

Introduction

This book considers three questions about understanding the past. How can we rethink human histories by including animals and plants? How can we overcome nationally territorialised narratives? And how can we balance academic history-writing and indigenous understandings of history? This is a tentative foray into the connections between these questions. Each has, in recent years, been subject to wide-ranging scholarly debate, but rarely in combination – and never for the region that we focus on.

We explore these questions for an area that historians seldom choose as their unit of enquiry. For most it has very low visibility, so they marginalise or ignore it in their accounts about the past. As a result, it appears as a remote expanse without historical dynamism or relevance to wider processes – a space where only trivial, local and derivative events and interactions occur. But grant it a central role and we learn about key moments, dynamic connections and mobile actors that force us to reinterpret and reassess the significance of processes, territorial units and personalities that historians habitually foreground.

The area we are concerned with does not even have an established name. For brevity's sake, we decided to refer to it as the Triangle (short for Eastern Himalayan Triangle). In Chapter 1 we explain its dimensions and our reasons for treating it as a unit – but suffice it here to say that it is a roughly triangular region that is dominated by two mountain ranges, the eastern Himalayas and the Indo-Burma Arc, and the basins formed by the rivers that flow from them. It forms a corridor between the two most populous societies on earth, China and India. At its heart is Northeast India, so another way to describe it is to speak of Northeast India and its surrounding areas. We are especially interested in the uplands of the region, not least because historians have been 'less fond of mountaineering' than other researchers.¹ Today five states administer the Triangle: India, Myanmar or Burma, Bangladesh, Bhutan and China (Map I.1).

¹ 'The highlands of Asia still attract little attention from historians, compared to the major kingdoms and empires that surround them.... Perhaps historians are less fond of mountaineering [than those adept at field enquiries].' Michaud, 'Editorial – Zomia and Beyond', 188–9.



Map I.1 Location of the Triangle

Source: Authors.

More-than-human histories

We live in a period in which the social sciences are being vigorously reconstructed in response to our rapidly growing awareness of planetary changes. These range from climate change to a massive loss of biodiversity. This scholarly rethinking has been spurred on by new ideas, notably the hypothesis of the ‘Anthropocene’, which holds that we are living in a new epoch of geological history that is marked by the emergence of humankind as a dominant factor shaping the evolution of our planet.² This idea challenges long-held convictions about humans being proudly detached from other-than-human organisms, or ‘nature’. The social sciences are beginning to shed extreme forms of ‘anthropocentrism’, ‘human exceptionalism’ and ‘speciesism’ that blinker us and force us into unhelpfully narrow narratives about ourselves.³

² ‘The hypothesis of the Anthropocene has called for a revision and surpassing of various deeply rooted distinctions in historical epistemology, such as, for instance, between natural history and human history, written history and deep history, human history and multispecies history, national history and planetary history.’ Tamm, ‘Introduction: A Framework’, 7. See also Neckel, ‘Scholastic Fallacies’.

³ For introductions, see Ingold (ed.), *What Is an Animal*; Boddice (ed.), *Anthropocentrism*; Van Dooren, Kirksey and Münster, ‘Multispecies Studies’; Harris and Cipolla, ‘Multispecies Archaeology’; Kopnina et al., ‘Anthropocentrism’; Hopster, ‘The Speciesism Debate’.

Following this major paradigm shift, historians are now engaged in debates about ‘more-than-human’, ‘multispecies’, ‘environmental’, ‘posthumanist’ and ‘human–non-human’ histories. Among historians, this has been a relatively cautious process compared with developments in some other disciplines within the emerging field of ‘environmental humanities’.⁴ Many historians have, of course, reflected on the clarion call for change, especially since a subgroup began to style themselves environmental historians half a century ago. But how do we translate ‘the collapse of the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history’ into new historical narratives?⁵ This is far more easily said than done.

Non-human animals and plants have always figured in historians’ narratives – usually with the scholarly eye fixed steadily on human protagonists and their agency. Today, this approach is being abandoned for a more nuanced one.⁶ It downplays human agency and suggests that the course of history is steered by ‘agential entanglements’ between humans and their environment.⁷ We are becoming more aware of communication between different species of living beings. It is not only the case that humans communicate with one another and with non-human animals, or that animals communicate with other animals, but also that rapid advances in plant science show convincingly that plants have biochemical ways of communicating with other plants as well as with animals.⁸ Humans, animals and plants are participants in a never-ending three-cornered conversation.

⁴ Tamm and Simon, ‘More-than-Human History’. See also Van Dooren, Kirksey and Münster, ‘Multispecies Studies’; Emmett and Nye, *The Environmental Humanities*; Heise, Christensen and Niemann (eds.), *The Routledge Companion*. Anthropologists have been particularly active (Haraway, *When Species Meet*; Viveiros de Castro, *Cosmological Perspectivism*; Kohn, *How Forests Think*). In the Triangle, ‘environmental humanities’ are only just taking off, and they are primarily concerned with contemporary anthropogenic impacts on the environment – historical studies are rare. See Smyer Yü, ‘Situating Environmental Humanities’.

⁵ Chakrabarty, ‘The Climate of History’, 201. For an overview, see O’Gorman and Gaynor, ‘More-Than-Human Histories’; Holmes, Gaynor and Morgan, ‘Doing Environmental History’.

⁶ See Nash, ‘The Agency of Nature’, 69:

It is worth considering how our stories might be different if human beings appeared not as the motor of history but as partners in a conversation with a larger world, both animate and inanimate, about the possibilities of existence. If that is one of our goals, then social history is not our model, and longstanding assumptions about ‘structure’ and ‘agency’ will not suffice.

⁷ Saha, ‘Colonizing Elephants’, 171. Scholars promoting actor–network theory (ANT) have influentially conceptualised such entanglements. For introductions, see Jones, ‘Nature–Culture’; Fariás, Blok and Roberts, ‘Actor–Network Theory’.

⁸ Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 16–21; Gagliano, Ryan and Vieira (eds.), *The Language of Plants*; Núñez-Farfán and Valverde (eds.), *Evolutionary Ecology*.

So how can historians deal with these insights? A new ‘animal history’ is emerging, but it ‘has remained little studied and elusive, a hybrid creature roaming the disciplinary deep forest, nibbling at the edges of conferences and journals, straying into unexpected territories, and prone both to local extirpations and bursts of fecundity’.⁹

Fortunately, historians of the Triangle are beginning to coax animal – or more broadly, multispecies – history out of this ‘deep forest’. They assert that plants and animals do have histories of their own, which constantly interweave with human histories in material, symbolic and emotional ways.¹⁰ Think of how the lives and deaths of humans, animals and plants are entangled: humans may ‘harvest nature’ by means of hunting, fishing, foraging and agriculture, just as pathogens and predators may ‘harvest humans’.¹¹ In the following chapters we will explore how humans in the Triangle hunted, protected and revered certain animals (such as tigers or hornbills), gathered wild plants (such as bamboo and herbs), cultivated plants (such as rice and cotton) and coped with pathogens (such as viruses and parasites). We will also consider how some other-than-human organisms (such as rodents and dogs) adapted to humans, moving closer and becoming companions; how others (such as bears and leopards) confronted humans; and how yet others (such as elephants) could take both these roles.¹² By behaving in a variety of ways, the Triangle’s non-humans have always co-designed human societies, just as humans have co-designed ‘nature’.¹³

⁹ Swart, ‘Animals in African History’.

¹⁰ Karlsson (‘Introduction’, 9–10) makes this point in his call for attention to ‘the agency of plants and animals’ in studies of the region.

¹¹ See Walker, ‘Animals and the Intimacy’, 45:

Animals permeate our history and we theirs.... The debate regarding whether humans are anomalous and outside nature or separate from other animals is complicated when the stomach enzymes from an animal, whether wolf or crocodile, digest a human being... My contention is that our reluctance to join the rest of the animal kingdom on its terms, on more natural terms, exposes a lingering devotion to human ‘exceptionalism’, one that is inherent in the humanities and social sciences.

¹² For a description of the multiple dimensions of ‘human–elephant companionship’ and ‘multispecies conviviality’ in another Asian location, see Lorimer, ‘Elephants as Companion Species’. See also Lainé, ‘Les éléphants sous la cour ahom’; Lainé, ‘Conduct and Collaboration’; Lainé, ‘Travail Interspèces et conservation’; Lainé, ‘*Phi Muangs*’; Lainé, *Living and Working with Giants*; Trautmann, *Elephants and Kings*; Saha, ‘Colonizing Elephants’.

¹³ As O’Gorman and Gaynor (‘More-Than-Human Histories’, 716) put it: ‘Relational views of the world converging in more-than-human and multispecies approaches, see the past and the present as dynamically co-constituted by multiple organisms, including plants, animals, and fungi, as well as by elements and forces, from water to minerals.’

We will use the term ‘more-than-human histories’ as shorthand for several overlapping approaches that go by different names and represent slightly different scholarly entry points: environmental history, multispecies history, environmental humanities and so on. They all aim at developing conjoined histories of humans and non-humans by showing the enduring intimacy of all sentient beings.¹⁴ This requires pooling insights from many different disciplines – geology, genetics, archaeology, geography, linguistics, biology, environmental studies and anthropology – because conventional historical sources, such as written records, are simply not up to the job. On the contrary,

many of the questions asked by environmental historians cry out for reliable proxy records ... that may reflect, for example, deforestation, erosion, salinization, or changes in species compositions.... While these disparate sources of data do not always combine as easily as we might like, the various material ‘proxy’ records are an essential part of researching environmental history, even in very recent periods.¹⁵

In the following pages we attempt to construct more-than-human histories of the Triangle over a very long time span. We will touch on the deep history of the region, the arrival of modern humans and the millennia that followed, up to the present. Inevitably, it can only be an introductory, exploratory and highly selective survey – merely a first attempt to connect some of the dots and sketch an outline. We hope that this will prompt others to look at this region as a whole in much more detail and amend and revise the very rough draft that we present here.

Nationally territorialised narratives

In addition to trying to rethink human histories by including animals and plants, we also aim at questioning historians’ spatial practices. Most historians produce nationally territorialised narratives. As a result, a number of excellent studies cover parts of the Triangle, but they stop at the borders of (post)colonial administrative units and are embedded in national narratives. Thus, more-than-human histories of India or Myanmar naturally deal only with the part of the Triangle that is

¹⁴ They all aim at understanding ‘human beings as they have lived, worked, and thought in relationship to the rest of nature through the changes brought by time.... The changes humans have made in the environment have in turn affected our societies and our histories’. Hughes, *What Is Environmental History*, 2.

¹⁵ Morrison, ‘Conceiving Ecology’, 42. For suggestions on how to develop methodologies for more-than-human history, see O’Gorman and Gaynor, ‘More-Than-Human Histories’, 726–8.

today administered by those states.¹⁶ In the same vein, we have wonderful studies of administrative subregions, but here, too, some readers may be left with the impression that beyond their borders another history is playing out.¹⁷ However, an important change is currently noticeable: a small but growing number of historians have become invested in developing cross-border narratives of the Triangle.¹⁸

In this book, we seek to go beyond the practice of viewing state territories as isolating containers. We try to be more like ornithologists – who follow the birds they study across state borders¹⁹ – or geologists or climate experts – who think in units that have little to do with current political borders and state territories.²⁰ This is fairly difficult for historians because most of us were trained to nationalise space and rely heavily on source material produced by states. It is important to reflect specifically on the fact that official and semi-official records created by the British colonial state (which used to administer most of the region) have had an inordinate effect on how we make sense of Triangle histories. For studies on purely human subjects, such as political history, the state context may be highly relevant, but for studies looking at more-than-human (or multispecies) histories this is not necessarily the case. We often need a broader scope – to help us understand many plant, animal and human connections that cross borders – or a narrower scope – to help us grasp how multispecies histories are anchored in particular landscapes and ecological zones.²¹

Like state territories, however, the Triangle is a spatial construct that is not rooted in local perceptions of space. Over time, and across the region, humans have imagined countless spiritual, social and political spaces that were relevant to them.²² There are no indications that they ever imagined the Triangle as a meaningful unit. Thus, the non-indigenous quality of the space that we refer to as ‘the Triangle’ in this book puts significant limits on its use. Its main value lies, we

¹⁶ See, for example, Rangarajan and Sivaramakrishnan (eds.), *Shifting Ground*; Fisher, *An Environmental History of India*; Bryant, *The Political Ecology*.

¹⁷ For example, Saikia, *Forests and Ecological History*; Jhala, *An Endangered History*.

¹⁸ To name some of them: Mandy Sadan, David Vumlallian Zou, Gunnel Cederlöf, Jianxiong Ma, Pum Khan Pau, Dan Smyer Yü, Bérénice Guyot-Réchar, Arupjyoti Saikia, Iftekhar Iqbal, Jayati Bhattacharya, David Ludden and Kyaw Minn Htin.

¹⁹ An example is Renner (‘Bird Species-Richness’), who covers a cross-border region comprising parts of Tibet, Northeast India and Myanmar in his survey of species richness.

²⁰ Mountain ranges or biodiversity hotspots figure in studies like these: Searle, *Colliding Continents*; Morley et al., ‘Structural and Tectonic Development’; Sharma et al., *Climate Change Impacts*; Kano et al., ‘Impacts of Dams’.

²¹ Aisher and Damodaran, ‘Introduction’.

²² For example, Zou, ‘Production of Place’.

think, in its heuristic potential. It can act as a provisional springboard to challenge both nationally territorialised and highly localised narratives – and thereby offer us an opening to alternative spatial perspectives.²³

What holds true for spatial limitations also holds true for temporal ones. Rethinking more-than-human histories has enabled historians to apply alternative ideas of time. The first issue is periodisation, which we deal with here, and the second is the plural construction of time, which we will discuss in the next section. Organising historical narratives in chunks of time, or periods, is unavoidable and necessary – and therefore it makes sense to reflect on the best way of doing so. In considering more-than-human histories of the Triangle there is little mileage in following the common practice of adopting state-oriented chunks of time – or ‘nationalised periods’. Periods of dynastic rule or colonial occupation are of little help because, across the Triangle, these explain very little. Considerable parts of the region were beyond state control until the late nineteenth century; the five states that now control the Triangle have experienced different periods of rule; and local ideas of time have rarely been in tune with state time. In writing more-than-human histories, we also need to take into account non-human time, whether in terms of geological eras, the evolution of nature, the mobility of animals and plants, or the life span of different organisms. We have to feel our way forward to the most effective approach to combining such disparate measures of time.

In this book we experiment, moving from deep history to archaeological time to historical time to the present. The first two take us back way beyond the domain of conventional historiography. It makes sense to broaden our historical horizon, however, if we are to trace the earliest human–non-human interactions. It is important to be aware that ‘of the entire past history of humankind, conventional historiography covers only a trifling part – just a few seconds, if we were to liken the history of humanity to a clock with twenty-four-hour display’.²⁴ Therefore, ‘the definition of history should not be based on the invention of writing, but upon the evolution of anatomically modern humans’.²⁵ This is especially relevant in the Triangle, where humans appeared at least 40,000 years ago. And even if we consider the practice of writing, there are huge differences. In some parts of the region, writing has been used for two millennia, but in others it was introduced a mere century ago. Moreover, many inhabitants of the region continue to be illiterate today.

²³ See Smyer Yü, ‘Perpendicular Geospatiality’, for an overview and assessment of other spatial constructs regarding this region.

²⁴ Tamm, ‘Introduction’, 4.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

Studying the Triangle in this way creates numerous practical challenges regarding historical traces and sources of information. Historical material is often scanty, uneven, contradictory, in multiple languages, full of gaps and difficult to access. Comparing fragmented information produced by different institutions, each covering only a part of the region, is a huge challenge. Archaeological and historical studies of human–non-human relations are still thin on the ground. Therefore, as authors, we must resort to ‘proxy’ sources of information that we have little or no expertise on, starting with human and animal bones, plant seeds and stone tools. But if we are to ‘offer new responses to old questions about time and its structures, perceptions, and meanings, [we need] to open up dialogues across disciplines and methods’ and should not shy away from wider vistas.²⁶ Following this line of thought, throughout the book we lean heavily on research by others, notably geologists, palaeo-anthropologists, archaeo-botanists, archaeologists, biologists, anthropologists, linguists and environmentalists. We are aware that sketching the history of the Triangle in this way is a precarious undertaking. And yet, we hope that it may help us develop new lines of enquiry and encourage new communities of historians working together across boundaries, periods and disciplines.

Academic history-writing and indigenous understandings of the past

The third question that animates this book – in addition to how we can rethink human histories to include animals and plants, and how we can overcome nationally territorialised narratives – is the issue of how we can balance academic history-writing and indigenous understandings of history. Historians use specific procedures to construct and organise their narratives about the past. These include notions of what constitutes relevant evidence, who can be considered an actor in the making of history and which causal explanations are acceptable. In this way, academically trained historians produce regimented, selective stories about our past.

It is especially important to reflect on the conventional way in which historians think about time. In the previous section we looked at periodisation but here we consider a more fundamental issue. In the nineteenth century, religious chronology in Europe (a time frame interpreted from the Bible) was jolted by the discovery of bones of unfamiliar, extinct animals together with human bones. Around the same time, a grand theory of natural evolution was formulated. Suddenly, a much longer human past opened up than the few thousand years that

²⁶ Champion, ‘A Fuller History’, 256.

people had inferred from Bible texts. As a result, historians became concerned with exorcising religious, mythical time frames from their discipline. They felt the urge to join the move towards a scientific explanation of the world that was becoming dominant in Western thought. They did this by clinging to the linearity of ‘chronometric time’, which is carefully measured in years, days and hours. And they created periods (‘Antiquity’, ‘the Middle Ages’, ‘the Early Modern Era’ and so on), separated by turning points.²⁷ From now on, their scholarly claim to truth would be grounded in coherent, connected narratives of accurately datable events. This linear, developmental understanding of time became the hallmark of historical research.²⁸

But this sequential time is hardly the only way to construct time. Nineteenth-century scholars who were interested in other concepts of time branched off from the new history-writing to become anthropologists. Many of them studied alternative ways to narrate the past, especially beyond Europe. They found historical narratives, legends, myths and spiritual stories that were concerned not with the historian’s standard chronology but with connecting to the past in other ways. Like historians, anthropologists also developed specific procedures about what constitutes relevant and reliable evidence and how to validate explanations – but their purpose was not to anchor the sequences of events, as told in these stories, in chronometric time. Rather, they sought to understand how these sequences expressed a shared sense of the past and how they offered maps to navigate the present and the future.

In essence, of course, this is exactly the task that historians had also set themselves: to study the past to offer maps to navigate the present and the future. But the two scholarly practices began to diverge. Historians suggested that their linear understanding of time was ‘modern’, whereas the constructions of time explored and explained by anthropologists were ‘pre-modern’, ‘traditional’ or ‘tribal’. Hence, historical accounts were ‘true’ in a modern way. According to this logic, historians created coherent, authoritative and impartial narratives based on causality and explanation, validated by carefully dated archival documents – and in this way gave presence to a forgotten past.²⁹ Anthropologists, they suggested, depended on observations and analysis of the narratives of ‘traditional’ storytellers to interpret a sense of ‘oneness’ that underlay the events being told.³⁰

²⁷ Luttkhuis and Van der Meer, ‘New Turning Points’.

²⁸ Hughes, ‘Introduction’.

²⁹ Hanss, ‘The Fetish of Accuracy’.

³⁰ ‘Such narratives might displace the problem of time by invoking mythic tenses of primacy or oneness, but the problem remained in the sequential ordering of events within the narrative itself.’ Hughes, ‘Introduction’, 1.

What was lost in this divergence between the two disciplines was their basic unity: history-writing and anthropology both depend on the interpretation of recorded memories to construct coherent stories about the past.

It took more than a century for this divergence to collapse. Today historians have become far more aware of the importance of ‘other pasts’ because, for many of the people whose lives they study, chronometric time was just one dimension of a much more complex universe of memories and time – as it is for many of us today.³¹ This is not just an academic issue. It is widely recognised that writing history is a political practice and that the decisions we make about what to study, who to focus on, what to omit and what to forget have political repercussions, today and in the future.³² And this includes the issue of time.

Historians have come to realise that time is not a neutral concept and that their research is never detached: they choose a particular construction of time to make their narrative cohere. If, in the past, they often did not show an interest in previous or local understandings of time, this is now changing.³³ Historians working with non-European source material – such as can be found in abundance in the Triangle – have long argued that they find a range of temporal structures (or ‘timescapes’) unknown in European texts, and that these necessitate a thorough shake-up of historical theory to make it ‘globally inclusive’.³⁴ They have joined a chorus of scholars from other disciplines who speak of ‘temporalities’ to highlight that time ‘cannot be considered as an object separate from human configurations [and] perceptions’.³⁵

Historians are now discussing their ‘chronopolitics’, the temporal assumptions and habits that have shaped their field.³⁶ They are re-examining their previous assumptions about how time was experienced in the past (as presumably slow, static or circular), as well as about their belief in an accelerating ‘arrow of modernity’ puncturing the stagnant, circular temporality of the past.³⁷ Present-day predictions of ecological collapse have undermined convictions of future purpose and development – and, as a result, that ‘arrow of modernity’ now seems to have been following a wobbly course.

³¹ For example, Saikia, *Fragmented Memories*.

³² Ray, ‘Boundaries Blurred’.

³³ ‘Viewpoints: Temporalities’. For overviews, see West-Pavlov, *Temporalities*; Grange, ‘Time, Space and Islands’.

³⁴ Sastrawan, ‘Temporalities in Southeast Asian’, 226.

³⁵ Champion, ‘The History of Temporalities’, 247.

³⁶ Hanss, ‘The Fetish of Accuracy’, 282. See also Zhang, ‘The Matter of Time’.

³⁷ Champion, ‘The History of Temporalities’, 250. See also Nandy, ‘History’s Forgotten Doubles’.