This lecture is based on ethnographic fieldwork with Sowa Rigpa practitioners (amchi) in Ladakh in the summer of 2018. The key research questions for our fieldwork have been: How is potency (nuspa) understood and altered during the process of turning potent substances into multicomponent medicines? How do amchi understand nuspa and actively engage with it during skilled workmanship, making their medicines—often still by hand—using grinding stones, cooking, triturating and burning techniques. We approach amchi as artisans, drawing on Ingoldian perspectives of enskilment, materiality and becoming. Tim Ingold proposes to be more attentive to the properties of materials as the true source of their agency or ‘power.’ We are also inspired by the work of historian Pamela Smith, who approaches artisanship as forms of embodied knowledge, which in her case studies of European craftsmanship frequently emerged more from practical experience than textual transmissions. Together, we explore how these two approaches might meaningfully inform Sowa Rigpa practical medicine making in our ethnographic settings in Ladakh, aiming to understand the dynamic meshwork of raw materials being transformed into potent medicines within the contexts of their longstanding oral and textual traditions.

ISA REGIONAL GUEST LECTURE

“POTENCY-IN-BECOMING”: ARTISANSHIP AMONG AMCHI PRACTITIONERS MAKING SOWA RIGPA MEDICINES IN LADAKH

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