

## 'A YAM BETWEEN TWO ROCKS'

Transcultural Histories of Nepal's Relations with India, China, and Tibet

**Venue:** Conference hall of the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities  
Karlstraße 4, 69117 Heidelberg

**Date:** 27-28 May 2024

**Begin:** Monday, 27<sup>th</sup> May 2024, 9:30

In his political testament, Divyopadeśa (c. 1774), King Prthvinārāyaṇa Śāha poignantly likened Nepal's geopolitical position, wedged between China and India, to that of a "Yam between two rocks" (*duī dhuṅgāko tarula*). This metaphor underscores the intrinsic link between Nepal's political destiny and its neighbors – a sentiment echoed by political analysts and decision-makers to this day. However, within the same text occurs another famous phrase – that of Nepal as the "true Hindustan" (*asala hindustāna*). In demarcation to colonized India, this self-representation upholds Hinduism's central role for the polity, observes the Brahmanical caste order, and zealously restricts foreign influence.

It is this notion of Nepal as the "true Hindustan" that has shaped the country's image as a "fossil" (Mary Des Chene), offering tourists an authentic glimpse into Indian culture and researchers an opportunity to study an India in the making ("Le Népal, c'est l'Inde qui se fait", Sylvain Lévi). The conference takes these tensions as a point of departure to delve into the historical, political, cultural, and intellectual connections between Nepal and the world, especially India, China, and Tibet. Moreover, it seeks to explore moments of conflict, seclusion, and the restriction of exchange resulting from complex entanglements. By investigating the potential of transculturality in understanding specific aspects of Nepal's non-colonized history, the conference simultaneously honors Professor Axel Michaels on the occasion of his 75th birthday. It critically engages with a key term in his scholarly oeuvre, inviting reflection on Nepal's dynamic relationships with neighboring regions in the past and present.

### HEIDELBERG ACADEMY OF SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES

Research Unit, "Documents on the History of Religion and Law of Pre-modern Nepal"

Nepal Heritage Documentation Project

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*Prior registration is strongly recommended*

*Photo: The Gurkha Campaign, painting on silk, China, 1792/93, Völkerkundemuseum vPSt*

Member of the Union of the German Academies of Sciences and Humanities



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HEIDELBERGER AKADEMIE DER WISSENSCHAFTEN

Akademie der Wissenschaften des Landes Baden-Württemberg

Conference  
'A Yam between Two Rocks':  
Transcultural Histories of Nepal's  
Relations with India, China, and Tibet

Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities  
Karlstraße 4  
69117 Heidelberg

P R O G R A M

MONDAY, 27 MAY 2024

09:30 **BERND SCHNEIDMÜLLER | HEIDELBERG**  
Welcome Address

**PANEL 1: HIMALAYAN CROSSROADS:  
NEPAL-TIBET-CHINA RELATIONS AND REGIONAL  
DYNAMICS**

09:45 **AXEL MICHAELS | HEIDELBERG**  
Transcultural turbulences: New Nepalese documents  
on the Sino-Gorkha War of 1791-92

10:15 **FRANZ XAVER ERHARD | LEIPZIG**  
The Tibet-Gorkha War of 1790-92: A Tibetan perspective

10:45 **AYUSHMAN BARUAH | TORONTO**  
The Gurkhas and the making of an informal empire in Tibet  
(1855-1912)

COFFEE BREAK

11:45 **AMISH RAJ MULMI | KATHMANDU**  
The Gyalpo Affair: Himalayan geopolitics at the beginning  
of the 20th century

12:15 **ZEZHOU YANG | LONDON**  
The unrecorded history of Nepal-China relations between  
1910s-1940s

LUNCH BREAK

**PANEL 2: ARTISTIC EXPRESSIONS, MATERIAL  
CULTURE AND RELIGIOUS ENCOUNTERS**

14:00 **NIELS GUTSCHOW | HEIDELBERG**  
Motifs in architecture: How the acanthus leaf from Corinth  
and the airborne wisdom bearer on a Chinese cloud arrived  
in Kathmandu

14:30 **CHRISTIAN LUCZANITS | LONDON**  
Mustang at the crossroads: On the entanglement of monastery  
collections

15:00 **ALEXANDER VON ROSPATT | BERKELEY,  
CALIFORNIA**  
From the periphery to the center: Reflections on how the  
Nepalese Buddhist tradition came to situate itself between  
the Indian motherland and *Mahācīna*

**KEYNOTE LECTURE**

**Venue:** Centre for Asian and Transcultural Studies,  
Building 4010, CATS auditorium HS05 (1. OG),  
Voßstraße 2, 69115 Heidelberg

**CHARLES RAMBLE | OXFORD/PARIS**  
A yam or a sausage? Elastic boundaries, internal exotica and  
other features in the slow coagulation of a nation

Introduction by  
**UTE HÜSKEN | HEIDELBERG**

AFTERWARDS RECEPTION

TUESDAY, 28 MAY 2024

**PANEL 3: ENCOUNTERING THE WEST:  
RELIGIOUS, MILITARY, AND DIPLOMATIC  
ENGAGEMENTS IN NEPAL'S HISTORY**

09:30 **MARIE LECOMTE-TILOUINE | PARIS**  
Distorting Christian presence in pre-modern Nepal

10:00 **ALAKA CHUDAL | VIENNA**  
Why do we fight in the WW1? A response from the Rana  
government and the Gurkhas

COFFEE BREAK

11:00 **MANIK BAJRACHARYA, SIMON CUBELIC  
RAJAN KHATIWODA | HEIDELBERG**  
Sources on Nepal's foreign knowledge and diplomacy in  
the 19th century (reading-in-conjunction)

LUNCH BREAK

**PANEL 4: CROSSING GEOGRAPHICAL AND SOCIAL  
BOUNDARIES IN INDIA-NEPAL RELATIONS**

13:30 **CHRISTOF ZOTTER | HEIDELBERG**  
Transcending borders: Hindu ascetics as go-betweeners

14:00 **MARTIN GAENZLE | VIENNA**  
Nepali Pilgrims in Banaras

COFFEE BREAK

15:00 **MICHAEL HUTT | LONDON**  
Dalit literature in India and Nepal: Questions of authority and  
influence.

15:30 **JOANNA PFAFF-CZARNECKA | BIELEFELD**  
From servants to academics: Trajectories of Nepal's Dalits  
in a comparative perspective

16:00 **MADELEINE HERREN-OESCH | BASEL**  
Concluding remarks

**BOOK LAUNCH AND RECEPTION**

**Venue:** Völkerkundemuseum vPST, Hauptstr. 235, 69117 Heidelberg

**ALBAN VON STOCKHAUSEN | HEIDELBERG**  
Welcome address

**BOOK LAUNCH**

Axel Michaels, *Nepal: A History from the Earliest Times to the  
Present* (Oxford University Press, 2024)

Introduction by  
**DAVID N. GELLNER | OXFORD**

AFTERWARDS RECEPTION