Obligations of Inhabitants of Panchsawakkola in Nuwakot,” *Regmi Research Series*, 4 (1975), 78; D. H. Holmberg, *Order in Paradox: Myth, Ritual and Exchange among Nepal’s Tamang* (Ithaca 1989); N. Gris, “The Use of Obligatory Labour for Porterage in Pre-Independence Ladakh,” in P. K. Varne, ed., *Tibetan Studies: Proceedings of the 6th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies* (Oslo, 1994).
17 In a period text Balfour defines *begar* as “forced labour, for the repair of roads, tanks, forts, barracks, and for carrying baggage. Begari, a person so compelled to labour. The labourers are usually pariahs and tanners” (E. Balfour, ed., *Cyclopedia of India and of Eastern and Southern Asia, Commercial, Industrial and Scientific: Products of the Mineral, Vegetable and Animal Kingdoms, Useful Arts and Manufactures* (Madras 1871) 377).
cluded the position of *Mokuddum* [sic], “whose duty is to report any irregular-
ities or thefts, to collect coolies and carriage for Government *or others*, and to
keep an account of the crops of his village in conjunction with another official
called the *Patwaree* [sic].”

The inclusion of “others” in this statement presumably alludes to the use of forced labour by private interests, including traders and travellers. This accords with statements found in most nineteenth-
century accounts of travel in Kashmir. The toll taken by such obligatory
porterage appears to have been harsh. Work on the Gilgit road was widely
known throughout Kashmir as the “Journey of Death,” and a “number of them
*begaris* died while transporting supplies to the Gilgit garrison.”

Demographic figures are scant for nineteenth-century Baltistan, so just how many
men perished under begar is unknown, although the 1901 census of India
records marked female-biased sex ratios for at least some Balti villages. Any
explanation of these figures is tentative but might well include the temporary
absence of men from villages when they were engaged in begar or the perma-
nent absence of men who died during begar service.

It was during the Dogra period that Balti villagers became widely recognized
and labelled throughout the state of Kashmir and much of north-west India as coolies. No studies, to my knowledge, have examined the state’s appropriation
of labour in Baltistan, but indirect references in colonial literature point to the
fact that transport corps throughout much of Kashmir were largely composed

---


20 In recounting the logistics of a trip from Srinagar to Leh, for example, Knight states “one of
the Maharajah’s army also accompanied us, a rough-and-ready-looking sepoy irregular whose duty
it was to ferret out supplies and coolies &c. during our march, and at the same time perhaps, to keep
a watch over our movements and disparate designs” (W. H. Knight, *Diary of a Pedestrian in Cash-
mere and Thibet* (London 1863), 127).

21 Chohan, *Historical Study*.

22 Thorpe, *Cashmere Misgovernment*, 74. Here is a vignette from the Baltistan segment of the
Gilgit road:

On the 27th we ascended the pass of Alumpi La, where we came upon the skeletons of several men
which lay bleeding on the rocks, the remains of some unfortunate coolies who had been overtak-
en by snow-storms and had been frozen to death. Half way up the ascent . . . three more skeletons
lay . . ., their loads on the ground beside them, one being still fastened to its bearer. Another steep
bit . . . brought us to the pass, where more bones and rags, and broken kiltahs told the dismal tale
of many a man’s last hours of suffering, in his unsuccessful fight with the elements. Fifty men had
perished here—coolies proceeding from Kapaloo [sic] to Gilgit with supplies [for the Dogra gar-
rison] (H. H. Godwin-Austen, “The Glaciers of the Mustagh Range,” *Journal of the Royal Geo-
graphical Society*, 34 (1864), 55).

23 The 1981 Census of Pakistan, however, records extreme male-biased sex ratios for these same
Mountain Community*; K. MacDonald, “Population Change in the Upper Braldu Valley, Baltistan,

24 Alternately, this record could simply, but significantly, chronicle a deliberate strategy of
under-reporting in an effort to relieve men from begar service. If the men did not officially exist,
there may have been less of an effort to extract labour from that village.

25 But see N. Grist, “The Use of Obligatory Labour.”
of Balti men. In much nineteenth-century European travel literature on Kashmir, the terms Balti and coolie are synonymous.

The British Conquest and the Accommodation of Begar

It is clear that a system of obligatory labour existed in Baltistan prior to direct British involvement in the region. Indeed, Balti villagers seem to have been of interest primarily for their labour to the wider colonial (and regional) society. Arriving in Kashmir to find an established system of labour procurement, British and other European travellers proceeded to make good use of it. After all, Europeans were not strangers to “the art of compelling people to work without pay.” The practice of forced labour, often called “political labour,” was widespread throughout the British empire, and porterage figured significantly in the politics of this notion.

The demand for coolies in Kashmir following British contact was dictated directly by imperial interests. At a minimum, the British had three specific reasons for maintaining the existing system of begar or instituting some modified form of compulsory labour in Kashmir. First, pressures to secure the frontier of British India against possible Russian invasion led to frequent conflicts with local rulers in Kohistan, Gilgit, Chitral, and Hunza and required coolie labour to transport supplies and munitions to the outposts of Kashmir and to travel with the troops during regular campaigns. Second, state and Indian government officials travelling through the mountains required a trained transport corps to carry their baggage and supplies. In order to satisfy this irregular demand, men were taken from their villages and stationed at regular intervals on district roads for extended periods. Third, imperial institutions such as the Survey of India and, indirectly, the Royal Geographical Society were actively involved in creating an official geography of the Karakoram range and demanded a regular supply of transport labour. As the volume of travellers to Kashmir increased through the late 1800s, a dependable system of travel was

---

26 Balti villagers were not only to be found serving the state but also working in the fields of nearby Gilgit district and further afield in India. It is unclear whether these Baltis were voluntary migrant workers or the victims of bonded labour schemes or a more direct form of slavery. Certainly, oral tradition in Askole records tales of village men being captured and forced to work in the fields of Gilgit. It also, however, records a history of voluntary migrant labour to the district of Yarkand.


29 Or at least the British used the specter of Russian invasion to extend their sphere of interest in the frontier districts, incurring minimal cost to the government by manipulating the Maharajah of Kashmir and his Dogra troops.

30 Chohan, Historical Study.

31 S. G. Burrard and H. H. Hayden, A Sketch of the Geography and Geology of the Himalayan Mountains of Tibet (Calcutta 1907); K. I. MacDonald, “‘The Map Might have Been Better’: Survey, Representation and Agency in the Karakoram Himalaya” (Manuscript).
developed to provide on a regular basis at fixed government rates labour, supplies, and accommodations when travellers needed them. In late nineteenth-century Kashmir, then, we find a British-sanctioned system of forced labour that denied local villagers control of their land and their body. Unlike the equally oppressive plantation labour schemes, coolies in Kashmir were not indentured, nor did they need to sign a contract to be taken legally from their homes and made to work for the state.

As in other spheres of the empire, however, this perceived injustice did not go unopposed by British citizens. Throughout the nineteenth century and as late as 1920, appeals were made to the British Indian government to abolish or at least reform begar in Kashmir. There were obviously a variety of interests behind these contestations, which almost universally seem to have achieved little change. In part, they focused on either ensuring that the “treatment” of coolies was in keeping with “the regulations” or with establishing regulations to determine “acceptable” standards of treatment. The immediate concern, in most cases, was not with abolishing coolies as a class, racial or ethnic category but with regulating the treatment of what was accepted as an essentialized and homogenous group which warranted regulation. In an indirect way, then, these protestations helped to bolster the colonial ideology that created and maintained repressive labour systems.

This was certainly true in the case of Kashmir. Apparently disgruntled with the sale of Kashmir to the Dogra regime, complaints of oppression and calls for British intervention began to be expressed by British abolitionists in the mid-nineteenth century. These petitions, however, appear to have arisen as much from perceived constraints on the activities of British visitors as they did from a humanitarian concern with the condition of Kashmir citizens. No doubt some of these emancipatory statements were sincere, but they were also directly rooted in the interests of imperial hegemony. In his pamphlet, *The Wrongs of Cashmere*, for example, Brinckman is as concerned with the issue of the con-

---


33 Cf., Prakash, *Bonded Histories*.

straints on the movement of British subjects in Kashmir as he is with more ba-

The Rajah will not allow British gentlemen to remain in his dominions during six months of the year . . . [the Rajah renders] things unpleasant in numerous ways, so as to make the country unpopular with us . . . the Rajah increases the price of supplies to visitors . . . the Rajah makes us buy our provisions from himself, at a fixed rate, which is ex-
horbitant [sic] . . . it is very seldom, if an English visitor is annoyed or insulted in Cash-
mere, that he can obtain any redress or satisfaction whatever . . . every possible diffi-
culty is thrown in the way of procuring supplies at certain places . . . the Rajah will not improve his roads, thereby hindering traffic and inconveniencing us.35

The eventual intervention of the British curtailed this “autonomy” of the Rajah in Kashmir but did little to address the substantive complaints of protestors. Be-
gar and obligatory porterage were continued as practical, if unofficial, state pol-
icy and the movement of European visitors in Kashmir was strictly controlled
and monitored right up to partition.36

Part of the ability to resist calls for reform, however, stemmed from a ca-
pacity to rely on a superficial cultural sensitivity enshrined in a policy of non-
interference. In India, the British discovered an existing set of authoritative
traditions and institutions which worked to their advantage and set about pre-
serving, through codification and legal authorization, “those indigenous cul-
tural, legal, and religious belief systems which [also] safeguarded the privileged
status of the Indian ruling class.”37 In this way, the colonialist discourse in In-
dia was produced in collusion with the Indian bourgeoisie. This Janusian poli-
cy of benign neglect and non-interference expressed itself in many ways, but
the effect was, at least until it became advantageous to the colonial interest, to
refuse to address internal demands to act against repressive practices such as
untouchability and begar.38 In Kashmir, then, begar was taken to be an internal
matter of state administration, and outside of the sphere of the British mandate.
For example, W. R. Lawrence, the officer in charge of State Land Settlement,
believed that “the time has not yet come in Kashmir when begaar [sic] can be
abolished and when a permanent establishment for transport purposes can be
entertained which will prove an efficient substitute for begaar [sic].”39 Even
while expressing this sentiment, however, Lawrence was actively involved in

35 Brinckman, Wrongs of Cashmere, 15–18.
36 R. C. Arora, In the Land of Kashmir; Ladakh and Gilgit: With their History, Places of Inter-
est, Routes, Walks and Exhaustive Information for the Guidance of Visitors to Kashmir, Ladakh,
Gilgit, Astor, Skardu etc. (Aligarh, 1940).
37 A. P. Mukherjee, “The Exclusions of Postcolonial Theory and Mulk Raj Anand’s ‘Untouch-
38 Notably Queen Victoria’s proclamation of a “policy of benign neglect,” aimed specifically at
non-interference in religious practice, was issued in 1858, immediately following what is various-
ly termed, depending on the subjectivity of the observer, the Mutiny, the Rebellion, or the War of
Independence, when an unsatiated elite was a potential threat to British sovereignty in India.
39 W. R. Lawrence to State Council, 18th Sept., 1892 (cited in Krishen Teng, “Introduction,”
xxxvi); Cf., W. R. Lawrence, Kashmir and Jammu: Imperial Gazetteer of India, Provincial Series
(Lahore 1901).
modifying begar. His primary objection was not against the constraint on the freedom to dictate one’s own terms of production; villagers still had little choice in the provision of labour to the state—this was still forced. Rather, the objection was to the lack of compensation. Uncompensated labour lacked the legitimacy of a remunerated exchange and the appearance of a contract or agreement. For Lawrence, the presence of money was all that was required to suppress the moral objections to begar and to legitimize it. At heart, then, begar, fell in with the wider imperial project of introducing the “native races” to the disciplining power of wage labour capitalism which would encourage villagers in the “habits of steady industry,” before awarding them complete freedom in the disposal of their own labour.40 Little of this actually came to pass during British tenure. A corrupt bureaucracy continued to siphon any prospective benefits of wage labour away from the villagers, and a two-tiered system of begar seems to have emerged. One tier of unpaid workers continued to serve the direct interests of the state. The other, nominally paid, was established to provide for the increasing number of European visitors to Kashmir. Though both had oppressive elements, it is the latter that concerns me here, since it establishes the foundation of labour relations for the contemporary modes of adventure travel in Baltistan.

With the introduction of standardized begar in Kashmir toward the end of the nineteenth century, a distinct system of administration was established to regulate the activities of European travel. Even though the conditions that this system placed on travel were just as, if not more restrictive than they had previously been, they began to be couched in terms of convenience for the traveller, and a bourgeois attitude which understood state surveillance as service seems to have taken hold among visitors.41 State officers, along with commercial fa-
A major function of this regulation of travel was the administrative division and organization of space. Not only was travel made to follow specific routes by prohibiting others, but for the purpose of European travel, space was ordered into marches or “stages.” Fixed stages marked on official route maps and guides were meant both to regulate and monitor the travel of Europeans. In order to accomplish this, both informal and codified rules made it difficult for travellers to operate outside of sanctioned routes. The 1884 version of the *Rules for the Guidance of Travellers Visiting Jummu [sic] and Kashmir*, for example, states that “unless travellers camp at the fixed stages and encamping grounds, there is no certainty that supplies will be available.”\(^4^3\) Just as “the rule book” governed the activities of Europeans, it also dictated the terms of engagement through which villagers were to support those activities officially.

In villages, the onus fell upon headmen to ensure that labour and supplies were available to any traveller who might need them. Support for travellers was provided by decree of the state government. *Parwannas*, or permits, were issued to them which assured that porter and animal transport would be provided on demand at rates set by the government.\(^4^4\) Most European travellers seem to have approved of this system.\(^4^5\) Indeed many saw it as advantageous not only for travellers but also for villagers. An early guide book, for example, notes that in so-called more civilised countries would greatly assist the helpless foreigner (Doughty, *Afoot*, xvii).

---


\(^4^4\) An examination of porter rates reveals the emerging capitalist nature of production relations in the travel industry of late-nineteenth-century Kashmir. These gradually assumed the vernacular of modern management whereby the term coolie became synonymous with “labour unit” or “production input” (cf., J. D. Kelly, “‘Coolie’ as a Labour Commodity: Race, Sex, and European Dignity in Colonial Fiji,” *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 19:3–4 (1993), 246–67; M. J. Murray, “‘White Gold’ or ‘White Blood’?: The Rubber Plantations of Colonial Indochina, 1910–40,” *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 19:3–4 (1992), 41–67). In 1884, for example, the standard rate for a coolie per stage was As. 4/-. A baggage pony, however, was charged out at a sanctioned rate of As 8/- per stage. This cost ratio persisted even as rates increased through time. Abolitionists used these figures to argue that in Kashmir, a horse was “worth twice as much as a man.” However, when interpreted in terms of the cost of production, the argument breaks down. The sanctioned load of a coolie was 25 seers, whereas a baggage pony could be loaded to 60 seers. Effectively, a baggage pony could, under the rules, carry over twice the load of a coolie. When both the coolie and the pony are considered as labour units, then, the economics of the day dictated that the pony should be charged out at twice the rate of the man. Humanist concerns have rarely found their way into the economics of production in Kashmir.

\(^4^5\) Jane Duncan, for example, found travel within Kashmir “thoroughly organized and at each village, it is the duty of the lumbardar, or headman, who is paid by the state, to supply at fixed rates any food and wood available and also transport in the shape of coolies or ponies and to show an of-
the traveller must remember that in British territory labour is free, and that, therefore, there may be some trouble in finding ponies or mules, though coolies are usually abundant. In the Maharajah’s territory labour is partly compulsory, that is to say, a fine is imposed unless ponies and coolies are forthcoming; there is on that account no difficulty in finding coolies or ponies; but the pay for the hire of coolies is double what each man usually earns working independently, so that they have little reason to complain.46

This codification of relations between travellers and porters in the form of rule books or standing orders is not insignificant. Marglin, for example, in a discussion of the evolution of capitalist relations of production, addresses how colonialists established their dominance over production through breaking, or at least attempting to break, the solidarity of villagers.47 In the restructuring of work, the key steps were those that developed technical and bureaucratic control—symbolized in the case of porter labour, for example, by the linearity of movement through space, state regulations and the informal “rules” of expedition travel, and the transmission of these rules from expedition to expedition intergenerationally—with the intention of creating and fostering the impression of a transcendent authority. For Kashmiri villagers and European travellers alike, this transcendent authority emerged in the form of a rule book. Not only did these rule books establish the duties and expectations of both villagers and travellers, but both could appeal to the text to justify their actions or sanction the actions of the other. Because these rule books entrenched the dominant position of the European and because the existence of codified rules permitted the individual traveller to escape any responsibility for his or her position in those relations, the rule book thus aided in naturalizing the subordinate position of the porter throughout Kashmir.

In sum, the conditions of production which underlie the contemporary portering economy in northern Pakistan stemmed from Dogra and European relations with Kashmir in the nineteenth century. The Dogra administration corrupted a legitimate form of public work into forced labour to satisfy the interests of the state, and the British modified a structure of forced labour in order to satisfy the interests and requirements of a new colonial power. The British established a regulated system of travel which framed the interaction between villagers and Europeans and shaped the emergence of transcultural relations in the region. This regulated system of travel also contributed directly to the process of transforming local communities. It prioritized the concerns of those employing porters over local village interests; it created a market mechanism through which portage was regulated, one which, not incidentally, assured the

availability of cheap labour; and it codified the political and legal status of villagers. To a large degree, the British were able to do this with minimal resistance because of their policy of “effecting colonial rule through an indigenous hegemonic class” and because of the classificatory schemes of European society at large, which operated to naturalize the distinction between the European colonizer and the native subordinate.\textsuperscript{48} It is these classificatory and discursive schemes that contributed to the construction of an essentialized coolie and that continue to inform transcultural relations today.

**PUSH: REPRODUCING RELATIONS OF PRODUCTION AND CONSTRUCTING THE COOLIE IDENTITY**

*Reproduction and Maintenance of the Porter Economy*

To understand how contemporary transcultural relations are structured, there is a need to examine the processes implicated in the formation and reproduction of the material conditions of interaction between distinct groups. To some extent, I have already alluded to the role of European discourses of empire in creating the conditions of interaction between villagers and European travellers. Manifest in these discourses were representations of self and Other that both informed and emerged from interaction between Europeans and Kashmir villagers. Indeed, nineteenth-century discursive formations in Kashmir played an important role in reproducing the material conditions of travel and instrumental relations of interaction in Kashmir.\textsuperscript{49} For many Europeans, the experience of travel and interaction with natives was, and continues to be, structured through discursive formations in the shape of travel and exploration narratives. A major feature of these texts are European discourses which serve mainly to perpetuate and legitimate the asymmetrical relations of power central to the existing political economy of portering.

Most travel narratives from nineteenth-century Kashmir are written very much in the prescriptive mode; that is, they explain the usual modes of procuring supplies and coolies, the routes to be followed, the sights to be seen. What


\textsuperscript{49} It is important to note here that both indigenous and European discursive formations are implicated in the structuring, or better, negotiation, of transcultural relations. Indigenous discursive formations receive, however, relatively less research, and I use the term in this essay to refer exclusively to European discursive formations as they relate to contact with villagers and the adventure travel experience in Kashmir (but see R. M. Keesing, “The ‘Young Dick’ attack: oral and documentary history on the colonial frontier,” *Ethnohistory*, 33:3 (1986), 268–92). By discursive formations, I mean, “frameworks that embrace particular combinations of narratives, concepts, ideologies and signifying practices, each relevant to a particular realm of social action” (T. Barnes and J. Duncan, eds., *Writing Worlds: Discourse, Texts and Metaphor in the Representation of Landscape* [London 1992], 8). Discursive formations, then, are central to, and reflective of, the naturalisation of particular world views.
emerges is a series of common descriptions of people, place, and mode of travel as they are transmitted through a body of travel literature. In any narrative, it is difficult to separate the rhetorical heritage of received ideas which people have derived from previous writings from their account of their own observations.\(^50\) It is this sharing of traveller’s lore, the repetition of information, that translates into an almost ritual repetition of the travel experience. Indeed, the very purpose of travel guides, as they evolved in the nineteenth century was to provide those who would travel with access to the collective wisdom of those who had travelled. One of the earliest guides to Kashmir, for example, contains recommendations that resonate through the travel narratives of Kashmir up to partition and beyond:

Each traveller, when he has selected his servants [is advised] to make one of them the *sirdar* or head man, and to allow him to have control over the others in all details; he will like to use the authority given him, and the others will readily obey him. The traveller will be relieved of trouble, and will only see, before he starts on the march, that the proper number of coolies and ponies are present. On arriving at the end of each march, arrangements should be made with the *ticcadar* [sic] or *lumberdar* of the village for the hire of coolies and ponies for the next march (Collett, *A Guide*, 24).

Collett’s list of recommendations go on. More important, they go on intergenerationally. Like authoritative traditions, they are transmitted, with minor modifications from one generation of traveller to the next. It is in the form of invented tradition and transmission that they take on a history, what we might call a genealogy of travel that links contemporary representations of people and place to those of the past. It is also important to understand that these representations do not originate with one specific individual or narrative but result from a conflation of discursive formations with which the narrator is engaged. These representations must be understood “largely within the contexts of their circulation and reception.”\(^51\) In the case of travellers to Kashmir, that context included European officers and civil servants who had been engaged in the generation of classificatory schemes throughout India.\(^52\)

While the Kashmiri or the Balti coolie had to be constructed from a contact experience, such contact was directly informed by the existing constructions of


\(^{51}\) N. Thomas, *Colonialism’s Culture: Anthropology, Travel and Government* (Cambridge 1994) 84.

\(^{52}\) This, of course, was one of the central purposes of the ubiquitous District Gazetteer, the typification of groups of individuals with particular characters and personalities “that can be recognized through behaviour and dispositions” (Thomas, *Colonialism’s Culture*, 83). This process, of course, allowed colonizers with no direct knowledge of a particular place or people to be able to speak of, say, “their” intelligence or belligerence and “functioned to naturalize the subordination of the colonial other it created” (D. Butz, “Revisiting Edward Said’s Orientalism,” *Brock Review*, 4:1–2 (1996) 54–80). This interpretation, of course, is central to Said’s construction of Orientalism as the systematic creation and representation throughout European culture of a subordinate and inferior Oriental other (E. Said, *Orientalism* [New York, 1978], and *Culture and Imperialism* [New York, 1993]).
the coolie elsewhere in India. Such contact, structured as it was through a particular mode of travel, as well as the representations that emerged from contact, were also subject to institutional sanction. In Kashmir, and throughout northern India, a variety of institutions not only exercised control over who entered the area but also sanctioned the representations that emerged from such travel. Such censures bore the implications of class, social status, and gender. Bishop, for example, noted that

women, non-Europeans, lower classes, amateurs, eccentrics and young people all, at some stage, had their journeys discounted. By selecting and encouraging one style of travel and reporting, whilst discouraging others, the British exerted the power of their fantasies over the “Himalayas” . . . creating a very specific type of place.

Robbins has provided an example of how such institutional sanctions effected control over the activities of mountaineers and explorers, two groups that played a large role in constructing European representations of people and place across the Himalaya and Karakoram. Mountaineering and exploration, like science, were regulated by a set of complex and largely tacit rules which governed the acceptability, recognition, and reward of achievements. These were granted in exchange for the contributions valued by the respective community. To be valued, however, these contributions had to abide by the rules, conventions, and authoritative traditions of the mountaineering and exploration community. These traditions and rules were maintained and reinforced by recognizing and rewarding those activities and persons that conformed most closely to them and sanctioning, censuring, or silencing those who did not. They were transmitted very effectively by the journals of such institutions as the Alpine Club and a variety of other periodicals and proceedings of royal and learned societies. In this way, the text of achievement played a hegemonical role by acting as an ideological chaperon on expeditions. These tacit rules, and the social control they exerted via the text, constrained the ability of the mountaineer and explorer to alter the institutional conditions which shaped their mode of operation.

56 This is how, for example, colonial literature filters out not only the voices of the colonized but also of some colonizers because, say, they are disreputable, women, working class, or simply “obstinate” in their willingness to breach the social norms of authoritative institutions (cf., Thomas, Colonialism's Culture). Consider the punitive response of a Royal Geographical Society reviewer to a publication of Fanny Bullock and William Hunter Workman: “If they fail to reap their natural reward in the cordial appreciation of their readers it will be because of the lamentable temper they show in regard both to the explorers who went before them and to the people of the country in which they were allowed to travel” (Royal Geographical Society, “Glaciers and Passes of the Karakoram,” Geographical Journal, 51:1 [1918], 42). For another example from the Karakoram, see MacDon-ald, “Of ‘Coolies’ and Sahibs.”
This control is important in understanding the (usually negative) role occupied by the coolie in mountaineering and travel narratives, since the discursive formations of travel—whether journal report, narrative account, or public leisure—acted directly to create, maintain, and reproduce certain conditions of production that placed limits on the role that the porter could play in the discourse. By dictating and prescribing the logistics of travel and expedition organization, the narratives and authoritative traditions of the institutions to which individual mountaineers and explorers belonged constructed the role that porters were to play and limited their ability to transcend that role. The place of labour in the production of the experiences of travel, mountaineering, and exploration has, however, not remained static through time. Important questions, however, are the degree to which this change is a function of internal agency expressed as resistance to exploitive labour practices and the degree to which it reflects changes in the ways in which adventure travel and mountaineering have been invested with meaning over time.57 I intend to offer a partial answer by addressing the former, but in order to contextualize such resistance, it is necessary to understand how the social category of the coolie was constructed and represented in the Karakoram.

The Making of ‘Coolie’ in Northern Pakistan

“Nagar porters are expensive and difficult.”58

“Locals hired from this area have a reputation for greed.”59

These apparently cautious warnings simultaneously rely on and contribute to a discursive formation which, over the past 150 years, has constructed the notion of the coolie in northern Pakistan. Through a genealogy of discursive repetition, individual men, usually categorized by their ethnic group—Hunzakut, Balti, Nagari—but occasionally by their valley or village, are homogenized and said to share characteristics or personalities which are recognizable through their behaviour and dispositions toward travellers and their role in the adventure travel industry.60 These ethnic distinctions, however, rarely made their way...
into the broader social discourse which drew real distinctions between coolie and sahib, between powerlessness and power. From the mid-1850s, transcultural relations in northern Pakistan have hinged on the use of Balti labour for portering. Indeed, the geographies of transcultural interaction in the Karakoram range relate directly to the instrumental relations of portering: who needed porters to get where and what indigenous villagers were considered suitable porters. Portering made possible the delineation of empire and allowed imperialists to travel to its margins. With few exceptions, labour, in the form of portering, has remained the critical element in the formation of transcultural relations in Baltistan. As the comments from contemporary guidebooks continue to attest, however, the reliance on local labour was aggravating to some: “Extremely galling was his [the traveller’s] dependence on the sillero and porters, who held their masters at their mercy. They were notorious for deserting and would always loitre, complaining of strange fevers and rheumatism of the neck.”

The significant part of Taussig’s observation is the generation of notoriety—that porters developed a notoriety for particular acts (complaints, theft, lies, cowardice on the one hand; helpfulness, bravery, cheer, and loyalty on the other). Notoriety implies not only the generation of knowledge but its extension. And for this to occur, there must be a system of procedures not only for the production of knowledge but for its regulation, circulation, and reproduction; and for notoriety to develop, this process has to be reciprocally linked with systems of power which not only produce but sustain it.

It is this process of the production of knowledge of the coolie and the system for sustaining and extending that knowledge that concerns us here, for it is this notoriety that is transmitted intergenerationally through travel accounts, both written and oral. And through this intergenerational transmission the traits

---


63 Taussig, Shamanism, 302, emphasis added.

64 Notably, equally legitimate synonyms for notoriety are disrepute and eminence. There is valuable comparative work to be done in examining the discursive configurations that bestow eminence on, say, Sherpas, and disrepute on Baltis.


66 That is, the tales of travellers who, in the comfort of a guest house or in a camp, offer an oral account of porters which mimics the advice of the more formalized written account, along with the increasing frequency of the visual account, including the proliferation of travel videos. The recent series of travel videos brought out by Lonely Planet, a publisher of popular travel guides, for example, are eerily reminiscent of the prescriptive travel writing of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.
that constitute a particular notoriety become essentialized and naturalized. They become recognized not as a truth derived from the generation of knowledge within a particular system of power but as the truth, becoming for at least some, the facts which one expects to encounter.\textsuperscript{67} It is this intergenerational transmission of expectation and advised behaviour that ties the colonial conditions of production of porterage to a contemporary setting.

The adjectives used to characterize the Balti porter in the travel, exploration, and mountaineering literature include garrulous, belligerent, greedy, unreliable, cowardly. Regardless of the individual experiences that generate this knowledge, the power system that sustains and extends it has produced a representation of Balti porters as unreliable. As each expedition encounters their own problems, they rely on descriptions of previous expeditions to dispel the notion that their problems are anything out of the ordinary and, thus, turn an individual experience into a common experience between generations of travellers. This experience is projected—transmitted—to subsequent expeditions who, based on the ritual repetition of expedition organization and travel style, become predisposed to expect problems with porters.\textsuperscript{68} In this way a reputation—notoriety—is developed. The notoriety of the “Balti porter as a problem” has spread far and wide within a group of people who travel or read about travel in mountain environs. Much of the colonial literature, reflecting the superior moral tones of the time, simply attributed this notoriety to racial characteristics of the Balti, representing them as cowardly, timid, stupid, lacking the capacity and knowledge required to survive in a “harsh mountain environment” and the economic motivation common to the European.\textsuperscript{69} Despite the existence of a dominant view, there are exceptions. For example, a recent traveller to the region who did not have a bad experience was “puzzled how the men from this area had earned such a reputation for recalcitrance, strikes and bloody mindedness.”\textsuperscript{70} As in many cases of domination, however, the reputation is taken as so concrete, and the blame is so complete that men are seen to have earned the reputation, even though it was one strategically assigned. Regardless, the rep-

\textsuperscript{67} D. Butz, “Developing Sustainable Communities: Community Development and Modernity in Shimshal, Pakistan” (Ph.D. disser., McMaster University [Hamilton, 1993]).

\textsuperscript{68} The problems mentioned in narratives reflect, the “importance of class struggle in determining the organization of work” (S. A. Marglin, “Losing touch”). Ironically, the documentation of this struggle in travel narratives, even as it was creating a negative notoriety for porters, was helping them to increase their control over the organization of work. A common trope of adventure travel narratives is a demonstration of an ability to overcome logistical problems as they are encountered. Thus, even as expeditions report on their porter problems and their culturally informed reasons for those problems, they usually also report on the steps taken to deal with them. When those steps include attempts to circumvent the problem through appeasement, through, say, higher wages or the provision of a rest day, the reporting of this solution acts, as least instrumentally, to benefit the porter. Through its insertion into the genealogy of travel knowledge it becomes part of an authoritative tradition. In terms of the struggle, it becomes a gain, and every gain that porters make through some act of resistance or overt challenge potentially minimizes the effort needed to achieve that gain with future expeditions.

\textsuperscript{69} Breman, \textit{Taming the Coolie Beast}.

\textsuperscript{70} J. Barry, \textit{K2: Savage Mountain, Savage Summer} (London, 1987) 156.
utation sticks. Ironically, the same writer describes a scene, reminiscent of the writings of his nineteenth-century predecessors, of selecting porters for an expedition:

our sirdar knew . . . most of the cohort [who] paraded before him . . . He selected the best two hundred. This was survival of the fittest unstrained: the lame were sent packing without ceremony or sympathy; midgets and idiots too (and there was a share of both) and then crooks, cheats, troublemakers and whingers [sic].

A significant part of constructing the Balti coolie was the generation of alterity, the process of making the Balti porter into the Other. This was not difficult for most colonialists in Kashmir, since they were able to deploy existing social categories to accomplish the task. The term coolie, for example, existed long before the British arrived in Kashmir or Baltistan, as did the typical representations of the coolie as childish, feminine, and bestial. The process of constructing the Balti coolie, then, presupposed the existence of a social category or class of the coolie. Portering brought Baltis into a colonial society in which the overwhelming organizing factors were race and class (during both the Dogra and British periods). It is not surprising, then, that we find evidence that the construction of the coolie as a social category is based on the threads of race, class, and ethnicity, all of which were woven into an Orientalist tapestry. It was among these lines that the dominant terms used to mark collective identity were drawn. In Kashmir, the ethnic label Balti became synonymous with the class label coolie. It is this conflation that allowed, Dainelli, for example, after crossing a pass in Baltistan and finding a birth in progress, to pronounce that a new coolie had been brought into the world. The fate of the child, at least in Dainelli’s mind, was sealed by virtue of his ethnicity. Dainelli’s consignment of the child to the social category of coolie carried with it certain characteristics that would be used to distinguish, or more to the point, to...

---

72 K. MacDonald, *Of ‘Coolies’ and Sahibs*.
73 Breman, *Taming the Coolie Beast*; Daniel and Breman, *Conclusion*.
74 Edward Balfour, in his *Cyclopedia of India*, offers the following definition: COOLEE, a name used in British India to designate any labouring man, working for hire; also the hire itself. The word is a corruption of the Tamil word Woleeya or Wozheeya Karen, a servant (E. Balfour, *Cyclopedia*, 334-c; cf., Daniel and Breman, *Conclusion*, xxx.
75 “Because they are such good carriers, and because the roads through their own and the adjoining countries are so bad, it has fallen out that they are employed more and more for carrying purposes, till the patient, long-suffering Balti coolie has become a well-known feature in the valleys of this frontier” (F. Younghusband, “A Journey across Central Asia, from Manchuria and Peking to Kashmir, over the Mustagh Pass,” *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society New Series*, 10:8 (August 1988), 485. Here, Younghusband, the archetypal European explorer-hero, naturalizes the Balti as coolie. According to Youngblood, Baltis have a natural proclivity for carrying baggage and their exploitation as coolies is a function of this proclivity and the lack of a physical infrastructure. Nowhere is there a mention of force, corvee, or the class structure which demanded the servility of load carriers. Their subordinate position has not been constructed, it has simply “fallen out,” through an unfortunate combination of circumstances.
76 G. Dainelli, *Buddhists and Glaciers of Western Tibet* (New York, 1934).
prevent the distinction of this individual, at least for most Europeans, for the rest of his life. The construction of the coolie as Other was, of course, interwoven with the process of constructing a representation of the European self. What Edward Said and Mary Louise Pratt, among others, teach us is that even as Europeans construct a set of subordinated Others, they also construct themselves in opposition to those Others.77 In our case, the Balti becomes amoral in opposition to the European’s morality, insincere in opposition to the European’s sincerity, and unintelligent in opposition to the European’s intellect. For the exploits of Europeans to be prioritized, the abilities and capacities of Baltis had to be either demeaned or left in the shadows, in the background of the narrative. This occurred in a variety of ways, most of which denied the coolie the benefit of any human agency. The most pernicious and violent of these representations, however, was one that facilitated the denial of agency by categorizing porters as subhuman.78

To avoid any moral dilemma from the use of fellow human beings as beasts of burden, the coolie had to be constructed as something other than civilized, other than fully human. The work of Michael Taussig in South America and Jan Breman in Southeast Asia, for example, reveals that the attitude adopted by employers toward local residents was one of abomination in which they “negat[ed] the human value of the other by attributing him [sic] with bestial behaviour.”79 Not surprisingly, we find the same attributes applied to Balti porters. Treating humans as beasts of burden demands that they be constructed as a category of beast or at least as sub-human. Evidence of this pervades colonial and neocolonial travel literature, which describes Balti villagers and their way of life.80 Expedition and travel narratives are rife with statements and depictions of scenes which naturalize the condition of coolie as beast. In the report of the Expedition française a l’Himalaya, for example:

One could not help feeling pity for these creatures, who were more like beasts than human beings. Their misery was terrible to behold, but they did not appear to feel this in the slightest; it seemed to fit them naturally—as naturally as the rags in which they were clothed.81

---

79 Taussig, Shamanism.
80 Such descriptions also applied to Balti villages. Specifically, the village of Askole was described in the early twentieth century as representing “primitive man at the edge of a primitive half-formed world” (C. G. Bruce, Twenty Years in the Himalaya (London, 1910). These are by no means attitudes of the distant past. In 1986, for example, Rowell described Askole as “pleasantly uncivilized, as representing that beautiful in between point at which the human race had hovered for most of its development up until the past two centuries” (G. A. Rowell, In the Throne Room of the Mountain Gods (San Francisco, 1986)). The words are much the same—both the place and its inhabitants are constructed as primitive and uncivilized—as somehow subhuman from the vantage point of Western civilization.
In the minds of the civilized, hence the non-bestial, Europeans, not only were these creatures like beasts but this was a part of their natural condition.

Similarly Fanny Bullock Workman, a leader of the American suffragette movement, who was party to this construction of the coolie as sub-human, suggests in a revealing statement that “the Himalayan shepherd is the personification of primitive and unintelligent man, scarcely higher in his habits than the animals under his care.” Mrs. Workman’s conspicuous contempt for Baltis and other “orientals” demonstrates the pervasive extent of Orientalism: Women could be equal to men, but the Oriental could never be equal to the Caucasian. This was not a moral dilemma for Mrs. Workman simply because she viewed the Oriental as uncivilized, as sub-human, and therefore not privy to human rights. Ultimately, by labelling porters as beasts and by denying them human, or civilized, qualities, their treatment as beasts could pass as legitimate. And violent treatment, along with the threat of it, was certainly made clear. Fanny Bullock Workman, for example, had her Swiss guide physically beat and kick porters to induce them to proceed. Aleister Crowley publicly whipped porters at random as examples to the others. The artist, William McCormick, threatened porters with his pistol, promising that the first to desert would be shot in the back.

The paradox here is that despite attempts to deny the humanity of the coolie, it is through the human agency of those who were forced to porter that their notoriety emerged. The actions that contribute to the development of notoriety are not simply pulled from thin air but are precipitated by an event. The characterization of the coolie as a stubborn animal who refuses to budge unless kicked directly implies the assertion of a will: the enactment of a decision to refuse to move implies the exercise of agency, an agency aimed at maintaining some autonomy over the conditions under which they labour that has brought violence upon men who work as porters. Yet, presumably it is the same agency which has allowed people to retain a degree of dignity and self-respect.

SHOVE: INDIGENOUS RESISTANCE TO THE PORTERING ECONOMY

Haynes and Prakash define resistance as “those behaviours and cultural practices by subordinate groups that contest hegemonic social formations, that

84 Rowell, In the Throne Room.
85 J. Barry, K2: Savage Mountain, Savage Summer.
threaten to unravel the strategies of domination; ‘consciousness’ need not be essential to its constitution.”

Ironically, then, it is the very behaviours and practices characterized as resistance that have generated a negative notoriety for Balti porters. It is also these behaviours and practices that we can examine to understand partially how Baltis have challenged or accommodated the conditions of production responsible for appropriating their labour. It is through the same texts that reproduce notoriety and maintain inequitable conditions of production that we can gain access to descriptions of resistance directed against this inequity.

Images from travel and mountaineering narratives often suggest that men are willing participants in the adventure tourism industry in Baltistan and that they derive significant benefits from that participation. Indeed, there is some truth in this statement. Certainly today, men are not pressed into service other than by the force of a need for cash imposed by the penetration of market-oriented capitalism. Portering does provide some men with access to a supply of cash without having to leave home for extensive periods of time.

But representations both of the willingness with which men participate and of the benefits they derive are belied by the reality of the porters’ apparent propensity to cause difficulties for these expeditions. This is a problem that has been remarked upon since the publication of the very first European travelogue describing Baltistan and travel within the region. Godfrey Vigne, for example, described how the porters’ refusal to proceed beyond a certain point forced him to cancel a journey. Current porters even speak of a desire to escape the necessity to work as porters in order to earn cash. Alternate opportunities, such as shopkeeping and government positions are quickly grasped as they present themselves. Men openly state that they would not work as porters if other paid work were available.

The apparent contradictions between these positions suggests that it cannot be assumed that there is a simple correspondence between discourse about an activity and the way it is structured. Such contradictions also, however, ex-

---


87 The actual benefits of adventure tourism to men who work as porters has yet to be fully examined in Baltistan (but see K. I. MacDonald, The Mediation of Risk: Ecology, Society and Authority in a Karakoram Mountain Community; K. I. MacDonald, “The contemporary structure and impact of adventure tourism in Baltistan”). There is some evidence, for example, that the vast majority of the material benefits of the adventure tourism industry flow to foreign, local and imported elites who capitalise on their positions as mediators.

88 Vigne, Travels in Kashmir.

89 Cf. J. F. Fisher, Sherpas: Reflections on Change in Himalayan Nepal (Berkeley, 1990). I avoid discussing the gendered aspects of portering relations in this essay, since I have had limited access to women’s perspectives in Baltistan, but see Kathryn Besio, Mountain Heirs: Western Imaginings of Sherpa Children in the Khumbu, Nepal (MA Thesis, Department of Geography, University of Hawaii [Honolulu, 1996]).

90 Robbins, “Sport, Hegemony, and Class,” 583.
pose an apparent dichotomy in a simultaneous willingness of villagers to participate in a portering economy and the resistance they exercise against it. This is a paradox of modernity: The generation of desire is juxtaposed with a realization of, and a need to escape, exploitation. But the only perceived way to achieve that desire—generally achieving material changes in the circumstances of life—is to be a party, either through imposition or accommodation, to that exploitation. Ideologically, power (in a variety of manifestations) persuades one to accept and deploy the rhetoric of modernization; materially, power (in a variety of manifestations) coerces one into participating in the set of exploitive labour practices that accommodate and maintain the material relations of that discourse. In relation to the apparent paradox of a willing participation in portering, resistance, within the frame of modernization, can be interpreted as an attempt to shift the relations of power, to close the gap in the hegemonic relationship between “him who rides” and “him who carries.” It is a shove back against the push of power.

Recognizing the Shove

Each form of oppressed labour sets in motion its own opposition, its own resistance. Students of slavery have outlined the passive and overt means by which powerless slaves resisted the demands of their masters. In a recent work, however, Scott suggests that there are two apparent faces to this resistance. The process of domination, he argues, “generates a hegemonic public conduct and a backstage discourse consisting of what cannot be spoken in the face of power.”91 In other words, the subordinated group behaves one way in public, essentially behaving in accordance with the perceptions and expectations of the dominant group, to produce a “public transcript.” Every subordinate group, however, also creates, out of its ordeal, a “hidden transcript”—an account, both oral and dramaturgic, that represents a critique of power spoken out of sight and sound of the dominant group. It is this public transcript to which we as researchers and as outsiders are most frequently exposed simply because the narratives—the historical and archival accounts that we rely on for insight—present a hegemonic account of power relations. For example, I am familiar with very few official papers or Residency reports which document the miseries or hardships suffered by Balti porters on large-scale expeditions under Western control or in any other power relation. Of course, the negative effects could hardly be brought to light without detracting from the success story of European achievement in a high-mountain environment. Any deviation on their part from presenting this dominant account would expose ruptures in, and consequently weaken, the existing power relations. The question arises, then, as to whether students of power can actually access this hidden discourse of subordinate groups. No doubt, it is impossible to access it entirely; but according to

91 Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance: The Hidden Transcripts, xii.
Scott and others before him, the hidden transcript is available for scrutiny because it is typically expressed openly but in a disguised form. Scott suggests that the theatre of the powerless (jokes, gossip, folktales, songs, gestures, and so forth) can be interpreted as a critique of power which hides behind the anonymity or innocuous understandings of their conduct.

In relation to the dominant group of foreigners in Baltistan, I suggest that this theatre of the powerless was and is played out on the mountain trails and glaciers that Dogra soldiers, colonial explorers and travellers, contemporary mountaineers and trekkers, and scientists follow. Reading between the lines of their accounts and discerning alternate interpretations of acts which contribute to the development and perpetuation of a negative notoriety exposes very specific acts of resistance which promote the exercise of self-determination. This is not to suggest that power relations have remained static or unchanging over time. In fact, one important revelation that comes from a close reading of the accounts of mountaineering expeditions and colonial literature is that the patterns by which porters have expressed resistance have changed through time. Particularly, following independence and the partition of India and Pakistan, expressions of resistance cautiously began to move from the covert to the overt, from passive to active, more and more directly exposing the hidden transcript to the jaws of power. Despite this, techniques of resistance have been, and remain, efforts to thwart the material appropriation of villagers’ labour, their production and their property.

One can almost collate a chronology of resistance through which changes in techniques of resistance have emerged to challenge oppressive conditions more openly. These shifts in techniques of resistance likely exist in a reciprocal relationship with changes in the conditions of production, but that work is yet to be done. Nonetheless, whereas flight was a popular means of escaping forced porterage in the mid-nineteenth century, it is absent from the contemporary “repertoire of contention.” Under the Dogras, a refusal to move would likely have meant death; under British travellers, it might have meant a whipping. The risk, in terms of generating changes in the actual relations of production may have been worth it—a survey of travel narratives reveals that the refusal to move, while articulating no specific demands, became a popular strategy in the early twentieth century. Indeed, this is an important element in the exercise of resistance, the gradual attempt to gain increasing control over the conditions of production while simultaneously minimizing the retribution that such resistance entails. Accordingly, an examination of the techniques of resistance employed by porters contributes to an understanding of indigenous discursive formations and helps undermine the authoritative position of European discursive formations.

92 Cf., Tilly, Contentious Repertoires.
93 Tarrow, Power in Movement.
Techniques of Resistance

Many European accounts describe Balti porters as acting with humility in the presence of Europeans, a part of Scott’s “public transcript.” There is, however, abundant evidence that Baltis did not suffer their subjugation and exploitation passively and travellers’ reports are full of descriptions of both subtle and blatant expressions of resistance, although the tone in which these incidents are usually reported clearly reveals anti-porter sentiments. This, of course, is not surprising. Any depiction of Baltis lashing out against the violence acted upon them would reduce the dignity of the European and, in all likelihood, not be recorded. If indeed such events did occur, they exist within indigenous discursive formations and cannot be reported here. I mention this as a caution that the techniques I discuss here are drawn from the dominant narrative, are not exhaustive, and will likely be supplemented by investigations into Balti oral tradition.

A preliminary survey of travel, mountaineering and exploration literature covering the period from 1835 to 1986 reveals that travellers frequently encountered a variety of obstacles to their progress, seemingly caused by some action on the part of their porters. It is these techniques that I wish to discuss here, but more specifically, how these techniques rely on a detailed knowledge and manipulation of topography and space in conjunction with an indigenous understanding of the limited ability of foreigners to function on their own in a mountain environment. Scott (1990) addresses the importance of space in the expression of resistance but stops short of considering, or at least of discussing, the importance of exploiting space and topography and the deployment of local knowledge in acts of resistance. Yet it is these qualities that I find particularly relevant and salient when considering acts of resistance by porters.

The responses of Balti porters to the conditions under which they have been made to provide their labour have varied through time and in relation to different circumstances. This is evidenced in the accounts of a variety of travellers who attest to having had no trouble with their porters. Kick, for example describes his experience as trouble free but goes on to note that “nearly all other expeditions did not get on well with them [Baltis] and describe them as the dirtiest and most inferior race in Asia.”94 Kick’s experience, and that of others, illustrates the complex and inconsistent character of such responses. While the types of resistance varied from silence to strikes, these cannot be seen as contained events. In the course of serving an expedition, acts of resistance might range from grumbling through to desertion. If the duration of the expedition to the point of desertion is considered a resistance event, then the character of that event is mixed and transcends any typology that I present here. Similarly a single episode of resistance characterised as a refusal to proceed might also in-

clude a refusal to communicate with expedition members when they try to find the source of the resistance or to identify the “ringleaders.” Mindful of these qualifiers, the most frequently cited acts of resistance are listed below.\footnote{Cf., R. Cohen, “Resistance and hidden forms of consciousness amongst African workers,” \textit{Review of African Political Economy}, 19 (September–December 1980), 8–22; C. Pycroft and B. Munslow, “Black mine workers in South Africa: strategies of co-option and resistance,” in P. C. W. Gutkind, ed., \textit{Third World Workers: Comparative International Labour Studies} (Leiden, 1988).}

**Sabotage.** Almost by definition, all acts of resistance are acts of sabotage. By expressing resistance in any way, porters are attempting to thwart the immediate goals of an expedition; whether that goal be to climb a peak, to reach a pass or simply to take a few pictures. The outcome of resistance is the same, to thwart the goals which their labour was appropriated to help achieve. There does, for example, seem to be a pattern in expedition literature whereby porter problems factor significantly in the narrative when an expedition fails to meet its goal, but little mention of the contribution of porters when they achieve success.

**Theft.** Theft or pilfering of expedition goods is reported by some expeditions but completely denied by others (suggesting that acts of resistance vary in proportion to the degree of domination). Interpreted as resistance, the act of theft or pilfering is simply an attempt to recover some “surplus value” and is considered as a wage supplement. Low wages are supplemented by pilfered goods.\footnote{A. Lichtenstein, “‘That disposition to theft, with which they have been branded’: moral economy, slave management and the law,” \textit{Journal of Social History}, 21:3 (1988), 413–40.}

**Deception or Refusal to Understand or to Remain Silent.** Numerous expeditions report having received poor information from Baltis or of porters who seem unable to comprehend their requests. This seems to occur most frequently when the questions relate to topography and routes. The reporters’ interpretation is typically to fall back on the racial stereotype of the Balti as stupid or unintelligent. But, as others have pointed out, a refusal to understand is itself a form of resistance and in playing dumb, the powerless exploit the very stereotypes that are used to stigmatize them. Again this amounts to a systematic use of ignorance to thwart the goals and objectives of the dominant group. Moreover, if the strategic use of space is an essential component of more overt acts of resistance, such as desertion or withdrawal, then ignorance is actually part of an active and intelligent strategy of passive resistance. When the one tool that you can use to your advantage is topography, why draw a map of it for those who would use it to exploit you?

**Sickness and Accident.** Accounts often report porters claiming to be sick and asking to be released from the expedition. Sickness, real or feigned, can be an attempt to deny labour power to the employer even while coping with the debilitating conditions that the employer has contributed to. Similarly, accidents can be used to evade or slow down work. A number of expeditions have reported porters suffering injuries from lacerated feet, all the while refusing to wear shoes that had been given to them when they signed on. I have yet to con-
firm this, but the refusal to wear shoes and the resulting injuries could well consti-
tute an act of resistance designed to avoid work and to slow down the progress of the expedition.

Community (and Individual) Withdrawal. Certain acts of resistance relate more directly to the use of space and the exploitation of topography than others. Community or individual withdrawal is one such act. Though currently not as common as it once was, community withdrawal, particularly in outpost villages was used as a response to colonial authorities seeking to acquire a supply of corvée or forced labour. Verbal messages always precede the arrival of outsiders in these villages, and village men would frequently leave for high pastures or hunting grounds in order to escape press gangs. Villagers still use the same tactic today to escape the surveillance of government officials. This ability to escape exploitation is an important demonstration of the deployment of local knowledge in the strategic use of space. Villagers were able to withdraw not only because of their knowledge of the local physical environment and the location of safe spaces but also because of the limitations of outsiders trying to operate in that environment. They were fully aware that the government official has neither the knowledge nor the will to follow them.

Task Bargaining. Rather than being paid by the day, it has become customary in the Braldu to pay porters by the stage or *pharo* (a designated distance rather than a set time) and to agree to the stages that will be completed each day before the journey is begun. Those managing expeditions have, however, often complained that porters only complete a half day’s work before trying to stop for the day. They attribute this action again to a racially stereotypical attribute of laziness. The porters in return state that they are only stopping at the traditional camp for that stage, citing as precedent previous expeditions that had stopped at that particular campsite. By task bargaining, then, I mean attempts by porters to reduce their exploitation by manipulating definitions of stages (definitions of distance) in order to confound the progress of the expedition. An intentional misinterpretation of stages could always be invoked as the basis for an act of resistance.

Expeditions also frequently complain of the slow progress or foot-dragging of porters again, attributing this to an inherent laziness. Interpreted from the standpoint of resistance, this is a means of time bargaining which enables a group of porters to avoid fatigue by allowing them to work at a comfortable pace and, consequently, to establish a degree of control over their own work. It reduces competition among members of the group and protects slower members who might otherwise be singled out for harassment. In essence, foot-dragging acts to protect the solidarity of the group. At the same time it tends to reinforce the perceived power hierarchy by allowing sahibs to reach camps long before the porters straggle in. This seems to satiate egos sufficiently that punishment is rarely meted out for progressing slowly through the day.

Work Stoppage. The form of resistance most frequently cited by expeditions
is work stoppage. This has typically taken three forms. The first is outright desertion. Again, this act was more frequent in the early days of expedition travel than it is today. When desertion was not meant as an act of open defiance, it tended to occur during the night in order to avoid confrontation with the dominant group. The degree of desertion seems to have varied with the degree of control exercised and also with the continued viability on the agricultural economy. When portering for an expedition meant that field crops might suffer from a lack of attention, the degree of desertion seems to have increased. The colonial government and expedition organizers responded to frequent desertion by attempts to control and regulate the recruitment of labour. The names of porters were recorded; work cards were issued; and in later years, porters were made to agree to contracts stipulating the conditions of employment. Currently, for example, porters working for expeditions are bound by contract in which, under threat of prosecution, they must promise neither to desert nor insist on an increase of wages during the march, and “to serve the party diligently and faithfully.”

In effect, the government response to porter resistance was to criminalize the mobility of porters. In response to this criminalization of mobility, we encounter another form of work stoppage—a simple refusal to work with no explanation given for the stoppage. Porters neither deserted nor made any demands, a mixture of the refusal to move with silence avoided the charge of desertion while allowing porters to assert some control over their labour power. Early expeditions tended to respond to such acts violently, threatening porters with firearms or publicly lashing individuals as “an example to the others.” Often, after refusing to work for a certain period of time, porters would return to work with no apparent explanation but, significantly, at a time of their own choosing. In some cases where work stoppage occurred, some porters, perhaps half of the contingent, would return to their villages, while others would continue with the expedition. I expect that an investigation into indigenous discourses of portering might reveal that this relates to a kind of work-sharing agreement, whereby those returning to the village agree to tend the crops of those continuing with the expedition.

The last form of work stoppage is a formal strike with stated demands and identifiable negotiators. The distinction between these latter two forms of work stoppage is extremely important because it represents the beginnings of the public expression of a “hidden transcript.” Simple refusals to pick up loads and proceed, as described in colonial narratives and accounts of mountaineering expeditions are just that—an anonymous mass defiance. The element of anonymity is crucial here. The strategy is developed out of sight of the dominant group. Strictly speaking, protesters are not anonymous but they achieve a kind of anonymity because of their numbers. Demands are not made, so no clear leaders stand out. It is next to impossible to single out individuals for retaliation. It

is this element of anonymity that increases the potential for open defiance. Resistance can be expressed with a virtual guarantee of minimal retaliation. Strikes, however, as acts of resistance, differ from a simple refusal to work in a fundamental way. They expose the hidden transcript to public view and openly defy the authority of the dominant group. They have identifiable leaders and those leaders make specific demands primarily aimed at improving wages and working conditions.

It is notable that the transition to strikes as a strategy of resistance on the part of porters became more frequent following partition because independence and partition meant the removal of a local, identifiable, structure of domination which could administer its own idea of justice in a swift and brutal way—a structure that operated in support of travellers and mountaineers. Although foreigners still represent a structure of domination in the post-partition period, the reinforcement of that structure has been significantly diminished, and particularly with a growing appreciation of the notion of human rights (though these still seem vague notions in relation to the travel industry), the success rates of strikes have improved markedly with real success occurring after 1974. For example in the 77 years between 1877 to 1954, porter wages increased from .25 rupee per stage to 1 rupee per stage. In the 35 years between 1954 and 1990—years in which there was an increased frequency of strikes—wages increased from 1 rupee per stage to 90 rupees per stage.98

CONCLUSION

Over the past 150 years, portering in northern Pakistan has emerged from a form of codified forced labour into a legitimate part-time occupation which men enter into out of economic necessity. Porter labour that once provided the muscle demanded by the colonial regime to monitor and map the limits of their sphere of domination and appropriation now provides the muscle power demanded by the adventure tourism industry in the continuing commodification of the mountain environment and in the production of a leisure experience. In the transition from serving a colonial to a neo-colonial master, porter labour has undergone few changes. It is rooted in an institutional system that maintained a hierarchy of power which instrumentally and ideologically produced a subservient class of people whose purpose was to carry the baggage of a superordinate group. It would be erroneous, however, to classify contemporary porterage as forced labour. Changes have occurred in the conditions under which men provide their labour to expeditions and travellers. These changes, however, have largely arisen from a refusal to accept passively the conditions under which their labour was appropriated. Through time, men have employed various means to gain a measure of control over their own labour power. These actions, however, were interpreted by the superordinate group through an institutionally controlled

98 MacDonald, “Of ’Coolies’ and Sahibs.”
discursive filter which encouraged them to represent such actions as characteristic features of conflated categories of class, ethnicity and race: coolie, Balti, Oriental were all essentialized through European discursive schemes—schemes which continue to resonate in contemporary tales of adventure travel. In brief, I am suggesting here that acts which have been used to characterize Balti people as unreliable, cowardly, unintelligent, and so on, are actually acts of resistance played out in an effort to exercise a degree of self-determination and retain an element of dignity in a task that can be most degrading. What has been transmitted among travellers as a bad reputation is actually a racist and Orientalist interpretation of the actions of a subordinate group involved in continuous resistance against the domination and appropriation of their labour. Understood as such, these acts bring into question the notion that men are completely willing participants in this activity and that they have any real degree of control over their participation. This is not only demonstrated in continued acts of resistance but in the comments of contemporary porters who seek alternate opportunities to earn cash income whenever possible so that they do not have to work as porters. I do not want to overstate the effectiveness of resistance here. It is clear in Baltistan, for example, that despite a long history of apparently collective action against expeditions, there are notable divisions within communities that provide men for portering. Some of the sources of these divisions are related to the dynamics of indigenous political systems. Others are related to the response of dominant power structures to acts of resistance—the push back against the indigenous shove.

Scott suggests that specific forms of domination within occupations having a set of similar working conditions promote the formation of a cohesive occupational group who act with solidarity, who form “communities of fate.” Their labour is marked by a high level of physical danger that is mitigated by a high degree of camaraderie and cooperation. And their occupation is marked by the homogeneity and isolation of their community and work experience, a close mutual dependence, and a relative lack of differentiation within and mobility out of their trade. According to Scott, these conditions tend to maximize the cohesion and unity of a worker subculture: “They are nearly a race apart. They are all under the same authority, run the same risks, mix nearly exclusively with one another, and rely on a high degree of mutuality.”

This notion of a community of fate effectively frames the occupation of portering and the conditions that porters work under. What is notable in Baltistan, however, is the degree to which this community of fate is grounded in the village origins of porters, rather than to an awareness of the common interests of the occupational group. Occupational solidarity, seems to be absent (as demonstrated in the lack of any formal union or association of porters), and village-
or valley-based allegiances persist in relation to the organization of portering. While speculative, I suggest that the absence of occupational solidarity, at least in part, is an effect of European discursive formations that emerged in response to acts of resistance by porters. Whereas the dominant group understood a social category of coolie and continues to understand one of porter, individuals still hold to roots of identity that are grounded in their household and village. Collective identity, then stems from the village, rather than from the occupation; and acts of resistance are most fully coordinated when their organization is predicated by village or kin membership. This fact did not go unnoticed by the organizers of early expeditions. When travelling in populated areas, porters were changed frequently, thus preventing the opportunity to develop even a temporary group consciousness centred on an occupational status. It is in the less-populated areas where frequent changes were not possible that the frequency of porter resistance increased. Not only were working conditions harsher, but men were together for a longer period of time, allowing the formation of a group identity that transcended village origins. The men were also further removed from the state’s coercive power. Further research is needed to determine the extent to which dominant group members actively attempted to prevent the formation of group consciousness, but the comments of a contemporary Pakistani traveller, recognizing the discursive schemes of his colonial predecessors, are revealing:

I didn’t want to hire all three men from the same area because Afridi [Co-ordination Officer between the Ministry of Tourism and mountaineering expeditions] had warned me that in a delicate situation they usually ganged up and struck work.101

What Rashid indirectly alludes to is that resistance is grounded in community identity more than occupational status. This relation of community and collective action is not surprising. Group formation is provided through opportunity structures; that is, the recognition of the existence of a community of fate arises within particular economic, political, and conceptual circumstances that encourage or hinder certain footings of collective identity and action.102 It is within such opportunity structures that subordinate groups express and assert their own notions of who they are. The apparent absence of an occupational group consciousness in Baltistan, then, can be taken, as an assertion that men who work as porters do not see themselves simply as porters, any more than, say, European travel writers see themselves simply as travel writers. Identity is, of course, complex and multi-faceted; and while occupational status certainly plays a role in the generation of identity, identity cannot simply be reduced to occupational status, despite our tendency to do this in the West. Compared to other forms of migrant labour, portering takes men away from their communi-

100 Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance.
101 S. Rashid, Between Two Burrs on the Map: Travels in Northern Pakistan (Lahore, 1995).
102 Cornell, “Land, Labour, and Group Formation.”
ties for a relatively short period of time. Consequently, individual identity is still directly informed by village norms and social bounds. Since portering is largely a seasonal and part-time occupation (and viewed primarily as a means of earning cash income), any collective identity that emerges within a group of men who are employed as porters for a short period of time, is secondary to the identity they have that is based on household and community. If the recognition of the occupational grouping of porter as a part of a broader identity is to emerge in Baltistan, it will, as in the past be the result of a negotiated and contested process, both indigenously and transculturally. I have attempted to describe the origins of that process in this essay. However, any such understanding of the negotiation of identity, any history of portering as an occupation and basis for group formation, is incomplete without tapping into indigenous discursive formations. This is necessary so that contrasting accounts of this negotiation may appear, but this is work that remains to be done. In the interim, by questioning the dominant narratives of history in northern Pakistan and by understanding the genealogy of European discursive foundations regarding porters and portering, we can begin to expose the origins of our assumptions concerning historical events and to disrupt the continuation of the effects of the power stemming from that genealogy.