

CONVERSATIONS WITH THE EARTH



Leaving Home

A Himalayan village confronts the spiritual reckoning of climate change

Little can tear at the heart more than the decision to abandon the place of your ancestors. But as a Himalayan glacier melts above them, pragmatic Zanskari farmers and pastoralists have decided to uproot their 1,000-year-old village beside a now-drying stream. In the absence of drastic reductions in greenhouse-gas emissions, their decision may foretell the fate of millions of people dependent on high-mountain water everywhere, from Pakistan to California. To those populations, the villagers offer striking lessons: acknowledge your vulnerability, act decisively, keep the spirits of the old place with you, rebuild with cheerful resignation (and passive solar houses)—and above all, take responsibility for the impact of your way of life, before more damage is done.



Photographer: Nicolas Villume
Captions: Jonathan Mingle
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Rising above the Zanskar Valley, the peaks of the High Himalaya catch the northern edge of the subcontinent's monsoon clouds, receiving snowfall that replenishes glaciers and snowfields. These frozen sources seasonally release water to the valley below, where it irrigates the fields of subsistence-farming communities like Kumik, population 200. But over the past century, the average temperature in the northwest Himalayan region has increased by double the amount of the global increase. And in recent decades, that super-heating has caused shrinking glaciers, erratic snowfall, more precipitation falling as rain, and earlier spring melt. In Kumik, the local stream is often drying up by late summer, the critical time before harvest. "Without water there is no life," said Tsering Motup, a schoolteacher in Kumik.



Zanskar mountain chain, India



Ishay Paldan | Kumik, Zanskar, India



Kumik, Zanskar, India

The act of securing water is one of the fundamental daily rhythms of a Zanskari village. Family members of all ages, male and female, help gather water throughout the year and irrigate in the summer. Over the centuries the people of Kumik ("Kumikpas") have created

informal institutions to manage and distribute water fairly throughout the village. Each household has a period to irrigate certain fields. The traditional rules are unwritten, but cooperation is well choreographed; everyone knows their time and allotment.



Stenzin Namgyal | Kumik, Zanskar, India



Tsewang Rigzin's family | Kumik, Zanskar, India

Though formal village- and household- leadership roles are filled by men, Zanskari women participate vocally in all Kumik's decisions and run the central unit of Zanskari society—the household. But now, as more men seek jobs outside the village, mostly in the government, the military, and tourism, women are playing an ever-larger role in the village economy. Because they perform and direct much of the daily work of



Miss Stobdan, wife of Phuntsog | Kumik, Zanskar, India

Faced with the pressures of drought, the Kumikpas vigorously debated whether to relocate the entire village to a candidate site. The headmaster of the village primary school, Phuntsog Stobdan, noted that many younger villagers were enthusiastic about moving closer to the main road, thus to the modern development in the valley's main town. But other residents were reluctant to uproot. "The older people think Kumik is the perfect village," said Tsewang Rigzin, an agricultural official from Kumik, "because it is close to the mountains, there is grazing for the animals, plenty of fuel." In the end, the community came to a firm conclusion: they would start over on the plains below, near the Zanskar River.

Kumik has an entrepreneurial streak to draw on. Twenty years ago, mason Stenzin Namgyal outfitted his house with a special masonry-and-window system to capture solar energy and to heat living space, and he aims to improve on the method when constructing his house at Kumik Yogma (Lower Kumik). Some villagers talk of building a new lhakhang, or temple, in the new village and perhaps even a solar-powered community hall. "With a systematic design," said agricultural official Tsewang Rigzin, "the new Kumik could be a model for the region." The government donated the land, but is providing almost no other assistance. "If somebody wants to build a solar room, but he does not have enough money," one of Namgyal's neighbors said, "then he can borrow some from friends or relatives. We will help each other."



Tsewang Rigzin's grandmother | Kumik, Zanskar, India



Kumik, Zanskar, India

Over the next several years, the villagers of Kumik will abandon the carefully tended fertile plots of their centuries-old terraces for the uncertainty of a few hundred acres of rock-strewn plateau. Each family will build a new home and till virgin fields in Lower Kumik near the Zanskar River. Although also fed by shrinking glaciers, the Zanskar will supply water more consistently and for much longer than Kumik's current stream. But nobody knows whether the villagers' ancient water-sharing traditions will survive in the hands of the youngest generation. They know only that a communally built canal will steer the river into what is now an open, dusty expanse—and that they must leave a "happy and green" village, said Tsering Motup. "I feel the same sadness as a young girl who marries into another family, and has to leave her home."

Many villagers believe that they themselves have brought on the drought. They believe that the lha, the spirits of the place, are unhappy that some Kumikpas are praying less and focusing more on material things, especially since the relatively recent arrival of roads and summer tourists. A shrine in a willow grove above the village commemorates the founding of the community, when the spirits of the valley were bound in a reciprocal relationship with its human inhabitants. The people's acts of respect for the land would renew the ancient compact with the lha, who would respond in kind by blessing villagers' efforts with prosperity, fertility, abundant snow, and strong sunshine to melt it. "The lha are punishing people for behaving badly," said schoolteacher Tsering Motup. "That is why the snow and water are not coming."



Lower Kumik, Zanskar, India

The starkness of their new surroundings serves to highlight the challenges faced by the next generation of Kumikpas. The seemingly lifeless plain of Lower Kumik (Kumik Yogma) will demand copious water, inputs of organic material, and careful husbandry if it is to yield barley, buckwheat, and vegetables. The complex functions and meanings woven into the homes and fields of the old village over the course of a millennium will have to be

re-created, or reinvented, within a decade's time. When their homes in Kumik Yogma are finished, these young Kumikpas will be even closer to the market economy mushrooming in the main town of Padum. And what about those spiritual partners and protectors, the lha? "We will perform many prayers asking the lha to make life happy below," said village elder Ishay Paldan. "We will take the lha with us."