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Of Reverie and Emplacement: Spatial Imaginings and Tourism Encounters in Nepal Himalaya

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Of Reverie and Emplacement: Spatial Imaginings and Tourism Encounters in Nepal Himalaya

Wrapped in innumerable myths and legends, Nepal is a land of magic and mystery. The confrontation between its millions of gods and goddesses on the one hand, and the most powerful demons on the other, at various points gives a meaningful perspective to this magic and mystery.

-- Nepal Tourism Board tourist booklet

The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images.

-- Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*

Spirituality and Corruption

One rainy afternoon, while I was having my usual lunch of Tibetan bread and omelette in the kitchen of my landlord in Langtang village, Lantang National Park, in came a trekker who had just returned from a place called Kyangjin, which is the final destination for most trekkers to the Langtang valley, one of the most popular trekking destinations in Nepal. At that time, Kyangjin was still under the 'rotation' system, under which throughout a particular week groups of hotels took turns to open for business. The system was devised so that hotels would not engage in cutthroat competition and to ensure that all the hotels in Kyangjin had a chance to earn some tourist money.

Now, this Italian trekker, fresh from being ‘fleeced’ by the Kyangjin hotels, and in an indignant and pained tone, began an apparently heart-felt litany on the degeneration of Langtang Tibetans. In between sips of hot lemon tea, he accused the Kyangjin hotel owners of being “money-minded” for charging high prices for food and accommodation, including charging Rs. 20 for a mug of hot water. Due to this rotation system, on each day there was almost a monopoly in the supply of accommodation in Kyangjin, with hotel owners agreeing to cooperate and to fix their rates. Since Kyangjin was the highlight of the trek and the last permanent settlement in the Langtang valley offering food and accommodation to trekkers, most trekkers had little choice but to stay at Kyangjin for at least one night if they wanted to explore the surrounding areas and to enjoy the stunning scenery, the finale of the trek. Perhaps not surprisingly, the Italian called the hotel owners a ‘Mafia’.

Because of the rotation system, this particular trekker found that he could not bargain down the prices of food and accommodation in Kyangjin, something that he could do in Langtang village, where the rotation system had previously broken down. In the presence of my landlord and two other villagers, the tourist, without any sense of impropriety, lamented that the Langtang Tibetans were “corrupted and finished”, for they had lost their Buddhist faith and piety, and were now all concerned with making money from the tourists. He had previously met many Tibetans in his travels, and was especially impressed by the Tibetans in Dharamsala, the seat of the Tibetan government-in-exile in northern India. The Tibetans in Dharamsala were the best, for “they were very religious and polite people, always praying and not so much concerned with making money”. The Tibetans in Kathmandu were slightly worse than their counterparts in India; but his most stinging criticisms were reserved for the Langtang people. To the bewilderment, and not to say, slight bemusement of my landlord, the tourist said that Langtang

had been “spoiled by tourism”, and that he had been disillusioned and would not visit the place ever again. As he got up to leave, he wished my landlord and the Langtang people “good luck”, meaning that Langtang needed all the luck in the world to stall the movement down the path to eventual failure, having lost its spirituality in the pursuit of tourist money.¹

“I heard there are good jobs in Malaysia”

Samten was back from Swayambhunath, the renowned Tibetan monastery perched on a hill in the outskirts of Kathmandu, and was now catching up with village news and gossip. Eighteen years old and the youngest son and child in the family, he had been sent to the monastery a few years earlier. It is a very common practice amongst Tibetan families to send at least one son to a monastery, and Langtanga—the self-ascribed generic name of Langtang people—are no exception. Apart from the important reason of religious piety, Langtanga also think that sending the boys to the monastery is one of the best ways to ensure they would have quality education in a favourable environment. The curriculum in the monastery includes not just the all-important religious instruction, but also general courses similar to those of secular schools, such as Nepali, English and Mathematics. Thus for a one-time donation to the monastery, a boy can receive an excellent education and learn discipline, as compared to the exorbitant amount the family would have to pay if the boy was sent to a private boarding school.

A small number of young Langtang men were in the monastery in order to take up serious study to become monks. Some came back to the village to become junior lamas, assisting in important rituals and perhaps to continue the religious training—not as celibate monks, but as householder priests. Some realised that they lacked the religious vocation, and gave up monastic

life and religious training all together. Samten belonged to the last category, for now, chatting away in the kitchen, he talked about his desire to give up his monastic life and to find work overseas. From some friends he had heard that it might be possible for him to go to Malaysia for work through an agent in Kathmandu. The problem was the hefty fee that had to be paid to the agent—eighty thousand rupees, roughly US\$1100, which is a phenomenal amount by Nepalese standards. Samten further revealed that the deal would not include a work permit and a guaranteed job at the destination. When he said that the plane ticket would be one-way, the alarm bells in me started ringing: I became worried that if he went ahead with his plans, he would find himself in an extremely thorny situation upon arrival in Malaysia. By now, I had read enough horror stories and news reports about Nepalese illegal migrant workers being cheated of their money and left stranded in foreign countries. As a result, many had been exploited by unscrupulous employers, working long hours for very low wages in hazardous conditions.

Seeing Samten's eagerness to take up the deal, and his attempt to persuade his brother to support him, I felt I had the responsibility to dissuade him from going to Malaysia without any work permit and with only a one-way ticket. By this time, I was already in the third month of my stay in this village of around 550 inhabitants, for my fieldwork, and I had come to know Samten's family rather well. So as a friend of the family, I tried to describe the risks involved and the dismal life an illegal worker would lead, trying to convey to him the fact that he was actually enjoying a better standard of living than an illegal migrant worker, but he was not convinced. To him, the most important thing was to go overseas and to look for a job, even if that meant being on the wrong side of the law...

Mutual Gazing and Spatial Imaginings

This paper seeks to make sense of the two vignettes above, and to tease out and analyse the underlying processes involved in these two seemingly unrelated phenomena. It focuses on the cultural encounters between the (relatively) wealthy tourists/trekkers and Langtang villagers, and relates such encounters to the shaping and re-working of the imagination of each other's lives. In the process, I wish to address a lacuna in tourism research: Tourism literature often focuses on images of tourist sites, that is, how these sites are constructed by the tourist industry and how these shapes the tourists' expectation and experience.² But given that tourism encounters very often involves two groups of people, who might be classified as 'hosts' and 'guests', and especially in the context of tourists visiting destinations characterised by Turner and Ash (1975) as the 'Pleasure Periphery' —a more adequate understanding of the dynamics of tourism encounters requires a simultaneous analysis of how 'they', the hosts, view 'us', the tourists.³ If one of the key motivations for tourists to embark on a trip to places such as Nepal is to seek out an Other that has been constructed by the tourism industry as manifesting "primeval unity and simple naturalness" (Cohen 2004: 252; cf. Turner and Ash 1975: 72-93), what then constitute the 'Other' for a host community such as the Langtanga? In other words, how do the places from where tourists originate get imagined and constructed by the hosts, and in what ways do the mutuality of imagery constructions shape the dynamics of host-guest interactions?

One important thing to note is that tourism images—having been moulded from a specific history of interactions as well as having emerged from media constructions and then circulated via the global networks of cultural commoditisation—are not immutable cognitive structures, but are amenable to interrogation and modification through the nuances of face-to-

face encounters. Here, the physical site of Langtang takes on cultural significance in the sense that it is a ‘practiced place’ (cf. de Certeau 1986: 117), defined, contested, and continually constituted by actors associated with it, both the local inhabitants and outsiders. I will treat the act of gazing as a key social practice that underlies these encounters. On this aspect, I take my inspiration from John Urry’s work on tourism in which he identifies the ‘tourist gaze’ as a vital element in tourist consumption, and privileges the investigation and understanding of tourism in the context of the sensual, especially the sense of sight. According to Urry, this consumption of the visual aspects of social worlds is what marks tourist activities as a unique form of social activity: ‘[T]he gaze in any historical period is constructed in relation to its opposite, the non-tourist forms of social experience and consciousness’ (Urry, 2002:1).

To be a tourist therefore entails seeking out and enjoying sights which are usually outside one’s ordinary social and cultural experience, and the gaze is the key means for enjoyment which a tourist employs upon arrival at any particular desired destination. According to Urry, there is no single tourist gaze as such, for the nature of the gaze always varies according to changing social and cultural contexts. However, one common factor that underlies the different forms of gazes is that they are all constructed through *difference*:

What makes a particular tourist gaze depends upon what it is contrasted with; what the forms of non-tourist experience happen to be...The gaze therefore presupposes a system of social activities and signs which locate the particular tourist practices, not in terms of some intrinsic characteristics, but through the contrast implied with non-tourist social practices, particularly those based within the home and paid work. (Urry, 2002:1-2)

Graham Dann (1996) has argued from his analysis of British tourist brochures that these serve a function of transforming images of destinations into texts with powerful ideological meanings for the tourists. Like most tourists, visitors planning to trek in Langtang National Park get to know the place initially through travel guides and books, brochures, or websites of travel agencies. Karsh and Dann ([1981] 2002: 183) liken the pre-trip stage of a vacation to ‘a total project’. Of course this is part and parcel of doing one’s research and getting prepared for a trip. But this also implies that one’s impressions of destinations are mediated by tourism operators whose main interest is to ‘market’ the destinations. The two quotes cited at the beginning of this article are typical of the kind of language both Nepalese and foreign travel agencies use to paint a particular image of Nepal in general and Langtang National Park in particular. When the private enterprises and tourism authorities both utilise the same tourism marketing strategy, the fate of Nepal as an ‘exotic’ tourist destination is more or less sealed. Of course, this exoticisation of Nepal is nothing new, and has received the attention of numerous commentators. What has happened to Nepal is often compared with the case of Tibet, which has been seen by many Westerners as the location of the fabled ‘Shangrila’ (Bishop, 1990). According to Bishop, the reasons for the creation of the myth of Shangrila are manifold, such as the influence of travel writings, the fixation with the discovery of ‘unknown places’ and the premium placed upon exploration as Western colonial empires expanded, and the self-imposed isolation policy of the Tibetans. Not to mention, we could add, the influence of popular media such the movie ‘Seven Years in Tibet’, the almost global stardom of the Dalai Lama since being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, and the fact that many museum curators seem to have a penchant of defining Tibetan art as primarily esoteric and religious when organising exhibitions.² Peter Moran notes

in *Buddhism Observed* that Nepal has been central to Western fantasies of ‘untouched, uncommodified life, where one can encounter people who “live in pure culture”’:

For those other Western travellers who have come to Nepal not only to find pieces of Tibet, but to find themselves through sacred Tibetan technologies, the spirituality of Tibetan culture is monumentalised in Bodhanath’s monasteries and personalized in the figure of the lama who dwells there. These Western pilgrims come to find a local culture-in-its-place (Moran 2004: 191).

The Shangrila myth is itself a part of a more general romanticisation of the Himalayas. Even for ancient South Asians, the Himalayas, abounding with numerous sacred lakes and peaks, was seen as the abode of saints and wise men and the source of countless Hindu and Buddhist myths (Hutt, 1996:50). All the Himalayan countries such as Nepal, Bhutan and Ladakh have had their turn of being romanticised, as the mantle of Shangrila was passed around (Ibid: 52). In the case of Nepal, the romanticisation process started in earnest with the first mountaineering expeditions to the country in the 1950s, as Westerners came into increasing contact with the Sherpa who are apparently able to combine within themselves with ease such admirable qualities as loyalty, cheerfulness, bravery, and stoicism, even in the face of appalling mountaineering hardships—qualities deemed increasingly hard to find in Western societies (see e.g. Fisher, 1990; Adams, 1996; Ortner, 1999).

While Urry’s concept of the ‘tourist gaze’ is a useful tool for understanding tourism practice, we must guard against over-visualisation of tourism analysis by paying attention to what Coleman and Crang (2004) call the performativity of tourism, that is, the concrete

interactions between the tourists and host communities that comprise a constantly configuring and negotiating of spatial meanings. Tucker (1997:107) cautions that “tourism theories that only emphasise the gaze can themselves set the tourist experience in frames, and thereby gloss over what actually takes place in tourists’ interactions with the visited environments”. In this paper, therefore, Langtang as a tourist site is an arena of social interactions, and not just an object of tourist gaze. What I seek to achieve here is to provide an ethnographic account of not only the economic and social circumstances within which the local-tourist interactions occur, but also to probe for a possible structure of tourism encounters, and to interpret the deeper meanings such encounters have for both Langtang villagers and the tourists.

Living in an Aestheticised Landscape



Fig. 1: Tourist images of Nepal (www.lonelyplanet.com)

The Langtang trek...gives you the opportunity to get right in among the Himalayan peaks and to walk through remote and relatively unpopulated areas. If you want real adventure then these 2 treks [Langtang and neighbouring Helambu] can be linked by high-altitude passes...It's 72km from Kathmandu to Trisuli Bazaar—about four hours by car or six by bus...From Trisuli the 50km road to Dhunche is steep, winding and rather hairy...Dhunche is a pretty village at 1950m and here you will have your trekking permit checked and must pay entrance fee to the Langtang National Park...

-- *Lonely Planet: Nepal*

Culturally [the Langtang National Park] is mixed including the Tamang, Sherpas and Brahmani people and is steeped in folklore, myths and superstitions.

-- www.visitnepal.com

The 'pristine' and 'other-worldly' condition that many trekkers seek to find in the Langtang National Park is not only portrayed pre-eminently in tourist brochures and websites; it is in a sense suggested by the actual travel itself. Although the National Park, gazetted in 1976, is relatively close to the capital, Kathmandu, some difficult travelling is involved in order for the trekkers to get to one of the park's main entrance at the Rasuwa district town of Dhunche, and further on to the small town of Syabru Bengsi, where the trek usually starts. There are a few ways to get to the Langtang valley. The quickest and most expensive option is to charter a helicopter from Kathmandu. This mode of travel involves the least hassle and physical effort, and enables the visitor to get right into the mountains in about twenty-minutes from the airport. At a hefty price of US\$1000, this mode of transport is infrequently used. For most trekkers, the most common mode of transport is the local bus, relatively inexpensive (US\$2) for the 120-km ride but entailing the greatest 'hardship'. It is on the bus where the tourist will encounter for the

first time the people of the Langtang region, who are distinguished by the languages they use (usually Tamang or Tibetan dialects), and the women stand out prominently in their Tibetan-style clothing. Another way to reach the national park is to charter a jeep or minibus from Kathmandu. At the cost of roughly US\$130 per vehicle, one could get to Syabru Bengsi in about eight hours, depending on the road condition.

Almost without fail, most tourists will express relief when they reach Syabru Bengsi, regardless of the mode of transport. For in the opinion of many tourists and guides I have talked to, it is ‘one of the worst rides in the world’. The conditions from Dhunche to Syabru Bengsi constitute the most hazardous feature of the journey, with the narrow dirt road perched precariously along sheer cliffs constantly facing the danger of being swept away by an avalanche of rocks and earth. At one particular stretch the vehicle has to do numerous hair-pin turns such that any braking failure could mean a steep drop into the valley far below. I had thought that Langtang people were used to the demanding travelling conditions, and with time sufficiently accustomed to the tension of the hazards of the journey. In fact all the locals I talked to immensely disliked the experience, even though some of them had to travel frequently to Kathmandu. Foreigners are only too happy to reach the destination without any mishap, and generally did not look forward to the return bus journey. Some even thought I was ‘brave’ to have endured the trip so many times.

An American tourist remarked to me that Syabru Bengsi was “like a border town”. The statement is true in the literal sense, as the border with Tibet is just a day’s walk away. However it also refers to an ambience of ‘unplanned’ development and haphazardness that characterises many a border town. Tibetans from across the border pass through southwards for business and

pilgrimage to the many sacred Buddhist sites in Nepal; there are South Indians working in the Hydroelectric Project, marked out by their darker skin tone and the language they speak; Hindu Nepalese from the central hills, many of whom are owners of grocery shops, travel frequently to Kathmandu to procure supplies; villagers from the surrounding areas come to Syabru Bengsi to buy supplies, meet up with friends and relatives, or to catch the early morning bus to the capital. And of course, tourists arrive with their trekking guides and porters, pitch their tents in the camping grounds and then wander around the town, with expensive cameras ever ready for action.

After staying a night at Syabru Bengsi, the tourists embark early next morning on the journey for which they have come: the trek up the Langtang Valley. The main path hugs the southern bank of the roaring Langtang Khola, and begins to climb almost immediately upon leaving the village. Vegetation at this altitude is lush and green most of the year, with bamboos, lichens, moss, fern and orchids intermixing with the ‘giants’ such as oaks, maples and firs. Along the way are strategically located hotels and teahouses, and most trekkers stay the first night at a place called Lama Hotel where several lodges operate, and from where they continue their journey the next day. A major stop on the second day is usually at a hamlet called Thangshyab. Many tourists stop here for lunch; some stay put for the night but most continue their journey after a brief rest. Often it is at Thangshyab that tourists encounter for the first time Langtang hotel owners or their employees soliciting custom. During the tourist season, the Langtanga leave their village in the late morning to reach Thangshyab at around mid-day, just in time to catch up with the trekkers’ arrival. Langtanga go to hotels run by their relatives or close friends, wait in the kitchen for the tourists to finish their meals, and some even start to chat with them.

Whenever possible the Thangshyap hotel owners in turn recommend their relatives' hotels in Langtang village. Some Langtang families own a chain of hotels stretching from Lama Hotel all the way to Kyangjin, so sometimes the tourists are unwittingly being shepherded from one hotel to another all run by members of the same family. This is usually done with the cooperation of the trekking guides. Hotel owners go out of their way to establish good relationships with the guides, since they usually decide where their clients will stay.

During the period of my fieldwork, the normally intense competition amongst the hotel owners was accentuated, primarily due to two factors. First, the increasing popularity of the Langtang trek over the years has resulted in the proliferation of hotels throughout the valley. A second factor was the drastic drop in the number of tourist arrivals between 2001 and 2002, due to unfavourable national and global events. In early June 2001, there was the notorious 'Royal Massacre' in which a supposedly demented Crown Prince shot dead most of his immediately family, including the King and Queen. Following this national tragedy came the September 11 terrorist attack in New York and the Pentagon that dealt a severe blow to tourism worldwide, as people became apprehensive about flying. As if that was not bad enough, this period also witnessed a brief military confrontation between India and Pakistan, as well as a war in Afghanistan. The whole of South Asia seemed to be on the brink of widespread conflicts. The last straw was the declaration of a state of emergency by the Nepalese government on 26 November, as a result of the escalation of violence wrought by the Maoist insurgency in the country. According to the figures of the Nepal Tourism Board, the number of tourist arrivals by air in 2001 decreased by around 21 percent compared to the previous year (Dhakal 2002). The

following year witnessed a further dip of 28 percent, the equivalent to a decrease of almost 50 percent in tourist arrivals in just over two years.

Hence, the optimistic promises of tourism in previous years fell short as a result of a series of unfortunate national and global crises. I was told that previously in a typical good season, about one hundred and fifty to two hundred trekkers would pass through Langtang on a single day, many of whom would stay for at least a night in the village for acclimatisation. In the period September-November 2001, however, I counted an average of 25 arrivals per day. In the spring season of 2002, the number increased slightly, to around 40. That still fell far short of the numbers Langtang had been accustomed to, and certainly not what the hotel owners had been hoping for. Given that there were sixteen hotels in Langtang village at that time, that sort of arrival rate was definitely not encouraging for businesses. With the dramatic decrease in the numbers of trekkers arriving at Langtang village, a particular lodge owner is compelled to devise schemes to give him the edge over his competitors.

One way was for a hotel owner to send someone down to Thangshyap or further away, to tout for business from trekkers approaching the village. For the large hotels, that someone is usually one of the cooks or kitchen helpers who can speak some English. For the smaller establishments, either the hotel owner or the spouse would personally go to meet the tourists. This means that the exhausted trekkers on the last stretch before reaching Langtang village would encounter villagers trying to persuade them to stay at their hotels, often offering huge discounts on the menu while many would also waive the room charge. Tourists I talked to generally disliked being pestered by the hotel representatives, but would usually not show their displeasure overtly. One common

tactic for the hotel representatives was to initiate conversation with potential clients. If the offer of discount did not work, another way of attracting the tourists was through enticing their trekking guides. During my stay in Langtang, the competition was so intense that hotels were offering free food and drinks to the guides and porters, in addition to the discounts offered to the tourists. Then, to the chagrin of others, three hotels started paying the guides large commissions to bring the trekkers to their establishments. The tourists, of course, were largely unaware of the back-stage negotiations that went on between the hotel owners and trekking guides. Many independent trekkers asked for huge discounts off the prices of the food menu, and if possible, tried to get the rooms for free as well. Unbeknownst to them, many hotels had two different sets of menu, one with higher prices than the other. If the trekking guides or the tourists asked for huge discounts, they were given the higher-priced menu.

So the first significant encounters of many tourists with Langtang villagers often involved intense bargaining over the prices of food and accommodation. Commentators on tourism in Nepal and elsewhere have often noted the asymmetrical relationship between hosts and guests: the latter usually much more economically well off than the former, hence frequently able to influence to a large degree the terms of interaction between the two. As tourism arrivals dipped, with a corresponding oversupply of hotels in Langtang, the trekkers and their guides arriving at the village were in a strong bargaining position. Even before the tourism downturn in 2001, many Nepalese saw the tourists possessing a level of wealth they would find difficult to earn in a lifetime. When tourism was suffering a decline at the time of my fieldwork, the wealth and power differentials between Nepalese and the tourists got attenuated even further. This translated into increasing bargaining power of the trekkers on the one hand, and a corresponding drop in

profit margins for Langtang hotel owners, on the other. But as profit margins dropped, hotel owners had to devise schemes to attract tourists to their establishment, some of which have been discussed above. Apart from the obvious adverse economic impact brought about by the tourism slump, one could detect in Langtang a certain cognitive impact as well. On the side of the tourists, the intense touting by hotel representatives gave them the impression that Langtanga were overly concerned about pecuniary matters. For example, one irate Israeli commented:

I have come here to look for some peace, to enjoy the mountains and the local culture...but what did I get? People asking me to go to their hotels even when I was a few hours away! Two of them actually followed all the way from Ghoratabela [about 2 hours walk from Langtang], each trying to offer a better deal than the other. People here are only concerned about business, just like the other places.

A German couple were furious when they arrived one afternoon in Langtang village to find the rotation system in place. When they were notified that they could not stay at the hotel of their choice, as that day was not its turn to receive guests, and that they had to stay at another, smaller hotel with fewer amenities, they promised they would tell their friends back home not to visit Langtang, commenting that “it is going down the drain”. Together with the incident of the Italian tourist mentioned at the beginning of this article, we see that many tourists had certain preconceptions about Langtang and its people, and being concerned about making money was not one of them. These are examples of tourists’ explicit expression of displeasure regarding the situation in the village. But even those who had expressed positive views betrayed the same preconceptions. An Italian tourist was staying at one of the three hotels in the ‘old’ part of the village, deliberately chosen in order to experience the ‘village life’. He had travelled extensively

in India and Nepal, and when I asked for his impression of the Langtang National Park, he replied that it was much better than Solu-Khumbu (where Mount Everest is located), because Langtang people were “not too business-like, unlike those in Solu-Khumbu. Here, people treat you like a person, not always trying to sell you things or do business”, he added. Another trekker, a Briton, commented:

There is a fine balance between local culture and tourism here in Langtang, and the people are very nice...It is different in the Everest [Solu-Khumbu] region, according to my friends who have been there. This is the reason I chose to come here.

A Belgian woman, who had travelled for three weeks in China before coming to Nepal, lamented that the “Chinese would soon lose their culture, everything they have previously known.” She thought China was becoming too ‘Westernised’. For the same reason, she disliked Kathmandu, and chose to “get away” for trekking in the Langtang region. Compared to her experience in China and Kathmandu, she had positive things to say about the village, and commented that “at least the culture has largely remained, with people very open and friendly.”

Most trekkers stay for at least a night in Langtang village to acclimatise. How much they see of the place and its people depends on their arrival time and their physical condition. There were a few options for trekkers wanting to see more of the place. A particularly popular attraction was the local temple situated prominently at the top of a slope on the side of Langtang village that clings to the northern massif of the Langtang valley. The temple itself was shut most

of the time, so visitors would usually take a short walk in the surrounding area that includes a collection of houses. Another option was to take a ‘village walk’ (cf. Guneratne 2001). When the intrepid British explorer Tilman first visited Langtang village in June 1949, as part of an expedition to explore and map the Himalaya, he noted that there were around “thirty families rich in cows, yaks and sheep.” (Tilman, 1952:35). Since he was more interested in the mountains than local architecture, apart from some descriptions of the temple, Tilman has not left us with even a picture of what people’s houses were like fifty years ago.

Since, according to Langtanga, most of the houses in the old part of the village date from the turn of the 20th century, we can safely assume they have not changed much since Tilman’s time. While these modest houses did not warrant the attention of Tilman in 1949, nowadays they form an essential part of the tourist experience of Langtang village authenticity. There was one house near the village centre, in particular, which seldom failed to attract the attention of the tourists. It was one of the oldest-looking buildings in the village, with the upper storey tilting precariously to the front, seemingly about to topple any time onto a perennially present heap of hay in front of the house.



Fig. 2 The attraction of old houses

Tourists passing through the village seldom fail to stop and ‘admire’ it and take photographs, to the bemusement of the villagers. Tucker notes that in the Turkish village of Göreme, “tourists seek to photograph the ‘authentic’, and preferably no signs of modernity should be present.” (1997:119) Photography in cases such as these could be seen as a tool that captures the evidence purporting to show the ‘primitiveness’ of the local people, occupying and living within a time frame different from the ‘modern’ one inhabited by the tourists.

Interaction between the tourists and the villagers was understandably limited. Langtang children liked to ‘talk’ to the tourists, the conversation consisting mainly of, “*Namaste*,⁵ pen? Chocolate? *Bakshish*, money?” Frequently, tourists would oblige by giving sweets, chocolate, stationary, or sometimes even money, and this in turn encouraged the children to continue the practice. During the trekking season, some would even sit by the main path of the village and make their request to tourists who were passing by. Some tourist groups, in addition to sightseeing and trekking,

came to Langtang on an environmental mission: during their trek, group members would pick up non-recyclable rubbish, such as empty plastic bottles, and post signs in lodges and teahouses along the way exhorting people to take care of the environment.

As recounted in detail above, when the trekkers approach Langtang village, their first encounter with the locals is likely to be some hotel representatives soliciting their custom, negotiating prices for food and accommodation. After they have settled in, they are served by the hotel owners and their helpers. Some tourists take the initiative to enquire about the village, especially after dinner when everyone is sitting around the stove for warmth. The dining room is the prime socialising space (Lim n.d), where the day's experiences are talked over, where gossip and views on Nepal and Langtang village are exchanged, the general convivial atmosphere helped to a considerable extent by after-dinner drinks. It is customary for either the owner or the helpers and cooks to join in a session of tête-à-tête with the tourists, especially if the lodge is of modest scale. The content of interaction can range from perfunctory exchanges of pleasantries to more in-depth discussion of Nepalese and global affairs. It is also at this time that some tourists might enquire about local matters. It must be pointed out that such sessions are important for the hotel owners and other locals, for it is through these interactions that potentially beneficial relationships with the tourists are cultivated. It is nothing more and nothing less than the concept of 'networking' in business parlance, similar to the cultivation of the sponsor relationship documented in the case of the Sherpa of Solu Khumbu. For example, Adams has noted that there is a tendency for the many Sherpas to view their relationships with Westerners from 'homogenizing perspectives': that of a "sponsorship relationship [that] creates a virtual Westerner who could be a sponsor." (1996: 12) According to Adams, this is the outcome of a specific history of encounters between the Sherpas

and the Westerners, whereby the former acted as high-altitude porters and guides in the foreign-run mountaineering expeditions and treks in Nepal from the beginning of the twentieth century.

In Langtang, what villagers most wanted tourists to ‘sponsor’ is the education of their children. Langtanga place a premium on this, with the hope that with the necessary academic qualifications the next generation will be able to get ‘office jobs’. Although the introduction of tourism two decades ago has brought about a general improvement in the standard of living for many Langtang people, they also realise that the tourism business can be fickle and income from it unstable. Over the years, competition has increased markedly with the proliferation of hotels in the Langtang valley. The recent tourism downturn has brought home that it cannot be taken for granted. Gyatso, who owns two hotels in Langtang village, has this to say:

You know, many people [i.e. fellow villagers] see us with hotels and think we are rich, but we have many problems (*‘dherai samasyā cha’*), they don’t know. We have to pay money back [repayment of loans for building the lodge], buy things and food for the hotel; if tourists don’t come, we are finished (*‘khatam bhoyo’*). I want my children to have good education, so they could get office job, so they don’t have to worry about money, and life is also easier if you have office job, you don’t have to carry heavy things and walk a lot. And every month you get paid.

So whenever the opportunity arises during either the post-dinner tête-à-tête session with the tourists, or when acting as guides and porters, if they are asked about their personal problems, Langtanga are likely to bring up the topic of their children’s education. They harbour the hope

that the tourists will agree to be their children's sponsors for their education in the private boarding schools in either the district centre of Dhunche or in Kathmandu. At the time of this fieldwork, of the entire village, there were forty-nine people who had once been, or currently being sponsored by foreigners for their education, ranging from the primary level to the tertiary level.

It is not surprising that foreigners are often courted as potential sponsors. Whether they are just passing through as tourists or as development/aid workers, most of them are immensely wealthier than the majority of Langtang villagers. For the Langtanga, as well as for many Nepalese, 'foreigners' (N. *videśī*) were cognitively linked to 'development', aid and 'projects'.⁶ In Langtang, the idea that foreigners mean potential sponsors for village welfare projects probably originated from the 1960s, when the first cheese factory in the region was opened as a result of Swiss financial and technical assistance. The most important project in Langtang since the late 1980s has been the Japanese Langtang Plan, which has provided for the development of a hydroelectric plant and cheese factory in the village. There was also the Langtang Ecotourism Project, a collaborative project between the Mountain Institute (a U.S.-based international NGO) and the Nepalese Department of National Parks. There have also been several other foreign-sponsored projects on a smaller scale, such as a tree-planting project organised by the Japanese, and an on-going project involving American missionary doctors and their Nepalese counterparts to provide medical consultation for a nominal fee to the villagers.

Tourists are harbingers of wealth in various senses. In general, tourism has provided a boost to the local economy and created employment opportunities for the Langtanga. As sponsors, they

can also be seen a potential source of money for children's education. Some tourists might even provide the opportunity for Langtanga to go overseas either to find work or for travel by writing recommendation letters for the purpose of visa applications. At the time of my stay, one lodge owner tried to apply for a tourist visa to go to the United States by relying upon by a letter of invitation by an American who had once stayed at his place. This Langtanga, planning to find some work once he had reached his destination, had paid a Nepalese acquaintance a large sum of money just for arranging an interview at the US embassy for his visa application.⁷ I have also been personally asked by some Langtang men if I could help them find jobs in the country where I came from. This despite the fact that many of them were wealthy, widely-respected people involved in the tourism business. With the downturn in tourism, Langtanga were starting to think of alternatives to tourism, the most common of which was, especially for young men, to try to go overseas to work, even if that meant working illegally. Notice that they first contemplated migrating not to the big cities in Nepal, such as Kathmandu, Pokhara or Birganj, but to foreign countries, often ignoring my advice that working illegally there would not normally guarantee an eventual improvement in one's standard of living. From the various reports of returning Nepalese who had worked abroad, especially those who were at the wrong side of the law, working life abroad was extremely harsh and many of them had been disillusioned (Poudel 2002).

Sociation in Tourism Encounters

For many Langtang villagers, foreigners in general, and tourists in particular, are both the embodiments and the bringers of wealth. Many Langtanga see tourists as potential sponsors or benefactors, with whom the cultivation of a meaningful relationship might bring the offer of patronage. Intimately related to the perception that the tourists are the embodiments of wealth is

their role as what I would term ‘travelling advertisements’. In an important sense, their very physical presence in Langtang advertises the life that they might lead back home, for their very ability to travel overseas for leisure would suggest to Langtanga a high level of economic well-being. I do not mean that what is advertised corresponds necessarily to the lived reality of the tourists, or the ways in which the tourists themselves view their own lives. The ‘advertisements’, so to speak, are the images that are projected through a specific history of interactions. Revealingly, a villager once told me that “tourists are like Congress people”. The Nepali Congress Party—a major political party in Nepal—is considered by many Nepalese as consisting of rich and powerful people.

For Langtang villagers, like most Nepalese, the primary reason for long-distance travel is not for recreation, but for more mundane, pressing matters relating to subsistence. Prior to their participation in the tourism industry that began in the late 1970s, the Langtanga had been actively involved in trans-Himalayan trade, plying between central Nepal and southern Tibet. Historically, therefore, long-distance travel entailed the hard physical toil necessary for everyday survival. Nowadays, the closest Langtanga come to experience travelling as pleasure is what is locally called ‘*cham cham la*’—‘to wander, to stroll’. This primarily involves taking a stroll through the village to look for one’s friends for chitchat or for recreational activities such as carom and card games. To travel beyond the Langtang valley is usually involved with work, such as procuring rice from Syabru Bengsi, a day’s walk away, or for the hotel owners, to procure from Kathmandu supplies that are not locally available. It does not help that going to Kathmandu requires a long day of walking and another full day of uncomfortable bus ride along roads which are treacherous in certain sections. Given the relatively high cost of living in the

capital, Langtanga tend to avoid travelling there unless they have to. The few occasions when Langtanga travel to Kathmandu for non-work related purpose include the period just before Losar, to buy new clothes and snacks for the festivity, and when they go on pilgrimage to the various holy Buddhist sites in the capital. Even then, most would spend not more than two or three nights there. Thus, in the eyes of Langtanga, people such as the tourists who can afford to travel for an extended period of time over vast distances for recreation, must have both the time and considerable financial resources to do so.

Almost all the locals whom I interviewed saw tourists in a very positive light, although they did have some negative things to say about tourism. (There is of course the likelihood that the respondents were voicing what they thought the interviewer might want to hear.) ‘Tourism’ in Langtang encapsulates a constellation of meanings: in addition to the mass arrival of foreigners, the phenomenon also refers to the gazettement of the whole region as a National Park, the arrival of soldiers to man the check-post, the building of an army camp next to the village, and the building of hotels. Tourism is seen as the primary cause of deforestation, as hotels continue to rely on large quantities of firewood for both cooking and heating despite the authorities’ effort to promote kerosene use. Many Langtanga loathe the soldiers in their vicinity as they will occasionally hunt for meat the very animals they are supposed to protect from poachers. In a religious context, Langtanga consider the killing of animals as both a sin (Tib. *sdig pa*), as well as a defiling act (*sgrib*) polluting their sacred environment. Also, increasing inequality and village conflicts due to competition and jealousy are seen as some of the negative impacts of tourism (Lim 2004a; n.d).

For the Langtang people, the category of ‘tourist’ is however, at one level, cognitively abstracted from tourism as an industry. Here, the formal sociology of Georg Simmel is helpful for our understanding of how Langtanga conceive tourists. According to Simmel, since we cannot have a complete picture of another person, we see the other as *generalised*. That is, whenever we engage in social intercourse, we always generalise the psychological picture of the other person(s) within that intercourse:

We conceive of each man...as being the human type which is suggested by his individuality. We think of him in terms not only of his singularity but also in terms of a general category. This category, of course, does not fully cover him, nor does he fully cover it. In order to know a man, we see him not in terms of his pure individuality, [but] by the general type under which we classify him. (Simmel 1971:10)

The Foreignscapes: Langtanga’s Counter-gaze

How Langtanga imagine the tourists and their societies can be gleamed from the popularity of a particular type of poster that is often on the walls of Langtang houses and hotels. These pictures are normally titled with the names of places they purport to show:



A: 'America'



B: 'Paris Tower'



C: 'Singapore'

Fig. 3: Langtanga's reverse gaze: imagining a better life?

For example, the poster in Fig. 3A is titled 'America'. However, upon closer inspection, some things are not right. The skyscrapers in the background are actually situated in the Singapore business district—I know because I happen to be from Singapore -- while the bridge that cuts diagonally across the picture is apparently the San Francisco Golden Gate Bridge. The small image of a mountain at the top centre of the poster shows Ama Dablam, a distinctive and well-known peak near Mount Everest in Nepal's Khumbu region. Hence, only the suspension bridge is in fact located in America. The title of the poster in Fig. 3B is 'Paris Tower', correctly referring to the Eiffel Tower in the centre of the picture. But here again, something is out of

place: the imposing snow-capped mountain that dominates the landscape, which most Japanese would recognise instantly as the iconic image of Mount Fuji. In real life, there is no mountain dominating the Parisian skyline. The last poster of Fig. 3C is supposed to show Singapore, but this Singaporean can say with confidence that it does not!

What are we to make of these posters? One thing to note is that these posters are composed with the superimposition of photographic images of various places, what I would term here as *foreignscapes*. The use of photographic images can be interpreted as an attempt to convey a sense of authenticity, except that the discrepancies between the representations and reality is immediately evident to those observers who are familiar with these places, either through their own travels or exposure to the mass media. Thus, my ability to interrogate the authenticity of these posters is based upon my experience of these places that has been afforded by my comparatively privileged background relative to most Langtanga. Perhaps here the issue of verisimilitude is not as important as what might be the message that is encoded in these images. First, the headings of these posters almost always refer to places located in the more ‘developed’ countries, from where many of the relatively wealthy travellers to Nepal originate, even though Indian nationals currently constitute the largest proportion of tourism arrivals. Next, the material objects depicted in these posters are revealing: skyscrapers, bridges, beautiful houses, aeroplanes, pleasure boats—symbols of ‘development’ and a privileged life-style. ‘America’, ‘Paris’ and ‘Singapore’ are shown as places with bright lights and tall buildings, peopled by the well-attired with their expensive and luxurious cars. No pictures of priests in temples or churches, colourful crowds at carnivals, or old 17th-century cottages in the English Cotswolds. In Nepal’s current economic circumstances and its long, ambivalent engagement with the project of development,

these representations of foreignscapes powerfully remind the Nepalese of what their country lacks, and at the same time reveal what they hope to achieve. In this context, it does not really matter that in real life there is no suspension bridge that cuts across the Singapore harbour; nor does it matter that actually there is not a snow-capped mountain that dominates the Parisian skyline. Place connotes values: the crucial issue here is what foreignscapes like ‘America’ or ‘Singapore’ in these posters symbolise. To the Langtanga, these images of wealthy foreign lands are even more vivid and convincing as they are seemingly being affirmed constantly by the trekkers’ personification as ‘travelling advertisements’ of their societies. Thus we can see that to Langtanga, these faraway foreign places as advertised by the tourists are also aestheticised landscapes. What these (mis) representations of the posters suggest to us is that verisimilitude is not as important as idealised dreams.

In a study of how Nepalese in the Kathmandu Valley conceptualise tourists, Hepburn finds that for many of her respondents,

‘Tourist’ is not a person who puts aside more lasting identities in order to travel: rather, the word often means ‘white person’. A Tourist is a ‘sort’ of person, as understood within the caste idiom common in South Asia. This term can mark a range of social categories and statuses depending on context, including race, culture, class, species, or caste. (2002:611)

Tourists as ‘white persons’ might have been true in the 1960s and 1970s, when Nepal, in particular Kathmandu, was one of the key destinations on the hippie trail. These days, tourists are

increasingly ‘yellow’, so to speak, as personified by the Japanese, South Koreans, and other East Asian nationals. While Hepburn correctly points out that the ‘tourist’ is usually regarded by the Nepalese as a ‘sort’—what, following Simmel, I would here call a ‘type’—of person, she has not addressed adequately the issue of how these conceptions might evolve.

In her case study of the Sherpa, Vincanne Adams argues that a process of mimesis determines the images Sherpa and Westerners have of each other. By the term ‘mimesis,’ Adams refers to the creative process of identity construction: the Sherpa see themselves through the eyes of the Westerners and the images the latter have constructed of them. The Sherpa “become like that which the Other [the Westerner] desires to see them as, in a set of perceived cultural differences and similarities that make the Sherpa larger than life, more real than reality itself.” Adams argues that the process not only compels the Sherpa to mirror the desires of the Westerners, but also to seek out their own cultural practices that would mark them out as ‘different’ (Adams 1996: 16-17). In the history of contact between the two groups of people, the Sherpa have been variously described by Western mountaineers, tourists, trekkers, ethnographers or aid workers as “loyal, hardy, reliable, skilled, capable of superhuman physical feats, and, above all, good-natured about demanding work” (Ibid.:43-44). The Sherpa are thought to have embraced these images of themselves and constructed an identity mirroring the desires of Westerners. The mimesis works in reverse as well: the Sherpa’s images of the Westerner are the creations that meet the Sherpa’s needs. According to Adams, this mirroring of desires between the Sherpa and the Westerners has resulted in the formation of a particular dominant form of relationship: that of the patron and client (Ibid.:12).

The downside of Adams' study is that it suffers from the same conceptual inadequacy as that of Hepburn's: for them, the images formed of the Other are immutable constructs that serve as guides to social interaction, and they fail to address the crucial issue of evolving perceptions and imaginings. Therefore, since the early 20th century, the image that Westerners have of the Sherpa has always had to be one of them being loyal, hardy, reliable, skilled, capable of superhuman physical feats, and good-natured about demanding work. Similarly, the Sherpa have always had to see the Westerners as rich and as a source of patronage. For Adams' argument to hold, this has to be the case for, according to her, the relationship between the Westerner and the Sherpa is characterised by the mimesis of the same images and desires each has of the other throughout the history of their contact. Like Hepburn, Adams' framework does not allow for the possibility of alternative definitions and imaginings—in fact I would argue that her method compels her to present the mimetic relationship between the Sherpa and Westerners as the only way for the Sherpa to construct their identity—contributing unwittingly to what Erik Cohen (1993) has called the “stereotyping of the stereotype”. One commentator has echoed the same sentiment, criticising Adams for “vastly [over-privileging] the effect of sahib perspectives and vastly [underestimating] the reality of a Sherpa world that bend sahib influence to Sherpa purposes” (Ortner 1999: 58).

What we need is a framework that can help us understand and explain not just the production and relative stability of categories, but also the conditions and contexts that would allow for their evolution and change. I suggest Simmel's idea of ‘excess characteristics’ can provide us with some illumination. According to Simmel, our inherently incomplete cognition of others means that there are certain facets of them that are turned away from social interaction (or what Simmel

calls ‘sociation’). For example, in the context of the class room, the relevant facets involved on the part of a teacher includes, for example, her knowledge of the subject which she is teaching, her personality (e.g. whether she is an extrovert or introvert), and her teaching methodology. Those other facets that are not immediately relevant to her role as a ‘teacher’ are what constitute the ‘excess characteristics’ of the teacher. Inherent therefore in any social interaction is a variable degree of ‘strangeness’. However, the fact that a part of an individual is not turned toward sociation does not mean that it has no relation to the socially relevant part. As Simmel says,

It is not simply something outside society to which society, willingly or unwillingly, submits. Rather, the fact that in certain respects the individual is not an element of society constitutes the positive condition for the possibility that in other respects he is: the way in which he is sociated is determined or codetermined by the way in which he is not...The proposition is not invalidated by the fact that at every moment we are confronted, as it were, by relations which directly or indirectly determine the content of every moment: for the social environment does not surround all of the individual. (Simmel, 1971:12-13)

For example, a teacher is not only a teacher, a tourist is not only a tourist. Therefore, “[t]his extrasocial nature—a man’s temperament, fate, interest, worth as a personality—give a certain nuance to the picture formed by all who meet him. It intermixes his social picture with the non-social imponderables....” (Ibid: 13)

Let us now look more closely at the interaction between the tourists and Langtang. As pointed out above, tourists usually would have certain preconceptions about a place and people they are visiting, having been formed by their exposure to certain sources when planning their travels—such as tourist guidebooks, brochures, internet websites and newspapers. I have alluded to this process through the various epigraphs quoted in this paper. Even the journey to Langtang undertaken by the tourists can contribute significantly to the shaping and reinforcing of those preconceptions of Langtang as ‘out of this world’: the difficulty of the bus journey, the arrival at the border town of Syabru Bengsi (a transitional zone between the ‘outside’ world and a ‘hidden’ valley), the trek into the mountains and the wilderness, a land of lamas and monasteries. Just as in any social interaction where one sees the others, to varying degrees, as generalised types, so do visitors see Langtang villagers.

What these preconceptions were could be inferred from both the positive and negative opinions of the tourists toward Langtang and its people. We should note here, however, that these types were not essentialised, immutable categories, but had been formed partly through a particular history of interactions and influences—in the present context, the influence of the media on the tourists, the nature of the journey, the geography of the place, and the situation at destination; and partly through the necessary process of generalisation due to the impossibility of our having complete knowledge of the others in social interactions. Even though types have their particular degree of stability, they can be interrogated and challenged via additional interactions that reveal the ‘excess characteristics’ of other parties involved.⁸ The very expressions of ‘disappointment’ of some tourists point clearly to the fact that the general type with which the Langtang people

were conceived had been destabilised, which in turn will likely evolve into a more nuanced image or type that these tourists will carry away with them when they leave.

Of Reverie and Emplacement

Using the general framework of Simmel's theory of sociation to generalise from the case of Langtang, I suggest that the interaction dynamics between tourists and host communities can be characterised as a constant shifting of subjectivity along a spectrum marked by the two poles of *reverie* and *emplacement*. The condition of reverie can arise through an aestheticisation of the landscape that simultaneously results in what the cultural geographer Jonathan Smith terms the 'displacement of the subject', a state in which the spectator is situated in an Olympian position that affords him a sense of detachment in relation to the scenery under his gaze. In a state of reverie, the spectator becomes a voyeur who feels a partial escape from temporal flux, while at the same time attributes qualities of completion, stability and innocence to the landscape, hence lifting it out of the vicissitudes of history:

Because they are able to endure...landscapes are believed to possess a reality surpassing that of the process by which they were created. At the same time, their endurance allows them to be cleansed of the taint of their creators, and to displace themselves from this context into the realm of private memories (Smith 1993: 81).

In our particular case, the construction of the Langtang valley by the tourism industry as a site of cultural tourism and 'touristic paradise' transforms its sheer physicality into an aestheticised spectacle fit for tourism consumption (see MacDonald 2004; Cohen 2004; Turner

and Ash 1975). If Smith's analysis is pushed further to include the fact that in many instances an aestheticised landscape is also *inhabited*, then the lifting of the Langtang valley out of the temporal flux under a tourist gaze has the effect of transforming its inhabitants into a timeless Other, and concealing the fractures and displacement of everyday life. Conversely, Langtanga's views of foreign places consist of a series of equally aestheticised landscapes, as evident from posters of foreignscapes widely circulated in Nepal and hung on the walls of many homes and hotels in Langtang. These images are sustained by a specific history of interaction between Langtanga and the tourists who act as 'travelling advertisements' that hints at their apparently privileged lives in 'developed' societies.

But a state of reverie only partially characterises the tourism experience for both the visitors and the hosts. Both parties are susceptible to being jolted out of this condition of detachment and indifference by situations that lead to 'emplacement', the re-situating of the subject "in a historically and existentially specific condition" (Englund 2002: 267)—that is, the subject metaphorically being brought down to earth from the Olympian heights of reverie. This subversion of the aestheticised landscape can be triggered by the introduction of "a representational discrepancy, a symbol out of place" (Smith 1993:86), revealing the farce of the represented pretensions constructed under the tourist gaze. The representation of Langtang as a pristine and timeless place where inhabitants are untouched by history and ossified in their cultural practices—in other word, preserved in an Age of Innocence—educates the visitors to see the Langtang valley as a spectacle. Emplacement occurs when this representation is revealed through social intercourse for its farcical nature: when Langtang men are not dressed in the traditional Tibetan *chuba*, when hotel owners seek profit maximization, when Langtang women

harass trekkers along the trails to entice them to their establishments, when villagers hope to find work abroad, when loyalists of opposing political parties come to blows with each other during the religious festivals. In other words, emplacement results when the crucial element of *difference* that is inherent in the construction of the tourist gaze is replaced by *convergence*, the awareness that the spectator and the spectacle are both entrenched in the vicissitudes of history, subjected to the cares and pressures of everyday living.

I discussed at the beginning of this paper Urry's conception of the 'gaze' as one of the key tourism practices, and what the tourists essentially gaze upon are scenes that are different from those encountered in their everyday life back home. The construction of such differences involves the production and circulation of images and perceptions related to the history of interactions between the tourists and the hosts, as well as the advertising campaigns of both the tourist industry. In the case of Langtang, factors such as geography and the experience of travel are intimately implicated in reinforcing the perception of differences: The difficult bus journey to Syabru Bengsi can therefore be seen to symbolise the arduous journey one undertakes to get from a 'normal' state of existence to that of an 'other-worldly' one in Langtang as promised by the travel guides and brochures. To the Langtang, the Langtang valley is a sacred geography (see Lim 2004b) filled with religious signs such as footprints and handprints of various deities and holy men claiming the valley for Buddhism, and this particular local conception of the land as sacred overlap to a considerable extent with what many tourists seek to experience when they travel to the area. However, as I have shown, the generalised images the tourists have of Langtang and its people does not fully encompass them since some of them have been transformed as Langtang were discovered to be as concerned about business and other pecuniary matters as

people everywhere else. The discovery of these ‘excess characteristics’ have the effect of jolting the tourists out of a state of reverie in their relation to the Langtang landscape and its inhabitants. Equally important to the investigation of the tourist-host relationship is that of the gaze of the hosts. Langtanga, like many Nepalese elsewhere, see the tourists as belonging to a general type that is often characterised by wealth and the willingness to ‘sponsor’ projects and children’s education. Therefore it seems that both the Langtanga and the tourists tend to view each other in structural terms. Due to a specific history of foreign presence in Nepal, mainly relating to international aid, developmental projects and tourism, Langtanga tend to view the tourists as embodiments of wealth.

However, there is one crucial difference between the tourists and the Langtanga in this process of mutual imagination. Unlike the tourists who can have a chance to interrogate the images they hold of Langtanga because of their ability to observe the latter in their day-to-day living environment, Langtanga are significantly less able to do so, since most of them are unlikely to go abroad to observe the lives of tourists back in their own country. In other words, it is more likely that the tourists will apprehend the ‘excess characteristics’ of the communities in the poorer countries than the latter of them, and more likely to be brought down to earth from a state of reverie. This in turn suggests that an idealisation of the Other can be more pronounced and stable on the part of the host communities than on the part of the visitors. For example, contrary to their romantic preconceptions, some tourists realise that Langtang people are as much concerned in seeking profits as business people elsewhere, and will resort to various measures to achieve them, such as charging for a mug of hot water. Or that Langtanga do not conform to the image of a tradition-bound, innocent and harmonious

people, as been portrayed by the tourist brochures, and whom the trekkers initially seek out and experience in their visit. On the part of the Langtanga, the facet they usually see of the foreigners is that of a 'Tourist': someone with almost unimaginable wealth who is able to travel for leisure for a prolonged period of time, many complete with guides and porters. The perceived superiority of the tourists is thus sustained by the geography of power: the host communities in the Pleasure Periphery have tremendous difficulty in transcending their idealised foreignscapes to see the mundane, gritty and unappealing mechanisms of daily life in these foreign lands. The tourists' spatial privacy therefore supports the pretensions of their privileged lives, while the grim reality of the hosts lies very much exposed to the tourist gaze.

Epilogue

In a rather bizarre turn of events, the tourism industry has actually picked up over the last two years, despite the ongoing conflict in Nepal. Even the recent spates of bombings and killings have not deterred the tourists. I almost could not believe my eyes when I saw this headline on the BBC news website: 'Trekkers drawn to Nepal Rebels' (13 Jan. 2004). The article reported that many trekkers actually relished meeting and chatting with the Maoist rebels, seeing that as one of the thrills of adventure in Nepal. Not long ago, an article in *The Independent* newspaper (23 Aug. 2004) noted that for the tourists one of the most coveted items to take away from trekking in Nepal these days is a receipt for making monetary donation to the Maoists. The state of reverie goes on.

Notes

1. The Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu have been deemed by some to have suffered the same fate, especially amongst foreigners who have a romantic view of the Sherpas as innocent and non-materialistic (see e.g. Ortner 1999:248-9).

2. This ‘packaging’ of cultures by museums and the media is an intricate part of events marketing in order to attract public attention. For example, Deborah Gewertz (1992: 218n) has given an illuminating account of the ways the National Geographic sought to portray the Chambri of Papua New Guinea. When she was reviewing the sound script for a programme it had produced on the Chambri, Gewertz protested to the organisation that film portrayed the Chambri as if they were living in the Stone Age, and pointed out that the Chambri musical performance used in the programme was in fact regularly performed for the tourists. The National Geographic replied that nothing could be done about the way the film portrays the Chambri, because its subscribers ‘buy’ this image of the still untouched primitive.

3. There are notable exceptions. For example, Abbink (2000), in his study of the Suri-tourist encounter in Southern Ethiopia, describes how the Suri continuously refused to conform to set tourist expectations, and how, unaware to the tourists, the Suri see them with a sense of bewilderment and irritation. Evans-Pritchard (1989) has similarly documented the native Americans’ images of tourists within a more general perception of ‘the Other’. In her historical approach, she analyses the ways in which historical parodies and critiques of the ‘whiteman’ influence present-day native Americans’ attitudes towards tourists, and how the hosts rely on stereotypical images to defend and protect as well as to discriminate. Tourism studies such as

those of Abbink and Evans-Pritchard are few and far between, which reflects perhaps a certain bias in tourism research in general.

4. However, on two other occasions, I myself became the focus of attraction after some tourists got to know that I was an anthropologist conducting research in Langtang. Somehow that made me an exotic spectacle and the tourists took pictures of me lounging.

5. As Langtanga speak Tibetan as their first language, they would use the phrase ‘khamsung bu? Are you well?’ for greetings amongst themselves, but will normally use the Nepali term ‘*namaste*’ (meaning ‘hello’, ‘greetings’) to tourists, for travellers to Nepal would all know what *namaste* means.

6. In Nepal the English word ‘project’ is often used to refer to foreign aid project or foreign NGO work. When Ramjee, a teacher from the Tarai (near the border with India) who had been sent by a British NGO to Langtang village to teach, was asked by a soldier at the national park check post the reason for his stay in the village, Ramjee replied “project-*ko lāgi*” (‘for a project’), and elicited a knowing nod and expression of respect from his interlocutor.

7. Before tourism came to Langtang, some local men had been to India to work. However, since tourists started arriving a couple of decades ago, only a handful of Langtanga had gone away to work, either in the Nepalese cities such as Kathmandu or overseas. This is different from the situation in other parts of Nepal. For example, the Khumbu region witnessed large-scale seasonal out-migration as many Sherpa men acted as trekking guides during the tourist seasons, many spending as much as 10 months away from home (Fisher 1990: 118). On the positive side, this

outflow of young Sherpa men to work in the tourism industry has brought about a general improvement in the standard of living in the Khumbu. There were, however, adverse consequences of this large-scale migration. In agriculture, for example, fields were abandoned for lack of able locals to cultivate them, leading to a decline in agricultural production (Ibid.: 122). Watkins (1996: 21) has documented the same phenomenon with the Nyeshangte in the northern central hills of Nepal. The Nyeshangte have a sizable diasporic population in places such as Bangkok, Hong Kong, Singapore, northern India, and also in Kathmandu and Pokhara in Nepal, as a result of their trading tradition and heavy involvement in tourism. It was usually the Nyeshangte men who travelled, and women were left behind in villages to handle domestic chores and to cultivate the fields. In recent years, due to the political turmoil and economic crisis in Nepal, more and more Nepalese have left their country to seek job opportunities in places like the United States, Japan, the Gulf States (or ‘Arab’, as the Nepalese would say), and countries in Southeast and South Asia. According to the Nepalese Department of Labour estimates in 2002, there were 214,839 Nepalese working overseas, of whom 99.5% were unskilled. This was the official figure of Nepalese with proper legal documents; an equal number was thought be working illegally abroad (Poudel 2002; Dhakal 2002). According to a study by David Seddon and his co-workers for the British Department for International Development (DFID), the remittance of these migrant workers could be as high as Rs. 69 billion, equivalent to about 20 percent of Nepal’s gross domestic product (cited in Poudel 2002).

8. It should be pointed out that the ‘excess characteristics’ are not more ‘*real*’ than the ‘types’ with which we perceive others in sociation. Our construction of types, according to Simmel, is the result of the necessary process of *generalisation* inherent in any particular sociation; we

might get to know more about the other's 'excess characteristics' through additional interactions, after which further generalisation is possible based on the additional information we have gleaned.

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