

TREKKING TO TENGBOCHE
Sherpas and the Tourist Challenge

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ABSTRACT

The rapid increase in tourism and trekking in eastern Nepal is challenging the social identity of the Sherpas. This must be seen in the wider context of Sherpa history, and how cultural schemata mediated contradictions and external challenges in the past. In particular, the Sherpa custom of *yangdzi* provides a schema that best situates Sherpa society in relation to modern challenges.

RÉSUMÉ

L'accroissement rapide du tourisme au Népal de l'est en question l'identité sociale des Sherpas. Au cours de leur évolution sociale, les Sherpas ont développé des pratiques culturelles qui servent de liens intermédiaires entre leur société et les influences externes. La coutume du *yangdzi* des Sherpas en particulier offre une mesure culturelle qui aide à situer la société des Sherpas en relation avec les exigences de la modernisation.

INTRODUCTION

In studying tourism one can investigate in concrete detail the links between power and knowledge, the generation of images of the Other, the creation of 'natives' and 'authenticity', the consumption of images and so on. These are as basic to the tourist industry as, indeed, they are to the anthropological researcher's ethnographic industry (Crick 1989:329).

Before being destroyed by a fire in 1988, the Tengboche monastery in Nepal was one of the most spectacular sites in the Himalayas. Situated at the base of the enormous, snow capped *Ama Dablam*, whose dog-toothed shadow fell across the central chapel and wooden roofs of monastic cells, this Sherpa Buddhist monastery provided a direct view of the world's highest peaks as well as a home to one of the world's most 'exotic' and 'mystical' religions. It is no surprise, then, that when Nepal became accessible to mass tourism this site became a significant destination for adventurous western tourists. The monastery had a number of significances for the Sherpa people who inhabit this region that were, and

still are, central to Sherpa religion and culture. The additional importance of the monastery as a pilgrimage centre for modern tourism contrasts these Sherpa significances, illustrating the many and rapid social changes in the Sherpa Solu-Khumbu region currently taking place.

In representing their culture to others as a kind of commodity, a primary commodity in the tourism industry, the symbols and meanings of the Sherpa world, Sherpa identity and, ultimately, sovereignty (both social and political) become negotiable in an international transaction with much larger and more powerful entities. Western tourists bring western currencies, and aid that is much needed by marginal countries like Nepal. They too bring cultural values that may be perceived as being superior or desirable by their relatively impoverished hosts. There is then an active exchange of commodities and images (as commodities) which actively combines the economic with the cultural.

A current debate regarding the virtues of political-economic versus 'interpretive' or symbolic-cultural analysis in anthropological literature (Marcus and Fischer 1986: 86) has led to a polarization between the two approaches; political economists tap the roots of the economic base as their interpretive cousins pluck the foliage of culture. Both assume that what they have is the tree, where both parts are necessary to understand the whole.

To understand the effects of tourism on the Sherpa culture of eastern Nepal, it is necessary to see both roots and leaves, that is, the economic changes brought about by the sudden boom of a tourist economy and the cultural structures in place to mediate those changes. An historical consideration of those structures instructs us about how the Sherpas have adapted to challenges in the past and how present responses are culturally conditioned.

The foundation of the Tengboche monastery and the other Sherpa celibate monasteries in Nepal arose from, reproduced and at the same time transformed Sherpa society. As a cultural representation the monasteries were constructed within the Sherpa community, from preexisting cultural patterns fused with contemporary economic and political challenges. This threatened Sherpa social solidarity with the internal contradictions of wealth and status disparity. These cultural patterns are visible in the ritual life of the community and provide models by which such contradictions can be mediated:

The Sherpa rites of exorcism utilize symbols of wealth and poverty, and we must ask why the demons that are exorcised, and the defilements that are cleansed, derive meaning from the inequities of the economic and political structure (and *vice-*

versa). The symbols of the rituals, in other words, lead us toward discovery of structural conflict, contradiction, and stress in the wider social and cultural world (Ortner 1978:3).

In *Sherpas Through Their Rituals*, Sherry Ortner (1978) attempts to locate the meaning of ritual in the structural contradictions of Sherpa society. In a sense, ritual attempts to mediate these contradictions and to solve the problems that they produce. Contradiction underlies the dynamics of society; the contradiction between productive forces and relations of production in Marxism, for example, or Talcott Parsons' contradiction between actors and the social structures that constrain them (Ortner 1989:21). To contemporary anthropologists it has become apparent that such contradictions not only condition human behaviour but are in turn conditioned by it.

In sketching the history of Sherpa celibate monasticism in *High Religion*, Ortner (1989) employs what she has called "practice theory" to her analysis. This is a theoretical approach that incorporates the roles of individual actors, historical influences and social structures in such a way that the opposition between objective, materialist historical influences and those more subjective and 'cultural' are contained within a theoretical framework:

Practice theory in fully developed form attends seriously to both of these moments. But its special contribution lies in the ways in which it operates on the interface between them, examining those processes by which one side is converted into the other. Thus one observes actors in real circumstances using their cultural frames to interpret and meaning -- fully act upon the world, converting it from a stubborn object to a knowable and manageable life-place (Ortner 1989:18).

In applying these broad theoretical themes to a sketch of Sherpa history, it can be shown that the recent introduction of mass tourism to the region constitutes a new historical challenge to Sherpa solidarity, and can thus be viewed in the same framework. Which preexisting cultural patterns can be mobilized through historical action to assert Sherpa solidarity? And, will these be sufficient in facing the increasing pressures from western economic and cultural practices? The general focus of this examination will remain the Sherpa monasteries as they begin to adopt a new role as an exotic destination, a commodity of tourist culture.

RELIGION IN PRACTICE

The foundation of celibate monasteries in Solu-Khumbu took place at the outset of the twentieth century. Prior to this, religious practitioners in this region were married lamas fully involved in all aspects of secular life. A broad distinction exists among the practitioners of Tantric (or Tibetan) Buddhism between these lamas, *gyuppi*, and the celibate monks and nuns, *tolden* or *ngawa*, who remain apart from secular life devoting their time to meditation and tantric practice to raise their own personal spiritual power (Ortner 1989:43). The position of the celibate monk in Sherpa society has always been an ambiguous one, for their rejection of marriage, family and their dependence upon the community for their sustainment contradicts social norms (Ortner 1978:136). Why then would such an institution take such a strong hold?

The answer to this lies in the combination of economic, political and cultural factors earlier this century, and in tensions within Sherpa society itself. The principal contradiction in the cultural sense is between the seemingly egalitarian nature of Sherpa society and the practical need for hierarchical organization. In the political sense, there was the disparity between those with high status and wealth and those without. These factors were further complicated by the increasing hegemony of the Nepali state, which was at the time controlled by the powerful Rana dictatorship in Kathmandu, who had instituted a kind of internal colonialism which maintained the country in a state of underdevelopment (Ortner 1989: 99).

The traditional Sherpa institution of *pembu* leadership was, until the mid-nineteenth century, the focus of political power in Solu-Khumbu. *Pembu* leaders were non-hereditary and accumulated their authority by economic achievement. Once claiming their position as village headman, tribute to them was paid by village members. With the extension of the Hindu state of Nepal into this remote region, the institution of *pembu* was superseded by the *gembu*, a government-appointed tax collector who exacted tribute for the Rana regime. The Rana regime undermined the traditional *pembu* system by showing preference to one *pembu* over another, thus increasing the competition between them (Ortner 1989:125). The contradiction of the *pembu* increasing his status and political power in an egalitarian society was amplified by this external action.

In this social environment, then, the *pembu* were seeking ways to assert their status. In this social environment, too, cultural factors were active. Zatul Rinpoche, a Tibetan Reincarnate Lama (who had founded the Rombuk monastery on the north face of Mt. Sagarmatha) began to exert influence on the religious activity in Solu-Khumbu. Zatul Rinpoche was

keen on founding monasteries with full time, celibate practitioners, a sentiment shared by several Solu-Khumbu religious leaders. Several *pembu* were eager to provide these religious leaders with the funds to begin these institutions, as a way of increasing their status, both in the secular and sacred sense:

When I asked the founder Kusang why he cosponsored the founding of Tengboche, he answered entirely in moral terms: to perform an act of virtue (*gyewa*), to make merit (*payin*). When I asked other informants why the founders did the informants were rather more pragmatic, saying that the sponsors might gain prestige (*ming*, name; *namdal*, reputation). But even these more pragmatic commentators mentioned the religious motive as well (Ortner 1989:143).

The founding of the monasteries followed a "cultural schema" according to the Sherpa culture (Ortner 1989:126). Schemata are cultural "plots", or "root paradigms" (Turner 1974:64) that "depict actions responding to, and resolving (from their own point of view), the central contradictions of that culture" (Ortner 1989: 61). These schemata may either manipulate or be manipulated by the actor. In the particular schema informing the foundation of monasteries, the competition between *pembu* results in one competitor (the hero) breaking off the (secular) competition, acquiring a 'protector' (the founding Lama) and 'defeating his rival' (symbolically, by sponsoring the monastery). Ortner demonstrates that a similar schema is behind the performance of Tantric Buddhist offering rituals: the basic antagonism between the participant of the ritual and the supernatural world, populated by malevolent demons; the acquisition of a deity for protection through the offering; the defeat or exorcism of the harmful deity, and finally the flight of the loser (Ortner 1989:73).

But it is not only the *pembus* and lamas who are active in monastery founding. The poorer people of early twentieth century Sherpa society were interested parties as well. Because of wage labour in the Indian town of Darjeeling, cash wealthy Sherpas were able to donate their labour to the building of the monasteries. Through this, these people benefited from the accrued merit and status, and their place in society was valorized (Ortner 1989:151). The introduction of potato cultivation in the mid-nineteenth century increased plot yields as well and, by extension, the leisure time needed for monastery construction (von Fuhrer-Haimendorff 1964:174).

The foundation of the monasteries was, then, an act of social solidarity, arising out of social contradictions, the cultural schemata required to mediate these, the actors shaping, and shaped by, the action, and the economic conditions necessary for the response to take root.

About the same time as these monastic institutions were forming, Sherpas began to hire on as porters for European mountaineering expeditions. As early as 1907, Sherpas began to distinguish themselves in such work. One satisfied employer wrote:

Really they are the most splendid fellows. Of the different types of coolie, the writer has found the Nepalese Sherpas superior to all others. They are strong, good natured if fairly treated, and since they are Buddhists there is no difficulty about special food for them ... (Ortner 1989:161).

As early as 1907 the seeds of another social upheaval were sewn, for the cash employment as porters on mountaineering and trekking expeditions was to become the most important source of income for the Sherpas later in the century. In examining the impact of such change on Sherpa society and specifically monasticism, however, it is necessary to see that change in the context of this broader history, and in cultural schemata which still exist in Sherpa culture and continue to mediate challenges from external or internal sources. In the past, the religious schema which channelled action towards monastery foundation resolved social disparities, symbolically. Sherpa culture contains other schemata by which the disparities enforced by modern tourism will be resolved. These economic and social problems will first be considered, then the Sherpa 'response' to them.

TREKKERS AND TOURISTS

Routine mass tourism is generally seen as presenting the tourist with attractions, the authenticity of which is staged. While mass tourism thus appears to be caught in an artificial 'tourist space', 'alternative' tourism seems to hold forth the promise of enabling the individual to visit 'authentic' places and meet 'real' people. Such experiences can be in fact achieved by individual travelers unconventional trips 'off the beaten track'. However, as 'alternative' tourism becomes popular it offers commercial opportunities for enterprising locals, who seek to cash in on the alleged authenticity of the attractions they offer (Cohen 1989:57).

In an article on 'alternative tourism' in northern Thailand, Erik Cohen (1989) shows how guides into the exotic hill-tribe area manipulate the cultural elements of the hill-tribes to create illusions of authenticity for western, 'alternative' tourists. Thus, two disparate cultures come into contact, and the relationship implied in Cohen's article is between western tourists 'scavenging' for new experiences (Crick 1989:324), and 'enterprising locals', who offer those westerners not satisfied with mass tourism " ... a more subtle, covert, and insidious form of staging" (Cohen 1989: 57). While the semiotic analysis in Cohen's article on the methods by which tourists are lured into taking guided hill treks very much illuminates the 'modernization' of middle class consciousness, it says very little about the hill-tribe people themselves, their motives for inviting westerners into their midst, and the effects of having done so.

'Trekking' is the major tourist mode in Solu-Khumbu as well. This is a relatively remote, high altitude area that requires a high degree of physical exertion to reach. It is a unique area, as few other accessible places can match its appeal. There are two main attractions: the Himalaya mountain ranges, including Mt. Sagarmatha (Mt. Everest), and the Sherpas, the same Buddhist society so praised in the quotation above. The Sherpas, like the people of the Thai hills, also engage in 'cultural production' to appeal to trekkers, who have become a major source of income in the region:

Successful trekking Sherpas realize that they are, in part, paid professional actors and entertainers. Their stories and dances and songs are genuine enough, but they are also what clients want. And what clients pay for, they get (Fisher 1990:125).

It has only been since the early 1960s that any substantial number of curious westerners ventured into Solu-Khumbu, as previously the area, and, indeed (before 1951) the whole country, was closed to foreigners. In 1964 there were a grand total of 20 foreigners trekking the high routes of the Himalaya. By the late 1970s the numbers had reached over 4000; by 1985, over 5000 people reached the area and by 1986, only one year later, 6,909 trekking permits had been granted for Solu-Khumbu (Fisher 1990:148). While comparatively small by western standards, these numbers have an enormous impact on an area inhabited by only about 14,000 Sherpas (Ortner 1978:12).

This has resulted in an enormous increase in wealth and employment, with all of the incumbent problems these raise. In 1964, a porter received, on average, 6 rupees a day (plus food) for his (or her) services. By 1988, this average had grown to 50 rupees a day, a 730 percent increase over the

original figure (Fisher 1990:116). The popularity of trekking work has caused it to supplant other economic activities.

The traditional herding of *zom* or *zopiko* (yaks and crossbreeds), for example, has become a less valued activity, largely because herding is dependent upon the animals reproducing, which is uncertain. Trekking, the Sherpa logic follows, is a more reliable source of income. This is ironic, as tourist economic activity is thought to be less stable, being subject to the whims of economic downturns in the affluent countries and to uncertain political conditions in the developing world (Crick 1989: 315). It appears, then, that the tendency in Solu-Khumbu is to abandon traditional activity in favour of the more lucrative tourist trade, and that this tendency is based on the short term consideration of abundant foreign currencies available at a time when the Nepalese economy is becoming increasingly reliant on currency exchange.

The many people vying for work in the mushrooming tourist trade has caused labour shortages in the agricultural sector. Sherpa men are increasingly off trekking when the harvest needs to come in. As a result, Sherpas from the high Khumbu area, the favored destination of trekkers and the region that produces the most porters, are forced to hire labour from outside to bring in their harvest (Fisher 1990:122). Some of the labour hired are fellow Sherpas from the lower Solu area, which is a significant departure from labour practices in the past: the use of other Sherpas as hired labour had been "unheard of" (Ortner 1989:154).

There is developing, then, in Solu-Khumbu an emergent class of "tourist Sherpa" who are distinguished from their kinsmen by virtue of their accumulated wealth (Fisher 1990:118). One direct result of such wealth has been the inflation of prices in the area which has the effect of driving even more people into the tourist trade, either as porters or as operators of the numerous 'rest houses' recently opened in the area by Sherpas. Many Sherpas leave, simply unable to afford to remain, but many more Sherpas are away in their capacity as porters and trekking company employees in other regions of Nepal, where Sherpas are also predominant in the industry. And there is, of course, natural mobility in the industry, successful porters may become *sardars* (expedition leaders), managers of trekking agencies, or operators of 'rest houses', and the less paying tasks fall to others, predominantly, again, from the Solu region (Fisher 1990:122).

The greatest danger to the institutional monasteries arises from the fact that so many Sherpas are away from Solu-Khumbu for long periods of time, and do not attend the great seasonal festivals staged by the monks that figured so importantly in the religious life of Sherpa society (von Fuhrer-Haimendorff 1964:212). The festival of Mani-Rimdu, for

example, is held in November of each year at the Tengboche monastery, and had been a central locus in the Sherpa ritual calendar. November is the height of the autumn trekking season, and many Sherpa men are now, increasingly, away from their homes during this period of traditional community activity. As well, the popularity of labour in the trekking industry draws male candidates away from the monasteries and into secular life. It is feared that a shortage of full-time practitioners that would result will eventually lead to the downfall of the monasteries (Fisher 1990:151). Indeed, in 1978, the number of full time monks at Tengboche was so few that others had to be temporarily imported to perform Mani-Rimdu (Fisher 1990:159).

On the surface, these changes seem most negative for Sherpa society, as the competition for tourist dollars antagonizes again the traditional contradiction between egalitarianism and hierarchy, as appears in the creation of a wealthy "tourist Sherpa" class and the undermining of many traditional aspects of culture. As some trekkers to the region have remarked, the tourist pressure is threatening the authenticity of the Sherpa world:

This spot, as well as other beautiful and unique places on earth, should be considered the property of mankind, not a handful of developers, and should be treated with respect so that our children and their children can experience the beauty and solitude that we have all felt on this trek. If we want to help the people of Nepal, let's help them in real ways -- better means of food production, schools, hospitals. Please, let's spare them the garbage that is consuming us (in Fisher 1990:108).

As honourable as these sentiments are, they also constitute a subtle threat to the Sherpa, for underlying are problems of who will profit from 'the property of mankind', and who will control the physical development of the Sherpa homelands? Does the tourist inspired 'solitude' of Solu-Khumbu include the Sherpas themselves as full partners, or as relegated to the status of living artifacts in an authentic landscape? To the Sherpa our 'exotic' is the everyday; in this 'unique place' food is grown, trade is practised and precious firewood collected. The economic interests of the Sherpa and the influx of tourists intersect in a contradiction, as the traditional lifeways and aspirations of the Sherpa would alter the very landscape that foreigners flock to admire. But exchanging western expertise and aid in return for the maintenance of this 'unique place' would deprive the local populations of sovereignty over their own social destiny. As the rapidly changing Nepali economy becomes increasingly oriented towards tourist dollars, it becomes clear that western aid is not

enough; local populations must control portions of the economic surplus produced by tourism in order to maintain a significant voice in their own social affairs.

The construction of the Tengboche monastery was an act of social solidarity in the face of an intrusive, hegemonic Nepali state, one which mediated contradictions implied in changing Sherpa social relations. The contemporary intrusions into the Sherpa world must be seen in the context of Sherpa history, and the cultural schema through which it is enacted. The demands of modern tourism constitute a challenge to Sherpa social identity, not only in material and economic demands on their homeland, but also to the efficacy of the symbols by which Sherpas experienced their solidarity with one another.

YANGDZI: THE RESPONSE

... tourists are like so many cattle, representing high mobility, productive, and prestigious, but perishable, forms of wealth. Like cattle, tourists give good milk, but only if they are well fed (Fisher 1990:123).

It is not surprising that the above sentiment, that of many Sherpas themselves, is expressed through the metaphor of food. Food holds a central place in the Sherpa symbolic inventory, with both religious and secular significance. The use of food in ritual offerings is calculated to appease a supernatural power as an ally against a malevolent challenge. Socially, food has a manipulative power as the exchange of food in a social relation implies the expectation that a return exchange will occur; the giver places a demand on the guest (Ortner 1978:68). In the Sherpa subjectivity, therefore, the acts of hospitality and generosity are in sharp contrast with western presumptions, namely, the presumptions of most tourists that such generosity will be extended freely. Beyond the immediate economic transactions for food and lodging along the trekking routes in Solu-Khumbu, the intrusion of western tourists into the Sherpa homeland with the resultant modification of economic and cultural practices is something which ought to be reciprocated, according to Sherpa cultural schema. The formalized rite of *yangdzi*, or hospitality, provides a social form by which this reciprocity has been patterned:

When one manipulates one's neighbours for cooperation of various sorts, one casts oneself as the host in an institutionalized transaction called *yangdzi*. When the community petitions the gods for protection, it casts itself as a

collective host to the gods. When a household, or community, wishes to rid itself of accumulated demons, it hosts the demons to a party (Ortner 1978:63).

In playing 'host' to the western 'guest', the Sherpa expectation is that their hospitality will be reciprocated, not, as with the demons above, by going away, but by cooperating with Sherpa material and cultural aspirations. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of this culturally ordered assumption of reciprocity among the Sherpa; it allows social relationships (including that between trekkers and hosts) to "unfold along more or less predictable lines" (Ortner 1989:60). *Yangdzi* then can be seen as a kind of model for an empowering response to modern challenges in Solu-Khumbu, a mechanism by which absolute reciprocity is maintained.

Westerners are viewed with some ambiguity in Solu-Khumbu, more so now that tourists are reaching the area in greater numbers. With the opening of the airfield at Lukla, the region has become even more accessible to people unwilling to trek the extra week in from the roadhead (Bezruchka 1985:214). On the one hand, Sherpas admire the egalitarian and adventurous qualities of the westerners, qualities that they themselves aspire to. On the other hand, the flood of tourists has brought less admirable types: "everyone from the psychotic Frenchwoman who had to be straitjacketed and evacuated to the American who has taken the vows of a lama and the German divorcee in search of romance" (Fisher 1990:125). Westerners, it seems, have become as exotic to Sherpas as is the reverse.

Westerners are also potential contaminants. When compared to caste-conscious Hindu Nepalese, the Buddhist Sherpa seems totally egalitarian. While this is true to a degree, Sherpa egalitarianism is not extended to outsiders automatically. The concept of 'tip', or pollution by a non-Sherpa, continues to be operative in Solu-Khumbu. Porters from the Khumbu village of Thame until recently had to ritually cleanse themselves before entering the village upon the completion of employment with foreigners (Fisher 1990:132).

The western view of the Sherpa has, by contrast, been almost uniformly admiring. This has historical precedents in the early mountaineering expeditions, and the admiration, even reification, of the Sherpa goes on. Often, tourist regard for the Sherpas goes beyond realistic appraisal. Commentators on modern tourism refer to the "cultural self loathing" of the modern tourist, a product of a sense of guilt over their relative position of affluence and perhaps of the alienation of labour in western societies (Crick 1989:307). In looking to the Sherpas, western

tourists see what is desirable but what is outside of the western experience (Fisher 1990:126).

The variant transactions that take place between tourists and their hosts in Solu-Khumbu can be viewed, from the Sherpa perspective, as modeled from the *yangdzi* schema. By 'feeding' the tourist trade with hospitality and performances of authentic tradition, from folksongs or dances to the contemporary representation of the Tengboche monastery, Sherpas fully expect to receive their due in return. One of the most tangible results of this reciprocal relationship is the high degree of foreign aid given to Sherpas to develop their region and to protect their culture. In the 1960s, Sir Edmund Hillary's Himalayan Trust constructed hospitals and schools throughout the region. A network of health workers, trained by medical volunteers from New Zealand or Canada, extend basic health care to even the more remote villages in the area. The schools, located in most districts in the area, continue to be substantially supported by the Himalayan Trust despite their being integrated into the Nepalese national school system. Later, two organizations were set up to fund aspects of culture; the Au Leshi Society, which funds artists from all over Nepal, but is named after a Sherpa artist, and Cultural Survival, a foundation began by the present Reincarnate Lama of Tengboche *Gompa*, Nawang Tenzing, which has constructed and maintains the Sherpa Cultural Centre on the monastery grounds (Bezruchka 1985:346).

The effects of an increased interest in Sherpa culture also combines with the increased affluence of the tourist Sherpa class: in 1981, Lama Nawang Tenzing raised the equivalent of \$20,000 U.S. in two days to construct a new *Gompa* in Kathmandu, where an increasing number of Sherpas now live, particularly those involved with the administration of trekking agencies (Fisher 1990:139). By 1988, 26 of the 56 largest trekking agencies in Kathmandu were owned and controlled by Sherpas, a substantial increase from 1978, when they controlled only four of twenty (Fisher 1990:115). As with the foundation of the original celibate monasteries in the early twentieth century, the material florescence of the religious institutions of Buddhism recently has coincided with the emergence of a new class of affluent Sherpa, those managing the harvest of the tourist industry.

The *Gompa* at Tengboche, which was short of full time practitioners in 1978, is now back to capacity occupation. Its magnificent location is shared by tourist lodges, the receipts from which contributed to the upkeep of the *Gompa* and monastic buildings (Fisher 1990:1489). When the 1988 fire destroyed the main chapel of the *Gompa*, Lama Tenzing petitioned Kathmandu authorities against bureaucratic obstacles, and the Sherpas quickly rebuilt it (Fisher 1990:167). The present Reincarnate

Lama has become a prominent contemporary actor in the maintenance of Sherpa religious traditions, and the economic climate in which he operates is favourable to effective action. Financial affluence has historically been an important cornerstone of Sherpa monasticism, whether support came from the *pembu* or from the modern class of 'tourist' Sherpa. The *Gompa* as a symbol of social solidarity and empowerment contains authentic, but dynamic, schema that continue to address the Sherpa identity.

DISCUSSION

The question of cultural authenticity is a problematic one, for even an 'authentic' people have a history. The reduction of other peoples to exotic artifacts by the modern tourist (and, implicitly, by theories of modern tourism) denies them this history, for the expectation is that they will remain static; 'authentic' and unchanging. As indigenous peoples of the Himalaya are further exposed to modernism in the form of adventurous 'experience mongering' tourists tramping through their villages, the tendency to commodify this contact will likely become more pronounced. The capacity for conflict between communities competing for this resource is great, as is the capacity for the exploitation of marginal groups by the majority culture. But communities will resist the status of artifact, particularly as this conflicts with their own social aspirations. The people of the Himalaya cannot be demarcated a national park of sorts, protected from all change. History is change, and all societies must have a history.

This is not to excuse the blatant exploitation of developing societies by the affluent under the rubric 'mass tourism'. Many tourist developments act contrary to the interests of the peoples groomed for display. But it appears, on the basis of the Sherpa experience, that this need not be a universal rule, particularly where tourist development continues to empower those people 'displayed'. The case of the Sherpas may be an anomaly, however, for even a brief review of their history reveals that they have had cultural attributes that positively predisposed them to change. Fisher, in fact, calls the Sherpa tradition a "tradition of change" (1990: 64). From the first migration from Tibet over 400 years ago, to the mounting challenges of the central Hindu rulers of Nepal and now to the onslaught of western influence, the Sherpas have always adapted to the circumstances in such a way that they remained Sherpas.

Nor is this to suggest that the Sherpas do not face enormous problems as a society. The reliance on trekking and mountaineering seems quite fragile: an economic downturn in the affluent world, or political instability in their own could well seriously retard or even halt the steady flow of trekkers into Nepal. It may not be so easy to return to traditional

economic pursuits, having constructed an affluent lifestyle from trekking money. As well, the social and economic divisions between the 'tourist' Sherpa and others poses an enormous problem. The influence of the tourist economy is relatively recent, however, and the Sherpas have successfully mediated such challenges in the past. Nothing in the present situation suggests differently.

The rebuilding of the Tengboche monastery in the past few years was carried out according to cultural practices, practices modified historically. Tengboche is no longer significant only to Sherpa Buddhists as a religious centre, and as a symbol of cultural identity. It has now also the added significance of being an important tourist site, an image of cultural authenticity positioned for consumption and thus important to the cultivation of new resources. It is apparent that in this transformation the cultural significances of the past will fade into the past, and new significances be constructed. I hope to have demonstrated here that Sherpas are asserting an influential voice in that construction.

It is not mere economic factors, finally, that will determine their fate. Many factors, material, ideational and historical will combine to continue Sherpa society along its historical trajectory. And it is individual actors who will put these factors into practice. Be they high or low status Sherpas, 'tourist' Sherpas or peripheral, a symbol of social solidarity will be found to mediate the contradictions of their society. In the past this symbol was religious, embodied in the construction of celibate monasticism. Should this change in the future, and religion not occupy such an important place, it will be because new symbols will be necessary; a decision that Sherpa history makers will make, consciously and unconsciously, themselves.

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