

ISA International Guest Lectures

Shifting rural spaces in the high Himalayas

Cosmopolitics, food and future-making in rural western Bhutan

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26 March, 2026
16:00–17:30

Meeting Room 5, 4th Floor
Georg-Coch-Platz 2
1010 Wien

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The agro-pastoral communities of the Haa Valley in western Bhutan face rapid change from outmigration, labor shortages, and concerns about agricultural viability, experiences shared across high-Himalayan communities. While villagers express loss of people and traditional ways of life, they also pursue creative practices to sustain and reimagine rural life. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in upper Haa since 2023, this talk examines cosmopolitics, food, and rural future-making, focusing on shifting human–animal relations (pigs, wild boars, cows, and yaks). I focus especially on changing human–yak relations: yaks remain central to household relationalities, economies and ritual life, yet new sensibilities around slaughter and vegetarianism challenge this interconnectedness. I show how consumption of yak meat and the ritual use of yak ribs are negotiated amid evolving policies, moral sensibilities, and outmigration, arguing these practices form creative cosmopolitical engagements that reshape imaginaries of rural futures in western Bhutan.

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Heidi Fjeld is Professor of Medical Anthropology at the Department of Community Medicine and Global Health at the University of Oslo. She has conducted fieldwork across Tibetan and Himalayan communities since the mid-1990s, researching organization of rural lives, including kinship, personhood and social inequalities, Tibetan medicine and health practices more broadly. Her ongoing Himalaya research focuses on food in Bhutan, as part of EATWELL: Integrated ethnographies of food systems and health in Bhutan, funded by the

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No registration required.

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