Smoky relations: beyond dichotomies of substance on the Tibetan Plateau

Gillian G. Tan

Introduction

For many societies, smoke expresses meaning in different ways and on multiple levels. In the past, the Cree of North America regarded agreements between two persons to be upheld in a binding way when they smoked the same pipe of tobacco (Venne 1997). ‘Smoking the pipe’ was used to bind treaty negotiations with the British in a way that was more meaningful to the Cree than the mark of ink on paper. Along with others, this example indicates the broader significance of smoke among Indigenous North Americans such as the Lakota with regard to pipe ceremonies and ritual identification (Csordas 2007; Kaiser 1984). Among Indigenous Australians, the smoking of shrubs and grasses is associated with the ‘Welcome to Country’ ceremony and, in this instance, smoke is thought to be cleansing and renewing to both land and people (Merlan 2014, 297, 300). Other circumstances in which smoke is used in Indigenous Australian communities include traditional health practices, in which babies are passed over smoke that is used to fortify them against sickness and mothers are smoked post partum for restorative health benefits (Carter, Hussan, Abbott et al. 1987; Musharbash 2018). Moreover, smoke and its associated fire have been used to signal communication across a distance for coordinating hunting procedures, disseminating location and announcing confirmation of prearranged activities (Gould 1971, 20–1; Kimber 1983, 41). Among Tibetan nomadic pastoralists, smoke-purification rituals are performed for multiple reasons, including to please territorial deities and to purify them from the pollution of anthropogenic activities (Bellezza 2011; Fitzherbert 2014; Karmay 1998;
While practices of smoke differ significantly in both the substance that produces smoke and specific cosmological framing, they nonetheless point to smoke’s transformative effects: why does (some) smoke transform places, persons and relationships?

In part, an answer lies in smoke’s liminal existence in the betwixt and between. Produced by combustion of materials, smoke requires substance to come into existence, yet once it is produced its ephemeral qualities interrupt narratives based on the boundedness and fixity of substance. From its creation to its eventual dissipation, smoke is simultaneously material and non-material and, in its liminality, able to penetrate substance and the senses with transformative effects. For example, smoke’s potent olfactory quality has accompanied the signal of category-change in different rites of passage, especially the signal of a transition from one classification of existence to another (Howes 1987). Moreover, the quality of smoke allows a unity of all previous classifications, so that the transformation is at the level of awareness itself (Howes 1987; Parkin 2007).

Building on these insights into smoke’s liminal existence, this chapter suggests that smoke also offers a productive way to think through the concepts of ‘materiality’ and ‘connectivity’, taken here as one expression of the classic debate in anthropology between ‘materialism’ and ‘mentalism’. The predication of materiality on substance and its boundedness in form have been assumed as the a priori basis for connection, first posited as self-same substance and form, then connected with other substances and forms. This proposition takes its logical lineage from a Cartesian perspective on ‘brute’ matter; substances are self-composed before being connected to other substances. Yet, recent literature has challenged this perspective through arguments on new materialism (Barad 2007; Bennett 2010; Braidotti 2000; Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012) and relational ontologies (Bird-David 1999; Descola 2005, 2013, 2016; Hallowell 1981; Strathern 1988, 2014; Wagner 1975, 1991). While these writings may be traced along several cleavages, most notably as an interdisciplinary strand (new materialism) inspired by the works of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and an anthropological strand (relational ontologies) grounded in kinship and human–non-human relations, one aspect that they share is a critical response to the mind–body dichotomy of Cartesian dualism, a critical response that prioritises the unity of mind and body and relations among entities. Here, relations are posited neither as a priori nor as a posteriori but along with material forms. In this way, both relations and materials are the thing~ties suggested in the introduction to this volume. Concepts and practices of ‘materiality’ and ‘connectivity’
are therefore not to be understood as operating in distinct and independent ways, but rather as simultaneously occurring and mutually enforcing.

Smoke as liminal and ephemeral underscores this clearly. Tibetans burn juniper to create fragrant smoke; the dissolution of juniper into fragrant smoke is the dissolution of ‘materiality’ into ‘relationality’. Yet this fragrant smoke is itself the connection by which worldly deities come into being, and is itself dissolved soon after it is created. Using the example of a smoke-purification ritual known as sang (T. bsang), this chapter understands the sang ritual complex as vital to maintaining and re-creating relationships among ritual practitioners, Tibetan pastoralists, worldly deities, and the environment in eastern Tibet (Kham). In particular, one manifestation of sang enacts relationships that bring entities such as worldly deities into being. What this means is that entities are not only fortified or augmented by the smoky relations of sang but also dependent on them for continued existence. Because smoky relations are an ongoing practice, and influence both human practitioners and worldly deities, the relationship may be more specifically articulated as a mutuality of becoming and un-becoming. Focusing on relationships agrees with the various writings on relational ontologies that have proliferated in anthropology following the earlier work of Marilyn Strathern (1988) and Roy Wagner (1975, 1991). More recently, Philippe Descola posited this question:

How to recompose nature and society, humans and non-humans, individuals and collectives, in a new assemblage in which they would no longer present themselves as distributed between substances, processes, and representations, but as the instituted expression of relationships between multiple entities whose ontological status and capacity for action vary according to the positions they occupy in relation to one another?

(Descola 2013, 5)

The task, then, is not to renew the primacy of material boundedness by redistributing substantive properties, processes and representations across already known and formed categories, but instead to recompose the apparently bounded terms of nature and society, humans and non-humans, through an emphasis on the manifest and instituted expressions of relationships in a given context. Using fragrant smoke in its ritual form as a heuristic device, this chapter demonstrates how relationships – maintained and re-created partly through smoke – are of primary importance for understanding thing~ties among Tibetan pastoralists, worldly deities, and the environments (variously material, social and political) of which they are part.
Smoky relations

The Tibetan pastoralists in question live in the south-eastern part of the Tibetan plateau, in an area traditionally known as Kham (T. khams), also called Chuzhi Gangdrug (T. chu bzhi sgang drug) for the four rivers and six ranges that topographically characterise the region. After the Chinese takeover of the Tibetan plateau in 1950, different traditional regions were placed into various Chinese administrative divisions and Kham was subsequently divided into Chamdo Prefecture of the Tibet Autonomous Region, Yushu Prefecture in Qinghai Province, Ganzi Prefecture in Sichuan Province and Dechen Prefecture of Yunnan Province. The pastoralist community of my field research is located in Ganzi Prefecture, Sichuan Province, which, in sixty years of Chinese rule, has experienced a succession of Chinese government policies targeted at altering pastoral modes of existence, reorganising methods of production, enclosing pastures and animals, and encouraging capitalist development. In the past, the community itself was subject to the collectivisation and subsequent famine caused by the Great Leap Forward (1957 to 1962) and the cooperatism of the Cultural Revolution (1966 to 1976), which moved previously distinct households of nomadic pastoralists into cooperative buildings where they lived and worked according to a points system. Pastoralists received rations of food and other necessities based on the points gathered from their labour (Tan 2018b). Through the 1980s and 1990s, policies of the Household Responsibility System and ‘four that form a set’ (Chinese sipeitao jianshe) initiated the construction of winter houses, fences for pastures, allocations of land for annual fodder and barns for animals, thereby adding to the material foundations of pastoralism. Finally, in the 2000s and up to the present, government policies have moved towards the rhetoric of environmental protection, expressed through policies such as ‘restoring pastures, converting grasslands’ (Ch. tuimu huancao) and ecological resettlement (Ch. shengtai yimin). In the present period, the context of pastoral existence in China is framed by the Nomad Settlement policy (Ch. you mumin dingju) and its focus on intensifying the production base of pastoralists to align with market demands (Tan 2018b).

As a result of these various policies and their implementation, the majority of pastoralists of my fieldwork community in Ganzi Prefecture presently live in stone houses – built in the 1990s – in the winter and spring months, and move with their animals to different pastures in the summer and autumn months. In the summer and autumn pastures, they put up and take down their black yak-hair tents as they move from pasture
to fresh pasture. The remaining pastoralists in the community live in concrete, government-subsidised houses located in an area of grasslands that is also the site of other developments, namely an asphalted double-lane road, a complex of buildings associated with a local incarnate lama (see Tan 2016), and an airport about 26 kilometres away. Pastoralists of the same community currently live in different types of houses in different parts of the grassland and depend on several sources of livelihood. This is the outcome not of a single factor but of a complex of reasons, including kinship networks, household demographics and income from the caterpillar fungus trade. ‘Materiality’ and ‘connectivity’ coalesce in multiple ways and instantiations; notwithstanding, it has been argued that communities of nomadic pastoralists in eastern Tibet are now internally stratified in ways that are more distinct than in the past (Levine 2015).

Despite alterations in the material conditions of life that outwardly differentiate the house and herd of one kin member from the house and
herd of another, the pastoralists of this community continue to orient themselves towards the symbolic and practical actions that bind them as a group. They are part of the same monastery of the Nyingma sect of Tibetan Buddhism, they share oral histories of their movement to these pastures from another region of eastern Tibet, and they perform collective and singular rituals to a common pantheon of worldly deities. On the Tibetan plateau, deities are more than the transcendental pantheon of Buddhist gods manifest as Guru Padmasambhava and the deities, for instance of compassion known as Chenrezig (T. spyan ras gzigs) and of wisdom known as Jambayang (T. ‘jam dpal dbyangs). Also included are worldly deities called jig ten pa’i lha (T. ‘jig rten pa’i lha), usually a range of territorial masters (T. gzhi bdag), homeland deities (T. yul lha), water spirits (T. klu), and the eight classes of gods and demons⁶ (T. lha ‘dre sde bryad) that have been ‘tamed’ (T. ‘dul ba) by Tibetan Buddhism. Crucially, and unlike the transcendental beings, the worldly deities are part of the environment, namely mountains, hills and lakes, and are integrally connected to these places by imbuing them with special power and fortune. For instance, the material entity and topological mountain referred to as Zhara is also Zhara deity, and the plants, rocks and soil on the mountain are thought to be the deity’s possessions (T. lha phyug) and imbued with his fortune. Moreover, worldly deities such as territorial masters (T. gzhi bdag) usually inhabit high places. They favour mountains and hills, with a correlation that the higher and more striking the mountain, the more powerful the territorial master. Importantly, worldly deities are distinct from transcendental ones because they are themselves thought to be of limpid composition (T. gtsang rigs), which makes them susceptible to anthropogenic activity. Burning (non-fragrant materials) and digging earth are just a few of the many acts that cast a pollution or shadow on the worldly deities, who are negatively affected or contaminated by this pollution. In retribution for this pollution, worldly deities enact deeds with negative repercussions that may cause ill-health and misfortune to the community. Correspondingly, worldly deities feel the range of emotions from anger and jealousy to friendship and approval. When the worldly deities are pleased and well disposed, they confer good fortune and power to the single or collective beneficiary. Worldly deities and humans are integral to the well-being of each other, and this well-being is enabled through practices of fragrant smoke. One instantiation of a smoke-purification ritual, or sang, to a worldly deity in this community sheds light on this chapter’s focus on materiality, connectivity, and the mutuality of becoming/un-becoming expressed through human–non-human relationships.
The sang ritual occurred on a late winter’s day five years ago, amidst a flurry of construction in the community: the two-lane road that passed the village had been completed, new houses were being built as a result of the Nomad Settlement project, and the incarnation lama had overseen the completion of a five-storey primary-level boarding school for pastoralist children of the area. The lama’s complex of buildings had been constructed in an area of pasture called Taraka (T. rta ra ka), and the pastoralists who had formerly lived there in stone winter houses and grazed their animals on its pastures had moved either to other parts of the community’s pastures or to the new concrete houses from the Nomad Settlement project. Because the incarnation lama was concerned about the fortune of this place, which included the sustained quality of water that flowed from the snow-capped mountains behind the place, he wanted to endow Taraka with the power of a worldly deity that would protect the well-being of the land and its inhabitants. However, he faced a problem. Taraka used to have a worldly deity that resided there however, pastoralists said that it had fled around sixty years ago, which corresponded with the 1950s and the time the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) of the Chinese state camped there for a while. During that time, soldiers destroyed local chortens (stupas), cut down forests, and killed wildlife. They also took away a number of people associated with religion, including the ritual practitioner connected with the deity. In the light of this series of polluting acts, Taraka deity left the place and, importantly, could not be called back since its ritual practitioner had died and the transmission was lost. Therefore, in order to confer the power and fortune of a worldly deity on Taraka, the local incarnation lama manoeuvred to call in a worldly deity from another place. This more powerful deity normally resides in, and is integrally associated with, the high snow-capped mountain called Zhara.

On that day, the ritual practitioner for Zhara deity was invited to conduct the smoke-purification ritual and chant the specific smoke-purification ritual text (T. bsang yig) for Zhara. It was a community event and pastoralists dressed in fine robes. The air was already thick with fragrant smoke from dried juniper branches taken specially from the hill of another nearby worldly deity. Plants and shrubs from this particular hill were thought to be endowed with particular potency. Within the framework of Tibetan Buddhism, incense is burned to please the gods. The subsequent fragrant smoke is thought to ‘please the five senses’ (T. ’dod yon lnga) of the Buddha as well as other deities that have been incorporated into the Buddhist pantheon. Fragrant smoke rises to the sky, thereby creating a pathway or channel to the Buddhas in their Purelands (Fitzherbert 2016, 1). But within the specific context of worldly deities,
fragrant smoke does more than please the gods; it purifies the deities themselves, securing not only their goodwill and fortune but also their continued presence in a particular place.

The ritual practitioner for Zhara deity was accompanied by a small retinue of monks associated with the local incarnate lama, as well as the lama himself. They, however, did not chant the ritual text, which was chanted by the ritual practitioner:

Homage to the master Guru Padma Sambhava (T. na mo gu ru padma thod phreng rtsal),

King Padma’s most revered host/collection (T. pad ma rgyal po’i tshogs la gus pas ‘dud).

Having nobly tamed the Snowy Land of Tibet (T. gangs can bod yul ‘phags pa’i gdul bya ste),

Particularly Guru Padma himself (T. khyad par gu ru pad ma ka ranyid),

... Protector of the sutra and mantra illuminating the world (T. ’dzam gling mdo sngags sgron me gsal ba’i mgon),

Protector of thunder illuminating Tibet, in particular (T. sgos su bod yul num pa gsal ba’i mgon):

... At that time the one master Padma (T. de dus rje gcig pad ma ka ra’yis) Saw Tibet’s poisonous demons (T. bod kyi lha srin gdug pa can gsigs pa),

Subdued and conquered them by magic (T. mthu dang stobs kyis btul zhing dbang du bsdus).

They completely listened to the requests of his servants (T. kun kyung bka’ nyan gsung sdod bran du bkod) And promised to deliver the treasure of the protector/guardian (T. dam tshig gtad cing gter gyi srung ma la).

... The many master protectors of the region (T. gnas bdag du ma chos kyi srung ma la) Order and entrust each with his teachings (T. bka’ bsgo mdzad cing rang rang las gnyer gtad),
Particularly in the borders of China and Tibet (T. khyad par rgya nag yul dang bod kyi mtshams),

To teach and protect the boundaries at the time of adversity (T. bstan pa srung zhung mu stegs kha gnon la),

To establish the 38 masters of the region (T. gnas bdag dregs pa sum cu tsa brgyad bzhag)

In the lining of Zhara Lhatse himself (T. de'i nang shar gyi bzhag bra lha rtse nyid).

...

Be calm with this smoke-offering (T. zhi ba bsang gi mchod pa ‘di ‘bul bas).

As the chant progressed, monks assembled the stone foundation for a cairn (T. la rdsas), with poles of prayer flags in the middle. Beside the cairn, a one-metre-high pile of dried juniper branches smouldered, releasing thick plumes of fragrant smoke both to the sky and to the immediate area. Everyone could feel the smoke penetrating their nostrils, eyes, skin and throats; it engulfed the area and blurred clear distinctions among participants and between the senses. Pastoralists who were at a distance from the cairn and the ritual practitioner might not have distinctly heard his chants, but they felt the smoky effects of the ritual. After an hour of chanting, smoking and observing, the ritual concluded and its participants dispersed. Notably, the ritual practitioner did not return to his abode a little more than ten kilometres away. Instead, he moved into a newly constructed, simple stone house not far from the stone cairn and, to this day, performs the rituals required to please and purify Zhara deity. The cairn itself was reconstructed more elaborately after the ritual and is now regarded as another presence for Zhara deity, so that any ritual action performed there is equivalent to actions performed at the snow-capped mountain itself. The ritual action elicits a relational response: Zhara deity confers his power and fortune on the place of Taraka.

Let us now examine a few points related to this smoke-purification ritual. First, and related to the overall themes of ‘materiality’ and ‘connectivity’, is the creation of new avenues of ritual practice based on context and need. The power and fortune of Zhara deity was not relocated to Taraka; that is, the deity was not transferred from one place to another but rather extended, in a way that conferred equivalent presence in both places, Zhara mountain and the cairn in Taraka. Elaborating on the extension, the cairn was also Zhara. It was incorrect therefore to think of the cairn as another representation of the deity; the material
form of the cairn connects with Zhara mountain as an extension of the latter, rather than as its representation. Here, to recall Descola (2013), is an example not of a redistribution of substantive properties, processes and representations, but of recomposing ‘materiality’ and ‘connectivity’: Zhara deity and the cairn at Taraka were recomposed as one through the smoke-purification ritual performed by the ritual practitioner. Importantly, physical and topographic manifestations, such as land and mountains and water, are not always or only understood through their material aspects, but also – and for Tibetans primarily – through the power and fortune that imbues certain portions of land or specific mountains or bodies of water. Recomposing materiality and connectivity, therefore, is not a universal and one-off act, but a constantly engaged practice (in this case, through smoky relations) of becoming and un-becoming.

I note un-becoming because of the second related point from the brief ethnography above: the original Taraka deity is now lost to the community and the place. This loss resulted partly from the polluting activities of PLA soldiers, which not only displeased the deity but also affected him directly and negatively. Even though these polluting acts could have been counteracted by fragrant smoke – that is, through smoky relations with his ritual practitioner – the person who could have performed the ritual was no longer alive. Taraka deity’s well-being and continued presence in Taraka depended on smoky relations with his ritual practitioner. This historical situation illustrates how the worldly deity and the ritual practitioner are not in existence before their relationship. Rather, they existed in mutual dependence and the loss of one signalled the un-becoming of the other. In this regard, Taraka deity and his ritual practitioner highlight not a substantialist ontology of being posited on a duality of mind and matter, but rather a mutually constituting ontology of becoming and un-becoming, perceived and expressed through smoky relations.

**Beyond dichotomies of substance and worldviews**

How do the ethnography and analysis presented here contribute to certain debates within anthropology on issues of non-dualism and relationality (Venkatesan, Candea, Jensen et al. 2012; Venkatesan, Martin, Scott et al. 2013)? At stake in these debates is a clear response to, and critique of, the understanding of realities according to dualism, and more specifically the substance dualism of René Descartes and its assumed
incommensurability between body and mind.⁹ The substance dualism of Descartes proposes that the thinking, cogito, or consciousness/mind, is something radically different from body or substance. Substance dualism is therefore contrary to both the perspective of materialists, which states that physical substance is the only knowable truth, and the perspective of idealists, which posits that physical states are only mental ones. Rather, the assertion of Cartesian dualism is that both mind and body are real but cannot be assimilated into each other. This incommensurability draws a dichotomy between mind (also mental, immaterial) and body (also materiality, substance) and has the effect of an almost unquestioned assumption, namely that substances – as inert, brute matter – are already composed (or thought to be), and it is minds that connect them together and interact with them.¹⁰

One strand of the critique of substance dualism has emphasised the person-as-individual and called for alternative articulations based on a kinship- and exchange-dependent ‘dividual’ (Strathern 1988) and on the ‘fractal person’ (Wagner 1991). Another, taken up mainly by Bruno Latour and the actor-network theory, has focused on the dualism between mind and matter specifically through ‘human action and material causality – in a hierarchical and axial manner’ (Ssorin-Chaikov 2013: 315). Yet another strand of critique understands the dualism in terms of a Nature/Culture dichotomy and is exemplified notably in works by Descola (1994, 2005), Tim Ingold (1992) and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998, 2004). All identify the problem of separating an inert Nature ‘out there’ on the one hand and an active Culture ‘in here’ on the other, particularly as a universal dichotomy, even while they have different perspectives on how humans relate with non-humans. In particular, Descola has argued for multiple ontologies of identification and relation (2005) and Viveiros de Castro for perspectivism (1998), and both have been pivotal to the literature on ‘the ontological turn’ (Alberti, Fowles, Holbraad et al. 2011; Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007; Holbraad and Pedersen 2014; Pedersen 2001; Willerslev 2007). Yet one key point related to this literature, as well as associated arguments for relational ontologies and subsequent critiques,¹¹ bears on this chapter. For if, indeed, the argument based on the ontological turn and associated relational ontologies is necessarily wedded to a basic theoretical ground, then, as Morten Pedersen (2012) suggests, the theoretical ground should preferably be the ground of our field of study rather than that of Descartes and substance dualism.

Taking seriously this proposition with regard to Tibetan smoky relations, the theoretical ground of Tibetan philosophy sees a dualistic view as
the ignorant view characteristic of the unenlightened mind in which all things are falsely conceived to have concrete self-existence [emphasis added]. To such a view, the appearance of an object is mixed with the false image of its being independent or self-existent, thereby leading to further dualistic views concerning subject and object, self and other, this and that and so forth.

(Yeshe 2001, 80)

In Tibetan philosophy, therefore, dualism is characteristic of the unenlightened mind, and the effort towards enlightenment is the ability to transcend dualism through non-dualism. Importantly, non-dualism is not the lack of recognition that categories and oppositions exist but rather a methodological approach that allows the thinker-practitioner to remain within the paradox of existing-within-dualisms yet not only existing-within-dualisms. In other words, it is the paradox of existing in a world of either/or while maintaining the methodological approach of both/and, which necessarily includes the either/or. A Tibetan example that expands on the category of smoke illustrates this point.

A classical and basic definition of smoke (T. du ba) from Tibetan philosophy comes from the Collected Topics textbooks (T. bsdus grwa’). and states that smoke – called duwa in the vernacular of eastern Tibetan pastoralists – is a secondary colour, which is also referred to as ‘shades’, of which there are eight kinds. Tracing the genealogy of this classification, smoke as duwa is a kind of colour pertaining to vision form sources (T. gzugs), which are part of external form/matter. Notably, external/form matter is an object of the senses rather than existence predicated on substance/matter (T. dngos po). This classification of smoke, like any kind of classification, is a process of ordering and exclusion: categorising what something is simultaneously comments on what something is not (within the system of classification). It operates within the categorising principle of either/or. Yet the Tibetan classification of smoke as colour exists generally as a phenomenon in the realm of conventional nature, which is marked by dualisms and the unenlightened mind. The aim of Tibetan philosophy is to transcend the dualisms presented by phenomena in conventional nature. To achieve this, though, the thinker-practitioner simultaneously holds on to dualisms in order to argue beyond them. As mentioned above, thinking with and through the classification of smoke in Tibetan philosophy and according to its method of argumentation and debate requires the paradox of existing-within-dualisms yet not only existing-within-dualisms if one is to transcend them. Guided by the framework of Tibetan philosophy, therefore, the aim of this chapter is
not to reconcile the dualism by rejecting it, but to recompose such terms as ‘nature’ and ‘society’, ‘materiality’ and ‘connectivity’ according to a method of both/and.

In practice, smoke-purification rituals comprise two different categories of sang, namely sang chod (T. bsang mchod) or fragrant smoke as offering, and nol sang (T. mnol bsang) or fragrant smoke as treating various spiritual, social and/or physical contaminations. These different categories can, in part, be explained by the fact that Tibetan Buddhism comprises what Samuel (1993) has described as two distinct components: ‘clerical’, prescriptive aspects and ‘shamanic’, dynamic approaches (Samuel 1993: 568–73). The latter is often traced to folk religious practices that share aspects of animism, as defined by Descola (2009).

In Tibetan ritual practices, also, the combination of these aspects at times results in a conflation of components, particularly when shamanic approaches are made to fit into clerical contexts. Therefore, in terms of sang rituals, it is not technically or theologically possible to fumigate or have any impact on the Buddha and other-worldly Buddhist protectors (T. 'jig-rten las 'das- pa'i srung-ma). In theological contexts of Tibetan Buddhism, the aspect of sang as offering (T. bsang mchod) is combined with, and often overrides, the aspect of sang as cleansing or fumigating (T. mnol bsang) (Bellezza 2011; Tan 2018a). In this way, ritual smoke can be seen to go beyond the dichotomy of either/or – either clerical or shamanic – to express the method of both/and. Smoke, worldly deities, ritual practitioners and nomadic pastoralists therefore should not be viewed as having concrete self-existence independently of the relationships that implicate them in a mutuality of becoming and un-becoming. To state this, however, is crucially to acknowledge and clarify that it is specifically through smoke from sang (T. bsang) that Taraka and Zhara deities, Taraka and Zhara ritual practitioners and the nomadic pastoralists of my fieldwork community are in a mutuality of becoming and un-becoming. Categories of language and thought cannot be completely ‘captured’ in the recomposing; rather, particular instantiations are implicated.

Therefore, it is important to acknowledge how different kinds of smoke in Tibet (Tan 2018a) and different worldly deities and communities of nomadic pastoralists recompose into smoky relations of different degrees and configurations. We can now fully appreciate that, for Tibetan pastoralists, only some smoke, namely, smoke from sang, transforms persons and environments. Smoke as duwa, on the other hand, sets up a category of phenomenal existence that heuristically allows a Tibetan thinker-practitioner to transcend dualisms and independent material existence.
Anthropological literature in its various ways has sought to go beyond dichotomies of substance and worldviews, culminating in multiple approaches that seek to activate the theoretical ground appropriate to an ethnographer’s field of study. Staying with this proposition, the chapter has concluded with the theoretical ground of Tibetan philosophy and its focus on non-dualism to highlight the methodological ability to remain both/and within the paradox of dualism, either/or. Recomposing smoke neither as just substance, just colour or just fragrant smoke (sang) allows us to appreciate the different and specific cadences of smoke and the effects it engenders. Smoky relations therefore index shifting and blurred categories – shifting because what is foregrounded, either categories or relations, changes depending on specific ethnographic contexts, and blurred because the liminal existence of smoke itself obfuscates clear delineations between categories and unifies mind and perception through its potent sensory qualities. ‘Materiality’ and ‘connectivity’ are reconfigured to exist not as independent terms but through a mutual constitution that, even though conceptually distinct, is nevertheless practically simultaneous.

Notes
1. For a useful review of practices of smoke in indigenous Australia, see Musharbash (2018).
2. I use ‘place’ in the ways signalled by contributions in Feld and Basso’s (1996) *Senses of Place*, namely as already marked by interactions – rather than existing conceptually in the abstract – as glossed by ‘space’.
3. For an in-depth discussion, see Descola 2013.
4. Tibetan words are shown in transcribed form, followed in brackets by transliterations that follow a modified Wylie system.
5. For an overview of these policies, see Bauer and Nyima 2011; Gaerrang 2015; Tan 2018b; Yeh and Gaerrang 2011.
6. Where the worldly deities have not been tamed by Buddhism, they are referred to as demons (T. ‘dre).
7. The Tibetan word used was the vernacular ‘shi song’, which glosses as ‘lost, left, died’.
8. Charlene Makley (2013) has written of a similar creative reinvention of a ritual event, the lurol festival, in the north-eastern Tibetan region of Amdo.
9. It is important to note that conceptual dualism invokes a necessary incommensurability between two terms and, in this way, differs from binary oppositions that may be regarded as two qualities of a single term, for example, hot/cold as qualities of temperature (which is itself a relative measure). In this latter regard, binary oppositions might also express monism, which is the conceptual opposite of dualism. The incommensurability of terms in dualism is of a more basic order.
10. Insights on dualism presented here have been informed by Robinson (2017).
11. For critiques and responses to them, see Course 2010; Heywood 2012; Ingold 2016; Laidlaw 2012; Descola 2016; Holbraad and Pedersen 201; Pedersen 2012.
12. For an interesting and relevant discussion of both/and, see Lambek (2015).
13. Here I would like to thank Ruth Gamble for her guidance through the basic tenets of Tibetan philosophy.
14. The eight kinds of shades (T. kha dog gi yin lag brgyad) are (1) cloud (T. sbrin pa), (2) smoke (T. du ba), (3) dust (T. rdul), (4) fog or mist (T. khug sna), (5) sun (T. nyi ma), (6) shadow (T. grib pa), (7) lustre (T. snang ba) and (8) darkness (T. mun pa).

15. It is important to note the different categorical references to gzugs. Matter – manifest as materials, things, objects, substance – and its synonym form (T. gzugs) are that which can be experienced through the senses. Matter is again divided into (1) external and (2) internal matter. The externals are the six sense-object spheres that are the things one can see, hear, taste, smell, touch and think. The internals are the senses themselves. Significantly in Tibetan philosophy, there is a delineation between that which ‘exists’ and is predicated on matter/substance (T. dngos po) and that which is an object of the senses, namely external forms/matter (T. gzugs). External form/matter is divided again among the various senses, and it is the vision ‘form sources’ that pertain directly to smoke.

References


Tan, Gillian G. 2016. ‘“Life” and “freeing life” (tshe thar) among nomadic pastoralists of Kham: intersecting religion and environment.’ *Études Mongoles et Sibériennes, Centrasiatiques et Tibétaines (EMSCAT)* 47: Everyday Religion among Pastoralists of High and Inner Asia.


The water in this humidifier was collected from a puddle formed in King Street after heavy rain, following an unusually long dry spell for an Aberdeen winter.