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Melissa Mittelman
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Sherpa Inc.

The Cultural Commoditization of the Sherpa Identity

Melissa Mittelman

Academic Director: Daniel Putnam

Advisor: Frances Klatzel

Middlebury College

Sociology Major, Economics Minor

South Asia, Nepal, Kathmandu & Solukhumbu

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Abstract

This study examines the ways the Sherpa identity has been commoditized for a Western audience, the Sherpa responses to such a process and the repercussions it creates when understanding Sherpa cultural “authenticity.” Located in Kathmandu and the Solukhumbu district of Nepal, the findings were acquired through interviews with various members of the Sherpa community, discourse analysis and observation. This research concludes that the Sherpa community views their cultural commoditization as both a source of discredit and honor, creating difficulty in rationalizing how it both de-authenticates and re-asserts their Sherpa culture.

Keywords: Sherpa, Identity, Commoditization, Branding

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this study to all the wonderful and welcoming Sherpa in Khumbu who invited me into their homes for a cup of tea and conversation. Without their openness, this research would not be possible.

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I would like to thank Frances Klatzel for her guidance and mentorship, Stan Stevens for his help in locating key interviewees, and Dan Putnam for his continued support in the development of my topic.

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Introduction

Sturdy. Rugged. Reliable.

As you browse the racks of outdoor gear for your upcoming adventure, what more could you want? Your eye catches glimpses of windswept mountainsides, smiling, round and tanned faces gleaming from the inspiring posters. Like the Sherpa from whom they take their name, these clothes offer to take you to the summit, providing ease and comfort the whole journey up. A flip of the tag reveals their foolproof durability—what could provide better support than gear tested by the sturdy, rugged and reliable Sherpa themselves?

Sherpa Adventure Gear is just one of the many enterprises—from soap to small dog carriers—capitalizing on the Western image of the Sherpa, an ethnic group native to Khumbu, the Everest region of Nepal. Famous for their role in Everest ascents since the early 1950s, the Sherpa are perhaps the most internationally acclaimed ethnic group in the country. It is precisely this celebrity that makes their identity such a complex interplay of both foreign discourse and cultural heritage. The Sherpa identity consists of both internalization of and reactions to foreign concepts of mountaineering, indigenous populations, and the transcendence of limits; they have in many ways come to symbolize the mountains they live among. This quality has made them a target of marketing ambitions held by tourist agencies, companies and Sherpa alike.

This study examines the ways the Sherpa identity has been commoditized, the Sherpa reactions to such a process, and the implications it has for a sense of cultural “authenticity.” I begin with a brief description of the

context for my research, explaining the value of exploring this topic and my choice of research location. I then define key terms for my analysis and locate my topic within the current field of literature and information about Sherpa identity commoditization. After explaining my methodology, I go on to present my research findings and discuss the main issues that arose. My research seeks to open conversation about the ways the Sherpa ethnic group understands the commoditization of their identity and the implications it creates for their understanding of self.

A Little Context...

My semi-extended time in Nepal has forced me to navigate the distinctions between tourist and resident. I have become acutely aware of my ambiguous status, trying to distinguish myself from a temporary visitor by diving as deeply into Nepali culture as my foreign skin would permit. These efforts have led me to critically analyze the way Nepali culture is exposed to, altered by and catered to foreign visitors. I have become captivated by the way Nepali culture is marketed to tourists because such processes reveal not only the way Nepalis choose to represent their cultural identity to foreigners but also the very real economic and business components of touristic exchange.

The Sherpa in the Khumbu region of Nepal immediately became an apparent opportunity of study—their celebrity renders them a group in constant negotiation with their traditional identity and that imposed by touristic attention, having to delicately hold onto a culture that is both protected and threatened by tourism but perhaps more specifically, by the celebrity itself. A community responsible for hosting a yearly tourist base

close to their own size, the majority of the Khumbu Sherpa pursues jobs in tourism and is familiar with foreign exchanges. Whether or not they are highly attune to tourist interest in cultural commodities and experiences—and some are, some are not—the Sherpa people often become products of cultural commoditization of their own working or otherwise. I was thus drawn to them, their reputable kindness notwithstanding.

Trekker tourism has changed the Sherpa community in a vast number of multifaceted and well-documented ways, some of which are touched upon in this paper. There is no doubt that trekker tourism and the benefits and detriments it brings deeply affect the Sherpa identity. While this topic is closely related to mine, the main focus of my research is to examine the reactions of the Sherpa people to the commoditization of the Sherpa name and culture, and the ways in which they understand cultural Sherpa authenticity, or lack thereof.

Kathmandu and Khumbu

My research was located in two main areas, Kathmandu and Khumbu. Due to increased wealth resulting from tourism and a desire for greater economic and educational opportunities, many of the Khumbu Sherpa migrate to Kathmandu. Kathmandu is home to the Ministry of National Parks and Wildlife Recreation and the Nepal Tourism Board, as well as various organizations that work in conservation, tourism and development initiatives in Khumbu, like The Mountain Institute and Icimod. Most of the trekking agencies used by tourists going to Khumbu are also located in Kathmandu,

mainly in the popular tourist section of Thamel. Sherpa Adventure Gear and other companies carrying the Sherpa name also find home in the city.

Located to the North East of Kathmandu, the district of Solukhumbu is very much divided into Khumbu, the northern segment that is home to Everest and Solu, the southern section below Phaplu. In normal conversations the names “Khumbu” and “Solu” have come to suffice for their respective sections of the region. Khumbu is famous for its trekking and attracts around 3,200 tourists each year primarily during the months between September and December and April through May. The Sagarmatha National Park (SNP) (including its Buffer Zone (SNPBZ)) encompasses 443 square miles and is home to around 4,000 locals, 90% of whom are ethnic Sherpa, the last ten percent being a mix of Tamang, Kami, Rai, Magar, Damai, Chhetri, Gurung and Newar (DNPWC, 2007-2012).

Coming to Khumbu, 93% of visitors arrive by air into Lukla, the place with the most accessible airport (DNPWC, 2007-2012). I spent a week in Namche Bazar—a central location two days walk above Lukla that functions as the main point of embarkation for the most popular treks in the area. It is common for trekkers to spend an acclimatization day in Namche and many coffee shops, internet cafes, small markets and comfortable lodges have simultaneously adjusted to the altitude. Every Saturday locals flock to the main area of the bazar for the morning market, collecting food, supplies and clothing, most of which is cheaply delivered from Tibet and China. Although Khumbu is overwhelmingly populated by Sherpa, Namche has a fair number of non-Sherpa migrants that have moved to the area for its economic

opportunities. Some of these people own their own homes in Namche while others rent rooms from local Sherpa families.

I spent a second week in Khumjung, a village nestled in a shallow valley about an hour above Namche. Often considered the “authentic” Sherpa village close to the main trekking trails, the population is almost all Sherpa and is immediately differentiated from Namche by its many crop fields, its more traditionally-dressed population, and its quiet atmosphere. It is home to the Khumjung School, an institution founded by the famous mountaineer Sir Edmund Hilary and funded by the village and many charitable foundations. For many locals, the school is a huge source of pride. Children from surrounding towns attend, especially given the weekly boarding opportunity.

Although there are a handful of quiet teahouses in Khumjung, there are many more residential houses—a sight I never saw while in Namche. Right outside the gates to the school lays a large open area with a stage. This area serves for communal congregations and gatherings; during my stay, Khumjung hosted the end of the “Beat the Glof Action Run” and held a subsequent festival celebrating Sherpa culture and customs. This area is certainly the heart of the Khumjung community. The discrepancy in tourist-infiltration between Namche and Khumjung provided an interesting juxtaposition for my research. See Appendix 2 for photos.

A Note on Terms

The abstract nature of my research requires a brief discussion of key terms.

Identity

“Identity” is a problematic term to use loosely, despite my strong desire to blissfully ignore its complications. Although identity theories will be further discussed in my literature review, I define identity as an essential characteristic of an individual or group. The Sherpa identity is thus the combination of characteristics attributed to the Sherpa people. In many instances throughout the paper, I focus more on the ways the identity is used rather than the specific attributes that comprise it. In instances where the Sherpa identity is explained, I use the attributes provided by my participants rather than my own understandings. Often times these attributions depend greatly on the one attributing them (e.g. tourists). This discussion will be further explored.

Commoditization and Tourism

I define commoditization as the process of making an intangible entity into a commodity or service to be bought and sold. In the case of cultural commoditization, an aspect of one’s culture—religion, family structure, work, lifestyle etc.—becomes embodied in a *thing*, like a souvenir or a *service*, like a tourist advertisement. These “things” and “services” are exchanged for money.

Since my primary use of the term “tourism” in my research refers to cultural tourism, I consider the term much like a cultural service: the efforts to market Sherpa culture to tourists are the same efforts to commoditize the culture into a touristic service to be paid for.

Literature Review

The Sherpa are by no means an understudied population and have therefore found their way into many types of literature—from autobiographical to anthropological. Westerners, conveniently generalized as “sahibs” (Ortner, 1999), tend to dominate the popular literature concerning Sherpa identity, often framing it in their own terms. The dynamic between sahib and Sherpa remains such a unique exchange of cultural discourse that it creates a current debate concerning the Sherpa’s agency in his/her identity formation. I begin by situating this debate within the context of Goffman’s theory of identity formation (Goffman, 1959). I then consider the role of social capital (Bourdieu, 1979) and “identity commons” (Loland, 2006) to contextualize both the basis and need for my area of research. While the literature often discusses Sherpa agency and the economic use of the Sherpa name, little is said about the Sherpa responses to their name’s enterprise.

Existing identity theory recognizes two main components of identity formation: the possessor’s own agency and the projection of the identifier. Goffman (1959) emphasizes the possessor’s agency, arguing that identity is a “performance” of one’s desired representations. He references the concept of “teams” as a group of individuals that work together to project a desired image that commandeer the “frontstage” and “backstage” (or private and displayed) aspects of the identity. Simultaneously, the outside identifier is classifying the identified, projecting his/her own concepts onto the subject. Identity is therefore formed by 1) one’s own agency and 2) images projected onto the subject.

Within this framework exists the current debate in Sherpa identity politics: who has that agency? Adams (1959) argues that sahib projections of “authenticity” have come to shape the Sherpa identity both in perception and in reality because of the Sherpa’s internalization of the imagined identity. Her position suggests that sahib projections therefore hold the most agency in Sherpa identity formation. Ortner (1999) considers Adams’ understanding as one that “vastly overprivileges the effect of sahib perspectives and vastly underestimates the reality of a Sherpa world that bends sahib influence to Sherpa purposes” (Ortner, 58). The tension between both sahib and indigenous contexts and their roles in forming the Sherpa identity highlight the difficult distinctions of what it means to be a “real” Sherpa. Facing similar issues to those experienced by the Thakali population in Nepal (Fisher, 2001), these Sherpa are not only dealing with the impact of their historic attention but also their “apparent cultural metamorphosis that is said to have followed their initial economic...success” (Fisher, 6). The long-standing engagement with foreigners in the mountaineering and tourist business has not only been a source of wealth but also one of exposure to new cultures, inevitably affecting the Sherpa sense of identity.

Given the intimate roles that Sherpa and sahibs play in Sherpa identity formation, Bourdieu’s theory of social capital (1979) lends itself particularly applicable while considering its commoditization. Bourdieu suggests that there are four types of capital that cater to an individual’s power potential in the social structure: symbolic (reputation and esteem), social (relationships and connections), economic (material means and possessions) and cultural (context-awareness, knowledge, wisdom). The Sherpa traditions and lifestyles

among the Himalayas are a source of cultural capital that holds great interest for tourists. In many ways, the Sherpa name becomes a social business.

Sherpaness can be regarded as symbolic or social capital which can give its possessors access to economic capital in trekking tourism which again can be used to foster the symbolic/social capital that constitutes their identity. (Loland 2005, 2)

The Sherpa therefore possess a cultural resource that caters to their economic benefit. The issue, however, arises when considering whether or not this is a positive cycle—does it change the nature of the culture itself? Does it degrade its authenticity? These questions become more difficult to answer when considering that many non-Sherpa also use the “Sherpa” name for social, cultural, economic and symbolic capital.

The Sherpa identity is thus rendered a “commons” (Loland, 2005). Considering it to function similarly to an open access resource, Loland discusses how “identities are regarded as authentic common properties which are collectively fostered and potentially profitable, but which can be eroded or degraded if over-exploited” (Loland, 2). The Sherpa identity process becomes one of “resource management” in which the identity “is collectively embodied (possessed) and managed (used and formed).” (Loland, 2). He recognizes the careful calculation of the Sherpa identity’s exposure, noting that “Sherpas try to balance the hegemonic power of the economically exploitable tourists and the symbolically exploitable Sherpaness” (Loland, 8). Loland’s perspective frames the Sherpa identity as an economic commodity, responding to its touristic demand in a capitalistic manner.

In examining the Sherpa identity as a source of economic capital, it is easy to leave cynicism unchecked and lose sight of the fact that identity isn’t

only an interested performance but also a very personal, sensitive, self-descriptive entity. I hope that my research communicates my efforts to understand these sensitivities about the identity as much as the capitalistic ambitions that also arise in pursuit of its cultural resources. While the existing literature has much to say about the ways the identity is influenced by sahibs and commoditized, little is documented on the Sherpa reactions to the process. The heart of my research rests in these responses.

Methodology

My research was conducted over three and a half weeks through discourse analysis, 14 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with individuals and focus groups, and observation. I spent my first week in Kathmandu interviewing Sherpa-run trekking agencies, scholars, organization leaders, and storeowners, and studying tourist brochures, agency advertisements and ministry libraries. When I arrived in Khumbu, I interviewed guides, porters, Sherpa lodge-owners, Namche storeowners (non-Sherpa as well), schoolteachers, community activists, park coordinators and villagers. My week in Khumjung was spent living with a woman in a homestay setting, allowing me to engage frequently and more personally with many of the villagers. Days in between locations were spent hiking, often talking to various guides, porters, and trekkers on the way; many of my informal conversations were often as fruitful as the interviews. My last half a week was spent in Kathmandu compiling my findings.

My interviews in Kathmandu with Sherpa-run trekking agency owners focused on the interactions between the Sherpa guides and the tourists, trying to understand the ways in which their Sherpa heritage (often mentioned in their agency name) has affected their guiding profession. Since much of the Sherpa branding has been based off outdoors and mountaineering attributes, these interviews gave insight into their internalization and rejection of these various stereotypes. I also interviewed the manager of Sherpa Adventure Gear, focusing on his personal understandings of the Sherpa label. My interviews with scholars and organization leaders familiar with Sherpa culture centered around their personal opinions on the commoditization of the identity. My interviews in Khumbu focused primarily on personal views of the Sherpa identity and the ways its commoditization have affected Sherpa authenticity and community.

My discourse analysis recorded key terms used when marketing “Sherpaness,” or the essence of being a Sherpa, and explored various ministry documents on the management of Sagarmatha National Park (SNP) and the “cultural resources” it contains. The various documents and advertisements provided much of the context for my interviews.

My sahib status likely limited my access to much information within the Sherpa community, especially regarding their perceptions of—and economic relations with—sahibs. To address this issue I tried to establish myself as part of the community while living in my home-stay and in cases where previous connections were not established, I was sure to emphasize the academic intentions of my research. My interviews were generally in Nepali and at times when my vocabulary reached its limit, broken English and charades

tended to fill the gaps. Nonetheless I fear I lost certain information in transition and thus only included information I was sure to clarify.

The Sherpa have long been the focus of many researchers and I noticed some resistance toward my anthropological purpose in the region—there is even discussion concerning an authorization process for researchers. However after discussing my full intent, my interactions became much more fruitful and honest, especially after multiple days of interaction. Due to the sensitive nature of my topic, many of my interviewees more safely discussed the ways tourism has changed the region and only briefly mentioned their view of the Sherpa identity and the ways it is becoming commoditized. As mentioned previously, these topics are similar but distinct, and I found it challenging to redirect the aim of my research away from the former, especially because many Sherpa are well versed in discussing it. I re-organized my questions and began receiving more valuable insights.

All participants granted consent after a full disclosure of my research's intent and process as read from a form previously approved by SIT World Learning (see Appendix 1: Informed Consent Form). The form was also translated into Nepali. In instances where the formality of reading a form seemed culturally inappropriate or impossible (like talking to guides and porters on the trail), I explained the purpose, intent and potential of my research prior to asking questions. In one instance one of these respondents wanted to see the form “out of curiosity” and I immediately produced it, however many respondents quickly agreed to participate and denied the need to see the written consent form.

Some of my findings were acquired through observation or smaller conversations—when this was the case, I did my best to explain my intent and was careful to protect the privacy of participants regardless of their willingness to have more private findings revealed. Participants who prefer to remain anonymous were given pseudonyms and their personal information disposed of.

Research Findings

My findings are divided into three main sections. I begin by giving a brief summary of the places and ways in which I noticed the Sherpa identity as being commoditized. I then report the various opinions responding to this commoditization. These findings then lead into my third segment of research, which reveal the attributes that many Sherpa consider locations of their cultural authenticity.

I. The Sherpa Commoditizing

What's In a Name?

Given that the Sherpa are one of—if not the most—recognized ethnic groups in Nepal, there is no shortage of brochures, agencies and products that commoditize its name and culture. It is important to note that these businesses carrying the Sherpa name are overwhelmingly directed toward tourists: trekking agencies and lodges, for example, are used primarily by foreigners and partially due to its price range, Sherpa Adventure Gear has a 70% sahib client base (Ang Phurpu Sherpa, 2011). The attributes these businesses

associate with the Sherpa identity therefore tend to reflect certain stereotypes that tourists tend to hold.

Various brochures and posters for Sagarmatha National Park advertise the cultural services: the “thriving Sherpa culture,” the “unique heritage,” the “cultural trophies” of the Khumbu region and the “warm Sherpa hospitality.” Endless trekking agencies (even those which employ no Sherpa at all) carry the name—Mountain Sherpa Trekking, Everest Sherpa Trekking, Sherpa Adventure, Boundaryless Sherpa Trekking Ltd are a few examples. Namche Bazar has its own share of Sherpa-labeled lodges like “Hotel Sherpaland” and “Sherpa Lodge.” In the commodities department, one can find the Sherpa name on everything from clothes, accessories, and sandals to soaps and airport-sized dog carriers. There is even a Canadian marketing company that takes the name: at Sherpa marketing, they make sure to tell their clients that “like all great Sherpa’s we know our job is to work quietly in the background...we will push you when needed, but are prepared to carry the heaviest part of the workload” (Sherpa Marketing, 2011).

“Why not [name it] Sherpa?” Ang Phurpa Sherpa, the manager of the Kathmandu-based Sherpa Adventure Gear store asked me in response. When asked why they chose the name “Sherpa,” many of the trekking guides, store owners and hotel owners seemed confused, as if I asked an obvious question. The strength of branding rests in its ability to transfer associations onto a commodity: the respondents identified the Sherpa name as holding connotations they hope would translate to their product. Pasang Sherpa, the owner of a trekking agency in Kathmandu, felt that Sherpa are considered more “trustable” given their long history in mountaineering, and he believed it

would attract a larger client base (Pasang Sherpa, 2011). Others suggested that the Sherpa name is associated with “inviting,” “capable,” and “lively” stereotypes and they hope such perceptions transfer to their company. Name recognition and stereotyping were the core reasons many respondents chose to brand their product with the Sherpa name.

A Cultural Commodity

As the Sagarmatha National Park (SNP) was being developed, it organized a plan for the management of tourism. Within this plan is a section devoted to the management of the park’s cultural commodities and the ways they should be represented to the tourist population.

The self-conscious ‘delivery’ of culture will become increasingly important...whereas earlier, adventurous visitors were content to be in a unique environment away from normal sights and sounds, the current markets are ‘on holiday’ and expect to experience the attractions as promised in brochures. At the same time, as the fruits of tourism success become more evident in the built environment and in local lifestyles, the tourism industry cannot rely on ‘culture being everywhere.’ (DNPWC, 2007-2012, 59)

Not only the appropriate display of cultural qualities but also their growing scarcity is clearly a concern for the park, prompting them to develop ways to “deliver” the cultural resource in a conscious way. The plan goes on to emphasize this need “for using interpretation techniques to ‘deliver’ a cultural product” (DNPWC, 59). The park is wary of “indications that some trekking markets already think SNPBZ is ‘overdeveloped’ and have moved on” and they recognize that “for a tourist destination this label can have dramatic consequences” (DNPWC, 53). Like the Himalayas that have made

the park famous, the Sherpa culture needs to maintain a degree of its pristine and traditional essence otherwise it loses its appeal. Its “delivery” therefore becomes a crucial part of the commodity. The efforts of the plan have led to a number of museums and programs designed to educate tourists about the park’s indigenous Sherpa culture, as well as to develop strategies that mediate the cultural exchanges that inevitably take place.

Various handicrafts and souvenirs also serve to commoditize the Sherpa culture. Emerging from the quiet trails into Namche Bazar one is surprised by the number of shops and stands displaying a variety of cultural handicrafts: small Buddha statues, mandala necklaces, prayer flags, spinning prayer wheels, yak wool hats, hanging carpets, prayer beads, yak bells, symbols, yak animal figurines, colorful wool sweaters. The Training of Trainer’s Manual on Ecotourism and Biodiversity Conservation found in the SNP office explained how “Nepali handicrafts—characterized by artistic design, affordability and manifestation of different cultures and traditions—are popular in the international market” (DNPWC & TRPAP, 234). The cultural difference becomes embodied in a souvenir exchanged between the one who’s culture it is meant to represent and the other, intrigued by the commodity that marks itself as culturally different. However desire to make money may sometimes skew the true cultural exchange: when asked if the local Sherpa wore clothes similar to those she sold at her stand, the owner giggled—“no those are just for the tourists.” In the meantime, the girl in the neighboring store pulled out her pink, bedazzled iPhone and began playing Hispanic rap music. She didn’t seem the type to wear traditional Sherpa clothes either.

Besides the small stands selling cultural handicrafts that populate the stone paths through Namche, I found very little intentional marketing of the Sherpa culture in Khumbu. The residents ignored many opportunities when their culture could be marketed, if they were even searching for an opportunity at all. I woke up early expecting to see a brilliant display of cultural commoditization at the Saturday bazar. Instead I was smacked by my own cynicism—the bazar wasn't for tourists at all, unless fresh eggs or pots and pans were the cultural tokens used to commoditize Sherpa culture. Up in Khumjung, the audience at the Sherpa Cultural Show was overwhelmingly Sherpa, with only a few confused-looking sahibs in sight. A young Sherpa spent hours explaining the intricate process in his mandala painting, completely absorbed in his art and oblivious to the paying customers quickly gathering round. The words of one scholar respondent rang loud and true: “they’re not doing it for the tourists...they do the cultural stuff for themselves.” Chimi Kalden Sherpa, an owner of one of the guest lodges in Namche put it simply: “our culture and tourism are very different parts of life” (Chimi Kalden Sherpa, 2011).

II. My Commoditized Identity

My conversations in Khumbu focused on the benefits and detriments of the Sherpa cultural commoditization. Among interviewees from all occupations, genders, and ages, opinions were split into two main perspectives. The first group of opinions, held by a diverse group of Sherpa respondents, felt that the process discredits the Sherpa community because it opens the Sherpa name to the economic use of a variety of non-Sherpa, low

quality businesses that may limit or harm the Sherpa reputation. The second group of respondents disagreed, arguing that the commoditization of the Sherpa name in fact honors, strengthens and conserves the Sherpa culture. One of my respondents further emphasized the benefits, believing that the increased awareness that results from commoditization was a source of strength and unification within the Sherpa community.

Discrediting: Monitoring the Margins of Sherpaness

Around half of the respondents felt that their use of their Sherpa name on various commodities and services greatly discredited their ethnicity. Their concerns expressed three general worries that the ethnic group's name is becoming 1) diluted among various ethnic groups, 2) limited by the product that took its name, and 3) branded by companies with low standards of quality that harm the Sherpa reputation. Interviewees consistently cited how the general tourist population's inability—even disinterest—in distinguishing the various ethnicities and roles involved in the mountaineering industry has allowed many non-Sherpa to use the name for their own economic benefit, especially within the guiding industry. “The Sherpa name has become sort of a tool,” one anonymous villager explained. “Brahman can be Sherpa, Tamang can be Sherpa, Chettri can be Sherpa...everybody now become Sherpa.” This concern over the ability of various ethnic groups to assume the Sherpa identity was an issue raised in most of my conversations. Chimi Kalden Sherpa, the owner of one of Namche's lodges, added to this sentiment; he feels quite uncomfortable with the idea that his ethnic identity has become used on various commodities: “people do a lot of things for money...but this is not

good” (Chimi Kalden Sherpa, 2007). But not only does the influx of non-Sherpa coming to the region dilute the tourist perception of the Sherpa identity—it also changes the cultural traditions and standards of the Sherpa living there. “They kill chickens!” one villager exclaimed in reference to the arrival of non-Sherpa Nepalis in his village. “That is not our culture. Now young people do things that aren’t our tradition.”

Respondents also felt that their identity could be further discredited by the bounds of the commodity that held its name. They expressed their discontent that many tourists (and the commodities targeted toward them) associate the Sherpa name to those involved in portering and mountaineering, not the ethnic group it correctly refers to. The popularization of the Sherpa name as associated with mountaineering—whether on clothes or trekking agencies or the like—is another source of discredit since it often limits their identity to those parameters. “A Sherpa is not a porter,” Chimi said gravely. He was clearly disturbed when describing an experience abroad when his Sherpa name was raised: “Oh you’re Sherpa? How much weight can you carry?” (Chimi Kalden Sherpa, 2011). Although I cannot claim that the use of Sherpa names on various mountaineering commodities and services are the sole reason for the continued climbing stereotypes, they certainly play their part in perpetuating certain understandings of the Sherpa name. Only around 10-15% of Sherpa are still porters today, many of whom resort to such work because they are illiterate and speak no English (Pasang Sherpa, 2011). Regardless, this porter image has stuck and continues to dominate many foreigners’ perceptions of what it means to be Sherpa.

Many of the interviewees expressed a third concern; they were fearful that the Sherpa name would be attached to services of low quality that would harm the Sherpa reputation: a problem previously considered when discussing the “identity commons.” A villager in Khumjung noted “the problem comes when low quality guides” take the Sherpa name, even if they are Sherpa themselves. Lower standards of quality “can harm the Sherpa name” by degrading the reputation of all who share in the cultural resource. In some answers, respondents suggested that the quality of the business is indeed the defining factor in determining the merit of branding the Sherpa name. Ang Phurpa Sherpa, the manager of Sherpa Adventure Gear’s Kathmandu store, argued that if one “brand[s] it as quality,” he sees little detriment to using the Sherpa name (Ang Phurpa Sherpa, 2011). Furthermore, the company’s close collaboration with the Sherpa in Khumbu (he himself was from Namche and attended school in Khumjung), charitable efforts put towards Sherpa education, clothing donations, and sponsoring of various Sherpa athletes seems to be a moral justification of their Sherpa branding: “we are more close to the Sherpa people” (Ang Phurpa Sherpa, 2011). Their close degree of association with and support for the Sherpa community thereby permits their use of the Sherpa label.

One villager choosing to remain anonymous was deeply upset by the marketing of his Sherpa identity: “we don’t need to advertise...some people say its good because we are getting famous. I don’t want to be famous.” For many respondents, the celebrity poses a threat to the credit of their ethnicity.

Honor, Strength, and Conservation: "It Lifts us Higher"

Not all respondents felt that the use of the Sherpa identity in the branding of commodities and services was discrediting. Many of the female respondents—lodge owners, villagers, and storeowners alike—considered it a source of honor, regardless of the user's own ethnic identity. Rita Doma Sherpa, the daughter of a lodge-owning family in Namche was quite confident. "We feel proud that our name is used...its like respect" (Rita Doma Sherpa, 2011). The owner of a small teahouse in Khumjung agreed, saying that she is "happy" to see her Sherpa name: "it lifts us higher." In the same breath, this woman also began emphasizing the ways in which tourism has benefited her community. For many respondents, they saw the commoditization of the Sherpa identity akin to the oncoming of tourism: if more people know about the Sherpa name—even if they've seen it on jackets, soaps or sandals—more will come to the region, and bring many of the benefits that accompany increased tourism. More Sherpa commoditization means more social capital, transferable to economic capital with high exchange rates. One of the anonymous villager respondents felt that this economic capital resulting from touristic attention was indeed the condition for the continuance of culture: "if you have money you can follow culture...religion, politics, culture—the base is money."

How so? One souvenir-store owner regarded the commoditization as a conservation initiative, displaying his figurines, tapestries and religious ornaments with sincere care. He felt that the ability to represent his culture within the souvenirs was a personal effort of conservation: "I sell these things to save my culture." He felt that the dispersal of the cultural commodities

would spread the traditions they embodied and instill a sense of his culture's importance in those that enjoyed them.

Ang Rita Sherpa, the Senior Program Manager at the Mountain Institute in Kathmandu believes that the attention given to the Sherpa name on commodities and services has been a source of strength and unification for the Sherpa community. He explained that “the media makes us closer now,” continuing on to describe how his community has to “work hard” and “push each other” to maintain a Sherpa identity to which they are all subject. The broadened use of the Sherpa name becomes an opportunity for the Sherpa people: “the media allows us to show what we know and what we want” (Ang Rita Sherpa, 2011).

III. Authenticity: The “Real” Sherpa

When the name “Sherpa” begins applying to a whole variety of commodities and services, let alone new ethnic groups, it inevitably becomes difficult to pinpoint what or who or where the “authentic” Sherpa *is*. Although one could reasonably argue that all of it—all of the commoditization—is an authentic aspect of Sherpaness, many of the respondents felt that Sherpa authenticity could be determined by a few key factors.

“Religion is the most important part,” Chimi said assertively (Chimi Kalden Sherpa, 2011). Although he believes there are many attributes within the Sherpa identity, Chimi (a Sherpa lodge owner in Namche) easily defined the Buddhist religion as its heart. Buddhism remains a part of daily life for many of the Sherpa living in Khumbu. Multiple times in Khumjung I accompanied my homestay *aamaa* (mom) for her clockwise walks around the

town's main *stupa* (Buddhist monument): a daily ritual used as a method of meditation and reflection. Kaji Sherpa, the owner of his own trekking agency believes that his religion is the basis for everything he does. He loves his work with trekker tourists and considers his opportunity to "make tourists happy" as a source for his own karma (Kaji Sherpa, 2011). When I asked multiple villagers about the most traditional Sherpa aspects of Khumjung, many pointed to the *ghompa*, or Buddhist monastery. Non-Sherpa people also identify religion as a key identity aspect of the ethnic group. An authentic Sherpa is "like a mantra-chanting lama" said a non-Sherpa working temporarily in Namche Bazar. "That's an authentic Sherpa," he laughed shyly. In their own self-descriptions and in others' descriptions of them, Buddhism remains a grounding source of authenticity for the Sherpa community.

Two Sherpa respondents considered language to be the clearest indicator of their "real" Sherpaness. One noted that some Sherpa in Khumjung only speak the Sherpa language and never learned Nepali, Nepal's national language. Nonetheless, many respondents lamented the younger generation's increasing inability to speak Sherpa, believing they are losing a key aspect of their identity. The SNP Management of Tourism Plan identified the Sherpa language as a top conservation priority, believing that "language is the foundation of an indigenous culture" (DNPWC, 64). Although it was not an explicit definition of authenticity, SNP's choice of language conservation as a main aim for its project highlights how language is considered a large component of authentic and traditional Sherpa culture.

While religion and language were the most commonly stated locations of Sherpa authenticity, one's age and distance from the tourist-touched

lifestyle were also claimed as main indicators. There is concern among the Sherpa community in Khumbu that the younger generation is slowly losing their traditional culture as a result of Westernization, increased wealth and tourism. A few respondents claimed that the “realness” of the Sherpa lies among the older generation. One respondent pointed to his elderly mother sitting at the table nearby and said, “She’s a real Sherpa.” In a similar way to how they viewed the authenticity of older generation, some respondents sensed that Khumjung was more authentic than Namche because it was less tourist-touched—it had less lodges, cafes, places for internet and trekkers passing through. One villager said that “Namche is totally out of culture”—out of Sherpaness, that is, whereas “Khumjung is still in good condition for the Sherpa culture.” Many respondents seemed to locate authenticity within the older generation and away from the influences of tourism because they consider authenticity as tied to tradition—to the *way it used to be*.

Locations of Sherpa authenticity are vast and constantly changing, although many respondents primarily locate it among one’s engagement with the Buddhist religion, one’s ability to speak Sherpa and the proximity of one’s lifestyle to that of the older, more traditional Sherpa. One anonymous respondent surmised a set of three questions he felt adequately tested for Sherpa authenticity:

1. Are you Khumbu?
2. What is your rue (clan)?
3. Who is your god?

Within these three questions of place, family and religion, he argued, true Sherpa authenticity is determined.

Discussion/Analysis

The research findings suggest that the Sherpa identity and culture have become commoditized and marketed to tourists in a variety of ways. The Sherpa are aware of such uses of their name but have differing opinions on the consequences. Despite the various ways the commodities modify the Sherpa identity, many of the respondents still find authenticity within their religion, language and tradition.

The Culture Commoditized

While examples of Sherpa commoditization were in no short supply, my findings suggested that the Sherpa in Khumbu had little role in perpetuating them. The souvenir stands being the main exception, I saw little cultural-marketing intent, even when the opportunities would present themselves. The reasons the Sherpa choose to maintain separate spheres of culture and tourist business could be many-fold. Perhaps the Sherpa simply see no reason to expose their cultural aspects to the tourists, especially given their short periods of interaction. Perhaps an overt display of culture would alienate the tourists, creating a gap difficult to transcend in establishing congenial relationships, business or otherwise. Loland (2006) raises yet another interesting prospect: “possibly, Sherpas regard their identity quite literally as a commodity that should be kept in short supply, to ensure a maximum benefit when ‘it’ is offered on the tourist market” (Loland, 9). Their identity is thus framed as a product carefully tuned to the forces of supply and demand.

Views on Commoditization: The Catch-22

The Sherpa's discrepant opinions on their identity's commoditization highlight the difficulty in determining the merit of such a process. As noted in the introduction, the commoditization of a cultural identity, whether in the use of a name or a cultural advertisement in a brochure, is at once an identity representation and an economic exchange. Many of the respondents who consider the commoditization a negative process felt so because of the misuse, disrespect, and simplification it could bring the Sherpa name: in essence, they dislike the delivery of the cultural representation. The second group of respondents seemed unworried (or much less so) about the cultural representation and considered the publicity a source of symbolic capital (esteem, honor) and subsequent economic capital; their focus lies in the economic exchange.

A question inevitably arises: does the marketing of culture for economic benefit degrade its cultural authenticity (ethnic, originality, quality or otherwise)? The tone of many interviewees betrayed an association between economic incentives and impurity, suggesting that the marketing of Sherpaness with monetary interests is an ignoble act that discredits the Sherpa. When recognizing that cultural commoditization does occur, respondents turned somewhat quiet, using explanatory phrases like "yes that does happen but not everyone does" or despondent statements like "people do a lot of things for money," as if the commoditization was an undignified, last resort. Furthermore, Ang Phurpa Sherpa (Sherpa Adventure Gear) conceded that yes, Sherpa Adventure Gear "is a business," but he went on to justify the brand by demonstrating his closeness with the Sherpa community and the company's

charitable work (Ang Phurpa Sherpa, 2011). The justification of his Sherpaness (in blood and relation) seemed to mediate the company's use of the Sherpa name and re-instill morality in their commoditization. In both the efforts to justify it and the tone with which respondents discussed the topic, the Sherpa convey an understanding of cultural commoditization as an impure, de-authenticating process.

However therein lies a catch 22: money achieved through the cultural tourist services and commoditization is simultaneously a source for the continuance of tradition, culture, and community. Around half of the respondents repeatedly emphasized the benefit of their name and culture's commoditization, arguing that it honored, conserved and strengthened the Sherpa community. Tourist's attention given to the cultural resources reiterates the value within the culture—it “enhances the local community's esteem” (DNPWC & TRPAP, 177)—while simultaneously allowing the tourists to consume their cultural product. This reinforcement of cultural conservation through tourism is the basis of “sustainable tourism” that SNP is working to implement in Khumbu. A surprising 50% of SNP's current proceeds go to the community for various projects, many of which focus on cultural conservation initiatives like the provision of Sherpa language programs or cultural centers (Ang Rita Sherpa, 2011). The marketing of Sherpaness essentially translates the cultural capital into economic capital and back again by re-enabling (through economic resources) and rekindling (through promoting cultural esteem) the Sherpa's cultural value. The marketization becomes a way to identify the cultural aspects that want to be

maintained and celebrate the traditions—the authenticity—in the Sherpa culture.

The commoditization of their culture is both disturbing and empowering to the Sherpa population in Khumbu. While many are uncomfortable with the use of the Sherpa name and culture for monetary interests, these same economic considerations have become a source for cultural conservation and valuation. A struggle arises to rationalize this irony: how can money de-authenticate culture while simultaneously enabling its survival and re-authentication? Efforts to re-instill culture seem impure because they are funded by the money earned from cultural commoditization—from selling culture, but if no cultural marketing is done, the community may risk the slow disintegration of cultural practices and sense of purpose.

We must recognize that this scenario operates under the (somewhat) cynical assumption that the Sherpa identity functions like a business and that, in the words of one villager, money is a basis for cultural practices. This assumption concedes one main fault: it undermines the strength of the Sherpa community in following their own culture out of personal interest rather than economic incentives. Although my respondents were open in expressing their awareness of cultural commoditization, I was continually impressed by their selfless pride in and devotion to their culture. The discussion here is merely a reflection on the ideological issues faced by their cultural commoditization.

In Perspective

The exploration of Sherpa cultural commoditization unavoidably treads on sensitive ground. The various ways my respondents understood their culture's

commoditization suggested an underlying difficulty in accepting, rationalizing and assimilating the commoditization process into perceptions of authenticity. Since cultural authenticity is a highly personal and emotionally charged topic, and commoditization seems to have negative connotations, their association can be rather uncomfortable. The aim of this research is in no way designed to discredit the Sherpa name, identity or authenticity. Rather I hope these discussions expose the many dynamics encompassed within the Sherpa identity and encourage further exploration of its commoditization.

Conclusion

As I was walking out of Khumjung, one of the young Sherpa schoolgirls with whom I became friends came and grabbed my hand. We walked a few steps together before she looked at my jacket and pointed to the label across the bottom: “you have a Sherpa one too!” She pulled aside her thick winter jacket to reveal a pink fleece, the Sherpa Adventure Gear label sticking out the back. “Now you won’t forget us!”

As we squeezed our cold hands and parted ways, her last comment remained ringing in my ears. Our matching Sherpa jackets served as a source of our unity, foreigner and native, and would continue to do so regardless of the distance between us. While one could analyze the various mountaineering stereotypes perpetuated in the commoditization of the Sherpa name in an outdoor jacket, the girl was suggesting a much simpler understanding of the Sherpa brand. Our mutual sporting of the Sherpa name became a token used to embody the memories I had shared with the Sherpa community. I hadn’t

bought the jacket because I thought it captured the characteristics of the Sherpa identity, but it had nonetheless come to hold symbolic, cultural value given my research's purpose in the region. The commodity carrying the Sherpa mark served to connect me to her because it summarized the complex web of questions I had come to explore.

My research suggests that the Sherpa are not only aware of the commoditization of their culture but also highly considerate of the benefits and detriments it creates for their community. Given that the Sherpa identity tends to operate much like a commons that associates all that carry it, many Sherpa expressed concern that the branding of the name often dilutes, limits and degrades their culture. Others understood the branding to be a source of honor, strength and unity. Therein lies the difficulty in assessing the merit of the cultural commoditization: while the "selling of culture" tends to have de-authenticating connotations, it simultaneously reinforces the sense of the community's value and tradition. Determining cultural "authenticity" thereby becomes a process deeply woven into understandings of tradition, ethics, and social/economic forces.

This research brings to light various Sherpa considerations about the incentives, effects and integrity of Sherpa cultural commoditization but it does not claim to be fully conclusive or all-encompassing. Rather I hope these findings invite further discussion of an issue that demands more research and analysis. Continued research is particularly applicable because of current worries expressing the dissolution of Sherpa culture in the face of Westernization and capitalism. Furthermore, Nepal's breadth of ethnic diversity provides abundant opportunity to compare cultural commoditization

across a variety of subjects. The ways in which a culture becomes marketed and commoditized illustrates much about both the culture being commoditized and the culture it is marketed towards. While my focus rested on the opinions of the culture being commoditized, an in-depth study of the tourist culture it targets would yield even more important and interesting elements to consider. The cultural, economic and social expressivity found in moments of Sherpa identity commoditization make its exploration a continually fruitful and dynamic topic of study.

I turned around for one last glimpse of Khumjung and found the girl still standing there. Above the wind she yelled, “please don’t forget us miss!” Celebrity aside, I don’t think I ever could.

Glossary of Terms

Terms

Identity: an essential characteristic of an individual or group

Commoditization: the process of making an intangible entity into a commodity or service to be bought and sold.

Stupa: Buddhist monument

Ghomp: Buddhist monastery

Abbreviations

SNP: Sagarmatha National Park

SNPBZ: Sagarmatha National Park Buffer Zone

DNPWC: Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation

TRPAP: Tourism for Rural Poverty Alleviation Program

Appendix/Appendices

Appendix 1: Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent

My research seeks to understand the ways in the Sherpa identity has been commoditized and the effects it has for the Sherpa community. Through interviews with various scholars, agencies, lodge owners, store owners, villagers, guides and porters I hope to understand the ways in which this globalization force has affected the Sherpa sense of self and community. My research will be compiled into a 30-40page paper that is the culminating assignment for the American academic program I am currently studying with: SIT (Students in International Training) World Learning Inc. This paper will be shared with my advisor at my home academic institution, Middlebury College. I may choose to further develop this research for publication. If you would prefer to keep your name and any information you provide anonymous, please specify this request. If you refuse to participate in any specific part of the study or would like to terminate your involvement at any point you are free to do so. If you have any questions or concerns you can reach me at:

Melissa Mittelman
Mobile: 9849-799286
Email: melissamittelman@mac.com

I have hereby read and agreed to provide my consent for this interview.

Name:

Date:

Signature:

Appendix 2: Photos of Namche Bazar and Khumjung

Photo #1: Namche Bazar

Photo #2: Namche Bazar's Saturday Morning Market

Photo #3: Full View of Khumjung

Photo #4: Khumjung's Houses and Crop Fields

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Student Signature: _____

Date: _____