



Waiting for ghosts

written by Callum Pearce

April, 2024



I am walking along a road on the outskirts of Leh town, in the Himalayan region of Ladakh. It is October, just past the turn from summer to winter, and after dark. Ahead of me is a *lamsum*, a junction where three roads meet. The road to the left leads into town, while the one ahead goes to the nearby army camp. To my right, I can just make out the oblong shapes of mud-brick *romkhang* ('corpse houses') scattered across the hillside rising up from the road: hollow cremation platforms used in funerals, which mark out this spot as the local cremation ground. It is the precisely the kind of place where, people say, you might meet a ghost.

'Ghost' is the English word Ladakhis use, like the Hindi *bhūt*, to gloss the catch-all term *lhande*: 'god/demon,' a phantom, spirit, monster, any strange and



unwelcome thing that has not yet been identified. ‘Ghost’ is used to refer both to the more specific *shinde* (a spirit of a dead person), and to the various named classes of demon and spirit known to Ladakhi ritual specialists. These beings are never deliberately invoked through ritual possession, but they are routinely implicated in accidents, cases of inexplicable illness and misfortune. When things go wrong, the response from Buddhist Ladakhis usually involves targeting the spirits involved: when livestock fall ill, or people suffer from anxiety or low spirits, or someone has a sudden stroke, or a bus full of pilgrims veers off the road and crashes, or a village is struck by a rash of suicides.

The process of healing starts with the identification of the entities responsible, whether by diagnosing an attack by a broad category of demon or by locating and naming the shinde of a specific person.

These experiences of misfortune often begin in strange encounters. Illnesses and accidents are traced back to glimpses of odd things in the dark, inexplicable sightings or sounds that could be meetings with *lhande*. Certain places appear again and again in these accounts: isolated groups of *chorten* (Buddhist monuments, *stūpa*), cremation grounds, crossroads and *lamsum*. Not all encounters at such places lead to disaster, but strange experiences at night are marked out if they are followed by sudden accidents or illness. Nor is everyone equally susceptible to sightings of ghosts: those who are nervous or fearful, who suffer from lower *sparkha* (vitality, life-force), are more likely to see or sense such things. Ladakhis talk of *namstok*, a kind of doubt or suspicion that has material effects: eating from a dish that you fear to be dirty or polluted can make you ill, even if there is nothing wrong with the food itself. Fearing harm causes harm; fear produces monsters.

A few nights before, I was sitting in the kitchen with the family I had been staying with in Leh when they told me how their cousin had fallen victim to ghosts—or to his fear of ghosts—while driving at night outside the town. He had been on the road leading southeast through the Leh valley, passing the nearby village of Shey,



when he turned a corner and came by a cremation ground off the side of the road. His car had stalled suddenly, to his horror, briefly stranding him at a place known as a haunt for *shinde*. When he had finally managed to drive back home he collapsed, waking the next day with a debilitating fever that left him bedridden for a week.

There was general consensus that *something* had happened, beyond mere coincidence, but no-one seemed sure whether he had actually encountered *lhande* or *shinde* or whether his fear had somehow affected the operation of the car and brought on the fever. The distinction seemed almost irrelevant: there is little to distinguish a real ghost from the apprehension of a ghost. This attitude may reflect Buddhist understandings of the illusory, phenomenal reality of spirits, which are characterised as little more than fleeting sense-impressions with no fundamental existence. What you fear may not be there, but it can still harm you if you sense it.

The man himself walked in halfway through the explanation of this story, and looked thoroughly embarrassed as his cousins gleefully described how his fear had made him ill. But I was left wondering:

if the existence of ghosts is bound up with the feeling of fear, and with the feeling of being in a place that might be haunted, how can you understand the role spirits play in Ladakhi society without experiencing those feelings?

Anthropologists working on similar topics have often tried to approach visionary and shamanic experiences from the inside through active participation in ritual, by becoming apprentices to healers or by inducing states of possession aided by music and hallucinogens (see Peters 1981, Pierini, Groisman and Espírito Santo (eds) 2023, Stoller and Olkes 1987, Taussig 1987). These auto-ethnographic projects have tended to privilege extraordinary experiences: trying to inhabit the perspectives of specialists who leave their bodies to bring back lost souls, or commune with spirits, or gain access to insights from another world. But what about the very ordinary experience of living with spirits? Ladakhis encounter



ghosts in mundane places, while walking along the road at night. This requires no special training, no ritual or trance-state. In principle, the experience should be as accessible as any other.

So: I am walking past a cremation ground at night, not exactly trying to meet a ghost but trying to feel what it might be like to fear meeting one. I walk the way I have been told I should walk: I keep my eyes fixed on the road ahead, watching for anyone coming in the other direction and averting my gaze from the *romkhang* to my right. I stay on the path, keep to the left of *chorten* when I pass them, and avoid looking too closely into the shadows.

But it isn't working. The night feels empty. I cannot convince myself that there might be anything there. I feel nothing following me, no sense of hidden presence. I am less worried about spirits than I am about Leh's unchecked packs of stray dogs—which take over the streets every night, barking and fighting through the early hours of the morning—and I am preoccupied by thoughts of how far I should walk before turning back. The exercise feels contrived. In Ladakhi accounts, people run across *lhande*—or things that might, later, be interpreted as *lhande*—unexpectedly, when they are rushing home in the dark or taking an unfamiliar short cut. But I am not really going anywhere. My purpose in being on the road at night is entirely unlike that of a local person:

I am seeking out something that Ladakhis try to avoid, directing attention towards a topic that is normally only relevant when things go wrong.

Others have commented on the apparent absurdity of exercises like this. Desjarlais, pursuing his own apprenticeship with a Yolmo *bombo* (a shamanic practitioner) in the Helambu region of Himalayan Nepal, describes his frustration with his attempts to understand experiences of shamanic trance from the inside. After recording his own 'trance visions,' he turned to his mentor— Meme Bombo, 'grandfather shaman'—to ask for guidance:

"Meme," I asked him one day as we basked in mountain sunshine outside his



home, “these visions I have, of caves, tigers, and elfin creatures, what do they mean?”

“Nothing,” came the reply, “you only see lightning flashes in the dark, as when a man is knocked on the head” (Desjarlais 1992: 16).

Desjarlais suggests that his visions are nothing but a ‘loose hodgepodge of unsystematized sensations,’ a meaningless ‘montage’ of images with no ritual relevance (*ibid.*: 15-16). He concludes that his own cultural background has shaped his experiences of trance to such an extent that meaningful Yolmo vision states are inaccessible to him; ‘one cannot adopt cultures as readily as one puts on clothes.’ The exercise may not be totally pointless—it may enable a kind of ‘conversation between cultures’ in which the ethnographer learns to confront unfamiliar patterns of embodied behaviour—but it cannot grant direct understanding of what a Yolmo *bombo* experiences (*ibid.*: 17-18). The ethnographic project is driven by the impulse to render the unfamiliar familiar, to rationalise what may initially appear irrational. This rests on an implicit faith that all topics are, in principle, amenable to translation and explanation; but grappling with spirits and visions can lead the ethnographer into confrontations with a fundamental, irresolvable absurdity.

In a sense, though, my failure to feel anything was already accounted for by Ladakhi understandings of *lhande*. Unlike encounters with the deities invoked in ritualised performances of spirit possession, a meeting with a ghost is fundamentally an unexpected event: it is a rupture in normality, not an ordinary part of everyday life. No-one normally expects to come across a ghost on the road, even if they feel a chill of fear when passing a cremation ground. People exchange stories of encounters precisely because such things are out of the ordinary, and because they only happen to certain people. From a Ladakhi perspective, I was not likely to be one of those kinds of people: the lack of fear I felt towards ghosts was taken as a sign of high *sparkha* that would protect me against harmful sensation. ‘You don’t have to worry about *lhande*,’ my hosts would tell me, ‘but we do.’



*Yet even when describing their own fear of ghosts, Ladakhis treat the topic as ridiculous, even absurd: the existence of *lhande* is widely regarded with doubt, while those who are overtaken by their own fear—like the cousin whose car stalled outside Shey—become objects for jokes and teasing.*

Ghost stories are a popular form of entertainment on winter nights in Ladakh, as in other Tibetan and Himalayan areas, but the accounts exchanged are often laden with irony: exaggerated descriptions of meetings with bizarre things (a dog the size of a horse! A man with three heads!) offered up for enthusiastically sceptical audiences. Stories are picked apart and explained away, though the possibility remains. These ghosts are essentially ambiguous: treated as both unreal and threatening, ridiculous and fearful. Their tenuous existence is grounded entirely in personal experiences, and in accounts of such experiences: in stories of things one's neighbours and relatives might have met at night, and in one's own vague apprehension of presence. But for most people, they are only known at second hand.

In a sense, then, as I walk down the road at night, there is nothing to experience. Unlike the vision states accessed by Yolmo *bombo*, the presence of *lhande* has no positive reality: ghosts are always elusive, impossible to pin down, met as things only felt or glimpsed out of the corner of one's eye. As a topic, they are laughable; it is only when they become implicated in illness or disaster that they become a serious concern. Accounts of meetings with *lhande* are always questionable, always open to contradiction. They are encountered through sightings, sounds or feelings that can invariably be explained away by others: just a dog on the road, or the wind in the trees, or the effect of an excessive fear of the dark. And for most people, they are not even that. Spirits are 'fundamentally vague entities' (Schlemmer 2009: 105). As you focus on them, they fade into nothing. They are not concepts, not graspable by thought.

To walk along the road at night trying to feel the presence of spirits—or just the possibility of presence—is, then, an absurd exercise. It is an attempt to inhabit



something that barely exists for Ladakhis: a sense of suspicion, a feeling of something that disappears as soon as you focus on it. This is not, I think, simply the problem of cultural baggage identified by Desjarlais—though my background and assumptions no doubt play a major role in shaping my response to the situation—but a testament to the nature of the topic itself. Ghosts thrive on suspicion and on doubt, emerging on the edges of vision and dwelling in zones of uncertainty. They appear only when they are unexpected, only where they are unwanted. Their presence is dispelled by attention; to seek them out is to guarantee you will find nothing at all.

References

- Desjarlais, Robert R. 1992. *Body and Emotion: The Aesthetics of Illness and Healing in the Nepal Himalayas*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Peters, Larry. 1981. *Ecstasy and Healing in Nepal: An Ethnopsychiatric Study of Tamang Shamanism*. Malibu, CA: Undena Publications.
- Pierini, Emily, Groisman, Alberto, and Espírito Santo, Diana (eds). 2023. *Other Worlds, Other Bodies: Embodied Epistemologies and Ethnographies of Healing*. Oxford: Berghahn.
- Schlemmer, Grégoire. 2009. 'Presence in Spirits:' What Spirits Are to the Kulung. *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 1 (145): 93-108.
- Stoller, Paul and Olkes, Cheryl. 1987. *In Sorcery's Shadow: A Memoir of Apprenticeship Among the Songhay of Niger*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Taussig, Michael. 1987. *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.