Rendering the House in Ladakh
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On holiday in Ladakh with two of my sons in 2013, I was asked by the older one, ‘What is this doubling here? Why do they have two houses next door to each other which are exactly the same, and why do they leave one empty?’ I shall attempt some sort of answer to this question by looking at developments close to the main town, Leh, since the 1980s.

Introduction
Buddhist Ladakh and the Tibetan-speaking region more generally are often epitomised by their house system. The *tronpa* (grong-ba¹) is ideally permanent and its holdings fixed, in part, by hosting only one marriage each generation. Residential arrangements introduce flexibility through one or more offshoot or ‘small houses’ (*khangun*; khang-chung), holding older and unmarried residents. These small houses ideally revert to the ‘big house’ (*khangchen*) every generation, as their residents pass on.

Figure 1 Illustration adapted from Elementary curriculum for teachers, Leh Nutrition Project (SCF), 3rd ed., 1989 © LNP

Such houses are named. Their residents are known by house names, which are associated with a lattice of obligations and rights that extend beyond the village and across the region. This name indicates, or used to indicate, a determinate position within and among nested orders of relations within the region. It thus guided interaction in relation to known principles that ordered, ranked and enabled navigation of the world. The name was in short a key plank of the social contract between Ladakhi smallholders and ‘the state’, which signalled a place and identity.²

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¹ I have added the Tibetan spelling to a phonetic or conventional rendering of the Ladakhi.
² Analogous processes have been described in the very different context of post-1800 Britain. Patrick Joyce (2013, p.89) emphasises the importance of developments in the
The middle-status Buddhist Ladakhi house has a name that carries you and which you carry in turn, making it comparable to other named persons, as I noted with reference to Levi-Strauss in an earlier piece on houses in the Leh area (Day 2014). Lévi-Strauss (1983, p.174) defined the house, after Schmid, as a corporate body holding an estate made up of both material and immaterial wealth, which perpetuates itself through the transmission of its name, its goods, and its titles down a real or imaginary line, considered legitimate as long as this continuity can express itself in the language of kinship or of affinity and, most often, of both.

The house is a moral person with a name that lasts. Common residence implied strategic attention to the appropriate balance between losing and gaining house members and between in- and out-marriage. House names are placeholders for shifting relations among a home, its people, places and objects, and the name can only continue insofar as it is animated by and embodied in these various parts.

Over the last thirty years, however, household division has become the norm and it is associated with a building boom fuelled by land grants since the 1990s from the then newly autonomous Hill Council. Ladakhis, anticipating ever-smaller holdings, wonder how they will sustain themselves without extensive salaried employment or wages. But, as I show below, they are especially concerned about naming. You cannot readily divide a house name that might have been bestowed by a lama or rinpoche. When Ladakhis partition formally, they are able to hold on to their name for a while with appropriate qualifiers but they cannot imagine how to partition again the next generation. Some will then lose their name and, with this loss, an aspect of their personhood. The spectre of names that change every generation suggests a morass without any habitual paths to follow.

I wonder, therefore, whether minimal and agreed definitions of Ladakhi Buddhist tronpa as named property-holding units that last over time need to be reformulated. I draw on a set of questions posed by Jane Guyer (2014), who asked whether households will become ‘shelter-services, pools for invested human capital, station-stops for sojourners, platforms for innovation, parking lots for “stuff”… and so on?’ I shall argue that households can meet all these ends today, albeit at different times and for different people. You can double the buildings; you can leave a house empty; you can bring people in and let them go.

In the circumstances of routine property division, I am interested in why and how the unity of the household still matters. How far does a household stretch to include members who have moved to the city or elsewhere; how do people manage or stay in two places at once; how is an (apparently) empty house animated and for how long? More generally, I wonder how it is that the house can both represent a historical and

postal service, where ‘addressability’ attached house and person in a new way, folding individual identity into a place and residence in the same way ‘as the folded, and literally “enveloped”, letter’.

3 ‘Personne morale’ is translated here as corporate body; however, the translation ‘moral person’ (see Carsten and Hugh-Jones eds. 1995) is more appropriate to the present context.

geographical legacy that is fixed, so that it appears merely natural or common sense, and also carry forward into what seems to be an entirely new world of speculation, as if for the first time.

I pose these questions of a particular house, which I call Onpo, in a village not far now from the city, Leh. I focus on an empty house (a khangun or ‘small house’) sitting next to its inhabited ‘big house’ (khangchen) in a way that echoes my son’s observation of doubling. I take the perspective broadly of my own generation who I have known since the early 1980s, and especially that of a woman I call Jigmed from the ‘small house.’ Hers will be a specific view as are others belonging to her own or adjacent generations although, as we shall see, such views are inflected by birth order and gender as well as residence. I track her position in the circumstances of a state land registration that required formal recognition of household units, including their land.

In this particular village, the Land Settlement took three years (2008-10) according to the village patwari (accountant or field officer), who was responsible for surveying and agreeing accounts. Although a sense of before and after the settlement as a whole is relevant, the plethora of issues that emerged along the way may turn out to be equally significant. As I hope to show, positions were inconsistent and attuned to circumstances that will no doubt continue to change. In brief, Onpo House was considered a single household or tronpa before the settlement but two afterwards.

The Land Settlement (2008-10)
Villagers were accustomed to the annual and four-yearly adjustments made by the patwari to their property records. But this was a land settlement on a large scale, associated with a National Land Records Modernization Programme (NLRMP), designed to replace the formula introduced or at least regularised in the 1900s. The all-India initiative to modernise and apply a uniform process for registering land since 2008 is not likely to generate revenue in Ladakh as there is no longer any taxation, rent or other dues on people, livestock and produce. It may, however, disambiguate property claims within families, between villages and in relation to the state. According to the Daily Excelsior, a digitized land record promises a much-needed solution to errors and omissions as well as overburdened courts and should provide a less archaic and cumbersome system in response to considerable legislative reforms and other changes. Needless to say, progress has been slow and recent outsourcing

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5 The distance has become much easier to navigate over recent years.
6 I am indebted to the people of Onpo and the village for their help and patience, and especially grateful for their friendship.
7 The patwari for this village kindly spent an hour and a half translating the Urdu for me and discussing developments in 2013 (and any errors in reporting remain my own). I am grateful to staff responsible for records in Leh for their help, including the District Development Commissioner, Saugat Biswas, Naib Tehsildar, Mohd Afzal, and in-charge superintendent, Mohd Elias.
8 Members of this village, however, continue to donate to a monastery at the equivalent of around 15% of yield.
plans promise that Leh records will be computerised in the second phase of the programme, in three years’ time (Daily Excelsior, 30/3/15).

The patwari said that this was the first regular settlement since British times and emphasised that he was preparing the second settlement ever made for the village. Looking through his large ledger, I learned how it was before and how it is now. From the end of the book, he showed what the villagers wanted to have documented about their customs. No sale of land was recorded for this village, and outsiders were now prohibited from clearing land within the village boundaries. From the front of the book, he showed how the name of the eldest brother alone was recorded until 1970, and then the names of all siblings. Since the 2000s, everyone’s names and rights in the family are entered even if they have married elsewhere.

‘Digitizing land record’, editorial posted on 30/12/2014 by the Daily Excelsior. See also updates on 24/03/16 as well as recent reports on the lack of progress in, for example, Early Times (Akshay Azad), 14/12/16. Records have also been lost; for example, one of the two offices holding these land records burnt down.

One patwari dated the only previous comprehensive documentation to 1903 but was most likely referring to the 1909 Preliminary Regular Settlement. Thanks to John Bray for providing me with a copy. Although there is extensive reference to predatory taxation under previous regimes, Hashmatullah Khan (2014/1939) suggests that the arbitrary nature of taxation and proportional adjustments were smoothed out equitably as revenue was increased first under the Dogra, who conquered Ladakh in the mid-19th century and regularized the previous Buddhist system of taxation, and then under the auspices of British officials.

As far as I could tell, this was a recent innovation to the customary law recorded in the relevant section of the current settlement. In addition, an untended graveyard suggested that Muslims were no longer buried in the village. I was told, ‘it is no longer allowed.’
Naturally, there have been many changes. In 1890, according to the Gazetteer, the village held about 20 houses, ‘some very substantial.’ In the 1981 census, it was said to have a population between 300 and 350 in 60 odd ‘households’ with nearly 70 hectares of cultivated land. During the period I have known the village, it has lost cultivated land to a housing boom and three times as many households are now registered in the village. By 2013, according to the patwari, cultivated land was nonetheless over 100 hectares, in large part because of the clearing of wasteland. A public action on the part of government, monastery and villagers also planted 500 kanal (25 ha) with trees. Records suggest that the population has grown in step but these document births, not residence, and reflect the current juggling act of living both at home and elsewhere.

**Onpo House, 2009**

I have known Onpo House since the early 1980s when an elderly widow lived in the small house with an unmarried daughter. Her eldest son was in the main house, his children gone or on the point of leaving for the city. At the end of the century, ‘mother’ passed away; her daughter moved out and the small house stood empty. When I visited in 2009, it was still empty, one of two or three such in the village. The eldest son was still in the main house with his wife and a young female relative who had come to help. You might therefore imagine that the small house had been abandoned and would soon revert to the household in traditional fashion. Most likely,

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12 The counting of houses and households in official records does not necessarily reflect the local practice of counting in terms of a conventional number of estates (tronpa) and, today, it is hard to know which houses (large or small) belong to which estate.
this is what the eldest son (in the main house) - who I shall call Anchuk - assumed. As one of his grandchildren said, ‘he always thought he was the only one [to inherit, as the only resident son] so it was a surprise to him that he didn’t have everything, and now the khangchen have too much work.’ Jigmed, Anchuk’s younger sister, stayed a night or two in the small house every month and she agreed that of course the household was his in the sense that he had been farmer all that time. She and her siblings, including another brother, had left home many years ago apparently for good. Even though circumstances changed for Jigmed and her brother, they had neither returned to, nor registered any property in, the village but continued to visit or commute from Leh.

Let me provide a sense of the situation from the perspective of the small house, and especially Jigmed, before the settlement was discussed. I had not visited the village for many years and, as we approached by car, Jigmed began to talk about the past. Almost as soon as we came through the khangun door, I was asked if I remembered the fire 25 years ago. I did not, but I was reminded when I found notes from the time: we had been sleeping in the main house, and a kerosene lamp fell over in the small house. The main house mother/wife said it was ‘ghosts’ (lhande) and Jigmed agreed that it was some bad thing (nodpa). I was told that we must not get cross with sister in the small house, because she was easily upset.

Jigmed continued in nostalgic vein as she spoke of her childhood summers in the high pastures, in a manner that is common among middle-aged Ladakhis. Villagers had not been to the pastures (phu) since the early 2000s, as few now kept any animals. ‘It took a whole day to get there walking, it is a big phu, quite flat but very beautiful. You find special herbs and flowers. Even the cheese you make or the butter and butter milk taste different. … One time I ran away to the phu to my mother. My brother and I used to look after the goats and collect herbs for tea and a special incense. I watched the lambs and calves, looking out for wolves. I enjoyed that. You know, I can’t sing but in the phu I would sing very loudly and enjoy myself. There are hardly any people there. … Well, we still have some animals.’

Jigmed was a child when she moved from the main to the small house, on the birth of her brother’s own first child. As she said, ‘for me, the biggest thing, the first thing I remember was [that] it was very good to be in the khangun. It was very good even though we didn’t have enough room or even good rooms. … The khangchen was big and proper; whatever you needed it had but we came to the khangun. … We had only one goat and one dzomo [half yak, half cow] that we took with us but still I was very happy. I don’t know why. My mother used to tease me. She would say, Jigmed, if you don’t like it we will go back to the khangchen. But I didn’t want to go, I just loved my khangun.’

The house felt abandoned. We slept on the roof because it was so dusty and I heard more of Jigmed’s childhood; stories from her father, for example, when they used to sleep on the roof about a constellation of stars, mothers and children, only one of which survived. The house was unkempt but required care, I realised, as Jigmed

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13 In fact, they were stuck with a number of aging yak in the high pastures of a nearby village as well as vet bills since it had been decided that it would be sinful to put any of these animals to death.
cleaned and tidied, visited the neighbours and watered the fields. Jigmed had no plans to visit more frequently; her children, she said, would never return. Her brother (the younger of the two, who belonged to the small not the main house) was settled in town and never came. And yet the house acted on visitors, even at a distance, I saw, as one of the grandchildren who lived far away explained how she wanted to repair it. Jigmed had replied, ‘no we won’t do it now... not again until someone lives here, then we can whitewash it too.’ In the meantime, Jigmed continued in her role as caretaker.

Even though most of the village had divided their properties since the 1980s, Onpo House had not. Therefore household members could sustain an undifferentiated sense of belonging to the land, the house and the family. ‘We are one,’ I heard. ‘As a household, we don’t quarrel because we all live separately.’ All the same, on one occasion, there were signs of visitors to the small house in the remains of a cooking fire on the front steps and what may have been a theft of firewood. Jigmed responded at once: her brother, she said, had no need to ask ‘since we are one’ but her expression suggested a rather different story, and she soon told how her father had created the khangun around 1960 or a little earlier; ‘he cleared all the land and none of this (except for one or two fields) has anything to do with the khangchen.’ The now elderly couple in the main house, with just the one young relative to help, worked hard and relied heavily on hired labour. But appropriate and timely labour was hard to find and it turned out that the main house had hosted labour in the khangun. In providing lodgings to migrant workers, the khangun had reverted to the khangchen after all, but in an unexpected fashion. Jigmed said sourly, ‘who knows, perhaps a Nepali or Bihari will move in.’

Figure 4 Signs of a cooking fire on the front steps © Sophie Day

14 This was not the first sign of trouble in 2009 as it was clear on our arrival that the khangchen had been using the khangun threshing floor for brick-making.
One household in some respects, two in others. Members of the large family spread through the region would ask of the *khangun*, still unoccupied most of the time a decade on: who will live there next; will it remain empty; what to do?

**Onpo House, 2011**

I knew members of the Onpo family who lived in Leh, and I learned from a young woman in the town that, ‘It’s like metro now. You have one or two houses in the village and that is where you get your identity from. Then, in town, it is just you. No brothers and sisters.’ This hardly described her own situation and stood rather for the urban predicament as presented in popular thought. And it invited the retort, ‘life would be shorter if you were a farmer. That’s why we are all in Leh.’ Incomers attracted more and more dismay in the city, because ‘we (‘refugees’, *kyampo*; ‘gyampo’) all captured land in Leh and slowly the people from Leh woke up…’ Jigmed explained that Leh people are proud about their money and land but ‘they were sleeping.’ They did not like their land going to outsiders who would rent, borrow and, eventually, own it: ‘The government also allows this: first of all, there was the Housing Colony where you were granted land so you can have 8, 8 kanal. Now they are aware. Leh don’t like *hamsaya* (incomers).’

This exchange with the young Onpo woman ignored salient connections in favour of an urban-rural contrast, and it was city dwellers above all who supported the village home in the 2000s. They gave labour as well as cash and goods: commuters watered and cultivated alongside their rural kin; they repaired land and buildings and delivered dues to the monastery and village. Although wage earners had long supplied rural family homes with cash, rural emigrants in the 1980s had been critical to the support of town houses, which they joined in order to study or work for a wage. They worked hard for their keep.\(^{15}\) The village of concern is accessible to commuters. But, said one, For those of us who come and go, who work in the city, we lose our land. It is captured by others. So we have to think, what is more profitable? It is a shame and dishonourable to leave our grandparents’ place. We should not allow the trees to die. But, I can pay labour and I can bring a machine to cultivate my land so I should not sell it. Nowadays, the government says that they will take back land that is not cultivated but, if other people take your land, you can take them to court. … Even so, when that happens – because court cases can last your whole life – it is better to do *phedpa*, to give half away.\(^{16}\) It depends on the person. You know, many have had their lands taken. Still, it is better that the fields are cultivated. …

In the village, nothing appeared to have changed much in the *khangchen* but the *khangun* was decidedly animated. Still no one lived in the small house; still Jigmed visited once a month. But the kitchen was clean and a new storage system had appeared for provisioning visitors. The water threatening the house foundations had been re-routed and there was no dust. Jigmed explained, ‘we’ll sleep inside. Don’t worry, it’s all different. Our turn to water is on Wednesday and now my brother comes every week.’ With the reinvigoration of the small house, attention turned to the *khangchen* and its ageing residents, now in their eighties. Anchuk’s son, I heard,

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\(^{15}\) Most town houses and urban districts were then organised like rural areas insofar as they grew crops, kept animals and engaged in a diverse domestic economy.  
\(^{16}\) The ‘owner’ and ‘cultivator’ take half the produce each.
could not return because of his city business but maybe his grandson would. A granddaughter wanted to go home to marry but could not imagine how she would make a living. Little by little, the young village relative/helper was nearing the end of her single life and would soon marry. Tiring of the heavy workload, exacerbated in this particular village by the additional duties (labour and a ‘return’ on land) to the monastery, she thought to marry outside rather than bring in a husband.

Accustomed as they were to regular adjustments by the patwari every summer, the heightened atmosphere that greeted the settlement process had led to all sorts of rumours and simmering disputes by 2011. Even though the formal process had scarcely been mentioned, it became clear that no one knew the rules. For example, many villagers understood that it was no longer viable to have a relative cultivating in return for an appropriate share of the produce. A commuting villager explained, ‘if I don’t farm my land but ask my neighbours to look after it, maybe with the alfalfa and watering, then they can say it’s theirs after three years.’ Another villager explained that you could not leave your land bare: ‘if you don’t cultivate your land for six years or so, then the government will reclaim it.’ It became increasingly unclear who worked for whom and how to hold on to what you considered your own. Thus it was that the younger brother visited to water his fields every week in proof of ownership and to defend his land, moreover, from the surreptitious small boundary shifts that occurred day by day.

At the most general level, villagers were troubled by the implications of division, even if they had already partitioned. As one woman explained patiently what I should have known already,

Look, a khangun means that when you have your first child or first children, then the grandmother and grandfather move to a small house with the younger children. They just move. They don’t divide anything. Maybe they take some property, maybe 20% or 25%, but it is not a division. Nowadays, we make a division and we call these shares. Look, before there was just the house and the khangun, there were just two. Now my brother has taken an equal share. We have to call each house by the name of the head of the house and everyone will lose direction. They might use the name of the land, or the name of the person, and no one knows which is the main house. You lose the family history.

And a mother and daughter tried to respond to my question about a newly completed house, which I did not recognise. The older woman said she thought it was a khangun, and continued, ‘Everyone is confused about the proper naming today: we don’t even know which village section it occupies. ‘What is [my khangun] called? And what if my child takes another share, what then? Nowadays we have to call the house by a person’s name and that’s how we lose our identity.’ Her daughter continued, ‘Say you have a fight and you don’t get along, you would start to call yourself something else and just divide. Earlier it was simple as it was always possible to have (keep to) just one khangchen and one khangun … Now there are so many divisions: which is the khangchen; who is the khangun?’ The mother emphasised, ‘some people don’t want to lose their identity’, and her daughter elaborated, ‘there will be so many divisions even in the khangun that there will be a

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17 I have reported this conversation in Day (2015).
different name every generation.’ A divided household, it seems, will continue to partition generation after generation.\textsuperscript{18}

The family were in a quandary. They were unsure how to proceed with registering claims that had been a mesh of customary and formal rights attached to the one family, but potentially associated with two houses as well as many living individuals.\textsuperscript{19} This mesh attracted varied understandings of ownership. Jigmed introduced one solution, short-lived as it turned out, which I heard about from a relative: ‘Just now, the khangun has a Nepali family living there. … They do all the work. …’ The incoming family took half the proceeds, staying in the small house, watering the land and carrying out associated labour obligations such as maintaining the irrigation system. In addition, ‘As they were so strong, they also made money by working for other villagers at 300 INR per day’ I was told by a member of the family that they could also grow vegetables and keep animals if they wanted and send their children to the local school. In their role as landlords, it was suggested that Jigmed’s family might offer to educate one child privately. Soon after hearing this news, I learned that village representatives had collectively decided that no one could hire labour any longer to meet their customary labour requirements. Village residents had clearly decided to punish non-residents but there were as many complaints from residents. Some were so old they could not look after themselves and would be unable to meet village dues. One villager reported,

They said no one can keep Nepali labour for more than a week because not everyone could afford it. But some of us are in Leh and we need the labour. So we ignore this rule and refuse to pay the fines. … Our neighbours [in the village] are old and they had two Nepali workers for more than a week and they were fined 50 INR for each. They said, ‘we look after them; we sent them to school. Who will bring our water? Will you? We won’t pay.’

Jigmed was finding her visits home pointless and costly, and contemplated further expenses so as to maintain possession. She complained, ‘how much can I do alone?’ as she wondered whether to plant and then wall her fields. As she observed, ‘what do you expect if you never go and no-one lives there? Perhaps the khangun will pass to one of Anchuk’s sons, or perhaps a Nepali working in the village.’ One of the Onpo grandchildren explained,

Someone will have to go back or we will lose it, and our identity. The parents aren’t interested; the daughters aren’t so interested either. I might go back one day, for we may lose both our houses and all our village identity if no one returns…. Maybe I could farm but how? All the fields are small and spread out; each would need a stone wall. Even that would take 3 or 4 years to recoup the cost. … If we stay here, how are we going to live? How are we to get money? … There is no one to take care of the children (in the village) any longer. It costs more to farm than what you get from your produce. Ladakh is finished. [Pause.] Maybe all cultivation … will stop.

\textsuperscript{18} Moreover, formal division of households is no longer based on the number of units (houses) but the number of individuals. From the perspective of khangchen residents, it seems unjust that a populous small house might claim the lion’s share if they chose to exercise their rights.

\textsuperscript{19} No one suggested that rights should be extended to two sisters who were still married, nor indeed to another sister who lived with her siblings in town.
By 2013, I learned more about the implications of the settlement. The lands held both jointly and separately for many years had been divided between the two Onpo houses. The brothers were left with more or less the same amount of land that they had been cultivating previously but found it difficult to settle claims to ancestral or ‘family land.’ Family land is much more highly valued than land that has been cleared recently or that you hold on rent; it also supports claims to a state subject record. Jigmed too received a share, including a small portion of family land; ‘They gave me a field that is not very big and not very good but I shouldn’t complain, should I? It is fine and I myself said I needed nothing.’ It turned out that she had registered her portion three years earlier. Jigmed’s brothers had insisted she have something for her children and grandchildren’s sense of identity but, in my understanding, Jigmed fought her corner hard on behalf of those who would follow. As she once reported, ‘the only thing I said, “I don’t care how much I get but it should be from the land of my great grandfather. It was you two brothers who said I had to have something for my children, I don’t want anything.”’

Jigmed continued to express ambivalence towards her family home. At times, she insisted that she would maintain her share as she reflected on unanticipated developments, ‘I used to think that I was the owner because my brother never visited

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20 The *patwari* has to witness birth records back to your father’s father’s father for a state subject record.
21 In 2010, Jigmed formally accepted a field of family land in the settlement; her brother in the small house had another. I was never sure whether this brother, who was seen as the ‘owner’ or head of the small house, because he was older and male, thought she should have given her family land to him.
except at harvest time.’ She would keep the two rooms from the current building that her father had built, and she could always build another house if the khungun divided, as it probably would when her brother’s children married. At other times, her interest waned, ‘I always thought I would come back when I retired. It is good to have elders at home but now my mother has passed away, I have little interest in returning … Perhaps subsequent generations… who knows how all the children will get on.’

Figure 6 The original khungun kitchen, one of two rooms built by Jigmed’s father that now stores dung © Sophie Day

Time will tell whether this particular family settlement will turn out to have been deferred yet again with hindsight or whether the new arrangements will be preserved. Certainly, the land settlement caused re-evaluation of existing arrangements. Thus, a granddaughter from the khungun explained how it had just dawned on her that she never could have built a life at home because of the competing claims within her family. Everyone, she said, had ‘loved me so much’ that she had not appreciated the relevant distinctions of birth order, khungun/khangchen residence and gender. These differences meant, she now appreciated, that this home was never going to be her home. Jigmed too was troubled to learn after the settlement that her brother in the small house had left the phasilha, a local god common to a group of several houses, to which they belonged. He joined his wife’s group (phaspun) which made it appear retrospectively as though he were an inmarrying husband. Jigmed no longer had anyone to attend the group’s funerals or other events on her behalf when she was away.

In the present circumstances, it is likely that members of each unit will try yet again to stretch their existing house to incorporate any new dwellings that are made, continuing with the virtuoso improvisation that makes it possible to hold an estate together for a while despite, indeed, because of competing interests.

**Conclusion**

Ladakhis do not think that the house is as permanent or fixed today as in the past. House partition occurs routinely and, equally routinely, causes dismay; Onpo House
is (or Onpo houses are) doubled and stretched in new ways. The recent Land Settlement framed explicitly longstanding issues about the unity of a household and the circumstances in which shares (including names) can be claimed and rendered viable. Formal codification anticipates demands according to Indian Law, which favour partition and thus have the potential to create friction among co-residents who normally live with the ambiguity that characterises relationships between formal and customary law, law and practice, and different views of the best way forward. Although patwari insisted that they merely ratified existing practices and agreed family and village settlements, they also said that claimants invariably won if they took a case to court on the basis of existing legislation.

The impact of disambiguating and differentiating entangled rights has been recognised widely. The settlement process that I have described may turn out to have promoted a more individualised approach to property but, as I have shown, these implications caused anxiety in the village. During the period of the settlement, the viability of first Onpo khangun and then the khangchen were called into question. No one knew who, if anyone, would go back to live in either house. Moreover, the women on whom I have focused reported a sense of unpleasant marginalisation vis-à-vis men. For example, Jigmed picks up the house keys from her brother on her way to the village and a granddaughter of the khangun, with children of her own, realised – in her view belatedly - that she had few rights to either the big or the small house. Nonetheless, makeshift improvisations kept them all going over these thirty years: commuting; hiring and housing migrant labour; bringing in less wealthy relatives as helpers; pooling and diversifying local production; collaborating to reproduce the village holding and also, at times, abandoning the whole project. Such skilled improvisation is not a new phenomenon even though many spoke as though the integrity of the household had never been called into question previously. Onpo had suffered serious setbacks in the previous generation when Jigmed’s father, the youngest of seven brothers, came to ‘inherit’ Onpo. When he moved out on the birth of a grandchild to the small house, he worked hard clearing and planting land and extending the building but Jigmed spoke as if the khangun had always been there, always the same. These anomalies were smoothed over in retrospect and none of them figured in the recent settlement.

I have asked how it was that Ladakhis both considered the house fixed or beyond question and also carried it forward into what seems to be an entirely new world of speculation, as if for the first time? Although it seems that activities are oriented

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22 See, for example, van Beek (1996, pp. 107-10) on Ladakhi settlements.
23 I should add that I am unsure how many households had small houses in earlier historical periods. Ngawang Tsering Shakspo (1988:34 cited in Phylactou, n.d.) recorded that younger brothers who married separately used to encounter difficulties feeding their wives and children and, in the 1930s, Prince Peter (Prince Peter 1963, p. 355) reported a decline in khangun formation since parents were no longer moving out in their old age.
24 Settlements of course incite speculation in themselves, as the Settlement Officer for the neighbouring area of Gilgit reported in his 1917 Assessment Report. The wazir-i-wazarat added a note to remind contributors, ‘At the time of Settlement some increase in litigation, particularly land litigation of speculative kind is natural.’ (Thakur Singh 1917, p.168).
towards sustaining a named property-holding unit over time, the reproduction of the household can be considered equally serendipitous and also a matter of simple dogma. Perhaps it was always thus and perhaps inevitably so since the new is joined, embedded or sutured onto what already exists. The doubling that struck my son when he visited Ladakh for the first time can be understood in this context. Onpo small house, left empty for fifteen years, is a store of value, a material resource, a place to stay, a house of memory, a site of work and care, and much else. Its standing is precarious today, as in the past. If you talk to Ladakhis about an ‘empty house’, they might ask why you would spend money pulling it down. Furthermore, they would say, it is used as a store and still shelters old shrines. Anyway, they would continue, people come and go. Most likely, they would add that such visits are rare and there is no-one left to do the work. In the meantime, domestic innovations such as gas stoves or running water lead families to build a makeshift room or rooms next door where they spend most of their time. Houses might be pulled down when you need the space or materials.

I referred to Jane Guyer’s (2014) discussion of households in the very different setting of the USA in the introduction. She has noted that the household is an archaic concept. Based on anachronistic images of a hearth or property-holding taxpayer subject to a feudal lord - and, I should reiterate, the Ladakhi household has not been taxed for a considerable time – Guyer (2014, p. 19) asks where exactly, ‘a given form come[s] from, still lives, thrives, gets protected and projected forward, within the ongoing platforms of economic and social life.’ Will households become ‘shelter-services, pools for invested human capital, station-stops for sojourners, platforms for innovation, parking lots for “stuff”…’, trusts where people come together to manage things of value, or material anchors from which we move away as our spiritual lives gather pace? (ibid) Neither a model from the past nor a likely horizon for the future, the household is still with us and Guyer asks how we might make use of a range of concepts in the anthropological record to understand better what is happening. Nancy Munn (1986), for example, has analysed the role of fame or reputation, Guyer and Belinga (1995) have emphasised the importance of wealth-in-people, and Annette Weiner (1992) has explored the value and paradox of ‘keeping while giving’ in relation to inalienable possessions. These concepts and others illuminate aspects of the Ladakhi house but I want to offer here one more descriptive term that might indicate a house that is both given and also improvised afresh through intense speculation time and time again.

In dialogue with filmmaker Laura Poitras on the topic of information-gathering, the artist, Hito Steyerl, discusses the role of editing in her art practice. She refers to the Adobe product, After Effects,

…there is hardly any real-time play back. So much information is being processed, it might take two hours or longer before you see the result. So editing is replaced by rendering. Rendering, rendering, staring at the render bar. It feels like I'm being rendered all the time.

What do you do if you don't really see what you edit while you're doing it? You speculate. It’s speculative editing. You try to guess what it's going to look
like if you put keyframes here and here and here. … (Steyerl and Poitras, 2015: 312)25

Rendering has a wide range of everyday as well as technical meanings deriving from the Latin reddere, to give back, which are related whilst not fully hanging together. For example, uses relating to ‘return’ such as to make a payment as by a tenant to a superior, including tax or tribute, and those relating to ‘representation’ such as a rendition of a building or an interior executed in perspective have little obvious semantic continuity. But, as a form of speculative editing, rendering captures the effort of reproducing what already exists while producing it afresh and never knowing what might emerge. You render a house with plaster, and you do so repeatedly to keep the surface fresh, to disguise the blemishes and to patch together contributions from different individuals, generations and institutions.

The condition of this small house can be understood too in relation to a world-wide move to the city as well as other mobility, and increasing numbers of single person dwellings. Might rendering therefore serve to question taken-for-granted notions of households and simultaneously challenge an equally taken-for-granted anthropological teleology of social reproduction, as though we knew where we were coming from and moving toward and as though we knew the referent of the name? Does rendering provide a more fitting gloss than reproducing for ‘the geometry of elastic rubber sheeting’ (E.R. Leach 1961) where shape, size or distance are less significant than what holds ‘things’ (variables) together, that is, how they are connected or related. The ‘elastic rubber sheeting’ of a house such as the one I have described assumes a variable shape and size, while standing empty, and extends great distances at times to connect people, objects and others who carry its name.

References


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I would like to acknowledge Celia Lury on this point; see Day and Lury (in press). In addition, Natasha Myers (2015) uses the term rendering to describe the work surrounding protein crystallography.


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