Exploring Materiality and Connectivity in Anthropology and Beyond

Schorch, Philipp, Saxer, Martin, Elders, Marlen

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16 Intervention

Tamga tash: a tale of stones, stories and travelling immobiles

Lisa Francesca Rail

Setting two scenes

The installation’s centrepiece is a stone. It took three adults to carry it up the driveway and the flight of stairs that lead into the Center of Advanced Studies in Munich, in February 2017. A couple of sturdy ropes are strung around its bulky middle and connect it to a laptop showing travel blog entries, to a guidebook on Kyrgyzstan, and to several photographs. Some ropes’ ends have pages of writing attached to them while others remain loose, leading nowhere. The widespread Buddhist mantra *om mani padme hum* is painted across the stone’s flattened upper side in Tibetan writing. Or rather, this is what some people might be able to read, should they be familiar with the sketchily emulated letters. On the wall next to the stone, a signpost designates it as a remake, an evocation, of an inscribed, historical rock resting in the north of Kyrgyzstan, called *tamga tash*: letter stone.

From the village of Tamga – more than 6,000 kilometres to the east, one summer earlier – I walk south, away from Lake Issyk Kul, while facing the distant mountain peaks. I leave behind the wooden and concrete houses adorned by front gardens and let an uneven road lead me through apple orchards, fenced and unfenced, past fishing grounds along

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**Figure 16.1** Image of the *tamga tash* in Djeti Ögüz region, Kyrgyzstan, as presented in an online travel blog. Photograph by Michal Choura, 2015. [https://www.choura.cz/kyrgyzstan-tamga/h69591115#h60660fa4](https://www.choura.cz/kyrgyzstan-tamga/h69591115#h60660fa4) (accessed 11 June 2019).

**Figure 16.2** Reproduction of the *tamga tash* at the Center for Advanced Studies. Installation by Lisa Rail, Symposium Connecting Materialities/Material Connectivities, Munich 2017, LMU Center for Advanced Studies. Photo by Marlen Elders.
the mountain stream, past the forester’s house, and past tall-growing meadows. Today, I do not undertake the walk to help with working in the orchards or preparing hay. Today, I come to visit the ancient, inscribed rock among the winter pastures.

A rustling breeze briefly stirs up the frayed remains of some colourful prayer flags that adorn the cool contours of the big, immovable *tamga tash*. It rattles the dry branches surrounding the massive mountain boulder before it rushes on across the fragrant grassland and the foothills towering over the lake and the villages by its shore. The stone among the shrubs is approximately three metres wide and two metres high, has been scrawled on by lichens and is split lengthwise. Its flattened side faces downhill towards the distant water surface. This side is also the one inscribed with a line of letters. The writing is weathered, yet its meaning is still decipherable: *Om mani padme hum*. Archaeological knowledge about the stone and its inscription is scant. It can be inferred from the writing system and the historical literature on past extensions of the Tibetan empire, however, that the marks on this stone must stem from roughly the seventh or eighth century CE (Beckwith 1993; van Schaik 2011). That past imperial presence is a story not commonly told in and about today’s Muslim Central Asia. Yet, stubbornly slow in its material erosion, the *tamga tash* keeps bearing witness and ties connections between widely separated times. It is the tie.

The writing suffices to single out the rock to be named and recommended in travel guides or blogs, even though information about its formation more detailed than a vague century is not ready at hand. Tourists far away from the breezy foothills read about the *tamga tash*, then make their way up through pastures towards the stone with its engraved line of letters.

In Munich, the compilation of knotted-up things forms one of the artistic-academic interventions at the symposium ‘Connecting Materialities/ Material Connectivities (mat~con)’ The assembled papers and installations share the purpose of tracing ways in which material things and connections – as *thing~ties* (Saxer and Schorch, Introduction to this volume) across space and time – bring forth one another. While many contributions are concerned with the joint proliferation of links and things through movement, my installation composed around the painted stone is based on an instance of material immobility, that is, on the absence of the original and immobile *tamga tash*. Its variously mediated figurations, however – the replica, images and writing, printouts and digital information – allow the stone to be partially present – or re-presented – nonetheless. Simultaneously, it is words and photographs on travel websites and in travel guides that help entice people to venture towards the stationary rock.
Recounting the *tamga tash* and the forms of connection, transmission and movement that spring from this case of resistant and immobile matter, this chapter explores three conceptual aspects in particular: One is the stone’s material property of endurance that enables connections through time. Another is that the same fixity may initiate movement of visitors, promoting additional connections across space. The third is that these connection-forging capacities cannot be ascribed to qualities inherent in lithic material alone but must be understood as the product of both the stubborn stone and its co-constitutive mediation processes. By the end of this tale, the *tamga tash* will have emerged as what I would like to call a *travelling and attracting immobile* – a figure of interest for the project of thinking through modes of entanglement of matter and connections.

**Connecting immobility**

Hauling the re-created letter stone through the hallway of the Center of Advanced Studies brought me and my fellow stone carriers to the limit of our influence over the stubbornly heavy rock. On the lookout for a suitable model, I had chosen the now painted stone from a street in Maxvorstadt, a neighbourhood in Munich. I picked it because of its flattened upper side and manageable size. It still took a car and six arms to bring it to the conference venue. Even my smaller remake of *tamga tash*, chosen to fit through the entrance door, made our muscles sore.

As mentioned above, other contributions to this volume are concerned with travelling things and connections emerging from the mobility of materials, from imperial horses, political gifts, Barbie dolls, migrants’ pilgrimage souvenirs, and smartphones moving across the Pacific, to arrowheads and life jackets. Theirs are stories of circulation, of becoming and taking effect on the move. Diverging from this mode of material connectivity, the *tamga tash* is notably stationary and comparatively unchanging. From the positional perspective of human longevity, physical power and sensory perception, boulders like *tamga tash* are fairly reliable preservers of history and points of orientation; in the dimension of geological time, it should nonetheless be remembered, this affective material-historical stability dissolves. Weathering slowly, for humans, the lettered stone is a keeper of a past Tibetan political topography and of a writing system that can still be translated into spoken sound. Resistant to muscle power, it carries the potential to be a shared reference point in the mountainous grassland. Whoever wants to touch and see the conserved traces of time
and history will have to make their way towards Tamga and its tamga tash, as the stone itself will not be moved.

Similarly to the stories of the travelling souvenirs and smartphones, we may observe material things giving rise to, or rather becoming themselves, linkages. Yet in the case of the lettered stone, this takes place not despite its fixity, but, importantly, because of it. Its immobility makes people wander towards it. Its durability allows it to become a mark of the landscape, an anchor for movement and talk, or – using Tim Ingold’s figure of thought – a discernible knot of past and ongoing lifelines (Ingold 2011: 148–9). Lifelines of herders, travel guide writers, villagers offering guestrooms, lichens, tourists, and a stonemason who has long passed away.

The capacity of material things to stay ‘fixed’ across diverse temporal and spatial scales is, among other aspects, what enables them to become connectors. As stones are particularly fixed and enduring media for traces like engraved letters, they may additionally become historic singularities calling for visitors. The stubborn lithic weight and the potential to preserve and attract others are inextricable. The painted stone among the ropes is more than a visual reproduction; its demanding setup gave a tangible glimpse of precisely the weight and immovability that characterise the tamga tash in its connection-weaving. In the end, because of its weight and bulk, the replica at the conference never made it back to Maxvorstadt.

Gravitation

On the village streets of Tamga, there are not many signs indicating the presence of the ancient stone nearby.

The right trail, up towards the mountain ridge’s snowy peaks, is neither easy to find nor in good condition. The last part of the way no longer even follows a path, but cuts through a swampy, overgrown meadow sprinkled with fruit trees and hidden puddles. Not many tourists find their way to Tamga, but those who do have generally read about the village’s eponymous rock on the Lonely Planet website or perhaps even in a copy of the guidebook that lies tangled up in the ropes in February 2017 (Scholl 2009). The local tourist infrastructure is sparse and guest rooms few. There

Figure 16.3 Image of Tamga’s main street in Djeti Ögüz region, Kyrgyzstan. Photo taken by the author in 2015.

Figure 16.4 Remains of the reproduction of the tamga tash in Munich, one year after its presentation at the Symposium Connecting Materialities/Material Connectivities, Munich 2017, LMU Center for Advanced Studies. Photo taken by the author in 2018.
are no restaurants in the village’s centre, neither is there any specialised
tourist information. However, Tamga’s residents are good at improvising,
and at reading the habits and desires of the odd visitor. Accordingly, they
know that most will probably ask for *tamga tash*.

*Tamga tash* literally translates to letter stone in Kyrgyz, a Turkic lan-
guage. The chiselled writing gave the village Tamga its name. None of
the village dwellers I know is able to read the Tibetan characters, and nor
am I. But I heard rumours about scientists who once roamed the area on
the quest for the stone’s provenance. The scientists, it is said, found let-
tered rocks matching the one on Tamga’s pasture, a handful of them close
by, others in a faraway land, all of them ancient. At the same time, the
stone, the *tash*, also features in a narration that is offered locally to explain
the genesis of the landscape and its landmarks: the gaping crack running
through the stone is said to have been caused by a stroke of the sword of
Manas, the protagonist of the Kyrgyz epics, now the national mythic hero
of the independent republic. Even though Tibet and the seventh and eighth
centuries are generally not featured in accounts of the stone’s origin in
Tamga, the *tamga tash* definitely appears as a bearer of both history and
stories.

During the summer months of 2016, an elderly woman sells honey
and pickled wild mushrooms in front of her house on one of Tamga’s two
main streets. Aware of the stone’s potential as an attracting sight, and to
make up for the lack of official signposting, she sets up a colourful card-
board sign describing the lettered stone. The writing is in Russian and not
well printed, but it is accompanied by more self-explanatory photographs,
recognisable by readers of guidebooks and travelogues. Should an inter-
ested traveller pass by, she will be quick to summon some children in their
summer school holidays who are eager to be her guide and earn some
pocket money. The honey seller, the children and the guesthouse keepers
align themselves with the dispersing, comparatively modest but locally
very palpable fame of the *tamga tash*. They tap and partake in the rock’s
gravitational force, the potential of its immovable, enduring weight to draw
and conserve narratives, and to pull in travellers. If a common language
can be found between tourists and villagers, the stone’s stories are likely
to be exchanged and perhaps eventually circulated further via travel blogs.

**Gradual detachability**

So far, this essay has explicitly traced the workings of immobility. Yet this
is only one half of the tale of travelling immobiles, because the rumours,
the book, the photographs, the webpages, the printouts, the ropes and I travel more easily. Tamga’s *tamga tash* emerges in Munich despite the distance between the two places. In a sense, it had already emerged for the village’s arriving tourists before they actually saw and touched its surface. Its story is not solely one of fixity, it is also one of multiplicity and the inseparability of representations and things.

Once mediation processes are not understood as separate copies of *an* original, ‘representations’ have effectively already become something else – actualisations, re-*presentations*, remakes, enactments, performances. The images, the blog posts, the talk I give in the course of the symposium, and this essay I write, would not exist without the stone’s heavy material basis. But likewise, the *tamga tash* would not be the same – neither the same point of attraction nor the potential generator of additional income in Tamga – without these more volatile and partial reproductions. Non-representational aspects of relational materialist theory (e.g. Anderson and Harrison 2010; Bennett 2010; Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012) and post-humanist rethinking of semiotics (e.g. Kohn 2013) are concerned with this inextricable mutuality. Signs, images and re-*presentations* do not form a separate mental realm vis-à-vis their material grounding. Rather, they inseparably emerge from, and consequently remain continuously entangled with, what we colloquially call the material world. This does not mean, however, that they can be reduced to it.

On the other hand, inseparability does not, and must not, mean that we stop distinguishing. While they certainly depend on their point of reference, narratives and images possess properties of their own, freed from constraints posed by *tamga tash*: spoken language travels differently from written lines. Words travel differently from images. Their difference is different according to whether their travel is digital, on paper or mediated through sound waves. All travel differently from actual rocks. The remake travels differently from its template. Nonetheless, the re-*presentations* stay conjunct with the letter stone in Kyrgyzstan. I would like to call this the gradual detachability of mediations, indispensable for immobiles to travel and sprawl. Mediations can be shared, multiplied, transported and communicated, each in distinct ways and within their own limitations. Along the way, they make the *tamga tash* arrive in Munich and become something slightly different with every single new enactment, including the conference installation and this very volume.
Radiation

Trying to grasp the tamga tash’s workings as a gravitational – stationary and moving – entity, I found an explanation in the interplay of singularising immobility and travel in the form of gradually independent reproductions. Accordingly, tamga tash can productively be understood as travelling immobile. Its anchoring fixity and the mobility of its mediations co-constitute each other; only together do they give rise to a stone that both stays put and connects, attracts and radiates.

The tamga tash has made it into the pages of this book. The book has become another node in the stone’s rope-work that it describes, another radiating spore. Carried along on the lithic lettering, a piece of largely forgotten history of past Tibetan presence in Central Asia has entered this chapter, as have some more or less improvised fragments of Tamga’s tourist infrastructure, as have some rumours, and some strained muscle fibres. One particular stone, immobile yet travelling, material and virtual, evoked an interplay of abstract lines of thought. The concepts that emerged from this engagement with a small empirical setting may move on and potentially help further as guiding tools for thinking through materiality and connectivity should they fall into a fertile substrate.

The lettered stone in the foothills of Tamga remains located among the grass and branches and keeps awaiting visitors. The lettered stone in Munich was first heaved out into the Center of Advanced Studies’ garden after the end of the symposium, to be left there in the absence of a car and the motivation to transport it back to its place of recovery. One week later, however, it had to be moved to a nearby park, as the centre’s staff found it a little too bulky and immutable either to be kept as a memento or to be ignored. It must still be sitting underneath a smallish tree with the stubbornness of its own weight. The watercolour writing, materially less resistant to rain, will, on the other hand, have disappeared, dissolved into particles, drained off into the ground and perhaps digested further by soil organisms.

That spore from Tamga, the remake’s lettering, was drowned: the spore between these duplicated pages keeps awaiting readers, even travellers.
References


