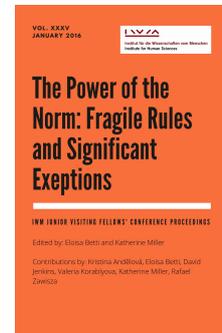


# Particularity and Exception: Ethnographic Commitments and Moral Exemplars

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*Abstract: This paper takes up the idea of exception from the perspective of anthropology. For a discipline with sustained commitments to ethnographic particularism as well as to the generation of theoretical models, the exception appears not as a taken-for-granted status of certain cases with respect to pre-given rules. Rather, exceptions are actively made and unmade through the interpretive and social practices in which both anthropologists and their interlocutors in the field engage. The people of Hunza, Northern Pakistan engage the tropes of geographic, political and religious exceptionalism that have defined them in the eyes of outsiders in efforts to create social boundaries and exclusions regionally while simultaneously forging bonds of relatedness with valued others. The paper concludes that the designation of exceptional cases is a form of social action that takes place against the background of rules and expectations that are pervasively, rather than occasionally, normative, and that its implications are always at least potentially moral.*

The idea of exception that informs this conference immediately struck me as a productive one because, on sitting down to think about my material in light of it, I was quickly overwhelmed by the profusion of ways in which the site of my own ethnographic fieldwork, the Hunza Valley in Northern Pakistan, has been considered, by its inhabitants and outsiders alike, an exceptional place. My goal in this paper is to attempt explore this complex and shifting but seemingly quite stable sense of Hunza as somehow unique, extreme, anomalous or, simply, striking, and to consider what this sense of exceptionalism has meant to *Hunzakuts* themselves and how it has served as a basis for their engagements with the wider world. I also take this as an opportunity to think about the status of exceptions or exceptional cases with respect to anthropological modes of making theory, and especially about the relationship between exception and particularity (long a commitment of the American interpretive tradition of cultural anthropology).

In a recent article on the use of exceptional cases in social science, Ivan Ermakoff (2014) offers a typology of different ways in which cases can be recognized as exceptional and the different contributions they can make to our understanding of the rules from which they depart. He begins by noting that in order to identify a case as exceptional, it must be defined as a ‘case’ in the first place, and he notes that we do this in one of two ways. In the first, ‘analytical’ mode, cases are identified “as an instance of a population or concept,” as “necessarily a case of” something. In the second, ‘phenomenological’ mode, a case appears as “irreducibly singular,” and “by definition problematic” (Ermakoff 2014, 225).

Ethnographic cases always have something of this later, phenomenological quality to them; as such it is often through the recognition and theorization of the events, narratives and individuals that make up ethnographic data as exceptional or worthy of comment that generalities or patterns emerge in anthropological writing, rather than the other way around. In the introduction to a recent edited volume on examples and exemplars, Lars Højer and Andreas Bandak (2015) make the case that up through the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, even the schools of anthropology most dedicated to the specificity of cultural forms retained a distinction between theory and the concrete, such that “particulars only made sense in relation to pre-specified generalities,” (though the generalities in question now shifted to refer to patterns of culture in an idealized and holistic sense). Even so, the capacity of ethnographic examples to exceed both the banal enumeration of their particulars and their merely illustrative function with respect to generalities has given certain cases a paradigmatic status—not merely illustrating theory but becoming theoretical models in themselves. Højer and Bandak mention Marcel Maus’s use of the Maori concept of the *hau*, which he appropriated as the spirit of the gift, and Foucault’s panopticon as paradigmatic exemplars, which “theorize or assemble what lies beyond them by elucidating connections, evoking trains of thought, and persuading audiences;” they are “cases that manage to theorize the world around them.”

Examples, then, have the power to generate, rather than merely illustrating, theory, but they also contain an inherent instability, “a possibility for becoming something else, either by ‘falling apart’ in other details/examples or by being made to stand for other wholes.” Alongside such a view of paradigmatic examples and emergent patterns the status of the exception is complicated, since theoretical categories themselves no longer appear either self-evident or bounded. Clearly they partake of the same instability, as what appears exceptional at one level of analysis turns out to be exemplary at another, or alternatively, when one generality is exchanged for another and what had appeared exceptional loses any significance. Indeed a certain blurriness of the boundary between what constitutes an example and what constitutes an exception is implied in the characterization of examples as inherently unstable.

The instability of ethnographic cases as exemplary and/or exceptional calls attention to the fact that, although they often present themselves to us as self-evidently interesting, surprising or illustrative, their status as exceptions or examples (or even as cases) is not given but made. It is through acts of thinking, theorizing and writing that they have their meaning; or in other words, exemplary or exceptional cases assume their form and acquire their force when we do things with them (Mittermaier 2015). And anthropologists are, of course, not the only ones doing things by way of exemplification; our interlocutors,

as Amira Mittermaier points out, often do so as well. Examples can be used to “convince and seduce,” to “direct us to, make us curious about and draw us into” the various meaning-making projects in which we—ethnographers and ethnographic informants alike—are engaged (Ibid., 130).

If examples can be used to “do things,” so too can exceptions. Discussing Clifford Geertz’s methodological reflections on ethnographic modes of persuasion, Mittermaier writes that examples “move from the particular to the general, to the general, to grand schemes” (2015, 131). The designation of exceptions would seem to lie in a contrary movement from the general (the rule or norm that is transgressed) to the particular (the specificities of *this* case and factors that set it apart). Perhaps any use of exemplification involves a reciprocal motion first in one direction and then the other. A two-way movement from generality to particularity and back toward some sense of connection or similarity is likewise involved when people in Hunza represent themselves—to outsiders and to one another—as exceptional. One thing that people do through the invocation of exceptionalism in Hunza, as I will argue in the remainder of this paper, is to cultivate desired relationships with distant others, even as they underscore a sense of separateness that helps to create social boundaries.

## **Tropes of Exception**

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The ways in which a local sense of uniqueness and difference with respect to various normative orders is shaped and re-shaped are entangled with external ways of understanding and representing the valley. In the pages that follow I’ll trace a subset of these overlapping and entangled discourses in which Hunza’s exceptionalism is delineated in terms of its geographical, political and religious features. Hunza’s status in this discourse slides easily from exception to example (and even exemplar) and back constantly.

By and large, Hunza as a place has been apprehended by outside visitors as striking or remarkable in keeping with the phenomenological mode of designating cases. The idea of Hunza as an unusual, peculiar or exceptional place has been elaborated over at least the past century and a half by Western (and some non-Western) explorers, colonial administrators, scholars, tourists and other visitors, writers of fictional and popular non-fictional accounts. At the same time, these tropes have been adopted and transformed Hunza people themselves— by the valley’s rulers and their representatives, pioneers of a relatively recent tradition of local history writing, development professionals, entrepreneurs and ordinary people in everyday conversation.

## **‘Remoteness’**

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Perhaps the most consistently outstanding feature of Hunza in the discourse of outsiders is its remoteness (Hussein 2015). From the accounts of the region’s earliest exploration by Europeans right up to the present, the valley has been defined by its distance from all metropolitan centers, or, alternatively, by its in-between-ness with respect to known, namable places. Hunza’s distance from the world outside is measured on the vertical as

well as the horizontal axis; it is often referred to as the “Roof of the World,” and people there refer to the rest of Pakistan as “downcountry.” Distance is measured not only in miles but also in terms of the difficulty and rigor of travel. Contemporary accounts often mention that until the completion in the late 1970s of the Karakoram Highway linking Pakistan’s capital with the Chinese city of Kashgar via the Hunza valley, there had never been a drivable road into the valley. The road itself is rarely mentioned without reference to the heroic feats of engineering and manpower mobilization represented by its construction, during which one worker is said to have died for every kilometer of length. Journalistic and documentary accounts of Hunza produced in the last fifteen years sometimes ignore the existence of the highway altogether, as if the only way into the valley remained a weeks-long trek over glaciers and mountain passes. As in the published descriptions of early exploratory expeditions, the length and hardship of the journey are recounted with as much relish and excitement as frustration—the journey being, in these accounts, the whole point. The extremity of the topography and environment within Hunza itself and the hardships of life there are another theme in the discourse of remoteness. An early explorer described Hunza as a “desert on its side,” neatly encapsulating the combination of steepness and aridity that circumscribe settled human life in the valley.

The area studies paradigm that has informed research programs in surrounding regions has rendered Hunza and its neighbors marginal to scholarship—what literature there is largely focuses on or attempts to explain its continuing isolation (see Sidky 1996) or, more recently, describes the way Hunza’s people negotiate their own marginality or remoteness, either as a geopolitical fact (Stellrecht 2006) or as a cultural construct (Hussein 2015). In the developmentalist vision of the state and of various development agencies, Hunza’s remoteness becomes a problem to be solved in order to alleviate its poverty, an excuse for the state’s failures to supply necessary infrastructure and an explanation for the failure of generations of development projects aimed at encouraging local entrepreneurship and transforming the rural economy.

Shafqat Hussein points out in his recent book on Hunza, “Remoteness and Modernity,” that while the idea of remoteness has consistently defined Hunza since the arrival of the earliest European explorers (if not, in some sense, long before) until the present, the values associated with that term have changed considerably in that time: while geographical remoteness once implied savagery and barbarism, it later came to stand for unspoiled nature and uncorrupted innocence. *Hunzakuts* have, correspondingly, been transformed from fierce and ruthless caravan raiders to peaceful subsistence farmers and bearers of indigenous environmental wisdom over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

I should at least note that there is an alternative geographic/political trope that people in and outside of Hunza also draw on; one quite different from, though entangled with that of the “lost kingdom.” This is the image of Hunza as a stop along the “Silk Road.” As an image of remoteness, the Silk Road trope is one of in-between-ness rather than simple distance, and its one that evokes, mobility, contact and exchange with others rather than isolation. The idea of remoteness as a form of connection is relevant to my overall argument.

More will be said about the ways in which *Hunzakuts* engage the idea of remoteness within discourses of international development. To nod to a longer discussion, however, Hunza's remoteness becomes, in local terms, an inducement to tourists; as a source of cultural purity and distinctiveness; a foundation for emerging practices of aesthetic appreciation and consumption; and, as will be discussed below, a claim to autonomy.

## 'Autonomy'

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A second, related dimension of Hunza-as-exception is its political isolation or exclusion. The valley is part of a region now known as Gilgit-Baltistan<sup>[1]</sup> whose political-legal status has remained ambiguous since its never-quite-formalized accession by Pakistan in 1947-8 (Bangash 2010). The region is administered by appointees officials of the federal government and has no place in Pakistan's four-province parliamentary system; since 2009 a council of elected representatives has been created to advise the administration, but they lack legislative authority and residents do not vote in national elections. These recent steps toward political inclusion represent a minimal change from the decades of indifference and neglect that followed independence; from 1947 until the mid-1970s the princely rulers of the distinct valley-states comprising the region were left in place. Hunza's ruling Mir was the last to be deposed in 1978. Even after the formal disbanding of the princely state, however, the image of the tiny, remote and fiercely independent mountain kingdom remains prominent, especially in narratives produced to attract and edify tourists. It is said that Hunza under the princely state was an inspiration for Shangri-la, the quasi-mythical setting for James Hilton's 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*, which helped reshape and repackage the trope of the spiritually enlightened Himalayan kingdom hidden away in splendid isolation from the corruption of the world. Today the phrases "Shangri-la" "lost kingdom" and "roof of the world" pepper guidebooks and travel features about Hunza and serve as names for many local hotels and restaurants.

For Hunza's people, both the legacy of the princely state and the recent history of the nation-state represent a more mixed set of frustrations and possibilities. In local historical memory the final decades of the Mir's state were a time of intense repression and isolation imposed by an autocratic ruler in a last-ditch effort to maintain control even as his rule was challenged by distant political upheavals and new opportunities for physical and economic mobility. While a sense of historically-rooted collective identity in which autonomy and self-governance are central is highly valued locally, this understanding of their heritage is associated with village-level traditions of shared resource management and inter-tribal cooperation. The sense of a unique and regionally exceptional identity rooted in this particular image of culture and tradition is drawn upon very actively by Hunza people in representing themselves in relation to development agencies and as members of a transnational religious community (about which more will be said below). The figures of the Mir and the princely state, while useful as anchors for a narrative of identity packaged for external consumption, do not anchor a strong sense of local identity for most *Hunzakuts*. <sup>[2]</sup>

In relation to the Pakistani state, on the other hand, I have seen a shift in attitudes since I first began studying the valley in 2000. At that time the federal government's distance from local affairs was widely viewed as an acceptable compromise—they received few benefits from the government and in turn received very little interference. In more recent years, however, as the initial gains from NGO-led development have slowed and a generation of highly educated young people have matured to find no viable economic prospects except out-migration, frustration is increasingly expressed over what has come to be seen as an unsupportable condition of exclusion and the state's neglect of its responsibilities. [3]

## 'Heresy'

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Less salient from the perspective of most casual visitors but highly significant to *Hunzakuts* themselves is the religious dimension to Hunza's exceptionalism, predicated on the local predominance of a form of Shi'i Islam characterized by its minority status worldwide, its heterodoxy from the standpoint of both Sunni and Shi'i majorities, and its esoteric approach to theology and ritual practice. Much more could be said about the unique or exceptional character of Nizari Isma'ilism, but I will stick to one of its key features, the Imamate. Like other Shia groups, and contrary to the Sunni majority of Muslims worldwide, Isma'ilis believe that Ali, the nephew and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, succeeded him in legitimate leadership of the Muslim community, and that the lineal male descendants of Ali followed him in assuming the role of divinely-inspired interpreters of the timeless truth of the Qur'an for the age in which they lived; these figures of conjoined spiritual and temporal authority, are known as Imams. Uniquely among the branches of Shia Islam, Nizari Isma'ilis trace an unbroken line of Imams from Ali to the present and 49th Imam, Shah Karim al-Husseini, better known in Europe as the Aga Khan. Owing to a history of active proselytization in earlier centuries (look up date range) followed by a period of contraction and isolation on the part of the Imamate, there are Isma'ilis scattered widely across the Middle East, South and Central Asia and East Africa, with diaspora populations in now settled in North America and Europe. The Isma'ilis of Northern Pakistan, Afghanistan, China and Tajikistan form a culturally and religiously distinct group within the global Isma'ili *jamaat*, which is dominated numerically and in political-economic terms by the Khojas, a trading caste with roots in the Indian state of Gujarat. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was the relationship between the Imams and the Khojas, among whom the Isma'ili Imams came to settle at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that defined the role of the modern Imamate and shaped a new Isma'ili orthodoxy (Steinberg 2011).

As a global community Isma'ilis are viewed—and actively produce a view of themselves—as exceptional vis-à-vis other Muslims. On the rare occasion when Isma'ilis do come to the attention of the Western press, as in the aftermath of a bus shooting in Karachi in 2013, for which a group claiming affiliation with the Islamic State took credit, they are described in ways that reverse the terms of their persecution— many of the same features which mark them as idolatrous heretics to the purveyors of Sunni orthodoxy are reassembled to present an image of Isma'ilis as “Good Muslims” in the eyes of the West. The centuries-long posture of political quietism by which Isma'ili communities have

avoided persecution by religious majorities and state regimes alike marks them as ‘peaceful’ Muslims, often in pointed contrast to their neighbors. Other markers include the community’s progressivism on gender and women’s education and the wealth and cosmopolitanism of its most prominent Khoja members. The association of the community with the Aga Khan also contributes to this image, as he is known to Western leaders and press as a wealthy businessman, philanthropist, bon viveur and, occasionally, spokesman on behalf of a progressive Islam. [4]

This distinctive religious identity is linked to a final trope of exception that has defined Hunza in internal as well as external discourses; that of international development success story. A central aspect of the process by which the modern Imamate came into existence was the creation of a network of institutions (social service networks like schools and hospitals, private businesses, a parallel court system, etc.) of which the NGOs of the Aga Khan Development Network have been perhaps the most important to the history of Hunza. This network of institutions have helped increase the economic status of Isma‘ili communities worldwide and at the same time radically consolidated these scattered communities under the authority of the Imamate and its newly singular vision of the faith.

The Aga Khan Rural Support Programme began working in Hunza in 1983, just after the abolition of the princely state and the opening of the Karakoram Highway. The twenty years that followed were marked by incredibly rapid change, including the doubling of household incomes and a massive rise in literacy rates among both boys and girls. Hunza and AKRSP were hailed in the ‘90s and 2000s as an unprecedented rural development success story, generating new paradigms in international development theory and practice and spawning other Rural Support Programmes throughout Pakistan. This is the root of another trope that today characterizes Hunza in development and scholarly literatures, as well as in journalistic and other accounts: that of Hunza as a ‘paradoxically modern’ place. Poor and rural yet highly educated, remote yet cosmopolitan in outlook and closely connected to transnational institutions; devout Muslims in a region marked by sectarian conflict yet progressive, “peaceful,” and favorably inclined toward western visitors and institutions, Hunza is frequently represented as a surprising combination of disparate, if not contradictory, elements.

Within Hunza, this idea has considerable traction, though the sense of a contradictory or paradoxical quality is played out in different ways. People there speak often of development as a process whose ends are theirs to shape in accordance with their own values. The phrase that is often used to describe their vision is “spiritual development,” (or sometimes “spiritual progress”), which is attributed to the Aga Khan’s repeated insistence that the spiritual and worldly aims of life (“*din* and *dunya*”) must be understood as complimentary if humanity is to progress. For people in Hunza, their dedication to spiritual development sets them apart both from their nearest neighbors, whom they sometimes characterize overly religious but lacking in real understanding of religious truth, and from the Western societies and agencies who serve as models of technological/economic progress, but which are sometimes viewed as having abandoned

the spiritual and embraced materialism. An interviewee once told me playfully, after musing on these themes of Hunza's difference, that for *Hunzakuts*, "development is our *jihad*."

The idea of spiritual development rooted in place-bound ideas and practices of community, care and sociability that constitute, to a significant extent, the practical basis from which people can live their religious commitments. The spiritual aspect of development is that which allows people to harness the material benefits of economic and technological progress to advance the communal wellbeing, harmony, and understanding of all its beneficiaries. Furthermore, by emphasizing that real development has a 'spiritual' component, Hunza's people set themselves apart from other (urbanized, wealthy, hierarchical) Isma'ilis as much as from non-Isma'ili Muslims and 'materialistic' Westerners alike, and subtly assert that theirs is the truest, more universal understanding of what human progress should be, despite the fact that they possess few of its conventionally-recognized, tangible attributes. [5]

The idea of spiritual development thus has spatial, political and religious connotations, building on the three previously-discussed dimensions of exceptionalism— it works to allow *Hunzakuts* to engage with wider communities and processes and to position themselves in a shifting way as aligned or included within with those larger conceptual entities ("the West," the Isma'ili *jamaat*, "humanity") and at the same time insists on its own separateness and autonomy. Indeed, it insists that its particular form of exceptionalism is the very basis for its engagement with the world at large.

## Conclusion

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The history of the past 50 years or so in Hunza has been defined by a dual impulse to maintain a sense of separateness from the world "downcountry" and to embrace membership in various wider networks of relatedness. In negotiating these competing desires, they have drawn upon the several interconnected and overlapping tropes of distance and difference by which others had already defined them, and embraced the idea of their own exceptionalism in ways that simultaneously set them apart from and situate them firmly within wider categories of identity and belonging.

In her article on examples, Amira Mittermaier argues that we must always pay attention not just to what examples do but to "who is doing what with examples." While I have barely skimmed the surface of the ways in which the idea of exception is used by variously positioned actors in Hunza, I hope to have sketched the basis for the claim that among the things that both exemplification and exceptionalism, as modes of relating the general to the particular, can serve as the basis for social claims—of identity or difference, of belonging or exclusion—that have social consequences and moral weight.

In his paper on exceptional cases, Ermakoff discusses three types of exceptions: anomalies acquire shape and meaning against categories or expectations that are "normatively constituted," often poorly-defined and having the character of common sense; exceptions emerge in contrast with clearly defined patterns which have "no moral content per se"; and outliers are "exceptions that are or can be measured" (2014, 227). I

am less confident than Ermakoff that normativity is a property of only a limited subset of the ‘rules’ against which exceptions acquire their status. Many anthropologists and at least some philosophers would see normativity as a pervasive condition of life, for social scientists no less than for those whose lives and communities form the substance of their investigations. Alessandro Ferrara (2008) that the world we inhabit is shaped by three forces; the force of things or what we take to exist; the force of normativity or what should be; and mediating what might otherwise be an unbridgeable gulf between them, the force of the example, or what is as it should be. He writes “the force of the example is the force of what exerts appeal on us in all walks of life ... by virtue of the singular and exceptional *congruence* that what is exemplary exhibits between the order of its own reality and the order of the normativity to which it responds” (Ibid., 3). If (as David Jenkins argues in his paper in this volume) the usual state of the world is not as it should be, what is exemplary in Ferrara’s terms is at the same time the exception. For Ferrara, the example partakes of qualities that arise from stable and enduring fusions of the *is* and the *ought*, but I would suggest that ethnography— and ordinary life— are stitched together by more fleeting and partial conjunctions. That Hunza people occasionally achieve such momentary yet recurring glimpses of the world as it should be through their collective endeavors attests to this. Hunza’s status as exception in the eyes of inhabitants and outsiders is multilayered, partaking of all three of Ermakoff’s levels as it is constituted against a plethora of different expectations, categories, patterns, and measurable trends. I argue that normative and, often, moral meaning is derived from the status of exception along all of these dimensions.

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## Notes:

[1] The region was renamed in 2009, having formerly been designated the Federally Administered Northern Areas.

[2] The area studies paradigm that has influenced the evolution of distinct research programs in surrounding regions has rendered Hunza and its near neighbors marginal to scholarship as well as to the designs of the nation-state. What literature there is largely focuses on or attempts to explain its continuing isolation (Sidky 1996) or draw on local oral history and myth either to construct an image of a timeless Hunza culture or to reconstruct the valley's history as the history of the Hunza state. Here Sidky is representative: in his book *The Hydraulic Kingdom: Irrigation and State Formation*, he argues that the tiny size of Hunza makes it an outlier (see Ermakoff 2015) with respect to theoretical models of state formation, but that this can be explained by Wittfogel's model of oriental despotism arising from control of irrigation infrastructure. To make the Hunza state appear as an autochthonous development arising in isolation, Sidky ignores the fact that the Mirs of Hunza were a cadet branch of the ruling family of a nearby, more central valley state (Stellrecht 2006).

[3] A tragic irony here is that as people become more politically engaged, the state seems to read their actions as evidence of dissent (to which it is primed to respond through the apparatus of counter-terror), which it imagines in the form of an ethnic separatist movement.

[4] The exceptional character of the Aga Khan both within the Isma'ili community and as a public figure deserves consideration in its own right— theologically the role of the Imam is at once exemplar and exception with respect to his followers.

[5] This affirmation of solidarity and belonging within the category of enlightened nations or that of a universal humanity also generates its own exclusions; while a discussion of these is beyond the scope of the present paper, it should be noted that defining *Hunzakuts* as tolerant and progressive is often accomplished through discourses that position them as exceptional vis-à-vis neighboring groups who are seen as “tribal,” “extremist” or “closed-minded.”

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