

**Worshipping with ghosts:  
historical presence in the contemporary landscapes of Shimla's churches**

Overview

In this paper I focus on the way that the landscapes of postcolonial Christian worship in India can act as shock absorbers against the trauma of history. I approach this issue primarily through a narrativization of aspects of my fieldwork with the Christian communities of Shimla, North India.

Shimla is a historically important city (having been the summer capital of British India) and today it is both an important tourist destination and functioning state capital. Shimla's Christians, although a minority in the region are central to the life of the contemporary city and have played a key role in its development. Their centrality flows from the colonial period, through the rupture of independence and into the postcolonial present. Despite this the voices of Shimla's Christians are largely absent from the emerging debates around the Anthropology of Christianity (Coleman 2007, Cannel 2006, Engelke 2007 *et al*), perhaps due to their lack of fit with dominant assumptions about Christianity in India (Caplan 1987, Robinson 2003). However, I will argue that it is precisely because of their ability to complicate the dominant discourse that Shimla's Christians offer important insights. In this paper I particularly focus on the way that Christians in Shimla negotiate issues of faith, postcoloniality, rupture and memory in order to help constitute complex and socially important landscapes of worship.

From Shimla's landscape to landscapes of Shimla

Landscapes are not talked about that much in the ever expanding literature on the anthropology of Christianity. They are even more ignored in literature discussing the anthropology Christianity in India, which has been dominated by discussions of caste and the continuance of indigenous practices post conversion. I therefore begin this paper by opening the idea of the usefulness of a focus on landscape when exploring the Christian communities of Shimla. Although I draw upon important historical material (Buck 1925, Kanwar 2003, Pubby 1996) I am primarily concerned with discussing the Christians that I came to know

during my fieldwork in the region in 2006 and 2009. This is realised by a presentation (accompanied by slides) of information from my field journal, which documents the changing landscapes of Shimla and the way that I became part of those landscapes at the same time as they shaped my being. This also leads to a development of the definition of the term ‘landscape’ that is grounded in wider debates about landscape in both the fields of cultural geography (Wylie 2007) and anthropology (Ingold 200). Secondary outcomes of this initial section include the introduction of the context and extent of my involvement with life in Shimla, the web of personal relationships that I existed within while there and something of the history of the city.

### Focusing on Christ Church Cathedral

Having in the last section spoken about Shimla in general the paper next turns its attention to Christ Church Cathedral in particular. This is the old Anglican Cathedral, which was constructed between 1844–1857 under the supervision of Colonel J. T. Boileau. Today it stands at the centre of Shimla and is both a popular tourist destination and a living place of worship. I introduce the space by describing my first encounter with it, before moving to describe the subsequent relationships that I entered into with both the building and the people who congregated there. This section also raises the issue of the way that the church has outwardly responded to the seeming rupture caused by independence and partition. In particular I dwell upon the way that my awareness of past worship in the space was developed through engagement with the present congregation. In a way that corroborates Ingold’s now classic comments about church landscapes (2000). I show how some of the congregation interpret the traces of past action and connect with the ancestors of the space; however I also suggest that the previously discussed traumatic history of Shimla means that Christ Church is quite different to the church that Ingold evokes in his discussion of a landscape painting.

### Ghosts of Christ Church

Shimla is known to be full of ghosts and many ghost stories are told about the place (Chaudhry 2005). These range from tales of malevolent *churails* to tales of sensing a trace of a presence that dwelt in the space historically. Perhaps not surprisingly most of these ghosts

are British. While not wishing to take away from the importance of the first kind of ghost (Turner 2003) I choose in this talk to instead focus on the second kind, which form significant elements of the landscape. In particular I intend to show how these ghost tales reveal something of the way that contemporary landscapes of Christian worship are understood. In order to accomplish this I present three, short series, of ghost stories told about Christ Church Cathedral.

I begin with a series of ghost stories that were related by an old female, Hindu, resident of Shimla. These show how her understanding of ghosts in Christ Church altered from the earliest ghost stories, which her parents and grandparents related, to the ghost stories she as a child recited, as she played with other children around Christ Church. The stories then further transformed throughout her adult life until, in old age, it came to be that the ghosts from before her life and ghosts of her own life intermingled with each other and notions of the Holy Ghost.

The second series of Ghost stories that I present surround music at Christ Church and were narrated to me by a family of Christians who have been worshipping there since before independence. They begin once more with early ghost stories told by grandparents and move to ghost stories of more recent, postcolonial times. These tales I claim demonstrate a sense of a connection between past and present songs of worship in the church, which is reinforced by the formal pattern of the church's services.

The third series of ghost stories were related to me by a minister at the church who had originally worshipped at the 'native' church on the lower Bazaar. He then moved up to Christ Church after it was handed over to the Church of North India. His stories show how a sense of being in awe of the spirits of the place was gradually replaced by a sense of feeling at home with the spirits.

### Understandings of the past and future of the church

In this final section I move from talking about ghost stories to look more generally at the way that Shimlites understand the landscapes of worship at the town's major churches, which they themselves help to constitute. Here I also move beyond simply talking about Christ Church and draw into the discussion material relating to other major churches in central Shimla. I will explore trends in the way that three groups interrelate with the church space: Shimla's

Christians, Shimlites of other faiths and tourists. While acknowledging the heterogeneity of each of these categories I argue that there are clear trends of understanding, which point to the importance of the church landscapes as a connector with the past. This reinforces Ingold (2000) and Sheldrake's (2001) understandings of church landscapes but is the exact opposite of the trope of disjunction that has dominated recent cross cultural explorations of the anthropology of Christianity (Engelke, and Tomlinson 2007). What is more, the church landscapes in Shimla seem to go beyond simply connecting the past and the present in the way that Sheldrake and Ingold have described and allow for a connection through rupture that is more reminiscent of Lévi–Strauss' notion of the way that cold culture myth operated.

I end with a suggestion that the model I have presented above only captures part of the processes underway in the diverse landscapes of Shimla's churches. There is a burden to sensitively engage with these historic places that some feel detracts from the *real* mission of the church. This feeling was captured by a young Christian when he related to me, during a discussion about one of the Cathedral's ghosts, that there is a sense that 'man has become so ignorant that we don't experience sensitive things of this nature as much anymore.. our ears and hearts are hardened [and] we have become insensitive'.

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