VISIONS OF LADAKH:
NICOLA GRIST, 19 APRIL 1957–26 AUGUST 2004

Sophie Day

Dr Nicola Grist introduced me to Ladakh and enabled my subsequent and much longer visit in the early 1980s.1 Her tragic and untimely death prompted my visit to Leh and Kargil in the summer of 2005, where I was able to visit her close friends and to give a talk in her honour at the 12th Colloquium of the International Association for Ladakhi Studies. This paper is based on that presentation.

On her first, almost accidental, visit to Ladakh in 1976, soon after its borders were opened to foreigners, Nicky fell in love with the region and dedicated much of her life to it. While an undergraduate at Cambridge University she took part in two expeditions to the region, in the summers of 1977 and 1978, and contributed to the writing of the subsequent reports (CULE 1 and 2). After graduating from Cambridge, Nicky lived near Leh for more than two years, made many friends, worked as a teacher, primarily in Lamdon school, and volunteered for Save the Children Fund. She spoke Ladakhi well and continued anthropological research, for example, into histories of trading and the Kesar myth that meme in Mir house in Gompa village told us both over many a long winter evening in 1981. She also gathered comparative material outside the Indus valley, travelling to Zanskar, Suru and elsewhere in the wider Ladakhi diaspora such as Delhi and Nepal.

Gaining a British research council grant for doctoral research in 1993, Nicky shifted her primary research site from the Indus to the Suru valley. She returned as a volunteer teacher and then member of the management committee at Noon public school in Taisuru, in the upper Suru valley. Nicky completed her thesis at Goldsmiths’ College, University of London, in 1998.

Nicky enjoyed simply being in Ladakh, whether teaching English, digging potatoes, or whiling away the long evenings in gossip. She was accompanied at times by her two children, Laurie and Jimmy, and one

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1 Dr Sophie Day conducted doctoral research on oracles and possession in Ladakh. She later supervised Nicky Grist’s doctoral research. Eds.
of the few complaints she made during a long illness was her inability to visit her Ladakh friends—so far away. Although ill health prevented travel, Nicky continued to sit on the International Association for Ladakh Studies (IALS) advisory committee. When she was admitted to Kings Hospital for the last time on her 47th birthday, 20 April, 2004, she was in the process of editing the papers appearing in this collection, which Fernanda Pirie and Martijn van Beek subsequently valiantly took on. In Kings, Nicky campaigned successfully for air conditioning to be installed on the ward, relished the visits of Ladakhi friends residing locally, and died in hospital four months later.

Nicky was a brilliant fieldworker. This made the greatest difference to the anthropology she produced. She not only published in learned journals but worked as an activist and an advocate. Nicky’s consummate fieldwork derived, at least in part, from her commitment to reciprocal long-term relationships and collaboration. A broad, generous humanism coloured her anthropology and meant that she saw no merit in separating applied and practical issues from more theoretical questions; they could not properly be divided without becoming either sterile and irrelevant, on the one hand, or easily co-opted by powerful interest groups, on the other. In consequence, Nicky was unable to take received opinion at face value or to reach easy conclusions: she based all her publications on empirical data collected painstakingly over more than two decades.

**Questioning Stereotypes**

Nicky’s passion about the history of Ladakh, its position within the broader Himalayan region and processes of incorporation within the nation state, was equally a passion about the situation today and, in particular, relations of inequality. From her first fieldwork, she questioned deeply-held convictions among locals and foreigners alike about the past and the present, including the construction of the apparent Shangri-la of traditional times, apparently egalitarian relationships among kin and neighbours and, of course, a series of stereotypes about Ladakhi Muslims and Buddhists.

Central to her work was the question of what it meant to be an indigenous Ladakhi. Who is included and who excluded? A series of representations are entailed, many with long histories, such as the two I now quote, and cited by Nicky in different publications (Grist 1979, 1983).