Why Blame the Tibetans? A Discourse Analysis of the Yunnan Great Rivers Project

By Ezra Goldman

Whatever interests may be at work, and whatever [development organizations] may think they are doing, they can only operate through a complex set of social and cultural structures so deeply embedded and so ill-perceived that the outcome may be only a baroque and unrecognizable transformation of the original intention.¹

Development…must be seen as a historically specific, even peculiar, experience; it must be defamiliarized so that its naturalness can be suspended in the eyes of theorists and practitioners.²

This paper seeks to answer one seemingly simple question regarding the Yunnan Great Rivers Project (YGRP), a joint operation between the Nature Conservancy (NC) and the Yunnan Provincial Government (YPG) in northwest Yunnan, China. Why is it that rural Tibetans and fuelwood collection are pinpointed as the root cause of environmental degradation in the Meilixueshan region³? I argue here that this is not simply the result of an “objective” analysis of the “empirical evidence,” but is the product of powerful and overlapping discourses. While any insertion of the surgical knife of categorical analysis is to a certain extent arbitrary, I have chosen here to focus on two discourses which seem to be the most prevalent: western development (as interpreted by the NC), and the politics of modern Chinese “Communism.” Note that I am not

insinuating that these are diametrically opposed discourses (indeed, it is where and how the lines blur that is of the most interest to me), nor am I assuming that these are perfect categories, nor even that the actions of members of either the NC or the provincial Chinese government act in accordance with some sort of “Platonic form” of “development” or “Communism” herein discussed. What I am stating is rather that even if we are to assume an “interest” of an agency, or an individual within an agency, there are strong discourses the actual definitions of which must be manipulated by actors “on the ground” that simultaneously empower and restrain certain types of actions over others. A better understanding of these discourses will hopefully shed some light on the limitations of philanthropic action through development work and leave the reader questioning the hegemonic discourse of western development as the “solution” to the “problems” of the so-called Third (or Fourth) Worlds. Employing ethnographic evidence, it will also suggest that developmental projects need to have a more nuanced understanding of the social complexities of the societies in which they are working if their projects are to be beneficial to the people they are trying to help.

Before delving too deeply into theoretical minutiae, let me begin by framing the situation. The NC is an American non-governmental organization (NGO) that works with governments, businesses and individuals “to preserve the plants, animals and natural communities that represent the diversity of life on Earth by protecting the lands and

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3 The YGRP consists of an area about the size of Ireland (66,000 square km). My focus for this paper is only on the Meilixueshan region, Deqin County, near the border of the Tibet Autonomous Region.
waters they need to survive.”

This American NGO has teamed up with the YPG because all foreign NGOs must be somehow affiliated with local governmental authorities. This legitimizes their presence, gaining them the requisite access necessary to work in China but also gains them access to vital funds for their projects. Hence, it would be folly to make any statements claiming that the projects of their joint venture were solely the product of the actions or discourses of one “side” or the other.

According to the NC’s website, “northwest Yunnan is one of the most vital centers of plant diversity in the northern temperate hemisphere.” The concerns cited are that “Chinese officials, aware of the area's natural and cultural significance, have targeted Yunnan for increased tourism development” and that, if unregulated, this will result in a significant threat to this area’s unique biodiversity. A second site, focused on their project in the Meilixueshan region, breaks down the “problem” as seen by the NC and the “solutions.” The page on “stresses” on the regional environment mentions, “Old-growth or primary forests with large trees are being cut for use as firewood and replaced by trees of smaller stature.” It goes on to state that “habitat loss” is resulting in loss or depletion of species. It is accompanied by a photograph of a sawmill cutting large trees on a

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4 The Nature Conservancy website, “About Us: Mission Statement.”
http://nature.org/aboutus/. Notice that here there is some ambiguity in the meaning of “natural community.” Do they mean the “natural environment” (however so defined) surrounding the plants and animals to be protected, or are they referring to certain human civilizations as somehow “natural”?

5 Beginning February 1999 and proceeding onwards for three years, the NC has committed USD$2 million, which has been superceded in funding by the YPG’s commitment of USD$3 million for their joint operation called the Yunnan Great Rivers Project in northwest Yunnan. “The Yunnan Great Rivers Project: Fiscal Year 2002.”
http://nature.org/wherewework/asiapacific/china/work/art5098.html. This is actually toned down, compared to another jointly published brochure called “Yunnan Great Rivers Project: Saving the Most Biologically Diverse Temperate Ecosystem on Earth.”
A hillside that appears as though part of it could have been heavily forested. The next page in the series mentions tourism development as a problem, but foregrounds “harvesting of wood for fuel (energy) and housing construction,” mentioning this phrase in each of the three separate identified “stresses.” An older man hunched over under a load of small sticks (bearing little resemblance to the large trees in the last picture) and smoking a cigarette appears next to this text. On the next page, we are told, “the highest-ranked source of the highest-ranked stress is the collection of wood to meet household energy requirements. In response, we designed a strategy to introduce alternative sources of fuel in the villages.” We have to look elsewhere, on a separate page, to discover that after heavy flooding in 1998, the central government instated a logging ban in this region and that commercial logging has since been forbidden. Even logging for local housing construction has been severely limited and restricted. What we are to believe then, is that there is currently large-scale forest degradation and that local rural poor, using wood for domestic fuel consumption and building, are the cause of this.

“Each household in Meili collects and burns almost 11 cords of fuel-wood per year.” This is a good deal of firewood and, considering that the Meilixueshan region

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7 http://nature.org/aboutus/howwework/about/art7004.html.
8 The three stresses are: “stress on forest function,” “stress on forest structure,” “stress on species composition.” http://nature.org/aboutus/howwework/about/art7005.html.
9 http://nature.org/aboutus/howwework/about/art7006.html. I am primarily interested in the construction of the “problem” and the way that it legitimates the “appropriate response” of the construction of alternative energy. The solution that has been devised is the construction of “biogas” units, which produce a methane-based gas (and fertilizer) from organic waste.
10 “Since a commercial logging ban was initiated in 1998, tourism presents the most viable option available for raising economic standards.” http://nature.org/wherewework/asiapacific/china/work/art5103.html. Why is tourism mentioned here, and not on the other site?
consists of the roiling Mekong river winding through steeply banked, arid gorges in which forests tend to be located high above the steep valley walls, this represents a considerable degree of work to collect. The point is that this does not necessarily imply that fuel-wood consumption is either “unsustainable” or causing forest “degradation.” For this to be the case, the NC would have to show that forests have been rapidly denuded recently. As commercial logging has been effectively banned, either population would need to have been increasing rapidly in this area, or (for some reason) fuelwood consumption would need to be shown to have been increasing rapidly. Yet their literature does not seem to address these issues. In fact, pictures taken by the intrepid botanist/explorer Joseph Rock from the area in the 1920s and 1930s, when compared with photos taken from identical locations in 2002, reveal almost no change either in forest cover, or in expansion of agricultural land. In fact, some areas appear to have become more forested.13 The fear is that “modernization” and tourism will change the way things already have been, thus leading to a state of environmental deforestation and denigration. Yet they are claiming that there is an immediate problem that must be resolved. As one local Tibetan critic pointed out, this sets up the NC nicely: they will be able to say that they have “preserved” what would have been preserved anyway.14 It appears that one change in the prevalent discourse has relegated a practice that has been around seemingly since people in the area have burned fires to a “problem” that is “unsustainable,” thus opening up a space for the NC to proffer a “solution.” Herein lies

12 The re-taking of these photos is one current project ongoing in this area.
13 This is of course not the most concrete evidence, but it raises the question of whether or not there has ever been any degradation in the area. My question here is: why does not any research seem to have been done on this matter that is so central to legitimizing the NC’s project? Or, if it has been conducted, why is it never mentioned?
the fundamental problematic of the development organization: it must find (or create) a situation in which its services are not only desirable but necessary. Presumably, what is sustainable is local land-use patterns, or Tibetan “culture.” Yet this brings forth another paradox of the NC discourse. Local Tibetans are simultaneously the “problem” and the “solution,” which poses a conundrum.

In brochures, on their website, and in casual conversation, the NC and its workers (and, at times, local Tibetans themselves) consider Tibetans to be “naturally environmentalist.” For example, in one eight-page glossy brochure, ethnic minorities are linked to having a “conservationist” ethic three times; two of these instances are on the same page (which contains only ten sentences)! This page is particularly interesting and exemplary of how nature and culture are framed in the discourse. In the middle of the brochure “nature” is presented on one side (as displayed by several paragraphs discussing the great biodiversity of the area) and pictures of endangered or threatened species (golden monkeys and the red panda). Neatly facing this page is “culture,” as represented by a line of Tibetan women in “traditional” dress. They are performing some sort of special ceremony presumably, although the caption makes no mention of this— it is utterly decontextualized and presented as “normal.” The caption reads: “many of Yunnan’s ethnic minorities, including Tibetans (above), have long traditions of respect for nature.” In the event that one had missed this comment, another is added on the

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14 Tashi. Personal communication. Names have been changed to protect informants.
16 “Yunnan Great Rivers Project: Saving the Most Biologically Diverse Temperate Ecosystem on Earth.” Jointly published by the NC and the YPG.
17 Women are often seen as the bearers of (material) “traditional culture” in modern Chinese propaganda.
many of these ethnic groups have long traditions of living in close harmony with nature.” This belief engenders the concept that there might then be “exogenous factors” resulting in the “breakdown” of (imagined) “traditional” values.18

Toni Huber has strongly argued against this model of the “environmentalist Tibetan.” He argues that “environmentalist” Buddhist values have never prohibited Tibetans from acting in “non-environmentalist” ways. Rather, Tibetans have acted “against” their cultural value system and, for example, hunted anyway. What happens is that breaking these taboos generates a lot of guilt, which then needs to be “worked off” by the accrual of “merit” (prayers, pilgrimages, etc.). In essence, to say that Tibetans are “naturally environmentalist” because of “their belief system” is both to conclude that there is “a” monolithic belief system and that “it” is shared, and practiced, by all “Tibetans” (however so defined); it is to make a leap from that which is “believed” (in the ideal) to that which is actually practiced.

Yet, at the same time that the belief systems of these “traditional societies” are idealized, on the very same page they are also considered a “threat.” “The cutting of trees for home heating, cooking and construction is a constant threat to area forests.” An authoritative quote above the monkeys seems to reconcile the two: “In the end, our society will be defined not only by what we create, but by what we refuse to destroy.”19 Implicit here is that there is a link between endangered species and endangered peoples

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18 For an illustrative example of this sort of romantic imagining, see Marcy Vigoda’s “Religious and Socio-Cultural Restraints on Environmental Degradation Among Tibetan Peoples- Myth or Reality.” The Tibet Journal. Vol. 14, No. 4. 1989. 17-44.

19 The credit reads: “John C. Sawhill, President/CEO, 1990-2000, The Nature Conservancy.” This can of course be questioned in many ways. To when is the time referent referring? To whose society is he referring? Who is the “we” doing the creating
and that the role of the YGRP is to “preserve” both of them. Indeed, we are told “the overall goal is to help the people of northwest Yunnan improve their quality of life while developing sustainable, alternative sources of income and preserving their natural and cultural heritages for future generations.” If we pass on critiquing the first parts of the sentence and focus on the topic at hand, we see here that “preservation” is formulated as an important aspect of the overall goal for “the natives.” Yet the astute reader should be confused at this point. What is it that must be “preserved”? Ethnic minorities (all globbed together in one amorphous mass of “Otherness”) are simultaneously living “in harmony with nature” yet need to be taught to do away with their “underdeveloped” means of engaging with that very nature in order to preserve it. Here we see another paradoxical distinction: the “traditional Other” society (universalized and homogenized for convenient analysis) is simultaneously exalted as “closer to nature” and denigrated as either ignorant, unwilling or incapable of its own role in “destroying” nature. In other words, they are seen as “underdeveloped.” Again, here is the space wherein the institution of development is able to insert itself, while simultaneously being able to label itself “culturally sensitive.”

Let me pause here to remind the reader that my question is not whether local villagers would (or do) appreciate alternative energy systems. My question is rather: why is it that local fuelwood collection is presented as the “problem”? What is left out in

\[\text{and destroying? Why is it that society is only defined by what “it” creates or refuses to destroy?} \]


\[\text{My fieldwork in Liutongjiang suggests that “they” (rural Tibetans) do appreciate them. However, most of my informants were } \textit{men}, \text{which may have had a significant impact on the conclusion that “they” (biogas units) are “good” for people there.} \]
this construction? How does this, in turn, affect the terms of the “solution”? What new sorts of problems may be raised by the interjection of this particular development aid? And, finally, what should be done so as to alleviate or avoid these new problems?

This analysis thus far suggests that the YGRP is a structure that is a fully active agent, which constructs the world in ways that it sees fit so that it can create a space for itself to engage in its activities. Yet to read the situation in this manner would be to gloss over the powerful discourses that are simultaneously engendering and restricting the agency of social actors. Let us now turn to two major intersections between the modern Chinese discourse and the development discourse of the west as embodied in YGRP’s activities: the conception of the area as “Shangri-La,” and the idea of “backwardness” or “underdevelopment” and the need to “develop.”

The modern idea of “Shangri-La” originated in James Hilton’s 1933 novel Lost Horizons. The British author wrote of a mythical land (somewhere in the Himalayas) where people lived to be hundreds of years old and interacted peacefully and harmoniously with one another. This has recently, with the advent of modern tourism, become a highly political idea. The new airport built in nearby Zhongdian (Gyalthang) has an enormous sign that reads “Diqing Shangri-La Airport” in English and Chinese. There are touristy picture books being published about the entire northwestern section of Yunnan, buses trucking the increasing trickle of tourists to the area, and even a knife that I bought- all bearing the Chinese characters “Xianggelila.”

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22 Hilton, James. Lost Horizon. New York, Grosset & Dunlap. 1933. He actually stole the name from the Tibetan “Shambala”, which refers to a utopian world just north of Tibet. But the Shangri-La referenced in the discourse is always Hilton’s.
tourist brochure available in Diqing town\textsuperscript{23} hotels reads “[Deqin] is a world of mystery and wonder, being an important component of Shangri-La in Diqing…”\textsuperscript{24} A Chinese tourism website makes the bold claim: “The mysterious and bewitching Zhongdian County, where the prefecture is headquartered, is the setting for the "Shangri-la, a hidden paradise in James Hilton's 1933 novel Lost Horizon.”\textsuperscript{25} If you follow this link, it brings you to a page that conclusively “proves” that this is indeed the case. In fact, in the year that passed since my first visit, the entire neighboring county of Zhongdian has since been renamed “Shangri-La County.” It was apparently an extremely close race with Deqin County. This was a heated battle, as it was sure to bring in much-desired tourist money from the increasingly profitable domestic and foreign tourist industry in China.\textsuperscript{26}

The NC’s ideology of “saving the Last Great Places” meshes nicely with this idea of Shangri-La. In essence, this area has already been designated the world’s Last Great Place for them. In an article in a recent NC magazine,\textsuperscript{27} the area is set up for western readers as so remote and distant as to be nearly inaccessible (like the fictional Shangri-La). “Terrain and altitude make travel by plane impossible, and the two-day drive twists and turns on unpaved roads that hug the cliffs and are prone to collapse, rock slides and sporadic yak-herd traffic jams.” It then goes on to frame the area as almost supernatural: “A faint fog of incense wafts through wind-whipped prayer flags as pilgrims bow and

\textsuperscript{23} Diqing town (xiang) is the capital of Deqin county (xian) and, (along with Zhongdian [now officially “Shangri-La”] and Weixi) form Deqen Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (zhou). They all fall under the category of Yunnan Province (sheng).

\textsuperscript{24} “Mysterious Deqin Tourism [sic].” MeiLi XueShan Travel Service of Deqin County in Yunnan. 

\textsuperscript{25} http://www.yunnantourism.com/deqen.html.

\textsuperscript{26} Note that this is not at all the only place in Tibet that claims to be “Shangri-La”

make offering to the awesome peak that no climber has conquered.” In the discourse of Chinese tourism, the changes that are taking place in these areas and the programs in place for the “preservation” of nature and culture are masked. However, in public TNC discourse, this image is problematized. The next paragraph begins: “But this image of Shangri-La is deceiving.” It goes on to state that although the sacred status of the mountain has largely kept it free of commercial logging (no mention of the government-imposed 1998 ban), most of the areas are “below poverty line” and “virtually all” heating and cooking is done using fuelwood (no mention of hydro-electric power). It then continues to state that each of the 600 households in the region consume 6 tons of wood each year and that

At this rate, scientists estimate that the slow-growing Meili forests will be wiped out by mid-century. It’s a quiet devastation. There are no bulldozers, no sawmills, no profiteers, just a continuous procession of impoverished people seeking the basic comforts of life.

Notice that this particular statement makes no mention of any evidence to suggest that this practice is any different from prior practice. Nor does it mention the burgeoning tourism industry, painting it out with the statement “no profiteers.” Indeed, there must be “trouble” in “Shangri-La,” otherwise how would TNC go about “saving” it?

This brings us to the next point of the modern development discourse that the NC appears to agree with: all of the problems of the world are explained in terms of “poverty” and the solution to this poverty is “development.” Many authors (Sachs 1996, Ferguson 1990, Escobar 1994, et al.) have argued that this discourse of development beginning just after the Second World War in effect creates the concept of “underdevelopment” which it then must heroically set out to “develop.” In essence, the
rest of the world (excluding Europe) must be brought up to the benchmarks of western society in order that it might “progress” to the level of modern civil society. In some sense, not much would appear to have changed from when Lewis Henry Morgan wrote *Ancient Society* in 1877. In it, he details the unilinear evolution of mankind from “savagery” to “barbarism” and finally attaining the goal of (western, bourgeois) “civilization.” Indeed, it is perhaps only the benchmarks of “civilization” which have changed. Yet now, with “cultural sensitivity” a hot topic, many (like TNC) are arguing that we need to “preserve” at the same time that we “develop,” creating a paradoxical situation.

The Chinese discourse accepts Morgan’s ideas almost at face value, not before becoming modified by Marxist, Leninist and finally Maoist ideology. The conception of the “backwardness” (*luohou*) of various minority groups (*shaoshu minzu*) is so prevalent that people of different ethnicities will answer frankly where they “rank” on an imaginary “scale” of cultural “evolution” based on things such as: minority language and literature, degree of road development in their regions, type of clothing they wear, etc. Tibetans rank exceeding low (if they are not the lowest) on this scale due to the remoteness of the territories in which they live, the lack of industrialization and their “barbaric” marriage customs, among other issues. In essence, all (including the dominant *Han* Chinese) are seen as steadily progressing along the same evolutionary path. Only the *Han* are like

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“big brothers” leading their “younger brothers” along—no matter how “grown up” one “brother” becomes, one still remains more mature.29

Development agencies tend to fail to take into account not only the hierarchies that are established between those developing and those being developed, but also the ways in which the development process affects power structures within the communities that are developed. In this final section, I will comment briefly on the ways in which the YGRP serves to unwittingly reinforce existent power relations in terms of race, language, and gender.

Perhaps the most apparent hierarchy is within the NC’s ranks of paid employees, with the most executive positions all held by American men. It is possible for Chinese or Tibetans30 to be heads of sub-departments, but not, to my knowledge, are they to be found chairing any major departments. Aside from a few women who were working temporarily on certain projects, it is a predominantly male-dominated environment. Everyone who works for the NC has to know English, but not everyone is required to know Chinese (and only Tibetans know Tibetan). While some of the Americans in positions of authority spoke exceptional Chinese there were several who did not speak a word of Chinese and relied entirely on interpreters.

Living for a week at an elementary school built by funding provided by the NC in the Tibetan village of Liutongjiang, I got a sense of the socialization process of

powerlessness that begins at a young age. The teachers were all Tibetan, but had all undergone their university training in Mainland China. While I was not there long enough to get a good sense of the topics that were actually covered in the classes, I was able to see how students and teachers interacted inside and outside of the classroom. All of the books and classes were in Chinese. I was informed that Chinese was used first, and then if the students “did not understand,” then Tibetan would be used.\(^3\) Apparently what this meant was not that the answer would be clarified in Tibetan. The only usage I heard of Tibetan in the classroom was to punish, scold or chastise students who had not done their homework, “misbehaved,” or did not know the answer to a question. These were acts of deviance that were punishable by what would likely be considered “child abuse” in America.\(^3\)\(^2\)

At another point, I went to the village of Xidang with two NC workers (both young Chinese men who spoke English) and three local government officials (all Tibetan men) to check up on the progress of biogas unit construction. The interaction between the villagers and the YGRP officials involved moving hastily from house to house where these units were being built, and critiquing their construction. Apparently, none of the units had been properly made.\(^3\)\(^3\) Villagers tended to stand back and listen to the comments, positioning themselves deferentially to the experts. Instructions were given in

\(^{30}\) Tibetans were at the bottom of the stack, as they were used predominantly as cultural interlocutors between Tibetans and Chinese or American groups.

\(^{31}\) Tsering. Personal communication.

\(^{32}\) I saw children get their ears pulled and heads hit with books as they were chastised (in Tibetan) until they cried for not having done their homework. I also saw two children have to stand in an extremely uncomfortable position for three or four hours. I never managed to get a straight answer as to what they had done.
Chinese by TNC coordinator and then were translated into Tibetan by the government official if they were not understood.\textsuperscript{34} The officials did not accept the villagers’ frequent offers to come and drink (Yak butter) tea, but rather were trying to maximize the “efficient” usage of time.\textsuperscript{35} Upon leaving, there was an argument between one of the NC officials and some of the local villagers. Zhou was upset that he had told the villagers about these problems last year and that his comments had not been heeded. Another “problem” cited was that sometimes villagers want to use YGRP funds for their own projects. In the car ride back into town (no one ever wants to stay in the villages) I was told that these villages need toilets (part of the biogas construction) and showers because otherwise tourists would not come.

Another issue that is not dealt with in the YGRP discourse is that of gender differences. As Allan Hoben puts it:

> The apparent uniformity of poverty in rural communities [as portrayed by development agencies] masks differences of power, honor and wealth that are of utmost significance to members of the community and play a vital role in determining who will have access to new developmental resources and who will reap the benefits…\textsuperscript{36}

Here I will only mention a few observations pertaining to gender relations in the village of Liutongjiang. In my discussions with some of the villagers, the response that I was given seemed to be dependent on the informant and the setting in which the question was

\textsuperscript{33} Construction of the units is left up to the villagers. The idea is that if they put effort into making them, they will consider them an “investment” and will be more likely to maintain them.
\textsuperscript{34} Note the similarity to the school system.
\textsuperscript{35} Efficiency was based on maximizing the number of units investigated and there was no focus on building a relationship with the villagers.
posed. This questioning revealed more to me about ways in which masculine and feminine work is presented in different contexts than it did about answering the straightforward question “who does what.” Yet I this question is important in the development discourse. If it is the case that wood collection does fall disproportionately on the shoulders of one gender or the other, what are the long-term consequences of drastically reducing that workload? These are some of the issues that should be addressed in the YGRP project.

I have tried to show here in this paper the ways in which the discourse of sustainable development as promulgated by the YGRP is not the result of simply an analysis of empirical evidence, but is rather the result of the overlay and interplay between several powerful discourses that operate at an almost subconscious level. Viewing Tibetans as the “problem” shifts the focus away from more deeply embedded structural problems and suggests that the solution is as simple as changing the means of energy production. This allows the NC and YGP to act together as partners addressing the same external “problem.” This analysis is unfortunately heavily weighted towards the work of the NC in this collaborative effort as a result of the linguistic and political challenges of analyzing the YPG. The ethnography presented is based on a brief period of time and, as such, is mainly provided as suggestive of the direction for further study to

37 A young man in private told me that wood collection was a “man’s job” because it was such hard work. But other men (whose wives were cleaning up after dinner behind them) informed me that “whoever had time” collected wood. It is unclear in the NC public discourse which gender is claimed to collects wood. In one article “[t]he rigors of collecting fuelwood fall disproportionately on women and children…” (“Brief to a Potential Swiss Donor”). In another (more public) article (Geatz: 32) both men and
be conducted and is not meant to be the authoritative final word on this topic. The point of these final anecdotes, indeed the purpose of this paper, is not to demonstrate the malignity of any of these agents. Generally speaking, they are well-meaning humanitarian philanthropists. Yet they are likely unaware of the metacommunicative strength of their actions that have become normalized by these powerful discourses. My hope is that the elucidation of some of these otherwise latent hegemonic social practices will help to bring them into the realm of conscious recognition. It is from this position that change for greater social equity can occur.  

women are claimed to collect the wood. The local director of the area was not entirely sure who collected wood, although he thought that it was the men.  

38 This research, carried out during the summer of 2002, was funded by a grant provided by the Luce Foundation.