

Spring 2010

# Views From the Road: An Inquiry Into the Meaning of Development in Lower Mustang

Tracy Pecher  
*SIT Study Abroad*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp\\_collection](https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection)

 Part of the [Growth and Development Commons](#), and the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Pecher, Tracy, "Views From the Road: An Inquiry Into the Meaning of Development in Lower Mustang" (2010). *Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection*. 881.

[https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp\\_collection/881](https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/881)

This Unpublished Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the SIT Study Abroad at SIT Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection by an authorized administrator of SIT Digital Collections. For more information, please contact [digitalcollections@sit.edu](mailto:digitalcollections@sit.edu).

# VIEWS FROM THE ROAD:

## AN INQUIRY INTO THE MEANING OF DEVELOPMENT IN LOWER MUSTANG



Pecher, Tracy

Academic Director: Onians, Isabelle

Senior Faculty Advisor: Decler, Hubert

Fordham University

Philosophy

Asia, Nepal, Lower Mustang

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Tibetan and Himalayan Studies, SIT Study Abroad,  
Spring 2010

## —ABSTRACT—

By considering the new road that connects the urban center of Pokhara to the previously isolated region of Lower Mustang, this paper examines the impacts of development in the area. I focus on the varied perspectives of three sets of individuals in the area: the founder of an NGO focused on agricultural development, youth from villages surrounding Jomsom, and a Canadian woman who settled in small village with her Thakali husband. I combine these personal accounts with an analysis of development on a broader scale, discussing a range of themes including conceptions of culture, education, and poverty. I emphasize that residents of the area should be free to determine their own fate and the future progression of development. I argue that the complex nature of the debate surrounding development in Mustang can best be understood through an approach that appeals to detailed personal accounts, since it is the effect upon individuals that matters most.

# CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	4
CHARACTER SKETCHES	
TORU KONDO .....	7
NIRAJ THAKALI, NAMARAJ ADHIKARI AND INDRA THAKALI .....	9
TENZIN THAKALI AND MEGHAN POWELL .....	10
PROS AND CONS OF DEVELOPMENT.....	12
CONCEPT OF CULTURE.....	14
TOURISM AND AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT.....	17
EDUCATION AND THE GENERATION GAP.....	21
WEALTH AND POVERTY.....	23
CHOICE AND MOBILITY.....	26
CONCLUDING REMARKS.....	27
APPENDICES	
MAP OF THE JOMSOM REGION.....	29
METHODOLOGY.....	30
SOURCES	
WORKS CITED .....	31
INTERVIEWS .....	32
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	33
SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH.....	34

---

## INTRODUCTION

---

I went to Jomsom to study the road, but my transportation mode of choice was an airplane, flying over hills in a fraction of the time it would have taken to weave through them by road. The flight lasted 18 minutes, flying low in valleys through the craggy terrain. The bus ride would have taken two days, winding slowly and bumpily along the path cut jaggedly into the sides of mountains. Plane tickets are expensive, though, and previous options for transportation of people and goods had taken far longer, depending on the strength of porters and pack mules. That road, that possibility of motor transport between the bustling urban center of Pokhara and the isolated, undeveloped regions of lower Mustang, changes everything.

The road is still very new, having reached Jomsom only two years ago. From Pokhara, it extends northwest to Beni, and then follows the lowland path carved by the Kali Gandaki river gorge north through Tatopani, Ghasa, Tukche, and Marpha to Jomsom, and then beyond to Kagbeni and Muktinath. This road is eventually destined to meet up with a section of road being built with Chinese funds, stretching down from the Lhasa Xinjiang highway in Tibet into Upper Mustang, reaching as far as Lo Manthang. The terrain changes as the road moves north from Pokhara's warm, tropical lowland valley into the Himalayas, becoming drier and colder—and transforming into desert.

Mustang has long held a reputation for its isolation from the modern world. Its desert terrain was a place where people still depended on horses for transportation and the local *amchi*, or traditional healer, for medical needs. It was seen as a freeze frame in time, a still photograph in a moving picture. Perhaps most famously, it was seen as a safe haven of traditional Tibetan culture. “The last traces of Nepal disappear at Marpha,” Giuseppe Tucci wrote in his travelogue, “We are truly in Tibet.”<sup>1</sup> People recognized that “Tibetan culture” was preserved better in Mustang than in Tibet itself, because of China's possession of Tibet and overwhelming desire to control the region's cultural identity. In fact, Mustang served as a hideout for the Khampas, the guerilla resistance fighters who opposed the Chinese invasion of Tibet in the 1960s.<sup>2</sup> Tibet's struggle for independence and the “Free Tibet” movement has spiked foreign interest in all things Tibetan, contributing to tourism in the area.<sup>3</sup> Mustang's version of Tibetan culture is also seen as more organic and more natural than the transplanted

---

<sup>1</sup> Giuseppe Tucci, *Journey to Mustang 1952* (Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bandar, 1953), 52.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Matthiessen, *The Snow Leopard* (New York: Bantam Books, 1978), 31.

<sup>3</sup> Sienna Craig, “Place, Work, and Identity between Mustang, Nepal and New York City,” *Studies In Nepali History and Society* (2002): 383.

culture of Tibetans in exile in refugee communities in India and Nepal.

Despite this reputation, Mustang historically served as a trade route between the highlands to the north and the flatlands to the south, exposing it to influences from both sides. The Kali Gandaki gorge provided a passable route through the mountains to these southern lands. Wool, horses, turquoise, and most famously salt were sent from the North in exchange for manufactured goods like cigarettes and fabrics as well as rice and grain.<sup>4</sup> Markets for the exchange sprang up in Tukche, the name being a combination of the words for ‘grain’ and ‘flat place.’<sup>5</sup>

The road has been built along the same gorge, mirroring the ancient route of transportation and trade. And yet the road stands as a symbol of modernization, carved by huge yellow cranes into the sides of the hills that bow so naturally to the gorge itself. The river predates the relatively young Himalayan Mountains that still grow toward the sky, and “so we have a gorge that was not cut through a range, but a range that grew up around a gorge.”<sup>6</sup> Leading to Muktinath, the river has long been considered sacred; its name offers some indication of this perception.

Kali signifies “black female” or “dark woman,” and it is true that its steep walls, gray torrent, and black boulders give a hellish darkness to this river. Fierce Kali the Black, the female aspects of Time and Death, and the Devourer of All Things, is the consort of the Hindu god of the Himalaya, Great Shiva the Re-Creator and Destroyer; her black image, with its necklace of human skulls, is the emblem of this dark river that, rumbling down out of hidden peaks and vast clouds of unknowing, has filled the traveler with



With Syang to the west and Thini to the East, the Kali Gandaki river runs through Lower Mustang, creating a lowland gorge useful for transportation.

<sup>4</sup> Tucci, 49.

<sup>5</sup> Berry Scott, *A Stranger in Tibet: The Adventures of a Wandering Zen Monk* (Tokyo & New York: Kodasha International, 1989), 71.

<sup>6</sup> Scott, 66.

dread since the first human tried to cross and was borne away.<sup>7</sup>

The juxtaposition of this natural, powerful gorge and the man-made road provide a tangible contrast between old and new, traditional and modern. It is development incarnate.

The road is more than a symbol—it does effectively change many aspects of life in Mustang. It offers the people of Mustang a connectivity to other urban centers that shatters its previous sense of isolation. With increased transportation comes increased cultural influence from the rest of the world—from Western clothing styles and unfortunate pop culture celebrities to education and medicine. The road allows for the cheaper movement of goods, and therefore more income and expendable money, which translates into more educational opportunities. Most of all, the expendable income allows for investment in development. And it is that word, that concept loaded with meaning, which really changes things.

Development is certainly an intricate concept, and it can be reconstituted to mean whatever it needs to, depending on context and motivation. Perceptions of what the term means vary from person to person. These perceptions are intertwined with everything else that forms an individual's experience, their way of looking at life and taking in the world. In truth, it is not far different from the Buddhist idea of dependent co-arising: nothing can stand on its own; everything is subjectively influenced by everything else around it.

Only by considering the broad expanse of ideas regarding development can we begin to see a bigger picture, and really get at the essence of what development is, and what it means. An analogy taken from Buddhist teachings best illustrates this point. Standing on the beach and looking out at the ocean, we see the rise and crashing fall of waves, and we can identify each wave as distinct from the others. In truth, these waves are all part and parcel of the sea, and it is only by looking at all of them together, as if from above, that we can begin to gain an understanding of the ocean.

Similarly, we cannot hope to understand development in Mustang by looking at it through only one perspective. This paper provides an analysis of development focused on the effect of one tangible icon of development, a new road, on one place, Jomsom, but through very different lenses of experience. While three weeks of research may not be enough to gain a perfect vantage point from which to see the whole ocean, this paper focuses on three distinct waves and analyzes the connections between them in order to gain some sense of the ocean.

---

<sup>7</sup> Matthiesen, 29.

## TORU KONDO

It was raining on the day I met Toru Kondo. I had been heading toward a new library in Jomsom built by the local women's group, but a sign reading MDSA (Mustang Development Service Association) caught my eye. I decided to go inside, out of the rain.

Mr. Kondo was sitting at the end of a long table, and he immediately invited us to sit down. After calling out in Nepali for his assistant to make tea, he began to tell us about his project of agricultural development



Mr. Toru Kondo, the founder of MDSA, has dedicated the past 30 years to assisting in the agricultural development of the Mustang region.

in Mustang. The Japanese man had heard about the intense agricultural poverty in Nepal and moved to Mustang to help. He has a project in upper Mustang, in Ghami, as well as in the Jomsom area, in Syang and Thini. Around 25 farmers help tend Mr. Kondo's land in the Jomsom area, where he implements advanced agricultural techniques developed in Japan that are suitable to the harsh environment of Mustang. He invests extra income in teaching those techniques to local farmers, and into various community projects like schools and hospitals.

He was 98 years old, Mr. Kondo told us, as if apologizing for the exceptionally slow way he moved to pick up books. He slowly took out a Surya cigarette and brought it to his mouth, and slowly brought a lighter to meet it. He inhaled deeply, and the end of the cigarette glowed red. "I'm 98 years old," he said again, "and I have the cancer." He would probably die soon, he said. Mr. Kondo's whole face smiled as he spoke, but I didn't quite know how to react to the fairly morbid conversation. He'd been alive for 98 years, he told us, further clarifying his age. "Enough, enough already." Mr. Kondo was a man at peace with himself and his life. And for all his achievements, I could understand why. He'd singlehandedly done so much—building schools and hospitals, as well as contributing to sustainable agricultural development.

Mr. Kondo was born in Niigata, Japan, on the Japanese Oceanside. As a young boy, he wanted to be a



poet and pursued his interest in literature. When he was 17, he fell terribly ill. For seven long years, Mr. Kondo was bedridden. His attending doctors could not diagnose the cause of his sickness, and they were sure that he would not recover. There were two windows in his room, and the connection they gave him to the natural world outside offered Kondo peace during those years. He spoke lovingly of the breezes that came in through the windows, carrying the songs of birds to his bedside. Mr. Kondo developed such a love for nature that he vowed, if he recovered, to dedicate his life to agriculture.

That's just what he did. When Mr. Kondo was 25 years old, he miraculously recovered, and enrolled in graduate school in Niigata University's Agricultural section. From there, he moved to Tokyo University to work as an assistant professor for agricultural studies, before returning to Niigata University. Once there, he shifted to agricultural research and development. At the age of 62, after seeing a television program about poverty in Nepal's Himalayas, Mr. Kondo he moved to rural Nepal to see if his knowledge about agricultural development could help to alleviate that poverty.

The walls of the room were covered with pictures of his projects, and many of which showed Mr. Kondo receiving various awards and letters of appreciation. Nepali farmers wandered through from time to time, carrying out their own business. He introduced us to his right hand man, Ari Sawa, calling him a son. Ari, a charming, affable young man, just laughed and lit his own Surya cigarette.

Ari Sawa worked as a salesman for a coffee company in a previous life. He realized that it was "not his work," and dropped it to look for something more meaningful. Ari Sawa felt that the spirit of Japan was somehow lacking; people had stopped caring about the things that mattered most. He wanted to help reawaken that spirit—the desire to make a difference in the world and the courage to overcome obstacles to achieve that end. He saw a television program featuring Toru Kondo as a guest speaker, and found the inspiration his life had been lacking. Ari Sawa showed up at Toru Kondo's doorstep in Mustang, and offered his services.



Ari Sawa checks the radishes in one of the green houses on the Syang Farm. Green houses protect crops from monsoon season rains as well as the fierce winds that sweep down from the mountains throughout the year.

I left Mr. Kondo with a series of appointments for further conversation and with a gift of two fresh radishes and two eggs from his farm, not really knowing how I'd prepare them without a kitchen.

## NIRAJ THAKALI, NAMARAJ ADHIKARI, AND INDRA THAKALI

Sitting on the ground in Thini overlooking the Kali Gandaki river and the green, luscious gorge cut



Niraj Thakali sits in front of his family's field. In addition to growing barley, his family also raises mules that can be used to carry supplies between Thini and Jomsom.

between the imposing, barren mountains, the differences between Thini and Jomsom were quite striking. On one side of the gorge, Jomsom serves as the headquarters for the entire Mustang region, and receives all of the benefits of the road and the effects of modernization. On the other side, Thini is an isolated cluster of stone houses and walkways. Pack mules still carry supplies down the hill and across the river to Jomsom and the road. Thini depends solely on agriculture.

As I walked back toward Jomsom, Niraj Thakali was walking toward his field with a basket and sickle in hand. We were headed in the same direction, so we struck up a conversation. I followed him to his field, and sitting in front of the barley as the wind sent ripples across the surface, he told us about his experiences in Thini and his thoughts on development.

Niraj was 17 years old, wearing jeans and a faded hoodie. He was back in Thini for 15 days on vacation from his boarding school in Pokhara, where he studies management. His schooling focuses on computer science, development, and business. After school, he plans to work for a while in a bank. If possible, he hopes to work abroad for a while, sending money home to help support his family. Eventually, though, he intends to return to the village. He has to take care of his family's farm. And Thini is his home—he loves the fresh air, the connection to nature and community. His sister attends boarding school in Kathmandu, and he expects that she'll return home after her studies as well.

He prefers village life to urban life, but he doesn't see development as antithetical to the way of life in the village. He talked about the potential for development in the area, both through tourism and through agricultural development.

... ..

I was sitting by Dhumba Lake, one of many places blessed by Guru Rinpoche during his travels. A fence decorated with prayer flags prevented animals from violating the sacred lake. The water was an incredibly vibrant blue-green color, and I'd been gazing at it for some time when Namaraj Adhikari and Indra Thakali approached. They were surprised to see a foreigner this far away from the trekking trail. I explained that I was studying the new road and development in the area, and they excitedly sat down to discuss the subject.

Namaraj and Indra also studied development, at Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu. They had just completed university and returned to Syang, a small village down the hill from Dhumba Lake, the previous day. They talked at length about the possibilities for development and their desire to actively participate in that process. In particular, the pair described their plans to build a rice mill. They had already gathered investments from local families and secured interest free loans to supplement them. They hoped to use local labor for the construction process, giving a sense of ownership to everyone involved.

Neither Namaraj nor Indra had a steady job lined up yet, a fact that their families were disgruntled with. They were not interested in continuing to work in their family fields, either. Both of the young men wanted to live in Syang, but they wanted to work on individual development projects, like their rice mill plan.

... ..

These encounters with young people from the villages around Jomsom provided another valuable perspective on development. Each young man was among the first in his family to have received an education from one of Nepal's cities, and they each returned their home village with new ideas about the future of modernization in the area. Their views form one instrumental piece of the development puzzle.

## TENZIN THAKALI AND MEGHAN POWELL

I met Tenzin Thakali at an archery competition in Kagbeni. I'd stopped by for a few hours in the morning and watched as the local boys helped each other heave two logs out of the creek that ran down beside the archery grove, setting them up in holes at either end of the range. They then packed in the dirt and added a



Indra Thakali (left) and Namaraj Adhikari stand at the edge of Dhumba Lake.

small, red, tin target at about eye level.

The grove that the competition took place in was fairy-tale like, reminiscent of my childhood dreams. There was a small brook running along the side, and the grove was lined on both sides with willow trees, wispy branches hanging low in long strands. Several of the trees showed signs of having been cropped recently, probably to keep the actual archery row clear. Behind the target posts on each end of the range, strips of wood formed a back wall to catch off-target arrows. Across the range from where we sat, a stone and cement restaurant buzzed with activity as the mother's group prepared a midday meal for the occasion.

I took a break and returned closer to evening, and the atmosphere had changed radically. Everyone was celebrating Nepali New Year, 2067, and the *chang* had been flowing all afternoon. Immediately, I was swept into the restaurant's sitting area by one of the archers who had probably had too much to shoot straight, and I was given tea. I talked to the archers crowded inside during their breaks from the competition. Yes, I was



Meghan Powell and Tenzin Thakali escorting their broken-legged goat back to the shed. The previous day, all three of their goats gave birth.

from America. No, I wasn't trekking through, I was a student. I was strongly encouraged to try the local wine, being poured generously from canteens topped with butter to signify its holiness. Tenzin Thakali stepped in to assure me that the wine wasn't compulsory, and I gratefully engaged him in conversation.

Tenzin wasn't from Kagbeni; he was from a small village near Jomsom. He'd gone to school in Amsterdam, but returned to Mustang as an entrepreneur—he owned the only auto repair shop in Mustang, operated from the Jeep stand in Jomsom. The Jeep owners paid him a monthly fee, and he took care of general maintenance for the entire fleet.

Since he lived near Jomsom, and I had unfinished plans there with Mr. Kondo, I decided to arrange to stay with him for a few days. The taste of rural village life was sure to enhance my experience in Mustang. His wife, Meghan Powell, was from Canada. She

couldn't speak Nepali yet, and Tenzin thought she would enjoy the company and conversation.

Two days later, just before heading to Somle, I was nervous about the homestay commitment. It had the potential to be incredibly awkward. Meghan met me at the auto shop, and I was immediately put at ease. She was a tall woman, with blonde dreadlocked hair. She wore a simple gold wedding ring on her left hand and a balance bracelet on her wrist. Sporting jeans and Salomon hiking boots, she could have been mistaken for a trekker—but she already had a reputation as the *inji* from Somle. After university in Canada, Meghan went to an international teaching school in New Zealand and had been traveling every few years as her teaching contracts changed. She met Tenzin backpacking through the area four years ago. Tenzin's family had a *chuba* made for Meghan in Kathmandu, and they were married just over a month previously in the monastery up the hill from Somle.

Tenzin and Meghan give interesting perspectives on what development in Mustang means. Tenzin is a local who has seen the world and decided to move home. He expresses nostalgia for the way things were, for aspects of undeveloped Nepal, but he is quite invested in development; he makes his main income from Jeep drivers on the road. Meghan left “the developed world” and found solace in Somle, through a sustainable lifestyle that gave her a way of existing in the world. She hopes that Somle can remain untouched by the over-consumption that plagues developed areas, but she recognizes the good that development could bring. Her views of development reflect the deep confusion and complexity at the heart of the issue.

On our first night with Tenzin and Meghan, we gave them a token of our appreciation for their hospitality—two radishes and two eggs.

---

## PROS AND CONS OF DEVELOPMENT

---

Considering the pros and cons of development, it is easy to see why local people respond so welcomingly to a new road. It offers increased mobility, cheaper goods, and easier access to medical and educational facilities. Before the road, a gas cylinder that cost 1150 rupees in Pokhara would cost 2500 in Jomsom. Now, they cost 1200, only inflated a manageable 50 rupees for transportation costs. Because these positive aspects are so apparent, many people fear that the negative aspects will be glossed over and forgotten. In response, they emphasize the negative aspects to such a degree that the drawbacks to the road come to mind before the good it brings.

There are definitely environmental repercussions. Plumes of black smoke trail behind buses and Jeeps,

visibly polluting the air. Because goods can be transported at a much cheaper cost, people consume more packaged products instead of locally produced goods, which contributes to more plastic waste. Illegal logging of Mustang's rapidly depleting forests has increased because of ease of transport as well—the downed trees cross to China, and then are sold back to people in Mustang. In addition to the problem of deforestation, that process adds completely unnecessary shipping, which means more black, diesel smoke. On a broader scale, development



A mule carries a load between Thini and Jomsom. Before the road, people had to depend solely on packhorses and mules like this one to carry cargo.

hurts the environment because it enables people to consume more than resources can sustainably provide.

Development has negative effects within social spheres, as well. At this time of change and movement toward development, a generation of youth seemed to be caught in an uneasy state.

“It creates problems with the youth,” Tenzin explained one evening, as we sat cross-legged on his floor, eating dal bhaat. He remembered when Pokhara had gone through a wave of urbanization, and the valley had developed a problem with gangs. “They carried knives, sometimes. There was cutting just for tickets to the movies.”

“You can see that here, too,” Meghan added, nodding somberly, “Too many young guys with not enough to do.” I thought about the groups of young men sitting around the Jeep stands in Jomsom—they definitely seemed to have plenty of spare time.

“With development,” Meghan said, “families have enough extra money to send their kids to schools in Pokhara and Kathmandu. But when they come back...”

“There’s nothing to do,” Tenzin finished. “Families don’t need them in the fields, and there aren’t jobs in what they’ve specialized in.” Pax, the couple’s 8 week old puppy, starting barking, and Tenzin stepped outside.

“Even Tenzin’s sister,” Meghan said in a confidential tone, “she went to school for engineering, but she came back and she just cooks and helps at the house. There aren’t jobs like that, here.”

Tenzin and Meghan's concerns weren't unfounded. The women's groups in each town were concerned with the issue as well. Both Jomsom groups, the Thini group, and the Kagbeni group organized fundraisers and village clean ups, but they were most proud of their commitment to curb the drinking and gambling that too many men were falling into nowadays. Shushila Gauchan, owner of the Krishu Guesthouse in Jomsom, was particularly proud of the library that the Punthang women's group had built, and she emphasized how it would help give young men constructive outlets for their time.

Development also affects society in a much broader, more sweeping way. Connectivity to the modern world goes hand in hand with the perplexing phenomena often referred to as the *loss of culture*. Trying to communicate across the language barrier with local Mustangis to ask if they felt that increased development would contribute to the loss of culture was an interesting task. The best phrased question tended to be something like: "Do you think things about how you live, your traditions, will change?" The answer was always negative. The difficulty in even understanding the question is a telling sign of how far from most people's minds *loss of culture* was.

I related this response to a group of trekkers on the trail between Muktinath and Kagbeni. They had trekked the Annapurna Circuit a decade ago, years before the road had been built. On this trip, they had already passed through Manang and seen the current road construction in that area. Cranes hammered into the cliff side, painstakingly carving a ledge out of the mountainside wide enough for Jeeps to pass.

"That's ridiculous," one man answered at once. "It will definitely change culture. It's blind and naïve to think otherwise."

His comment was harsh, but correct. With the new road and the increase in development in Mustang, culture is sure to change. There is a definite difference, though, between *change* and *loss*. It's an extremely significant point, and the concept of culture and its place within development requires much further discussion.

---

## CONCEPT OF CULTURE

---

For a culture fastened so strongly to Buddhism, with its ideals of impermanence and inevitable change, the feeling of certainty and security regarding the maintenance of culture in the face of development seems paradoxical. But then, culture is not a static thing; it is ever changing with the times. It is erroneous to ask about *losing* culture. Culture is not lost; it is changed. This change is not something abrupt, forced upon it from the outside. It comes from within as well as without. It is more like an evolution, a slow progress from one thing to

another. Value judgments are pointless—it serves no purpose to say that culture was better before, or that it is changing for the better. It simply is, whatever it is.

Furthermore, Donald A. Messerschmidt points out that the culture of the Thakalis in Mustang is in fact *based* on change. He recalls their historic role as traders, stating that their economic success was due to “their ability to accommodate to the social and religious orientations and expectations of their various neighbors and trade associates.”<sup>8</sup> He also describes the shifting history of connection to neighboring regions, starting in the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Available historic records document various powers struggles for dominance over the region between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries:

These powers, or kingdoms, are identified as: *Gunthang* (in eastern Ngari, western Tibet) during the 13<sup>th</sup> century, *Jumla* (the Khas Malla kingdom in what is now NW Nepal and SW Tibet) during the 14<sup>th</sup> century, *Zhang* (probably Shang in Guge, or a valley in Gtsang, both in western Tibet) during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, and *Lo* (or Lo Manthang, or Mustang, north of Baragaun) in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Later, the kingdoms of *Jumla* (in NW Nepal) and *Ladakh* (adjacent to western Tibet and Kashmir) contended for control of the upper Kali Gandaki region from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, after which the entire region, including Thak Khola, came under the control again of *Lo* (i.e., under the “Raja of Mustang” in Nepali sources), then a tributary monarchy to the *House of Gorkha* (centered in Kathmandu) (Jackson 1978:198-224).<sup>9</sup>

Taking into account their history of being influenced by outside forces, Messerschmidt astutely notes that social adaptation and innovative change is a part of Thakali culture.

It is helpful to distinguish between culture and heritage. Heritage refers to traditions of the past, a shared sense of previous history that ties a group of people together throughout generations. Culture, on the other hand, is something eternally current. It is what ties a group of people together within one lifetime, a sense of shared experience that has affected the way a group perceives the world and the attitude they take toward it. Culture has been defined as “the acquired knowledge that people use to interpret experience and generate social behavior.”<sup>10</sup> Culture is part of the ethos that informs a worldview. Our traditions and heritage helped to make us who we are, but culture *is* who we are.

---

<sup>8</sup> Donald A. Messerschmidt, “The Thakali of Nepal: Historical Continuity and Socio-Cultural Change,” *Ethnohistory* (1989): 269.

<sup>9</sup> Messerschmidt, 273.

<sup>10</sup> Messerschmidt, 275.



For example, the road has inspired something of a cowboy culture in Mustang. The desert terrain has never provided a shortage of dust, and the bandanas that people wear to keep that dust out of their lungs is definitely reminiscent of the cowboys of the American West. More than that, though, is the general spirit and attitude that seems to dominate the Jeep drivers as they steer their metal beasts skillfully or recklessly along the road (or through the gorge itself). In Kagbeni, I watched a tractor plow right through the river, all the way up to and over its engine. The attitude seems to stem from the same sense of empowerment that I imagine cowboys took from their horses. At the archery festival, Tenzin and one of the other archers laughed and talked about the Wild Wild East. “You know,” he said as he explained their joke to me, “like the Wild Wild West, with the cowboys and everything. Except this is the East!” He slapped his friend’s back, as if punctuating his statement. “We have the power here,” he said more seriously. “In other places, in the cities, there are police, but there are no police here. Here, we can do what we want.”



One of the jeeps drives along the Kali Gandaki gorge, carrying pilgrims back toward Jomsom from Kagbeni and Muktinath.

That cultural identification is valid. It unites a group of people, it alludes to the attitude that a group takes toward their surrounding, and their way of life. An entire youth of an area sees that and identifies with it. They have grown up with that shared experience informing their world view. That, in essence, is what culture is.

It is a constantly shifting, never static concept. Because of this, efforts at cultural conservation seem to be something of an anomaly. Cultural preservation is something imposed by outsiders. If it is not already ingrained in you as part of the fabric of your being, then it is not your culture. As Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali wisely noted in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, “the survival of tradition depends on our being unaware that we are upholding it.”<sup>11</sup> In Buddhist philosophy, there is an analogy that helps to illuminate the futility of attachment and clinging, and it applies as well to the tendency to cling to culture. When you want to hold a handful of sand, the best way is to rest the sand in your open hand, with your palm up. If you close your fingers around the sand and turn your

---

<sup>11</sup> Craig, 393.

hand down in a clenched fist, all the sand will simply slip through your fingers. Culture is just like that sand.

We cannot discuss cultural conservation in Mustang without at least touching upon the issue of Tibetan culture. The difference between conserving culture in Mustang and the conservation of Tibetan culture in general is that for Tibetans, the struggle for cultural conservation is imbued with a much more definitive purpose. It represents the retention of a shared identity, in place of a home that was taken away. People in Mustang didn't feel that need to conserve culture, that urgency. They still live in their sacred lands, and they feel that that is enough to maintain their shared identity.

In the debate over development, culture is often heralded as the virtue that stands to be lost in the waves of industrialization and modernization. While development does have other negative repercussions, it is false to think about culture as something that can ever be lost. It is also not something that can be halted in its change. Especially in the case of Mustang, rapid cultural change has been "more continuous than discontinuous."<sup>12</sup> It is a part of what culture is. Culture shifts in response to all the other changes in environment and atmosphere, and it is very silly indeed to think that the world has ever remained still, from one moment to the next. It turns.

---

## TOURISM AND AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

---

People and organizations still operating in the name of cultural conversation, such as ACAP (Annapurna Conservation Area Program), herald tourism as the best means for development. Taking advantage of the natural landscape and selling it to foreigners brings in extra income, and expendable money that can be used for investment is the building block of development. If tourism is the means, then the road could certainly be seen as a hindrance toward the end. After all, nearly all of the foreign tourists to the Mustang region are trekkers on either the Annapurna Circuit or Sanctuary Trek, and trekkers don't travel across the world to rural, undeveloped Nepal to walk along a road.

Shiva Devkota, a stylish ACAP representative from Pokhara, sat down at a large round table in the back of the Tourist Information Checkpoint in Jomsom to talk to me about development and the road. He looked somewhat out of place in dusty Jomsom, sporting gelled hair, fingerless knit gloves, and a skinny scarf. Three years ago, he said, ACAP sat with the Tourism Management Committee in the same room at the same round table discussing the future of development in the area. While ACAP was steadfast even then in opposition to the building of new roads through Mustang, the Tourism Management Committee supported the construction,

---

<sup>12</sup> Messerschmidt, 275.

blaming ACAP for the lack of development in the area at the time. Now, he said with not a little bitterness, they understand.

Devkota went on to explain that since the building of the road, tourism in the Mustang region has declined. After all, trekkers want to travel where there isn't a road. And secondly, the ability to move through places allows tourists to do just that—without visiting and patronizing various local enterprises. People ride buses or Jeeps through areas that they used to walk through, no longer stopping at the many guesthouses and teahouses along the way. He even went so far as to say that local business owners essentially agreed, and regretted having been open to the road construction in the first place. “They feel guilty for having wanted it, because it was not good after all.”

It was an interesting statement, since every other guesthouse or restaurant owner in Jomsom seemed to think that business had actually *increased* dramatically because of the road, and they were quite happy about it. This confusion arose from the fact that ACAP only counted *foreign* tourists, whereas local businesses were benefitting from *local* tourists on pilgrimage to the holy site at Muktinath, sacred for Hindus and Buddhists alike. This disregard for regional and domestic tourism is standard in Nepal's official tourism statistics.<sup>13</sup> Guesthouse owners prefer these pilgrims over foreigners, because they don't try to barter. They are only traveling for a few days, and are less conscious of spending a few extra rupees than the foreigners who are backpacking for months at a time on a strict budget.

And notably, the pilgrims have no interest in trekking—the ease of transportation offered by Jeeps and a road definitely entices them in greater numbers. Tony Bleie, who studied the effects of a cable car that carried pilgrims effortlessly to the temple of Manakamana in the Gorkha district, found that “this mode of journeying indirectly violates the very essence of the Himalayan pilgrimage.”<sup>14</sup> Pilgrims expressed distress at the ease of their ascent to the temple. Similarly for pilgrims to Muktinath, the effortless method of Jeep transport does not allow for an appreciation of the journey itself, the traversing of “physical arrangements of sacred space, which are integral cultural, social, and semantic aspects of the process of sacred journeying.”<sup>15</sup> In any case, the road increases the quantity of tourists, if not the quality of their religious pilgrimage.

ACAP's focus on cultural conservation and exclusively foreign tourism is no coincidence. They have

---

<sup>13</sup> Tone Bleie, “Pilgrim Tourism in the Central Himalayas: The Case of Manakamana Temple in Gorkha, Nepal,” *Mountain Research and Development* (2003): 180.

<sup>14</sup> Bleie, 180.

<sup>15</sup> Bleie, 177.

argued that tourism is in fact the most responsible means of inviting development because it increases income and alleviates poverty while rewarding the maintenance of culture. The alternative form of ethnic/adventure tourism in the region is seen as “a way to foster meaningful cross-cultural relationships as well as to promote environmental conservation.”<sup>16</sup> But tourism commercializes everything; it only preserves culture in order to sell it. A sign in the ACAP office sells Mustang with the following description:

There are few places left in the world where mystical fascination still persists and the long arms of modern “civilization” and “globalization” has no significance.... In most places, dzopas and mules sporting colourful headdresses are the main form of transportation. This is a place where natural beauty, wildlife, history and culture coexist in timeless harmony. This is the land of Mustang.<sup>17</sup>

In such a context, where culture is something to be packaged and sold like “Faces of Nepal” playing cards, it becomes an abstract ideal and moves away from the real, ever-changing culture of the people.

The issue of the road’s effect on foreign tourism, then, goes deeper than the obvious idea that trekkers prefer to walk through natural landscapes, not roadsides. The road not only affects the landscape in terms of upsetting the natural ambience; it affects people and the ways of life that trekkers see as a part of the landscape every bit as important and alluring as the dominating, snow-peaked Annapurna Mountains. Nothing cements a sense of self more than being engulfed in foreignness, in a sense of other. In the case of Mustang, it is not only the otherness that tourists find appealing, but the backwardness, the feeling of seeing a place operating in antiquity. “It was incredible,” one trekker commented after walking through an old fortress in Kagbeni where people and livestock still live. “It felt medieval.”

Interestingly enough, it was just this kind of image of Nepali people that intrigued Mr. Kondo and drew him to Mustang. In describing the television program he had seen about rural poverty in Nepal so many years ago, he spoke about how they lived without any modern conveniences at all, how they lived such *simple* lives. He described with equal pity and fascination how many homes, lacking firewood, instead burned horse droppings for warmth. While his description sounded somewhat condescending toward that “backward” way of



A sign in a store window in Old Kagbeni bluntly advertises its “culture.”

<sup>16</sup> David N. Zurick, “Adventure Travel and Sustainable Tourism in the Peripheral Economy of Nepal,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* (1992): 608.

<sup>17</sup> Jomsom ACAP office, 2010.

life, his motivations were admirable—he wanted to alleviate the poverty he saw.

Shiva Devkota emphasized that tourism is particularly important because of the difficulty for agriculture in the high altitude desert region. Existing agriculture is purely subsistence based, even in areas that have been relatively successful. Operating on a subsistence system means that almost all food produced is consumed locally, distributed mainly within the producing village. Some exchange for other goods may take place, but there is very little cash flow.<sup>18</sup> These villages, like the ones off of the road and the trekking routes, are considered undeveloped because of their reliance on agriculture. Business and economics are the basis of development, and the terrain does not provide surpluses of food adequate for export and trade. The only option for business is tourism. Therefore, in Mustang, development means participation in the tourist industry.

In reality, though, that is not the complete story. Tourism is not the only developing force at play in Mustang. Agricultural development offers the potential for increased production and exportation, and therefore it also offers increased expendable income for investment in further development. With advances in agricultural technology, the terrain in Mustang could support a greater agricultural pursuits and exportation. The methods that Mr. Kondo established on his farms in Mustang included vertical rice cultivation, green house technology, and a fishery. In the future, he plans to give his land back to local farmers and teach them all the techniques needed for maintenance.

Niraj Thakali agreed that agricultural development was of utmost importance. Brushing some of the barley in the field behind him with his fingertips, he explained that his family needed most of the crops to use in their home. Only a little could be sold. The stalks of the plants that aren't used for wheat are fed to the family's mules, which are used for transporting goods, offering some extra income. But overall, Thini operates on a subsistence basis. Modern techniques, like the use of chemical fertilizers and tractors, could greatly increase the amount of crops a family could harvest, leaving enough to export for extra profit. "Plows take so much time. It would take two or three hours to plow this," he motioned to the field at his back. "Only fifteen minutes with a tractor." If they could accumulate enough money, Niraj said that his village could even open up a factory, perhaps to process apples into jam or brandy. Along the same lines, Indra Thakali and Namaraj Adhikari agreed that producing goods for export was the key to developing in general. They mentioned the potential for exporting energy from windmills and hydropower mills, and they emphasized how development had to come

from within. For an economy based so completely on farming, that directly necessitates the modernization of

<sup>18</sup> Robert F. Schroeder, "Himalayan Subsistence Systems: Indigenous Agriculture in Rural Nepal," *Mountain Research and Development* (1985): 36.

agricultural techniques.

However, they did not ignore the benefits of tourism. All three of the young men mentioned the potential their home villages offered for tourism. Indra pointed to a hill in the distance, marking with his fingertip a possible walking trail that could lead to a fine resort lodge. Niraj mentioned rafting on the Kali Gandaki. They felt that tourism made sense as a business enterprise—the natural beauty is there and should be taken advantage of. They had no negative feelings about the industry at all, and were indifferent to the issue of cultural conservation. Their approach toward development was multi-faceted, including both tourism and agriculture. The key was to earn expendable income, either way, and invest it in further development projects.

---

## EDUCATION AND THE GENERATION GAP

---

The opportunity for education outside of the Mustang region is still a recent trend—the current generation of youth coming back to the area is the first to have ever really left. People from older generations were proud of their ability to send their children away to Pokhara, Kathmandu, and even India for school. Most families expected their children to return home eventually, following the pattern of temporary migration for work that has been in effect since the early 1960s.<sup>19</sup>

Young people with big ideas face opposition from older generations everywhere, and always have. But this experience is intensified in the context of Mustang, where the cultural effects of modernization affect the youth much more quickly than their parents. There is definitely a frustrating tension between the number of youth lucky enough to receive an education in the city and the older generations who did not have that experience.

“My parents,” Niraj said, “they only know about their ways of agriculture, not about the world.” His parents knew that their old ways worked, Niraj explained, and were exceedingly reluctant to move to more modern methods. This is not to condemn old means of agriculture. As Robert F. Schroeder points out, indigenous farm knowledge in the Himalayas is well organized and systematic. “Knowledge was scientific,” he explained “in that farmers experimented with crops, varieties, and management, and used the results of their experiments both to help them determine subsequent agricultural strategies.”<sup>20</sup> Still, he argued that their agricultural output could improve a significant amount from modern methods and knowledge.

---

<sup>19</sup> Craig, 363.

<sup>20</sup> Schroeder, 38.

Niraj attributed this distrust of modernity to the lack of education in Thini, causing a generational gap. Although government schools are free, many children do not have the opportunity to attend because they are needed to work on farms of their families. According to Niraj, education is a big marker of development not because development brings the opportunity for increased education, but because increased education allows for more productive development.

Bound up with the idea of education is the sense of connection to the outside world. Niraj claimed that village people crave that sense of connection, and it is one of the driving forces of development. The road is a symbol of that connection, allowing for an easier transport of not only goods and passengers, but also of communication and ideas. It is a common tendency for modernization to shift social allegiances away from the immediate community and toward larger communities in farther off physical distances.<sup>21</sup>

Indra and Namaraj expressed their own complaints about the generational gap. Although Syang would benefit from using composted pine needles as fertilizer instead of manure from livestock, or diversifying their crops—growing crops like eggplant, which are well suited to the terrain—the older generation was reluctant to move away from its staples of barley and buckwheat. Schroeder hypothesizes that this “tendency for Himalayan farmers to follow cropping strategies that maximize yield and return is offset by the farmers’ need to avoid risk.”<sup>22</sup> In a subsistence economy, if new methods of agriculture fail to succeed, the repercussions are dire. This makes it understandably difficult to move away from established practices.

It had been difficult for Indra and Namaraj to convince their families and neighbors to invest in their rice mill project. When slight complications arose and delayed building on the project, the older generation wanted to pull out immediately. The pair could have looked to NGOs or foreign aid investment for their project, but they were steadfast in their belief that progress must come from within. Manjushree Thapa expressed a similar sentiment, describing how, after foreign agencies built small hydropower plants in Mustang and turned them over to local care, the plants fell into neglect and became the center of community disputes.<sup>23</sup> People need to feel a sense of ownership over development projects, or else they won’t put in the time and effort to keep them running after foreign aid falls away.

That is, if they’re even trained to maintain the foreign funded projects in the first place. Indra described a safe drinking water station across the river that a British NGO had set up. It worked well at first, but when

---

<sup>21</sup> Ulrich Beck. *What is Globalization* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 48.

<sup>22</sup> Schroeder, 37.

<sup>23</sup> Manjushree Thapa, *Mustang Bhot in Fragments* (Lalitpur: Himal Books, 1992).

it got old and its parts started to rust and break, the British engineers were long gone and none of the locals were capable of fixing it. Indra and Namaraj emphasized the need to teach local villagers how to maintain development projects, and educate them on new agricultural methods.

The importance of training local farmers on modern agricultural techniques is very important to Mr. Kondo and his projects. In his previous life in Japan, he taught agricultural techniques to students at Tokyo University and Niigata University, and he has pursued his passion for teaching in Nepal. His farm in Syang has a small dormitory complex where farmers from other areas of Mustang can stay for months at a time to learn his techniques. Other foreigners, he said, “come for a short time to lecture and to teach. Then bye-bye.” He mimed a good-bye wave, and shook his head somberly. He felt that, through education, his project would succeed where the work of other NGOs and well-meaning foreigners had failed.

When I met them in Mustang, Niraj was on break from his school in Pokhara, and Indra and Namaraj had just completed their schooling in Kathmandu. They all returned home bursting with inspiration for how to improve their villages and help them grow. Their enthusiasm was tangible when they got to talking about their ideas; there was an electrifying charge behind their eyes. Those boys are the future of the area. Their ideas have the potential to be carried out, if the fire in their eyes stays lit and they pursue their ideas with their youthful passion. In a way, they are what matters the most.

And that is one extremely significant benefit of the road. The rural region of Mustang has difficulty finding qualified persons to teach in the remote, isolated region itself. The increased profit margin that the road’s ease of transportation provides allows families to send their children to school in greater numbers—and then the students return equipped with the skills to guide the development of their homes.

---

## WEALTH AND POVERTY

---

The standard of development has a lot to do with our conceptions of poverty and wealth. Poverty certainly strikes urbanized areas, and the undeveloped world is not without its classes (and castes) of rich and poor. But in conceptualizing the difference between developed and undeveloped, images of industrialized modern comforts and excess are pitted against agricultural subsistence and poverty. This raises the question of how we define wealth, and whether those definitions are valid in such different cultural contexts.

Niraj, Indra, and Namaraj spoke of wealth in terms of education, grateful for having had the opportunity to attend a quality school in a city. Niraj claimed that development was directly tied to literacy. The marker of



development was the ability to send children to school, and this could only be done with expendable income gained from an economic basis above subsistence level. Families had to have sufficient workers for their land without utilizing their children, freeing them for education. Niraj also pointed out that the government schools were not particularly rigorous; private schools were much better, if families could afford them. This method of defining wealth and relative stages of development is very practical and common.

Mr. Kondo provides an equally common, if slightly foreign and patronizing, perspective on poverty. He stated proudly—and repeatedly—that he came to Nepal to help the poor people. Discussing the television program that first inspired him as well as his initial experiences in Mustang 30 years ago, he emphasized two key attributes of the poverty he saw: a lack of modern conveniences, and dirtiness. “They had no road,” he said, “no electricity, no cake, no nothing. Very poor.” Coming from the ‘developed’ world, it is easy to see the absence of comforts that we consider essential as a symptom of poverty. Concepts of cleanliness are similarly used as measures of wealth. Mr. Kondo measured the success of his projects in this way. After thirty years, he said, “house life is growing clean, suitable.” Although this type of assessment through a foreign lens is obviously problematic, it rides through the undercurrent in many western dialogues about development.

Others would argue that this amounts to labeling all undeveloped regions and ways of life as impoverished. Not only is this a false association, it is problematic because alleviating poverty can stand alone as a reason to facilitate development—alleviating lack of development obviously cannot. If “helping the rural poor,” as Mr. Kondo puts it, is not the motivation for development, then what is? Thus far, economic gains have constituted the main benefits of the road and of development. Rural areas may be operating on a subsistence basis, but life is cyclical—in the end, all any of us do is subsist. Questioning whether economic advances are necessary in a region that is, essentially, doing alright opens up a new approach for discussion about standards of wealth—a word that, devoid of its modern economic connotations, simply means well-being.

In particular, this brings up the issue of sustainability. If development is linked with economic advances and accumulation of wealth, it only leads to a way of life that will progress onward in increased consumption. In other places that have already developed and seen the environmental and societal repercussions of this “progress,” that lifestyle is beginning to be seen as unsustainable. Movements in the west are afoot to shift back toward a more sustainable, self-sufficient way of life.

It was the desire for sustainability that allowed Meghan to adjust to the lifestyle in Somle. Growing up a Canadian feminist, it was difficult for her to settle into the role of housewife in the small village, spending

days washing clothes by hand, chasing chickens and herding goats, and learning how to use a pressure cooker to make rice. Tenzin's aunt recently offered Meghan a serious compliment—"she seems like an obedient wife." Her mother-in-law prays that Meghan will get rid of her dreadlocks, which drives Meghan crazy. "Of all the things to pray for," Meghan said with exasperation, "pray for world peace, not silky hair." These frustrations are minor, though, in comparison with the peace she feels. In more developed areas of the world, she felt disconnected from the environment, surrounded by products of unknown origin. In Somle, she knows where her food comes from and feels connected to the process of life. "And I know my chickens are free range," she laughed.

As Shiva Devkota from the ACAP office noted, virtually all of the villages off of the main trekking routes are subsistence based. His implication, though, was that there was something inherently wrong with subsistence agriculture. Those villages produce enough for their own purposes; they have enough to eat, and they have time for leisure. They don't have house payments or credit card debt, which is a step above many people in developed countries. "Development," one disgruntled Nepali stated, "is us going from being self-sufficient making our own shoes and clothes, feeding ourselves on tsampa from grain we've harvested, taking care of ourselves with our own doctors—to being less self-sufficient."<sup>24</sup>

While that's true, to a large degree, it is not the complete story. There are people in the villages of Mustang who are poor by any measure of poverty—without their own land, home, or enough to eat. While Tenzin was at the archery competition in Kagbeni on Nepali New Year, a drunken man had come to his home, peering through the kitchen window at Meghan. She was alone and scared, and when she told him to leave in her broken Nepali, he refused. Tenzin's sister came from her neighboring house and chased the man away with a stick. He was from a different village, and he used to work in Somle on the family's land. They didn't need him anymore and tried to send him home, but he wouldn't go. He just spends all his money on liquor, Tenzin explained, "He goes around drunk all the time, he has nothing."

Living on a basis of agricultural subsistence is not poverty, but sometimes agriculture does not provide subsistence—sometimes ends do not meet. Subsisting does not leave much room for security, and the risks are high when things as basic as food are at stake. It is easy but erroneous to align undeveloped with poor, but it is an equal mistake to romanticize the subsistence lifestyle and ignore its harsher realities.

---

<sup>24</sup> Craig, 387.

---

## CHOICE AND MOBILITY

---

This brings us to the very crux of the discussion about the new road and the shipment of development that each Jeep moves through Mustang piece by piece. From an outsider's perspective, it is all too easy to look at the modern, developed world and point to its many flaws, some of them horrendous and heartbreaking. Undeveloped and developing areas have so much potential to preserve what we see as the goodness of the simple life, uncorrupted by the evils of modernity, money and greed. It is easy for the West to say to the East, "Yes, we have wealth and expendable income and material things, but good sir, your *way of life* is better." People must have that experience themselves and reach their own conclusions.

Meghan loves the simplicity her life in Somle holds. But even she, who consciously made the choice to take up life in the village, is plagued with itchy feet. She loves Somle, but still wants to travel and see other places. Her ability to leave is very much a privilege of wealth, a signal of her developed roots. And indeed, mobility is often looked to as a measure of wealth. Her ability to leave Canada for Mustang in the first place sets her apart with a choice that others aren't given.

Everything centers on choice. People must be able to define themselves and work toward the lives that they want. Industrialization in America and Europe was an ugly, smoggy affair that took its toll on the environment and most definitely impacted culture forever. We offer help in offsetting the environmental impacts of development, but we can by no means suggest that they should not develop. The road, painstakingly carved out from steep cliff faces, is a symbol of development for which the region has worked hard and is proud.

Because the road interferes with trekking tourism, ACAP is building a new trail across the river from the road. This trail will pass through Somle. Meghan and Tenzin hope that guesthouses don't spring up around their small home village; that would change the character of the place too much. Days later, they spoke of plans to turn Tenzin's brother's house into just one such guesthouse. Even those who recognize the benefits such as sustainability available in a less developed way of life still reach out for the opportunities and conveniences of development, on their own terms.

Striving to stop development in Mustang is like a parent trying to keep a child forever. The growing is inevitable; the potential lies not in preserving innocence but in cultivating growth in a positive direction. In the end though, they have to be free to make their own decisions regarding that growth, that development. Like

any well-meaning parents, we don't want our children to make the same mistakes that we made. But in order to mature at all, they have to have the freedom to make mistakes, the freedom to choose.

And with that freedom of choice, education is unspeakably important, but in a different way than as expressed by Toru Kondo or young Niraj Thakali. Mr. Kondo focused on education about new agricultural techniques, and Niraj emphasized occupational education that directly related to development efforts. These are exceedingly important aspects, but so is education about the world at large, and about the broad variety of ways to exist in it.

---

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

---

Mustang is changing. But in the villages, sitting on rooftops, you can still escape it. You can get lost in the feeling of the simplicity of life, the feeling that things are as they should be. That sustainable existence has the capacity to last forever, but only for a moment. Then you notice something—the electric poles standing next to the prayer flags, a plane flying into Jomsom, a road etched into a hillside, zigzagging toward the sky. You recognize the signs of development, of modernity, and you know that everything will change, whether or not people realize that now.

When Tenzin was younger, he used to ride horses. He trained them and raced them—they were an integral part of everyday life. One night as we drank tea together, he told me that on his way home he had seen the most beautiful horse. He had pulled his Jeep over to watch it run, its muscles rippling and mane waving behind it as it went. “You don't see many really beautiful horses anymore,” he said. Tenzin reminisced about the horses of his youth, falling into a reverie of pre-road nostalgia.

Yet with his motor parts shop, he benefits more than most people from the road and the shift to mechanical transportation. Nostalgia has its place, but the development is highly beneficial. He mirrored the response that Sienna Craig conveyed from another motorcycle cowboy in Mustang: “We don't have to feed and shepherd a motorcycle every day, the way we do with horses. We can just feed it Petrol.”<sup>25</sup>

This type of response is common in Mustang as people consider their options and decide for themselves whether to embrace development. The sentiments of change are tangible in the environment surrounding Jomsom, as ever present as the dust and as momentous as the mountains. From a different perspective, it is tempting to think of the change as negative, a move away from a sustainability or cultural tradition. But from a

---

<sup>25</sup> Sienna Craig, *Horses Like Lightning* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2008), 288.

local perspective, they are working toward freedom and the ability to choose what kind of future they want. The West has already achieved that freedom of choice, and is struggling to decide what to do with it. It is easier by far to strive toward the freedom of choice than to know which choice to make.

...

The people I met in Mustang gave me an intricate, multilayered perception of development in the region. Our paths crossed entirely by chance. While I was there to gain an understanding of a road and the cargo of development that followed its dusty, winding path, each person I met had his or her own motivation in mind. They were remarkably inspired individuals, and they were in Mustang to change things, to fix whatever problem they considered to be the most essential.

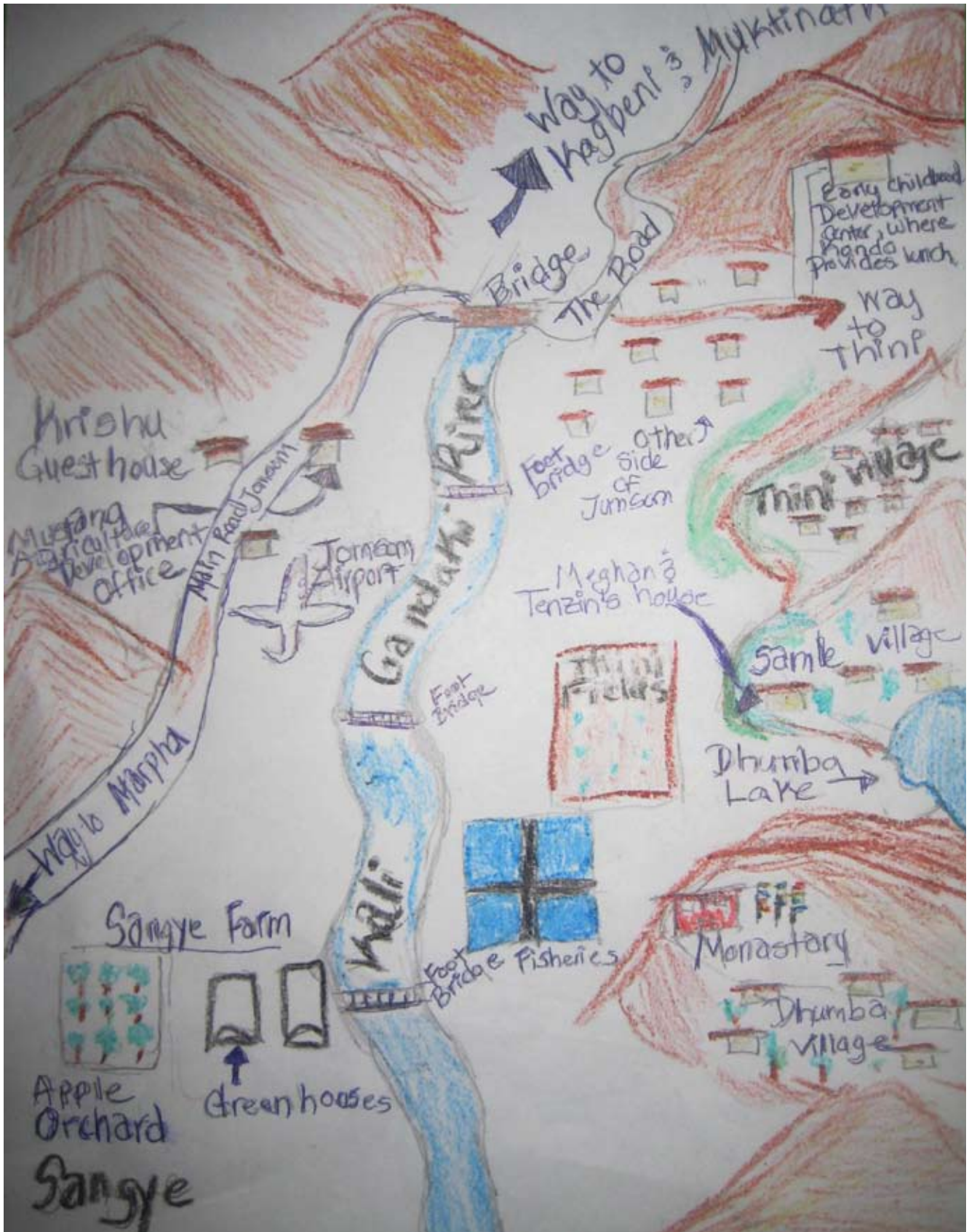
Mr. Kondo had identified that most essential problem to be rural poverty in Nepal, and he had come to aid in agricultural development, establishing farms and passing on his modern methods to rural farmers. Niraj, Indra, and Namaraj—the young men from Thini and Syang—wanted to help their home villages enter the modernized world by introducing various means of development, from advanced agricultural techniques to factories and forays into the tourist industry. Meghan had judged the Western world to be in a state of disconnect and on an unsustainable path, and she took up a simple lifestyle in Somle to do her part in encouraging a more sustainable world.

These individuals came from vastly different backgrounds, and their approaches to development mirrored these varied perspectives and the world views that informed them. As Sienna Craig commented, the knowledge we draw from concrete experiences with individual people reflects “the irreducibility of human experience, and communicates something of the messiness of life.”<sup>26</sup> Development does remain a complicated and messy concept, but these points of view give us a way to unravel the issue and consider some of the individual themes that combine in such complexity. By taking this approach, we can reach a more complete understanding of the ocean of development than we could hope for from any one wave.

---

<sup>26</sup> Craig, 394.

MAP OF JOMSOM AREA



Courtesy of Betsy Catlin

---

## METHODOLOGY

---

I set out for this Independent Study Project with a vague plan. There was a road in Mustang, either being built or fairly recently completed. The road would affect the livelihoods of porters and lodge owners in the area, and it was sure to be a controversial issue. I would go to Jomsom and study the road. Beyond that, I had no real plan—and that planlessness gave the project a feeling of adventure.

I ‘cast a wide net’ in my attempts at research, asking questions about everything I could think of. Hubert la told us to be lucky, and I was. My first several days in Jomsom were filled with chance encounters that turned into quality conversations about various themes regarding development. During the remaining time, I cultivated those relationships and investigated the deeper ways in which the development impacts every part of life. I spent most of my time in the Jomsom area, living with Meghan and Tenzin in Somle, but I also traveled along the road north to Muktinath and south to Tatopani, and then east to Ghorepani and Nayapul, where the road-building was still in process.

The language barrier presented a significant obstacle. Knowing at least some basic Nepali would have been useful, and because most of my interviews were informal, it was difficult to arrange a translator. Secondly, “studying the road” quickly became “studying development,” and the theme of development is probably too large to fully address in a three week time frame.

It is important to note that each of the main players in this paper—Tenzin and Meghan, Mr. Kondo, the teenagers from Thini and Syang—received a level education much higher than the average in Mustang. Education helped to overcome language barriers and enabled people to step outside of their environment in order to engage questions of development. I offer warning, though, that the importance of education could be part of an inherent bias in this paper.

---

## WORKS CITED

---

- Beck, Ulrich. *What is Globalization*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000.
- Bleie, Tone. "Pilgrim Tourism in the Central Himalayas: The Case of Manakamana Temple in Gorkha, Nepal," *Mountain Research and Development* (2003): 177-184.
- Craig, Sienna. "Place, Work, and Identity between Mustang, Nepal and New York City," *Studies In Nepali History and Society* (2002): 355-399.
- Horses Like Lightning*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2008.
- Matthiesen, Peter. *The Snow Leopard*. New York: Bantam Books, 1978.
- Messerschmidt, Donald. "The Thakali of Nepal: Historical Continuity and Socio-Cultural Change," *Ethnohistory* (1989): 265-280.
- Schroeder, Robert. "Himalayan Subsistence Systems: Indigenous Agriculture in Rural Nepal," *Mountain Research and Development* (1985): 31-44.
- Scott, Berry. *A Stranger in Tibet: The Adventures of a Wandering Zen Monk*. Tokyo & New York: Kodasha International, 1989.
- Thapa, Manjushree. *Mustang Bhot in Fragments*. Lalitpur: Himal Books, 1992.
- Tucci, Giuseppe. *Journey to Mustang 1952*. Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bandar, 1953.
- Zurick, David. "Adventure Travel and Sustainable Tourism in the Peripheral Economy of Nepal," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* (1992): 608-628.



---

## INTERVIEWS

---

Shiva Devkota: ACAP office, Jomsom. April 11, 2010.

Shushila Gauchan: Krishu Guesthouse, Jomsom. April 12, 2010.

Niraj Thakali: Barley field, Thini. April 12, 2010.

Toru Kondo: MDSA office, Jomsom. April 12, 2010.

Indra Thakali and Namaraj Adhikari: Dhumba Lake, Somle. April 17, 2010.

Tenzin Thakali and Meghan Powell: Conversations held while I stayed at their home. April 17-24, 2010.

---

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

---

First of all, this paper would not have been possible without the incredible people I met in Mustang, and their willingness to open their hearts and minds to me. Toru Kondo made me feel welcome from the first day with his gift of radishes and eggs. Ari Sawa arranged my formal interview, gave me a tour of the farm, and set me up to volunteer at the local kindergarten. Tenzin and Meghan opened their home for a week. Living in Somle was an incredible experience, and I'm thankful for their hospitality.

As always, I'm grateful for my parents' support. I've felt incredibly fortunate to have had this experience, and I know that I owe everything to them.

Betsy Catlin had the idea of leaving our well thought out ISP plans in Kathmandu for an adventure in Mustang, and I'm glad we did it. I definitely couldn't have written this paper without all of our inspiring conversations, and I couldn't have asked for a more chill travel partner.

The whole group was amazing this semester, and I'm glad to have gotten to know some incredibly cool kids. And thanks to Isabelle la for trying to organize the chaos and reminding us that we mustn't die, and thanks to Hubert la for the stories and inspiration.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the Maoists. They enforced a bandha the week before this ISP was due, so all of the stores and businesses in Pokhara and Kathmandu were closed. This left me no option but to sit and write. Though I don't think thanks are in order, an acknowledgement of their influence on this paper is only fair.

---

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

---

This paper explored many themes regarding development. It might be interesting to look at any one of them in more detail. In studying agricultural development, for example, more research on actual agricultural methods could be done at Toru Kondo's farms in Lower Mustang. In addition, the maintenance of "cowboy culture" through the switch from horse transportation to motorcycles and jeeps could be an interesting study. It would also be interesting to look at pilgrim tourism in more detail, and the effects of modernized transportation to Muktinath could very well be a study in itself. Development is happening quickly in Mustang, and the push of modernity is sure to raise more issues in the region. It's certainly an interesting place to do research.