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Mixed Legacies in Contested Borderlands: Skardu and the Kashmir Dispute

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The article explores the sense of belonging of people from Skardu, a border town located in the Gilgit-Baltistan region, a territory administered by Pakistan but which is disputed by India for its being part of the former Princely State of Jammu and Kashmir. Neither full Pakistani citizens, nor identifying themselves with Kashmiri nationalism, the people of Gilgit-Baltistan lack of a common sense of belonging. The uncertain future of the territorial entity contributes to this, despite transformations already at work there. By examining the social and material landscape of Skardu town, and therefore using a micro-level perspective, the article aims to address issues of identity and security connected with broader constructed narratives of intrastate or interstate conflict, such as the Kashmir dispute within the wider geopolitical imaginary of India–Pakistan rivalry.

INTRODUCTION

Border people in contested borderlands are often caught between rivalries among states and subject to exclusive territorial nation-building processes that disregard their generally heterogeneous (and therefore non-exclusively territorially articulated) sense of belonging and their mixed loyalties. In some cases, border communities develop a degree of agency capable of altering these general centric-state narratives, as Kashmiri nationalism has done in the India–Pakistan conflict; in other situations their margin to influence those hegemonic representations is very limited, as the case of the population in Gilgit-Baltistan (northeastern Pakistan) in the same dispute exemplifies. Bordering is about difference, about representing and making identity but...
In conflictive contexts, is done through material practices in which local populations are regulated by extraordinary and restrictive security measures (regimes) that do not merely delimitate their activity but actually place them under an exceptional form of political control.

Borders also function as sites for exchange and cooperation. These activities, that involve a potential for transformation at different levels—economic, political, cultural but also local, regional, national—depend very much on the state’s influence and control over its boundaries. Many boundaries in the world today are characterised by being permeable and porous and it is just the opposite that seems less common. Globalisation processes have also accentuated cross-border mobility to the point that some scholars have postulated that ‘state borders are becoming increasingly obsolete’. The idea that international boundaries are vanishing has been articulated in two main ways: on the one hand, one trend of research considers that state boundaries are becoming ‘virtual lines’ but nonetheless, other cultural, economic barriers are emerging and need specific attention; on the other hand, neoliberal approaches, particularly in the economic field, maintain that the world is becoming ‘borderless’. However, both these interpretations contrast with constant phenomena in which issues of power, security and identity intermingle to erect or reinforce boundaries as barriers. For example, the so-called war on terror and the subsequent military interventions in some countries, policies of deportation of ‘illegal’ migration, or even the recent state responses in the European Union to the economic crisis, among others, constantly remind us how deeply bounded and territorialised the world is.

In border conflicts of partitioned and postcolonial states, territory and state control are still a matter of crucial concern because they are usually attached to ongoing discourses of nation-building related to the formation of particular national identities and, in the process, recreating a certain image of the Other, the neighbour. The cases of India and Pakistan and their respective arguments on Kashmir based on claims of achieving a ‘secular’ and ‘Muslim’ state to articulate a national identity are exemplary in this regard. As a result of the animosity between both countries, the border is still a place to claim a national allegiance based on separation and alienation from the neighbour, as it is manifest in the ‘cartographic anxiety’ displayed by the Indian state but also applicable to Pakistan.

However, proposals of border transformation and the creation of ‘soft borders’ have also penetrated the political discourse in various conflicts, including Kashmir, with the creation of confidence-building initiatives intending to reduce or alleviate the source of hostility between the contending parties. This has sometimes implied reconsiderations of the state as the sole sovereign over a concrete territory but has also put into question important issues on state’s identity and culture. Protracted disputes such as Kashmir have been affected by these new considerations of ‘making the boundary
irrelevant’, as the former Pakistani president Musharraf publicly expressed one year later after the initiation of the India–Pakistan dialogue process in 2004.

The eventual relaxation of tensions among states and the adoption of decisions related to transforming the hostility of the border landscape (through facilitating cross-border mobility initiatives) can alleviate the situation of some groups on the ground but will hardly affect the whole understanding of the conflict by local populations, at least on a short-term basis. Opening boundaries is one thing, but the dismantling of the ideological framework in which border people in conflict areas have lived with and have been socialised for decades is another one. The scholar Anssi Paasi, in his work on the Finish-Russian border, argues that, despite the disappearance of the traditional enmity with the end of the Cold War and the opening of the boundary, symbols and practises of historical hostility still are present.10

However, in the context of the Kashmir dispute, the traditional enmity remains very much unsettled and occupies a central part of the respective national building processes in India and Pakistan. The problem rests on the fact that the Line of Control (hereafter LoC) is still mainly considered as a ceasefire line and therefore still can be challenged. Besides, conflict in Indian Kashmir has been part of the everyday life for the last two decades and thus the opening of the line only addresses part of the humanitarian problem but not the political one. The self-positioning of different border groups along the LoC on the dispute depends very much on the prevailing conditions of uncertainty in regard to the future settlement as well as other variable regional considerations. Indeed, these regional considerations, characterised by complex interrelations of ‘agency, social relations and power’,11 are crucial in people’s perceptions of belonging and have to be considered as rather strategic.

The present article focuses on the Pakistani area of Gilgit-Baltistan, a territory formally attached to the Kashmir dispute, although the experience of conflict and perceptions emerging from local populations there seem to indicate otherwise. It argues that issues of culture and self-identification of border people in this area play an important role in understanding the dispute, but these are shaped by specific state practices of authority and control over time resulting in particular social orders in this borderland, distinct from those being formed in the mainland parts of the state. The existence of these social orders – marked by the proximity to a contested boundary of variable regional reach – question the liberal approaches adopted in the India–Pakistan dialogue process to deal with the Kashmir dispute. These approaches emphasise that trade and cooperation will gradually attenuate the sources of the conflict, as a sort of positive evolution ‘from conflict to harmony’,12 as it has been experienced in some European borderlands. However, such evolution depends to a large extent on the willingness of the
state actors and the agency of the borderlanders to transform these specific border orders.

The article is structured as follows. First, it discusses the implications of adopting a borderland perspective to address the Kashmir dispute by looking at the history and the heterogeneous experiences of people living in the territory, as well as their own understanding of the geopolitical space they inhabit. Then, it examines the question of the lack of constitutional definition of Gilgit-Baltistan as a specific form of bordering. Third, state strategies of inclusion and exclusion, and the local self-identifications in relation to the conflict are explored through the case of Skardu, a border town close to the LoC in the division of Baltistan.

UNDERSTANDING KASHMIR AS A BORDERLAND

The Kashmiri historian Chitrakaha Zutshi argues that adopting a borderland’s perspective to explore Kashmir history, apart from the potential of liberating the region from the imperatives of national borders that misread history, can also give a boost to the academic work on South Asian borderlands. Zutshi is right in her assessment but adopting a borderland perspective, as understood in the present article, implies engaging with certain considerations of the political space, of inclusion and exclusion, and a historically variable expression of agent power. In other words, it is precisely this lack of questioning on national borders, borderlands and processes of nation-building and territorialisation that remains at the core of the problem when examining the Kashmir conflict in its present form. In the sub-field of Kashmir studies the focus on social borders (the identity and the ethnic plurality of the region) has not been related, with some exceptions, to the analyses of the state’s strategies of territorialisation in the periphery.

Besides, most of the published material deals with the Indian part of Kashmir as compared with the areas of Azad Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan and few works have been produced by Pakistani authors regarding these territories. Accounts by Indian authors on developments in the Pakistani Kashmir tend to focus on legal–constitutional matters and the historic evolution of the territories, usually adhering uncritically to Indian government positions and displaying a traditional animosity when observing how Pakistan deals with Kashmiri affairs. Part of the problem lies in the fact that it seems almost impossible for Indian scholars to conduct fieldwork on the Pakistani Kashmiri–related areas, but important difficulties apply also for foreigners trying to do research on both sides of the LoC. Kashmir still belongs to the military realm.

The territories that were part of the former Princely State of Jammu and Kashmir constitute a vast borderland inhabited by a multitude of peoples belonging to different cultural groups that coexist and interrelate in various
and complex ways. Previous to Partition of the subcontinent, the region could be described as a sort of frontier instituted by the Treaty of Amritsar in 1846 that later was expanded by further conquest on the North and Northeast (notably Gilgit, Baltistan and Ladakh). Different territories were amalgamated around the political control of the Dogra maharaja in the Kashmir valley, a Hindu prince ruling over a Muslim majority population.

In 1947 the Partition of the subcontinent took place and the indecision of the maharaja to join India or Pakistan, followed by the dramatic unfolding of events, led to an internal revolt against the ruler and in the aftermath caused the intervention of the Indian and Pakistani armies. After the 1947–1948 Indo-Pakistan first war on Kashmir, the former Princely State split up and its territories became peripheral areas of two large postcolonial states. Further conflict erupted in 1965, 1971 and 1999 – apart from different crises – exacerbating the rivalry between the two countries. The interstate dimension of the dispute has been complicated by the development of a nationalist insurgent movement in the Indian Kashmir, centred in the homonymous valley, in the late 1980s.

The 1949 ceasefire line, later converted in the LoC, remains the main source of dissent, not only between India and Pakistan but also between the divided territories of the former Princely State. The LoC has acquired tangible and symbolic meanings related to experiences and discourses of Partition and the building of a national identity at the wider state level, connected with claims to a past identity, a Kashmiri one, still very much disputed. It remains the most visible form of division and confrontation, although the existence of other territorial and social borders within these territories complicates the understanding of the conflict.

To examine Kashmir from a borderland perspective implies not only analysing the impact of interstate warfare and the humanitarian dimension at the border as an edge of the state,19 to some extent a common feature shared by most of the conflicts. It is necessary to enquire how and in which ways local populations have been kept on one side of the line or the other and their experiences of it. It is the bordering process that affects interaction and cooperation and/or conflict20 and hence, it is the role of the state as a powerful agent of territorialisation under different forms of social control that has to be considered.

India opted during decades for an integration policy of the Kashmir-related territories it acquired in 1947 and later, after the insurgency erupted in the late 1990s, it controlled the region through militarisation, even though it preserved a form of democratic government most of the period. On its part, Pakistan decided to maintain its own Kashmiri-related areas as not proper parts of the state in order to keep a solution to the conflict open but it differentiated between Azad Jammu and Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan, the first with a nominal federal status and the second in a constitutional limbo. Indeed, the case of the Pakistani Kashmiri–related areas serves to expose
the contradictions of the state and nation-building processes, as well as the understandings of the dispute by people from these territories.

CONSTITUTIONAL UNDEFINITION AS A MODE OF BORDERING IN GILGIT-BALTISTAN

At first glance, the history of the Gilgit-Baltistan area of Pakistan could resemble that of many remote regions whose populations have had limited interaction with the state (colonial and postcolonial), a sort of ‘Zomia’.21 The territory is sandwiched between India, China and Afghanistan. People living in this area, surrounded by seemingly never-ending high mountains, often have more in common with the communities on the other side of the international boundary than with people within the neighbouring valleys. Gilgit-Baltistan is administered and territorially controlled by Pakistan through an executive order approved by the federal government but its legal–political status remains undefined and attached to the Kashmir conflict.22 As a result of this situation, people’s socialisation in the state can apparently be seen as marginal and therefore they can be regarded as relatively outside of the state’s purview, both in a positive and negative sense.

However, the military presence, which exercises power and authority in the area, shows otherwise. Indeed, Gilgit-Baltistan poses an interesting case of territorialisation and state-making done through security discourses that evidence the paradoxes of Pakistani nationalism.23 The interaction with the external threat, India, shapes the ‘internal’ dimension or state-making process, but this happens without a clear sense of community definition. Put differently, it is the Other that matters rather than a definition of a shared or inclusive ‘We’. The enmity with India is articulated by resorting to the ‘Kashmir’ issue as a security problem through a *speech act* articulated by the bureaucratic and military elites in which the survival and the definition of Pakistan are at stake.24 It is the maintenance of this order and this status quo that creates insecurity and uncertainty in the people living in the borderland territories.

Current developments seem to move in the direction of a progressive integration of the region within the Pakistani state, in line with the rest of the country’s four provinces, but still with remarkable differences.25 One major challenge for the Pakistani state in integrating Gilgit-Baltistan comes from its internal diversity and its lack of a single dominant cultural group, contrary to what happens in the main provinces of the country. This territory is sparsely populated, with perhaps little more than 1.5 million inhabitants, according to an estimated projection from the 1998 census (at the time of research, there was information that the elaboration of a new census would start in the near future),26 still predominantly rural but with increasing urbanisation. Besides,
the geographical and climatologic barriers that characterise the Karakoram Range or make interaction among these communities quite limited as compared with the populations living in the provinces. Baltistan represents the more homogeneous division, but in the whole territory there are significant differences in sense of belonging and emotional and cultural affiliations. Thus, the current politico-economic scenario in the region can be best described by the existence of changes on the surface – some of them induced by the central state, others by supra-regional and supranational forces – and also by uncertainty as to the future status of Gilgit-Baltistan. This uncertainty is not only due to the link with the Kashmir dispute and Pakistan’s claim to it, but to the frequent instability within the Pakistani state – even though it has not directly affected Gilgit-Baltistan to date as compared with the other four provinces of the state and also Azad Jammu and Kashmir – and the role of Gilgit-Baltistan as being a territory of regional encounter.

Pakistan took over the region after Partition, but without considering the claims of local actors who had been loyal to the creation of Pakistani state, perpetuating a sort of colonial government through the figure of the Political Agent, who was later replaced by a Resident Agent. The first attempt to introduce a regional administrative body came in 1972 when Z. A. Bhutto abolished the raja system, thus extricating power from the regional rulers, who until then had exercised certain legal and administrative duties, and reorganised the administration of the area into districts by creating the posts of Resident Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner. He also established an elected Northern Areas Council to function as a sort of regional body, but with limited capacities. Later, in 1994, a new order, the Northern Areas Legal Framework Order, came into force, by which the Minister of Kashmir and Northern Areas (KANA) now exercised executive powers over the area.

During the presidency of Pervez Musharraf’s military rule, new problems arose due to the increasing sectarian violence in the former North West Frontier Province (now renamed as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), which also affected the area of Gilgit. An internal controversy about the use of new textbooks, whose content condemned some important figures in the Shia religious mindset, arose in 1999 in Gilgit, causing a new period of violence and protest. The problem was partially solved in 2005 when the authorities gave the option of not using the controversial chapters until a revised edition was supplied, but such new books never materialised.

The new Pakistan People’s Party (PPP)-led government announced on 9 September 2009 a reform package, the Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order, which included the name change of the former Northern Areas in favour of the more concrete Gilgit-Baltistan. The name change has somehow added a new element to the image of self-identification of this territory, but the undefined constitutional status of the region within the Pakistani state remains. The 2009 reform is concerned only with the guarantee of maintaining some sort of figurative political representation in
the area (still closely controlled by Islamabad) and to dealing with matters of administration and development, rather than giving answers to people’s citizenship rights demands.\textsuperscript{30} The ruling has to be understood also as a move of the PPP-led government to conciliate the official Pakistani stand on Kashmir without denying rights to a territory in which the majority of the population may have pro-Pakistani sentiments (as compared with the ambivalence of the nationalist-separatist leanings of the Azad Kashmiris).

As a result of compromise, the 2009 reform for Gilgit-Baltistan is no more than a ruling approved by Pakistan’s Federal Cabinet. Gilgit-Baltistan has no representative in the National Assembly because the people of the area cannot participate in state elections. It creates the new figure of the Governor (in line with the other provinces of Pakistan) with wider powers to supervise the decisions of the Assembly and establishes a Supreme Appellate Court. However, despite some minor improvements, the main debate on the political characteristics of Gilgit-Baltistan persists with important implications in terms of rights for the local population. For example, Article 9.2 of the 2009 Order, which deals with the freedom of association, refers to limits of association or political expression regarding activities detrimental to the ‘ideology of Pakistan’. This vagueness about ‘how the ideology of Pakistan has to be interpreted’ has clear implications for imposing restrictions on autonomist movements, apart from other religious or cultural considerations.

The Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Empowerment Order introduced by the PPP has met with opposition and criticism, especially from the political leaders of Azad Jammu and Kashmir, on the grounds that the Order could hamper Pakistan’s position on Kashmir.\textsuperscript{31} Some people in Gilgit-Baltistan have also questioned the resolution, but on different grounds – for extending a status that makes locals vulnerable and passive spectators to important transformations that are already taking place. In Skardu, for example, when interviewing some relevant local personalities after the reform was passed, reactions were mixed and cautious.\textsuperscript{32} People recognised that the Order brought certain improvements, but still they were not regarded as Pakistani citizens like the rest. In their answers, they showed an ambivalence that indicated the ruling did not fulfil their expectations. Nevertheless, when enquiring about why the AJK Assembly were concerned about the measure, they too stated that the situation of Gilgit-Baltistan was different and they were somehow tired of the Kashmiri leadership voicing something that was not their own business. Among the interviewees, there were PPP and Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid-e-Azam (PML–Q) sympathisers, as well some with more nationalist leanings (closer to the Balawaristan National Front). What emerged from these interactions, irrespective of their political leanings, was a distinct regional sense of shared belonging or self-identification. They were reacting to the dominant narrative of ‘being part of the Kashmir dispute’ but without directly pointing at the Pakistani state as the sole actor.
responsible for it. If they do not openly question the ambivalent attitude of Pakistan, they admit to feeling that the ‘government is doing its best’, that they have some advantages in the current context\textsuperscript{33} (notably tax exemptions and subsidised prices for basic products such as rice, wheat and petrol, among others) or perhaps, what is most probably the case, they cannot openly express themselves on this point.

Hence, the ambiguous constitutional status of Gilgit-Baltistan may be interpreted in the first instance as a relative autonomy or freedom for the communities living in the area, marginally socialised with the idea of Pakistan. However, power relations evidence state continuous practices of bordering and ‘reimagining’ of its borders.\textsuperscript{34} The changes are connected with possible future alignments, particular in relation to a solution of the Kashmir dispute and the preservation of the LoC as an international boundary. Within this context, border people adjust to the uncertain circumstances by searching for non-conflictive forms of self-identification.

THE CASE OF SKARDU WITHIN THE ‘KASHMIR BOX’

As has been said, the uncertain territorial status of Gilgit-Baltistan within the Pakistani state has clear implications for citizenship and raises questions of self-identification for the people living in the area. In articulating their sense of belonging, the state remains a contradictory and distant figure because statehood in a modern sense (after Partition) has not been experienced much in everyday life. By contrast, what prevails is a historical experience of shared neighbourhood and proximity with the Ladakh area that the separateness created by the LoC has not completely removed so far.

In order to understand the ways in which Gilgit-Baltistan has remained within the ‘Kashmir problem’, and therefore as an issue of disputation between India and Pakistan, it seems pertinent to observe the social landscape of the border area and the mixed affinities of their inhabitants. The local perspective of a border town such as Skardu offers a good example of the complexity of the area’s wider geopolitical landscape because, as Anssi Paasi points out: ‘Local life in the border area is constituted by socio-spatial boundaries that are simultaneously both local and non-local and are to a greater or lesser degree social’.\textsuperscript{35}

Skardu town is located in a valley relatively near the LoC but well outside the military restricted zone, surrounded by mountains 3,000–4,000 metres high. At first glance, it could hardly be described as a border town in a disputed area except for the two military cantonments that denote the overwhelming presence of the army. The town does not conform to the typical image of violence and lawlessness associated with most of the Pakistani border areas, since criminality there is almost zero.\textsuperscript{36} The representation of the Pakistani administration in the region is through the figure
The population of the town, excluding the army, is mainly of Dard-Tibetan origin, who speak *Balti*, a dialect of Tibetan mostly employed in its spoken form. Nevertheless, Urdu is widely employed in the bazaar and in more formal contexts. With regard to the religious composition, most Skardu inhabitants belong to the Twelver Shia branch of Islam (around 70–80%) but there is a growing Nurbakhshi community as a result of a continuing labour migration from the eastern part of the region (Ghanche district). Sunnis make up around 10% of the town’s population. There are also some Shia Ismaili families from the Gilgit-Hunza area, most of whom are employed as skilled workers. To some extent, the Skardu human landscape offers a representative portrait of Baltistan as a whole, although perhaps the Skardu district is less homogeneous in terms of ethnicity (Tibetan), language (Balti) and
religion, than the eastern part of Ghanche, where the Nurbakhshis dominate, along with Shias.

Language and ethnic and religious affinities are also shared with the other side of the LoC, especially in the Kargil area of Ladakh, on the Indian side. However, while the inhabitants of Kargil are seen by people from Skardu as part of their own cultural ethos, the broader region of Ladakh is perceived as more distant, mainly because of religious differences (given the predominance of Buddhism there) and cultural issues derived from these differences, such as the use of Tibetan script and vocabulary of Tibetan origin in the language as opposed to an ‘Urdufied’ or ‘Persianed’ Balti. Acknowledgement of these differences is also reflected in the political dimension when views are expressed about ‘the other side of the border’ in relation to the disputed nature of the boundary. For instance, many in Skardu opine that Kargil people ‘are like us’. Thus, the multicultural social landscape of the border area, part of an objective shared borderland, shows the existence of other socio-spatial boundaries that are intertwined in various and complex ways. These do not necessarily coincide with general ‘static’ understandings of the conflict, in this case the reference to ‘Kashmir’, based on territorial, historic or identity aspects.

The Impact of the India–Pakistan Conflict at Local Level

Visible scars of conflictive and alienated border areas (gutted houses, soldiers deployed in the streets, propaganda, etc.) are not evident at first glance in Skardu town, but a closer look at the history of its inhabitants reveals definite episodes of confrontation between India and Pakistan and their impact on local populations near the LoC. For example, elderly people who moved in from neighbouring Ladakh in 1947 still live in town. Before Partition, they were mostly involved in trading activities. There is also a settled community of families in the southern part of the urban centre. These people, whom some locals refer as to ‘refugees’, moved from their villages in Chorbat La area in 1971, once the Indian forces took over that territory as a result of the third India–Pakistan war. In addition, some families from the Siachen area moved to Skardu after conflict erupted there in the mid-1980s. More recently, two relatively new colonies were established in the outskirts of the town as a consequence of the 1999 Kargil conflict. The latter are made up of petty farmers who previously inhabited the areas located just off the LoC on the Pakistani side. Apart from these groups, some scattered families live in Skardu who are not necessarily from Baltistan but from adjacent areas such as Astore or Diamir. Some of them are headed by widows whose husbands used to work as porters for the army and who died as a result of crossfire episodes in the last three decades.
Conflict-related migration in Skardu seems difficult to address and is sometimes minimised by social agents who argue that people tend to move to town from border sites because of the economic opportunities and the possibility of a better life, as a representative of a local NGO has suggested. Sometimes this can indeed be a motivation, but it is not always the case. During group interviews, women who had migrated from the border villages near Kargil (on the Pakistani side) as a result of the 1999 conflict, particularly stressed their preference for their former lifestyles, as opposed to the current lives they were leading in Skardu. While they recognised that their children had better educational facilities in town, their economic lives were substantially altered for the worse. As an example, the women pointed to the fact that now they were working as labourers for other families for paltry salaries whereas before, in their former villages, they had worked for themselves.

It is not clear whether inward migration from border sites is voluntary, encouraged or forced. This aspect was not openly explored during the fieldwork but there seem to be indications that situations vary according to army security and strategic needs. At times, the permanence of the local population on border sites can be encouraged for various reasons: for example, the army might persuade people in a sensitive territory to remain there as a proof of its control (however, these locals could be real hostages when fighting takes place); or the army might wish to use civilians as a source of labour. At other times, military needs may require seizure of land, participation in military campaigns and even fighting, all of which would encourage forced displacement.

However, the government of Pakistan, or more specifically the army, has brought significant improvement to border villages and has an interest in keeping the population there. In group interviews conducted with people displaced from the border areas, especially those from the vicinity of Kargil, it became clear that the conflictive scenario in which they were living was the main reason for their decision to abandon their houses or livelihood and to move to Skardu. Intensive shelling, the need to spend periods in bunkers when fighting was going on, the problems of attending to and collecting crops and the Indians cutting off irrigation channels (during the Kargil conflict) were among the main reasons cited for taking the decision to move.

The scars of interstate conflict significantly define the contours of the social landscape of border towns. They also provide useful information on how conflict is perceived by the population, in this case as a confrontation between the Indian and Pakistani armies, rather than as a ‘Kashmir issue’. It certainly raises some questions about the perspective and the information that borderlanders have on the conflict for which they are not politically mobilised, but for which they suffer. In this sense, the border area seems to be a place where a regime of silence reigns, in which locals do not have any significant scope for action.
Social Control and Loyalties in Contested Borders

Border people along contested boundaries are dubious nationals; their loyalty to the state is under suspicion most of the time, even where locals take active part in national struggles, as the case of the Gilgit-Baltistan region shows. The conflictive environment worsens this condition because the crucial issues of belonging and self-identification have not been solved. The inhabitants of Skardu do not feel they are part of Kashmir but might reluctantly side with the imposed association with that dispute; they are kept within the Pakistani state but they do not enjoy full citizenship rights. In order to confront this situation of permanent uncertainty the unity of the community is preserved largely through religious forms of social control.

The significant military deployment and the heavy surveillance of the population impose a code of silence on many issues and especially on the manifestations of civilians’ own worldviews. For example, it was not seen as controversial to enquire about people’s opinions on Kashmir, when conducting interviews in Skardu, in trying to understand their views about the ‘other side’ of the LoC. Yet to ask about personal views of Pakistan’s policy for the region and the fact that the Gilgit-Baltistan is not considered a proper part of the state was a sensitive issue. In this sense, the tight social control on the population poses some limitations to openly and freely addressing many problems, especially the state policies that affect them and, in particular, those related to the India–Pakistan dialogue process.

Contrary to what happens in the Kashmir valley and adjacent areas, the people of Baltistan and Ladakh seem to have no say in conversations between New Delhi and Islamabad and have limited agency to raise their own issues. They have been affected by the conflict but have never been involved in violent activities, and have not even articulated political claims on the ‘other side’ of the line, as the Kashmiris of the valley have done. However, so far they have not benefitted from cross-border communication links. Strategic impediments have often been cited for this on both sides.

The army is present in Skardu and the border areas mostly to neutralise or to combat any external threat but also to closely monitor, through intelligence agencies, the local population’s activities, as well as those of foreigners. In fact, beyond the idea that border areas constitute natural sites for spies and the spreading of rumours the reality that seems to dominate on the ground, at least in this case, is that they are places where people do not enjoy the same political and legal rights as other citizens belonging to that state. In that sense, one may consider these places as exceptional territorial sites under specific border regimes.

Although the long-term presence of the army acts as the primary instrument of social control inhibiting possible dissent, it has also a cooperative character that is sometimes seen as beneficial by the local population.
Indeed, the army represents a significant source of employment (as soldiers, assistants, tailors, etc.) and is a body that can defend the local population from possible threats from India. During interviews conducted in August–September 2009 and March 2010, most of the interlocutors underlined the existence of a relationship of ‘mutual respect’, but it is not clear whether this has something to do with the fact that a number of soldiers recruited are now locals. Some interviewees proudly reported that, during the Kargil mini-war, the local population was actively involved in organising food supplies for the troops, thus showing loyalty and support to the army, but they also remarked that there were local soldiers fighting in that conflict.\textsuperscript{47} In any case, the relationship between civil and military forces remains complex and a discernible differentiation exists between the two sides.

In fact, against this security backdrop, it is the religious leadership of Skardu (and Baltistan by large) that is the one responsible for keeping the people together and thus defining the community. The clergy seems to play a moderating role between the military and the civil population,\textsuperscript{48} but mediation is also articulated through the maintenance of rigid religious observance among the population, particularly participation in religious rituals (prayers, accepting legal opinions or fatwas, etc.), the preservation of gender segregation and limitation of women’s role in public, among other things. Until now, this complex social order of civil-military relations has helped Skardu, and to a certain extent Baltistan, to escape the endemic problems of sectarian violence that affect the rest of Pakistan and, more concretely, the neighbouring area of Gilgit. Paradoxically, this seems to reinforce the sense of belonging to a community in which the contours of political identity appear highly debated or problematic, if not directly schizophrenic. In this sense, the proximity of the international boundary, where the boundary is located,\textsuperscript{49} and its conflictive character can be seen as constitutive of specific socio-political orders.

A Society in Transformation

Despite the codes of silence that reign there, border towns are not merely static places located on the periphery of states but areas that cannot escape larger transformations happening at the state level or in the region. An overview of Skardu shows a society at an early stage of its socio-economic transformation from a traditional self-sustainable agrarian society to a more service-consumer oriented society. There is an increasing growth of population attracted by the possibility of finding jobs in the administration or public sector,\textsuperscript{50} non-profit sector and also in tourism. As a result, economic activities such as construction for business purposes (mostly in the touristic sector) have become more noticeable. Communications have also improved significantly since 2007, when internet access and the use of mobile phones became operational. In addition, the widely visible presence
of schools, mostly private, points to an important change for a region which had very low literacy rates just one decade ago.\textsuperscript{51} The spread of education also brings implicit cultural changes, such as the diffusion of Urdu and English in the instruction and thus the perception of these two languages as being more ‘refined’ as compared with Balti and thus becoming the guarantors of socio-economic mobility.\textsuperscript{52}

Skardu can be still regarded as a relatively isolated area, whose expectations for development (economic, political and cultural) are restricted by its condition of being a town near a disputed boundary. The communication infrastructure with the rest of Gilgit-Baltistan and Pakistan is poor, and this indirectly imposes restrictions on trade development as well as the possibility of establishing small industries due to high costs and distant markets. Only tourism has developed Skardu into a popular venue for foreign mountaineering, and this activity helps to employ local skilled workers and some educated youth as translators and guides as well as developing the wider tourist sector.

Attempts to end the relative isolation of this territory and to connect it with the wider Himalayan region seem to be under way. In 2009, Pakistani Prime Minister Y. Gilani announced the upgrading of Skardu airport to international level, allowing a flight connection with Katmandu,\textsuperscript{53} with the aim of linking important sites of mountaineering tourism. Despite its clear economic aim, if the measure finally materialises it can also be seen as a first step to ending the imposed cutoff of Baltistan traditional ties with the Himalayan–Tibetan milieu.\textsuperscript{54} The upgrading of the airport may also benefit some local entrepreneurs and indirectly help local inhabitants to develop a cultural affiliation, already at work and promoted by some local individual and groups,\textsuperscript{55} with other Himalayan peoples as part of a shared sense of belonging to the Tibetan-Buddhist past.

Another issue concerns the improvement and development of certain major infrastructure projects such as the rebuilding by Chinese companies of the Skardu–Karokoram highway link, which is expected to start in the near future,\textsuperscript{56} and the construction of major dams in the Gilgit-Baltistan region. Although these dams are not located in Baltistan, they might have implications for the mobility of the local workforce. In fact, plans for the Diamer-Basha dam remain highly controversial because of the potential effects on both the environmental and human landscape. This project has resulted in a displacement of population: some people from the affected areas have already moved to Baltistan. Also, the arrival of a workforce tens of thousands strong from other parts of Pakistan (probably Sunnis Muslims) may alter the fragile population balance in the area, especially if they settle there.\textsuperscript{57}

The ongoing development and infrastructural activities taking place in the area suggest re-territorialisation processes in which old and new symbolic meanings are being developed to acquire tangible forms, thus reshaping the region’s human and material landscape. Within these processes, Kashmir can
represent only one reference among others (Xinjiang, Tibet, etc.). In short, the challenges faced by a border town such as Skardu, located in a disputed territory, are many. On the one hand, the conflictive character of the area imposes on the local population a strong imprint of silence, if not fear, to state agents’ activities there, even when loyalty to the Pakistani state seems not to be in question. On the other, the changing scenario in a multitude of directions (changing the educational environment and its implications on culture, developmental activities and building of major infrastructure projects presented as politically unproblematic, movements of inward and outward migration) demands responses from the local population.

CONCLUSIONS

The examination of the social landscape of Skardu town, in relation to the legacies of the Kashmir dispute and the status of Gilgit-Baltistan and the Pakistani state, questions the commonly assumed macro-narratives associated with the dispute. The geopolitical imaginary of ‘Kashmir’ has led to a great sense of ambiguity for the local population living in the proximity of the LoC. It contradicts their own historic experiences during the colonial period and the subsequent Partition. Although past ties with that region are not denied, the whole dispute has been imposed on them from above, mainly from the Pakistani military-bureaucratic establishment, causing a great sense of frustration and uncertainty.

Being part of the Kashmir conundrum has implied for the inhabitants of the region the absence of a socialisation in the Pakistani state, since the latter does not consider them as full citizens, thus limiting their possibility of making claims based on political, legal and economic issues, among others. The control of the population by the state elites, mainly the military, has happened through the exercise of both despotic and paternalistic power. This power has been legitimated by security discourses articulated around the existence of an external threat, India and the Kashmir problem, and thus ignoring the lack of institutionalisation of the state for not integrating the region. The aim has been to conciliate the state claims on the whole of Kashmir while at the same time accommodating a local population which so far has not developed any autonomist leanings.

Yet, more than separation or differentiation from the other side, the proximity of the Line of Control has created a particular social order in the borderland marked by ambiguity and uncertainty. However, to counter this ambivalent situation, the existence of the provisional boundary has caused other group ties and cultural affinities to emerge at the local and regional level. These ties and affinities can be partially related to the process of bordering but also to a reaction to this context of uncertainty in which belonging and group affinities need to be assured. The case of Skardu as a border
Skardu and the Kashmir Dispute town in the Kashmir borderland highlights that issues of power, control and intervention by state institutions and other actors play an important role in shaping forms of self-identification of border people. This reality questions the predicament of the obsolescence of the state and its territorial markers.

Moreover, the significant infrastructural and development transformations taking place in Gilgit-Baltistan hint at territorialisation processes with the potential to impact the Kashmir borderland in various ways. The LoC remains an unsettled boundary but it divides peoples who, although they might have shared historical experiences, do not see themselves as part of a unique culture. Within this context, the possible opening of the LoC for mobility might be a referent for some groups, but not necessary for others whose intentions and expectations lie somewhere else.

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NOTES


17. A notable exception is the columnist Ali Aziz Dad, who regularly publishes on issues of Gilgit-Baltistan in the Pakistani press.


22. This is a rather controversial issue. While the Government of Pakistan officially maintains that the territory is disputed on the grounds it was part of the former Princely State of Jammu and Kashmir, on certain occasions it has been ambivalent and Islamabad’s policy has been to progressively integrate the region into Pakistan, if with certain restrictions. The ambivalence rests on the assumption that only some parts of the now Gilgit–Baltistan would be disputed, while other areas could be considered as full Pakistan territory because at the time of Partition some former local elites agreed to the integration with Pakistan. For instance, the letter sent on 8 May 2007 by the Pakistani Ambassador to Baroness Nicholson on her report ‘Kashmir: Present Situation and Future Prospects’ notes that ‘the whole of Northern Areas, which include Gilgit–Baltistan with Pakistan Agency was not part of Jammu and Kashmir State in August 1947’ and that the ‘UNCIP resolutions are relative to the State of Jammu and Kashmir and do not, in any manner, apply to any part of the Northern Areas which were not included in the State of Jammu and Kashmir before 1947. From this perspective, integration of the Northern Areas with Pakistan is also not prohibited.’ See also, European Parliament, P6_TA (2007)0214, European Parliament resolution of 24 May 2007 on ‘Kashmir: Present Situation and Future Prospects’ (2005/2242(INI)). Also, Aziz Ali Dad, ‘The Case of Gilgit–Baltistan is Different’, in *Kashmir Affairs*, available at <http://www.kashmiraffairs.org/aziz%20ali%20dad%20case%20of%20gilgit%20baltistan%20is%20different.html>, accessed 7 June 2010.


27. See Sökefeld (note 16) p. 959.


32. These interviews were conducted in the first two weeks of September 2009, during fieldwork in the region.

33. During the government of Z. A. Bhutto, the area was declared as tax free and subsidies were introduced on some basic products for a period of thirty years that was later extended, and therefore, still in force.


36. Interview with the District Attorney, Mr. Gulam Abbas Chopa, Skardu, 25 March 2010.


38. See Hasnain Sengge Thsering, ‘The Linguistic and Cultural Diversity of Kashmir: Baltistan’s Tibetan Links’, *South Asian Voice: Views from South Asia* (Sep. 2003), available at <http://india_resource.tripod.com/baltiyul.html>, accessed 24 June 2010. On this topic, different meetings were also held with Mr. Kazmi, Abbass and Mr. Yosuf Hussain Abadi, who kindly discussed with the author the sociolinguistic map of the area.


40. Although the third major war between India and Pakistan erupted because of the crisis in East-Bengal (today Bangladesh), it was also fought along the cease-fire line in Kashmir. As a result, India gained some territories in the Ladakh–Baltistan eastern tract (Turtuk, Chulunka and Tyasik) that were never returned. This is a different situation from the position that developed in the Kashmir valley/AJK tract, where Bhutto and Gandhi agreed, during the negotiations at Simla, to go back to the positions of the 1949 ceasefire agreed line.

41. Interview held with a widow of a former porter who died in an episode of Indo-Pakistan confrontation, Skardu, 2 Sep. 2009.

42. Land grabbing by the army constitutes a source of concern that has been addressed in some interviews, even with people from the bureaucracy, but that cannot be openly questioned.


44. Mr. M spoke about events preceding the Kargil operation, events that were referred to by some other local interlocutors. His account reveals local disapproval of military-orchestrated activities along the border. He said that in the months before Kargil started, some ‘outsiders’ (it is not clear if they were Kashmiris) came to live in town, presumably for training. Some stayed in rented apartments, while others may have been in military areas (the narrator could not confirm this when asked about how many men came to Skardu). What happened was that some locals rented their apartments to them, but these men’s behaviour was soon under question. They were ‘noisy’ and ‘disrespectful’ towards locals and they used to roam around in town with their jeeps at a great speed. Apparently, an incident happened between one of these men and a local old lady who had rented an apartment to them. It seems the man...
threatened her when she asked him to leave the place. News of the incident spread quickly and the locals openly protested, requesting the army to make the ‘outsiders’ leave the place. Eventually, these supposed militants abandoned the town (interview, 26 March 2010).

45. For example, during my interviews I came across the importance of rumour in the perceptions of ‘outsiders’ and the wider world. I myself had to understand my position in this as an ‘angrezi’ which meant more than being identified as a ‘foreigner’. A curious anecdote emerged when some locals tried to explain to me why they did not openly talk to ‘outsiders’. In 2004 a rumour spread in town following the two visits of a high-ranking American official to the Deosai plains, an uninhabited plateau of 4,000 metres close to the Indian border and also not far from China. It was believed that the American military was about to occupy the Deosai to watch Chinese activities in the area.


47. They mainly referred to the Northern Light Infantry. The recruitment of locals in the army is also referred to in Stöber (note 29) p. 398.

48. Several interviewees have reported the role of mediator played by the religious leaders in moments of local unrest. For instance, during an episode of sectarian violence in Gilgit in 2005 that also spread to Skardu, certain local youths were imprisoned by the army. A section of the population grew angry and demonstrated in the streets to ask for the release of the boys. Apparently, the religious leaders interceded with the army and the problem was finally solved.


50. The Pakistani administration is the main employer in the area. This seems to be a common feature of the entire disputed area between India and Pakistan.


52. Sengge Tsering (note 38). Attitudes toward language were also explored in the interviews because language is a powerful instrument of power that can shape identity.


54. A similar policy seems to be taking place in the Gilgit region, after the demands of local trade associations to lift impediments and to facilitate trade with the neighbouring region of China. Northern Areas Chamber of Commerce & Industry, Gilgit (NACCI), ‘Proposal for the Economic Development of the Northern Areas’ (n.d.); Pakistan Peoples Party, ‘The Last Hope of Gilgit-Baltistan’. Both documents were signed by Mr. Shehbaz Khan, advocate, former president of PPP in Gilgit and Chairman of the NACCI.


56. At the time of research, the Chinese virtually stopped their reconstruction of the Karakoram highway because of security reasons, except for some areas in Gilgit. The enlargement of the Skardu–Gilgit road is expected to start once the highway work is completed. Interestingly, the Chinese government has also expressed its interest in linking Xinjiang and Gilgit by rail, a rather controversial project.

57. Interview with the spokesman of the Marafi Foundation, Skardu, 8 Sep. 2009. This NGO is active in providing vocational training to workers involved in these projects.