

Spring 2013

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Martha Oster-Beal
SIT Study Abroad

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Preserving Tradition: Analyzing the Commoditization of Cultural Identity Through Beauty Pageants Among Ethnic Minority Groups in Kathmandu



Martha Oster-Beal
The College of Wooster
Anthropology

Academic Director: Isabelle Onians
Senior Faculty Advisor: Hubert Decler

Kathmandu, Nepal

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Nepal: Tibetan and Himalayan Peoples,
SIT Study Abroad, Spring 2013

Abstract

This research primarily focuses on the “cultural talent contests” enrolling contestants who are members of the numerous minority ethnic groups residing in Kathmandu. In a growing metropolis, these beauty queens are often seen as symbolic representations of collective cultural identities, and the pageants as fields of active ‘cultural production’. This author surveys the growing literature on beauty pageants and several opinions of organizers, community members and the contestants themselves to better understand how culture is produced within the contexts of pageants. The study examines how beauty pageants operate as locations of commodification and consumption in a world increasingly influenced by global markets and media institutions. An analysis of the social theories constructed by Thorstein Veblen and James Duesenberry help to make sense of the social phenomenon that is beauty pageants. It also illustrates how culture is produced in beauty pageants by examining these events as sites of oppression, sites to articulate cultural agency, and sites of ethnic, gender, cultural, and sexual identity production and exploitation.

Acknowledgments

This research would be incomplete without the help of several individuals. To the School of International Training staff, thank you for letting me frantically vent my frustrations of my research in your office, calling countless non-English speaking Fashion Houses and various contacts for me and for feeding me an occasional lunch when my stipend began to deteriorate. Thank you to Arun, Pradeep, Rechu and Suraj, my dear Nepali friends who were always willing to help, in whatever way. But mostly, I am thankful for the continuous support, reassurance and much needed laughter from my dear roommate, Mack.

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Introduction

The influence and presence of Western popular culture in Nepal is striking. Walking down any given street in Kathmandu, giant faces of music and movie icons are plastered on every marketable surface to be found: clothing, notebooks, gadgets, you name it. American music reverberates through the city's microbuses and taxis. Western food items often times outweigh Nepali dishes on menus, and saris and kurtas have taken a back seat to jeans and a t-shirt. The rise in domestic radio and television production since 1998 has introduced a new variation of Nepali programming that is heavily influenced by Western media. TV shows, radio programs, fashion spreads and websites have seen an increase in both the production and consumption of Western culture aimed at teenagers and young adults.

In urban environments, ethnic groups have long struggled with the ability to maintain their cultural identity and to preserve their traditions. Outside influences, most often American and Indian, have a large effect on efforts to preserve aspects of one's culture, especially as a minority in the context of the ethnic make up of a city. In Kathmandu, of the most conspicuous ways in which Newari, Tamaung, Sherpa, to name a few, and many other minority ethnic groups have made attempts to promote their culture is through beauty pageants. The number and popularity of beauty pageants has grown at an exponential rate in the past decade. The variety of pageants is extensive; teen pageants, baby pageants, regional pageants, international pageants, and believe it or not, Miss Canine Nepal. Most of the major ethnic groups in Nepal host their own beauty contests, with the mission to promote the identity of their ethnicity and encourage their youth to perform service in the name of their culture.

In a growing metropolis, these beauty queens are often seen as symbolic representations of collective cultural identities; the pageants viewed as fields of active 'cultural production'. This study aims to examine how beauty pageants operate as locations of commodification and consumption in a world increasingly influenced by global markets and media institutions. It also illustrates how culture is produced in both the ethnic beauty pageants, like Miss Newa, and general pageants, as represented by Miss Diva and Miss Nepal, by examining these events as sites of oppression, sites to articulate cultural agency, and sites of ethnic, gender, cultural, and sexual identity production and exploitation.

This research, although specific to beauty pageants, is indicative of how ethnic minority groups are trying to recreate and preserve their cultural identities in a huge metropolitan environment. I was most interested in observing whether or not these attempts have been successful and how the contestants and the community at large have benefited from the pageants. All preliminary research led me to believe that pageants of all types were an outlet for the typical, reserved Nepali girl to restore her self-esteem and find empowerment as a proud, and confident woman. I wanted to see if this was an accurate representation. Additionally, I have tried to gain a greater understanding of why beauty pageants, specifically, have become so common in Nepali society. An analysis of beauty pageants in general combined with various social theory literature about why we feel the urge to conspicuously consume, resulting in the commodification culture, functions as my interpretation of these blended theories.

For the purpose of this research, a few terms need to be clearly defined in order to best understand my motives and conclusions. "Culture" is used in terms of one's ethnic or national identity. Culture and ethnicity are utilized interchangeably throughout the research to represent groups of people whose ethnicity can be described as a minority group in Kathmandu. "Western" primarily refers to the way of life and culture of the United States. This word also may be used to

reference the “modern” world i.e. first world countries. In the theory section of this paper, “society” is referenced several times. This is not specific, but rather, the society of human nature, our global society.

Methodology

When I set out to conduct this research, I originally wanted to focus solely on the ethnic pageants in Kathmandu. I soon discovered, however, that the pageant scene encapsulates much more than the cultural competitions. Thus, my research question was reorganized to include possible theories as to why these beauty pageants, of all types, are so prevalent in this region. This included literature pertaining to both feminist and social theory relevant to the research conducted for this study, and relevant literature provided by past researchers as well.

My methodology consisted mainly of interviews and participant observation. The amount of people I interviewed who were either involved in pageants or had an opinion about them was relatively low for how prevalent they are in Nepali society. I wanted to really be able to understand how each of the pageants worked by spending valuable time with both the organizers and contestants in order to make the most of their assistance and the information they supplied to me. Thus, I primarily focus on the Miss Newa ethnic talent contest and the Miss Diva beauty pageant although I did briefly speak with the organizer of the Miss Tibet pageant and was able to gain a basic understanding of several other talent contests from interviews with staff of the Nepalese Fashion Home.

These interviews were semi-unstructured in that many of my conversations typically wandered in and out of casual exchanges in an effort to get to know my interviewees better. I felt slightly uncomfortable just asking questions and demanding answers; I wanted to make a strong connection with them. I felt this would enhance my results and make it easier for them to answer comfortably in my presence. I documented the interviews in a field-journal in hand-written notes. Trying to listen, engage and write down information all at once proved challenging and in the end, restricted the amount of information and direct quotes gathered. Looking back on the research and interview process, I realize it would have been invaluable for my results to have used a recorder.

While I was unable to attend an ethnic talent contest during the Independent Study Project period, I was able to observe the first annual Miss Diva pageant. My connection with the event organizer enabled me to be present and survey exactly how the competition was organized and I was able to get a feel for the atmosphere created during these events. This was vital to my research and analysis of the pageant scene, as an interviewee’s descriptions were not always completely sufficient in gaining a complete understanding of what the events entail.

All persons interviewed and included in this review provided informed consent and were informed of their ethical rights.

Miss Diva and Miss Newa: Alike but Different

Miss Diva: “Beauty is a compliment to your personality and your personality is a compliment to your life”

Already feeling discouraged for having missed two beauty pageants at the beginning of the research period, I was “busy” cruising the internet one Sunday afternoon, desperate for any leads to help with my painfully slow moving research. While there are official publications and public advertisements of these events, they are typically only displayed a day in advance. Mostly, their occurrence is most commonly known by word of mouth. Feeling frustrated, I googled “beauty pageants Kathmandu” for what felt like the one-hundredth time. A stroke of luck! Far down on my browser, an announcement was promoting the Grand Finale round of Miss Diva, a pageant that was going to be held within the week. Crossing my fingers and all other potentially crossable extremities, I entered the available number into my phone, held my breath and pressed the send button. Two days later, I found myself at the Grande Finale of the Miss Diva 2012 beauty pageant held on April 26 at the Army Officer’s Club in Sundhara, Kathmandu.

It was similar to what I imagined it would be like to watch the movie “Miss Congeniality” in a live performance. The music started, twenty-eight girls teetered out from behind the stage, stiff smiles on their made-up faces, one arm on their hip and very clearly concentrating on not falling off of their perilously high heeled shoes. One by one they introduced themselves, all but two of them speaking English. The audience learned their name, where they live, qualities about themselves, some of their hobbies and what they aspire to be: air hostesses, models, social workers. Only one contestant mentioned a career path that inspired individual thought; her dream is to be a microbiologist.

I was quick to realize how long the event would take. After starting about two hours later than when the ticket advertised, the entire event took about five hours; there was supplemented entertainment in between rounds while the girls, I assume, fixed their makeup, changed outfits and practiced their answers backstage. I was to sit through five stages of judgment: the introduction round in which the contestants formally present themselves to the judges and audience by giving a brief biography about themselves, a best dressed round in which the girls display their personal style by wearing dresses they have chosen themselves, a talent round showcasing the top three contestants who advanced at an earlier talent round competition prior to the grand finale, and two question and answer rounds.

There were various musical and dance performers making attempts at pumping up the overheated crowd when we all became tired of the monotony of the show, not to mention the presentation of numerous tokens of thanks and love to the pageant’s various sponsors. The talent and best dressed rounds came and went; the girls paraded around the stage in their own dress of their own choosing, mostly sequin-encrusted gowns, each one more shiny and garish than the last. From here, only the top ten continue on and compete in the first round of interviews.

There are many titles awarded to contestants other than the ultimate crown of Miss Diva. After the judge’s score are tallied, participants have the opportunity to become Miss Smile, Miss Best Dressed, Miss Talent, Miss Creative, Miss Best Hair, Miss Best Walk, Miss Personality, Miss Photogenic, Miss Popular or Miss Social Service. The participants are judged and thus scored from the moment they enter the competition. Additionally, they are given scores based on how well they answer the interview questions. Each girl is ranked on a scale of one to ten, in the categories listed above. There is not, however, a formal way in which the girls are scored. It is all

based on the judge's perception of the girl in question. If a particular judge is partial to red dresses, one lucky girl may come away with a ten for that round. Typically, Rojal explained to me, the judges are prominent entertainment figures in Nepali society. The Miss Diva judges consisted of Miss Nepal 2009, a well-known photographer, music video producer and a singer.

The questions that were available for the judges to ask the top ten contestants in the first round of questions are listed in Appendix I; the questions that are underlined were actually asked on the day of the competition. Girls who answer in English are most likely to score higher in the interview level and pass onto the final five in which they are all given the same question and asked to give a written answer; they girls stand on stage balancing clipboards, writing their responses, later to be read to the judges and the audience. They speak slowly and clearly, it is very obvious that they have rehearsed these answers hundreds of times, most likely in front of bathroom mirrors or their dogs. As the pageant winds down, the top five are asked the final question: "Who is your idol, and why?" Out of the five contestants, four said their idol was their mother. One loan contestant answered: Mother Teresa.

The qualifications for girls who are looking to participate in a pageant differ from show to show. Some have height and weight requirements; all require girls to have completed the School Leaving Certification examination, and of course, the ethnic shows require girls to be of that specific ethnicity, a specification that can be determined just by reading her surname. There is always an age limit; typically 16-24. An additional requirement is that the girls must be unmarried and without children. Contestants for Miss Diva already need to have a basic knowledge of pageants, to be what was described to me as, "fit": a good figure with a charming face, and needed to be "practical in life" with their answers, ideals, thoughts. Imaginative is not practical, I learned.

For about one and a half months after the initial application and selection process and before the grand finale, the participants undergo "grooming classes." I was told that most girls "can't groom themselves: their thoughts, fashion or personality" (Basnet). Thus, they are enrolled in a variety of classes that help them to learn how to speak in a public setting, walk on the catwalk, answer questions in an interview, apply makeup, take beautiful photos and "develop their personality." The personality development classes are what struck me the most. "How can you develop someone's personality?" I asked. The response was vague and, like many of my questions that inquired about the individuality, or lack thereof, of the contestant, produced obvious discomfort in the body language and facial expressions of whom I was interviewing. Personality was described to me as simply, "a girl's ability to participant in a beauty pageant" and, if all goes well, go home with a crown (Basnet).

Pageants, as relayed to me by the director of Miss Diva, Rojal Basnet, are important not only because they enhance the personality of the girls who compete, but they also promote Nepalese culture. Interestingly, only one of the contestants at the Miss Diva chose to wear a sari for the best dressed round, two out of twenty-eight contestants answered in Nepali, and only one of the top three talents performed at the event included an aspect of Nepali culture, if you consider hip hop dancing with remixed Nepali music playing in the background a display of the customs and traditions of Nepal. He told this to me only after I had briefly discussed my research topic with him. As I felt with several of my conversations, it seemed like he was telling me what he thought it was that I wanted to hear, for the sake of my research.

Miss Newa:

The first thing I was told when I met with the media coordinator of Nepalese Fashion Home in Bagbazar, Kathmandu after we had introduced ourselves and made simple conversation, was that ethnic beauty pageants are misunderstood. She explained that their pageants are not based on beauty and instead, prefer to be referred to as “cultural talent contests.” In Jenisha’s words, these contests “promote the development of culture, especially language, because most importantly, the youth should know where they come from.” She expressed to me that while beauty pageants are not the best way to promote culture, they are a good way because they appeal to the public, most especially, the younger generations.

Miss Newa has aspects of both beauty pageants and “talent contests,” as coined by Jenisha. The format and script of the pageant are amazingly similar across the many different types of shows. The same is true for the two pageants I looked at in the greatest detail. Miss Newa has homogenous components to the Miss Diva pageant, despite their reluctance to be grouped in with other pageants. There is an introduction round, best dressed, top three talent competition and two question/answer rounds. There are, of course, several differences that set the pageants apart. Miss Newa is without a doubt, focused on Newar culture while Miss Diva operates as a site for individual promotion. The participation requirements are quite clear: you must be Newari, between the ages of 16 and 22, and have passed the SLC examination. Height, weight, a “charming face,” – these qualities are not necessary. In fact, since its debut in 2005, Miss Newa has never turned away an interested competitor; their roster has often times exceeded 36 girls.

Instead of speaking English, like all but two of the participants in Miss Diva did, the ethnic talent contest contestants are given higher marks for speaking in their mother tongue for both the introduction round and, if they are capable, for the question/answer level as well. Language, says both Jenisha and the two most recent winners of Miss Newa, is one of the most important aspects of Newari culture that needs to be preserved as it is quickly diminishing within their community. A huge part of the grooming classes is teaching the contestants the how to read or write in Newar; most girls can only understand Newari, and a few have learned how to speak conversationally at home. In addition to language classes, the participants also take classes that teach them how to make traditional Newar food, take them to historically sacred locations all around Nepal and, according to Miss Newa 2012, Sudina Shreshta, provide the girls with scientific reasons behind practicing the culture. In Newar culture, she shared, there are nine different grains that are both sacred and required to consume throughout the year. The classes taught Sudina the nutritional reasons behind this custom. The contestants are also required to give a small presentation about an aspect of Newar culture of their choosing, partially to practice public speaking but also, to ensure that the girls are taking initiative in learning about their ethnicity individually.

Contestants who choose to sing or dance for the talent round of the contest must complete it in a traditional Newar style. A few of the pictures that are included in Appendix II depict a contestant dancing a traditional dance, which portrays Kumari, the living goddess. Many Newaris worship pre-pubescent girls, who are seen as representations of the divine female energy. The intricacies of this will be further discussed in the Analysis section of this report. There are no restrictions as to what a contestant can perform, within reason. Sudina opted to showcase her skills in speaking Newari language and gave a speech discussing the importance of educating children.

When I spoke with Jenisha, she explained that the contest operated under the “theme of cultural modification.” This idea can be demonstrated most clearly in the best dressed round of the competition. Like Miss Diva, the girls get an opportunity to showcase their personal style by designing their own outfit to wear. While there are no official cultural requirements for this round, I was told that it is better if “a hint of culture is there.” I had a chance to look through some of the fashion houses’ photo albums of past pageants. Although the girls are allowed to wear whatever they want, most choose to incorporate aspects of Newar culture, which is physically represented in the form of a gown. For example, one contestant wears a modern-style gown with Lord Buddah stitched down the front. Another wears an extravagantly made gown depicting the various types of traditional Newari food. Copies of these photos can be found in Appendix II.

The interview round produces questions very different than those of Miss Diva. Jenisha had explained that the questions were written to inspire the contestants to think about how their culture, personality and country interact with each other. While I was unable to get a complete list, both Sudina and Suneeta were able to remember the two questions they received in the top ten round and later, in the top five round. Suneeta’s (Miss Newa 2011) questions were: “Why should we preserve our mother tongue?” and “If you were the minister of your culture, how would you promote it to the rest of the world?” Sudina could only remember one: “In the past, Newar people were known for getting into fights with each other, if you could prevent this from happening, how would you?”

It is, however, still a beauty pageant, regardless of the title and so the contestants are groomed in a similar fashion as the contestants of general pageants are. They undergo lessons that teach them how to walk, apply make up, speak in public, sit properly, dining etiquette and how to present themselves in a positive light. Additionally, each contestant is given a makeover; new haircuts, skin treatments and manicures. The girls also participate in a photo shoot. They are given twenty frames each and wear both modern and cultural costumes.

The crowning ceremony in Miss Newa is also similar to that of Miss Diva. Girls have an opportunity to win the title of Best Smile and Most Photogenic, which are determined from the photos they take in the studio. Best Skin and Best Hair are chosen based on how the girls looked after they received their makeovers. Miss Personality, Miss Charming, and Miss Discipline are chosen by the choreographer who spends ample amount of time with the participants, teaching them all the welcome dance that is performed at the beginning of the event along with the proper staging and locations that are necessary for the fluidity of the show. In addition the winner and the two runner-ups, one lucky girl is awarded Miss Nepal Bhasa, the best at speaking and understanding Newari language. Obviously, this is a title completely unique to Miss Newa.

The judges, or rather, the jury members, as they are called by the Miss Newa organizers are all prominent members of the Newar community, often times including guests who are also well known in the greater Nepali society. Well known religious icons of the Newar populace are also invited to attend and be entertained by the cultural event. Each year, at the beginning of the contest, they are greeted by the customary Newari hospitality techniques, which include various symbolic hand washings, the exchanging of kind words and the placement of a red tikka on each of the guests’ foreheads.

The Nepalese Fashion Home, managed by Hema Manandhar, has been organizing these types of pageants since 2004 when they produced the first ethnic competition in Kathmandu: Miss Teen Sherpa. The popularity and frequency of the cultural shows has exploded with almost eight different ethnicities holding shows all over Nepal. The other pageants that NFH organizes enroll mostly participants who are considered ethnic. Their other events, besides Miss Newa,

Miss Teen Newa and Miss Gurung are Kid Queen Nepal and Master Star, both pageants for children ages 9-13. These are advertised as general pageants, despite the large number of ethnic groups represented, and are simply a chance for the youngsters to gain “exposure.” Jenisha explained that often times, kids are not aware at what their talents are and these pageants provide them the opportunity and encouragement to express themselves and uncover their potential.

Miss Tibet Pageant: An Amalgamation?

During the research period, I came into contact with the organizer of the Miss Tibet pageant. Although exiled from being held in Tibet, it is held annually in Dharamsala, India. Interestingly, this pageant falls within the boundaries of both a cultural and a general competition. I used the information from my interview with Lobsang Wangyel to compare aspects of both types of pageants and to briefly discuss how national beauty pageants act not only as a way to construct national identity and pride in addition to raising awareness about the current issue in Tibet but also, to gain a better understanding of how women are used as political vessels during international pageantry.

In my conversations with Lobsang Wangyel, the organizer of the Miss Tibet pageant in Dharamsala outlined the purpose of the pageant in five rather succinct points. First and foremost, the pageant addresses the need for opportunities for young, Tibetan women. He wrote to me, “The Tibetan culture is a living, breathing, changing culture, with young women who wish to have the same opportunities as their counterparts in other parts of the world including education, travel, and cross-cultural experiences.” Essentially, it was explained to me that the pageant hopes to dispel the stereotype that young Tibetan women are culturally stuck in the past. The pageant also serves to inform the world that Tibetan women are like women everywhere and have the same capabilities, skills and interests. There is a large need for role models for young girls either living in Tibet or in exile. Additionally, awareness plays a large role in the objectives of the competition. The creation of international recognition of the traditional arts, culture and philosophy of Tibet, the contemporary lifestyle of Tibetan people living in exile as well as attention to the plight of Tibetans living under Chinese-occupied Tibet. The mindset is this: millions of people all over the world are interested in the international beauty pageants and watch to see who represents each nation. As such, the Miss Tibet pageant will “bring Tibetan culture forward in time; it will provide a contemporary forum for Tibetan girls and women.”

After Lobsang and I finished our discussion, I tried to figure out where the Miss Tibet pageant would fit in relation to the Miss Diva and Miss Newa pageants. Like the cultural talent shows that take place in Kathmandu, the participants in Miss Tibet attend classes that teach them about Tibetan culture, language and Buddhist philosophy, to name a few. The Miss Tibet pageant has criteria of its own as well: interested applicants must have a central Tibetan administration tax paid up to date, although, this criterion does not apply to a woman coming from Tibet to compete in the pageant. However, because this pageant competes at an international level, they must abide by the international regulations, this includes a swimsuit round, the anti-culture of cultural Tibet.

Almost every nationally held pageant teaches the contestants aspects of the culture in preparation for competing in the international arena. I have concluded that although Miss Tibet promotes Tibetan culture, it is in no way helping to preserve it in the most traditional sense. Wearing a swimsuit and competing to win an international title has a much different attitude than that of Miss Newa.

Theory

By analyzing Thorstein Veblen and James Duesenberry's theories concerning conspicuous consumption and the demonstration effect, respectively, and in association, a broad understanding of how and why beauty pageants have become such a large part of Nepalese society will be established. While these theories are each unique, it is the combination of their properties that will help the most to create a working interpretation of the contemporary issue and the broader social implications at hand. Before this combined theory can be described, however, the relevant terms individual to each theory must be defined and discussed before they can be pertinent to the social phenomenon.

Thorstein Veblen: Conspicuous Consumption

Writing during the late 19th century, Thorstein Veblen is best known for his work: *The Theory of the Leisure Class* and its representation of a strong critique of the neoclassical theory of consumption. Whereas neoclassical economics define humans as rational, utilitarian beings who aim to maximize their pleasure, Veblen reinterprets people as irrational, economic beings who pursue social status with little regard to their or anyone else's happiness. Thus, according to Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption, individuals emulate the consumption patterns of other individuals situated at higher points in the civil hierarchy. Conspicuous consumption arises because it is not enough merely to have wealth or power, but one must put it on display for all to see. This, as argued by Veblen, is inherent in human nature and is essentially unavoidable. "The law of conspicuous waste guides consumption in apparel, as in other things, chiefly at the second removal, by shaping the canons of taste and decency. In the common run of cases the conscious motive of the wearer or purchaser of conspicuously wasteful apparel is the need of conforming to established usage, and of living up to the accredited standard of taste and reputability" (Veblen, 119). In other words, most people do not purposefully conspicuously consume. Instead, they aim to maintain their self-esteem and self-worth by meeting "the accredited standard of taste" that is fashioned by the luxury class.

Each social class tries to emulate the consumption pattern of the class above it, to such an extent that even the poorest people are exposed to the compulsion to participate in conspicuous consumption in an effort to slide up in social class rank. "The result is that the members of each stratum accept as their ideal of decency the scheme of life in vogue in the next higher stratum, and bend their energies to live up to that ideal" (Veblen, 84). This is a never-ending process; people will always strive to reach new consumption goods in an effort to distinguish themselves not necessarily from each other, but from the class to which they belong. Therefore, conspicuous consumption, for the poor, is a way to symbolically represent their desire to be part of a higher class and indicate their wealth to other members of society.

Veblen identifies two main ways in which an individual can display wealth: through extensive leisure activities and through lavish expenditure on consumption and services. The commonality is "the element of waste that is common to both...In the one case it is a waste of time and effort, in the other it is a waste of goods" (Veblen, 85). The ability to engage in wasteful activities is a key way in which members of the leisure class are able to demonstrate their wealth and status.

James Duesenberry: Relative Income Effect

James Duesenberry book, *Income, Saving, and the Theory of Consumer Behavior* challenges Keynes' construction of consumption behavior by introducing psychological factors that are associated with habit formation and social interdependencies affected by relevant income concerns. Most of the theoretical basis for his argument is given in the chapter, "A Reformulation of the Theory of Saving" where he argues that "the frequency and strength of impulses to increase expenditures for one individual depend entirely on the ratio of his expenditures to the expenditures of those with whom he associates" (Duesenberry, 32). Duesenberry maintains the idea that the attainment of a materially high standard of living has become a "generally recognized social goal" (Duesenberry, 28). Our culture defines success and affluence as an accumulation of material goods and has evolved "the drive for self-esteem into a drive to get high quality goods" (Duesenberry, 31). Essentially, he argues that the absolute level of consumption that has always been standard has recently become less important than the relative level. Our relative income is what determines our happiness. Individuals who consistently consume the same type of goods year after year will feel continuously more self-conscious as their neighbors upgrade the quality of their consumed goods. The relationship between self-esteem and consumption patterns is, in Duesenberry's opinion, is a vicious, unending cycle as individuals are always trying to increase their esteem through purchasing higher caliber consumer items, despite their need for them; a high standard of living is an end in itself.

The frequent exposure to higher quality goods than the ones one usually consumes will inherently cause an increase in the individual's expending of consumptions. Duesenberry labels this as the "demonstration effect" (Duesenberry, 27), which similarly, in a popular cultural term, be called the "keeping up with the Joneses" effect. He argues that the demonstration effect has the potential to be independent of Veblen's concept of conspicuous consumption as it is typical for increased expenditures to arise because of the need to eliminate feelings of inferiority that have been created by others who are consuming superior goods in one's surroundings, not because of a conscious desire to imitate others, as is argued by Veblen. In other words, if "income is one of the principal status criteria" and "every individual tends to associate with other individuals of nearly the same status" then nearly everyone will be in contact with some people who spend more and so, nearly everyone will be dissatisfied with their incomes to about the same extent (Duesenberry, 30). Therefore, Duesenberry concludes that people judge their standard of living less by comparison with that of their associates than with reference to some more general ideal standard.

Much like Veblen, Duesenberry attempts to theorize how consumption goods are ranked within society. According to Duesenberry, purchases are made to "provide physical comfort or to implement the activities which make up the life of our culture" (Duesenberry, 20). Of course, there are a variety of ways to meet these needs, some of which are seen as better than others. It is maintained that at any given time, the knowledge of what is considered to be "better" is dependent on cultural relativism and is therefore, always changing with society but is more or less always agreed upon and understood as an ideal standard. This stems from a fairly clear ranking of goods in order of their observed superiority or inferiority, a sort of "trickle-down effect" that Veblen favors.

Application of Theories

There is not one theorist that is able to completely address every aspect or social implication that beauty pageants present, as they are a relatively new phenomenon. We can, however, work with what has been discussed in the past, using various features of the previously mentioned theories to most accurately apply them to the issue at hand. Thorstein Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption is used as a basic framework for understanding one of the motives behind our societal urge to conspicuously consume. It is important to realize when applying these theories to the mass-production of beauty pageants, that the "leisure class" referenced in Veblen and Duesenberry's writing is, for the purpose of this research, Western culture. The Western world's need to identify itself as a member of the leisure class, in an effort to separate from lower economic and social classes, represented by developing countries like Nepal, is incredibly relevant to the issue at large. Beauty pageants have been elevated to showcase the most beautiful girls a nation has to offer, separating the mundane from the extraordinary. Competing with other women and other nations (Miss World, Miss Universe, etc.) is a clear example of how our global society conspicuously consumes the female body and cultural identity.

Beauty pageants that have sprung up in developing countries all over the world easily fit to Duesenberry's "demonstration effect." Jenisha, the spokeswoman of Nepalese Fashion Home admitted that the thrill of beauty pageants is alluring and has a success rate that is incomparable to other program's attempts at preserving culture. They use the draw of participating in a beauty pageant to preserve culture. The unavoidable exposure to Western culture in Kathmandu has created a standard that everyone needs to meet, even if the implications are negative. This is a feasible explanation for why pageants have become so popular in Nepali society as of late. It is not necessarily because there is a large demand for pageants but rather, it allows Nepali women the chance to become what the Western world has made into the "ideal woman." The identities of most beauty queens are in large part written by male judges and journalists. The way in which their sexuality, gender and personality is presented is an illusion. This holds true for the ethnic contests as well. The entire process is a rehearsal; the girls are simply miming what they have seen on television and in magazines, providing entertainment for little girls and interested men.

Analysis

For the most part, the attempt to create the ideal Nepali woman has been successful. After the month of grooming classes the contestants have certainly changed. Before entering the pageant, they were shy, unconfident and modest. Pageants transform these natural girls into completely fabricated women. They are told to be confident, informed about what the judges are looking for in an answer, taught how to memorize, walk and look. Sure, beauty pageants are good for something: creating real versions of the quintessential Americanized Nepali girl. Even more frightening is the realization that the children's pageants are grooming these robotic women even before they hit puberty. While the two contestants of Miss Newa that I spoke to did in fact seem like confident, outgoing and chatty girls, their answers to my questions were just as rehearsed as the ones given at the Miss Diva pageant.

Interestingly, in the Miss Diva contest, contestant number 14, whose aspiration is to be a microbiologist had made the top three in the talent round that was held the week before. These contestants then perform their talent for a second time at the grand finale. She gave a speech expressing her concern and distaste with the stagnant status of trafficked women in Nepal. It was powerful to watch and by far, the most entertaining and inspiring part of the show. It is no real surprise that she did not claim the crown of Miss Talented. Instead, she was crowned Miss Creative.

During my conversations with individuals who were not involved with the organization of or participation in the ethnic talent contests, and had only briefly heard about their existence, common themes of distaste and disinterest toward the cultural shows emerged. I was told, "the cultural shows are good for their own community, not for the rest of the nation...other girls aren't given the same opportunity to get involved." Miss Diva, on the other hand, collects culture and community in one place, I was told. Our conversation turned political very quickly. He expressed his sentiments about Nepal being too divided. "Showing off is a problem, Nepali is Nepali, no matter the ethnicity." My landlord expressed a similar attitude when I brought up the topic of my research over dinner one night. "There is no coincidence that these sentiments were expressed by middle to upper class Chhetre and Brahmins. I later learned that Miss Diva was Rojal's first experience with pageants, thus, I found it hard to be convinced that he was the most reliable source.

There is a disproportionate number of indigenous girls compete in pageants, even contests outside of their culture. One explanation for this increase in ethnic participants is the notion of beauty in this region of the world. Straight black hair, rosy cheeks, and fairer skin: all qualities that are most typically found in girls of indigenous decent. While national pageants like Miss Nepal do not rule and divide between multiple people groups, they do not promote indigenous or minority queens either – only three Miss Nepals until date have not been from the privileged Bahun-Chhetri-Newar castes.

A certain type of girl enrolls in beauty pageants. The entry fee is typically around 800 rupees, followed by an 8,000 rupee bill for the grooming classes. Although I was consistently reassured that girls from all castes and economic backgrounds participate in the shows. While this is apparent in the surnames of the contestants, participation from every caste is hard to believe. The competitions cater to girls who have the money, time and parents who support their decision to enter. Even though the ethnic pageants are advertised as non-selective, the application requirements act as a way to separate the participants from the hopeful onlookers.

Ironically, most participants and organizers of the ethnic talent contests are vehemently opposed to the Miss Nepal competition, arguing that it is a clear and blatant way of “commodifying the female body,” said Kunda Dixit, editor of the Nepali Times with whom I met to gain a better understanding about how non-beauty pageant participants perceive the spectacles. This was only further emphasized when I met with the Nepalese Fashion Home. The tension between the indigenous pageants and those organized by the wealthy, high caste and ethnic-free is striking.

In Miss Newa, the women who participate are keenly aware of the feminist critiques of pageants. Suneeta acknowledged this in our conversation, stated that beauty pageants do not represent “the real concept of Nepal.” However, she was quick to jump to their defense, arguing that the only realistic way to promote and preserve culture is to accept the “good parts of Western society.” By casting themselves as “cultural talent shows,” the Miss Newa pageant organizers in Kathmandu hope to side step the exploitative aspects of “beauty pageants” (a stereotypical blonde beauty queen posing in a bikini, a large sparkly crown resting on top of her hair sprayed do) and use “culture” as grounds for how they are different from pageants like Miss Diva or Miss Nepal. While do they do have a point – the general pageants have the smallest traces of any cultural identity, besides the fact that every participant is Nepali – the allure of winning a crown and spending the year being interviewed by various newspapers and talkshows is relevant across cultures.

There is a huge incentive to compete in any type of pageant. Winners typically receive one lak while the First and Second runners up are awarded anywhere from 25,000-50,000 rupees. Various other prizes are presented depending on the sponsor for that year’s competition. Crown holders can obtain anything from a laptop, mobiles, or scholarships. I asked the two winners of Miss Newa why they decided to join the pageant and their answers revealed that they were initially attracted to the idea of being in a pageant; they hurriedly modified their answers though, sharing that they also wanted to promote the traditions of their culture.

It is also important to recognize how extreme the globalization of beauty pageants is. For international pageants like Miss Nepal and Miss Tibet, the contestants become embodiments of the nation and culture itself. Historically, a connection between womanhood and protection of culture is longlived and is only further epitomized in beauty pageants. In hosting such ethnicity – and nationality – based beauty pageants within and across national borders, “a woman’s body is used to demarcate political power” (Madsen). This can easily be understood by China’s interference with Miss Tibet’s participation in international pageantry.

Beauty pageants are not all to blame, however. Ethnicity and sexuality both feed into the consumerist demands of the fashion industry, the “ideal woman,” and recent attempts to create a bridge between modern and traditional culture. It is no surprise that beauty pageants are stages for the highly politicized spheres of nationality and gender, two of the most defining and conscious identities – where a woman is the perfect device for the job, responsible for protecting and promoting race, sexuality and traditions. “Such beauty pageants focusing on ethnic and national pride at best encourage communities to appreciate diversity. However, at worst, it signifies how a woman is to be the caretaker of culture and a vessel of political activities” (Tzu-Chun-Wu, 21).

Conclusion

For decades, beauty pageants have been seen by many scholars as philistine cultural events that only serve to reinforce patriarchal images of ideal beauty rarely attained by most women. White feminists (Faludi 1992) have been particularly vocal about the harm that beauty pageants have created and continue to create in perpetuating unattainable bodies and appearances. While much of the critique of pageants is clear and incontestable – judging in pageants objectifies women as symbols, their bodies used to promote nationalist, ethnic or promotional goods – refusal to analyze beauty pageants is unrealistic. Their growing popularity around the world is undeniable and when really studied in depth, they have the potential to reveal numerous social facts about the global society.

Even though most everyone I spoke with were confident that pageants are beneficial to women as they help to improve their self-confidence, develop their personality and if applicable, their cultural identity, I am still not convinced. What I experienced at the Miss Diva show and in my interviews with the Miss Newas was nowhere near what my perception of what an empowered woman is. The answers they give are so obviously rehearsed, memorized and most likely, printed in a pamphlet titled “Good Answers,” and distributed to the contestants. And sure, the grooming classes are beneficial; they transform reserved, modest girls into a man’s idealized form of a modern, yet virginal woman, what girl would not want that?

As I stated earlier, beauty pageants objectify women and foster feelings of insecurity. There are, however, overriding benefits for the ethnic talent contests. Because of the racial discrimination against minorities in mainstream pageants like Miss Nepal, the ethnic contests give women of those backgrounds an opportunity to achieve recognition within the existing commercialized society. Ethnic beauty pageants provide an opportunity to examine how idealized versions of womanhood reflect broader concerns about power and culture. The editors of a collection of published essays entitled *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage*, argue that pageants:

Showcase values, concepts and behavior that exist at the center of a group’s sense of itself and exhibit values of morality, gender and place...The beauty contest stage is where these identities and cultures can be – and frequently are – made public and visible.

What is really distasteful however, is how Western society has affected the ways in which indigenous cultures attempt to preserve their culture. The formulation of gender and ethnic identity presented by the cultural talent shows throughout Kathmandu suggest the vulnerability of the ethnic minority groups living in a huge metropolis. Through the demonstration effect outlined by Duesenberry, conspicuous consumption has become a global phenomenon, forcing ethnic groups to submit to the capitalist world market in an effort to maintain their ethnic identities. Suneeta told me, “without your culture, you have no identification.” Regardless of the self-esteem and language rehabilitation that Miss Newa produces, it still commodifies culture, making it marketable as a source of entertainment. No matter how much the ethnic contests wish to separate themselves from the beauty pageant image, there is no denying that they are beauty pageants, even in the name of culture, hypocritizing their professed aversion.

Ethnic talent contests, the way they operate now, will not last long in our ever changing and modernizing society. Slowly, as we become more integrated and more immune to the

dangers of conspicuous consumption, the cultural aspects that still remain in these shows will peter out. I have a hard time believing that authenticity can be salvaged using a reproduced model that is the beauty pageant. The only ray of hope is that the ethnic talent contests are still able to obtain positive results and educate their communities by modifying some of the aspects of beauty pageants, despite the oppression they produce in every other context.

Appendix I – Miss Diva 2013 Official Judge Questions

What is the biggest challenge to young people today?

If there is one thing you could do to change the world what would it be?

Why did you enter this pageant in spite of being in a full-fledged career?

Why do you think we should choose you as one of our final contestants?

What would you do if we reject you today?

Define ‘Mother.’

What makes you confident?

Do you consider yourself to be a giver or a taker? Why?

What do you expect to gain by competing in pageantry?

What is the biggest accomplishment in your life?

What have you learned about yourself today?

Who do you love most and why?

What do you want to be, a successful Miss Diva or a popular Miss Diva? Why?

Regarding your future, would you give priority to your parents’ decision or your own decision, why?

Life is said to be an examination where the questions are unknown, do you agree or disagree?

Why?

Global warming is said to be global warning, why?

How important do you think positive attitude is? And what could be the advantage of being positive?

Do you think taking interest in the political situation of the country defines being a responsible citizen? How?

In today’s context, how important do you think is looking good?

What power would you like to have, to experience the change, power to run, power to fly or power to swim, why?

Did you learn anything new from competing in Miss Diva?

Appendix II – Photo Album



Miss Tibet 2011, Tenzin Yangkyi



Several contestants who chose to showcase their talent by performing a traditional Kumari dance at Miss Newa 2012



The winner of Miss Little Newa 2011 accompanied by the First and Second Runners Up



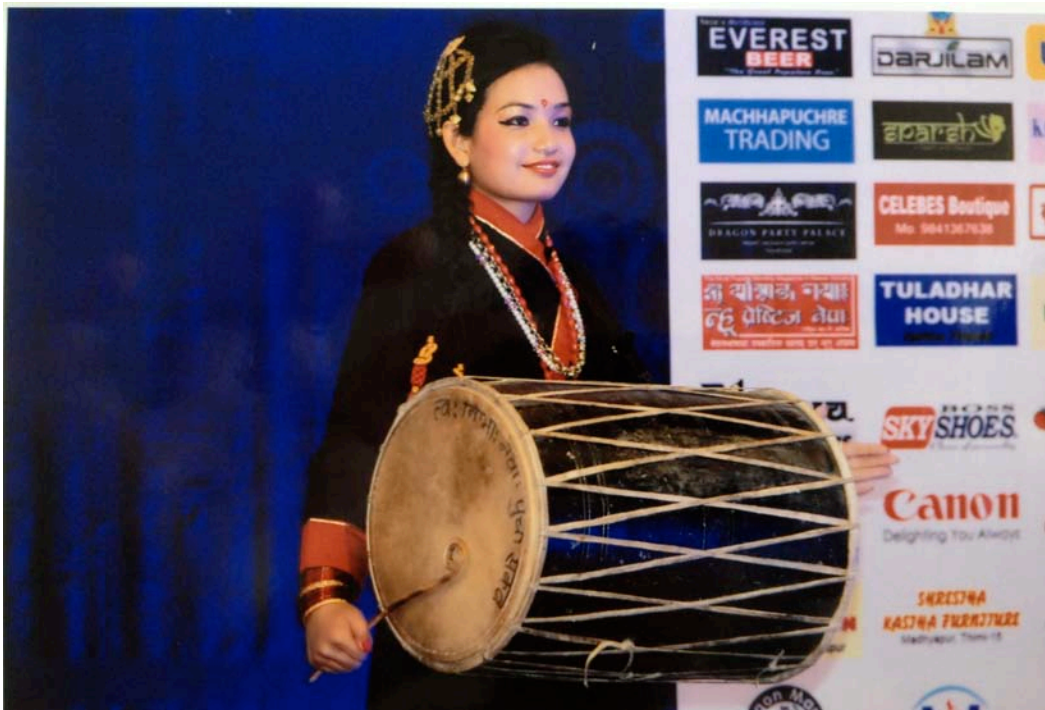
Miss Little Newa contestants posing in traditional costumes, called Jyaphu, for their photo shoots



Suneeta Dangol, Miss Newa 2011 places the crown on the new winner, Sudina Shrestha



The 7th annual Miss Newa, Suneeta Dangol, poses for the camera



A contestant plays Newari Dhime drums during the talent round



A perfect example of how Miss Newa contestants interpret “modified culture” through the best dressed round. This contestant is seen wearing what is considered a modern gown but has incorporated culture into the dress by embroidering Lord Buddha on the front

Another Miss Newa contestant's outfit depicts typical Newari food; fish, rice, soybeans, saag and potatoes.



Again, food is represented in the bottom half of this participant's dress. On top, she represents Kumari, the living goddess



The top ten contestants take the stage at the Miss Diva pageant, anxiously awaiting the interview round



The newly crowned Miss Diva in between the First and Second Runners Up

Limitations

All throughout the Independent Study Project period, I felt extremely limited by my inability to speak Nepali. Most of the contestants and organizers of pageants with whom I spoke had very basic English-speaking abilities. Thus, in interviews where a translator was not present, our conversations were restricted to their vocabulary and comprehension skills. Additionally, I found that almost everyone I contacted was unwilling to say anything negative about their experience with pageants. This in itself was a huge restriction as I felt that several conversations I conducted were inadvertently censored. I am not sure if this was because I am considered to be an outsider or because it is not customary in Nepali culture to articulate their irritations with the system and its societal implications. Regardless, I think this was, to some extent, inevitable.

As always, time constraints limited the amount of research I was able to complete during the one-month period. Mostly, it was difficult to make relationships and find connections until the second week and even third week into the allotted research time. Reflecting back, the countless phone calls, unanswered emails and frantic reading of the map was in large part, the most worthwhile result, although it certainly compromised the research expectations I had set for myself before beginning.

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Lobsang Wangyel, conducted via Email, April 12, 2013

Rojal Basnet, Sundhara, Kathmandu, Nepal, April 18, 2013

Kunda Dixit, Patan, Kathmandu, Nepal, April 21, 2013

Jenisha Manandhar, Bagbazar, Kathmandu, Nepal, April 22, 2013

Sudina Shrestha, Bagbazar, Kathmandu, Nepal, April 25, 2013

Neha Paudel, conducted via Email, May 1, 2013

Suneeta Dangol, Bagbazar, Kathmandu, Nepal, May 2, 2013

Suggestions for Further Research

The research I conducted attempted to analyze many aspects of the different types of beauty pageants and their respective effects within Kathmandu. As a result, my findings just skimmed the surface of the pageants' attempt at producing social, sexual and cultural identities. A more specific thesis may have the opportunity to uncover fascinating and meaningful results. There is a huge amount of research that has yet to be done about this subject matter. My research did not even begin to discuss the implications of what the standard of an "ideal woman" has become since Western beauty pageants have begun. Analyzing Nepal's perspective of beauty would reveal fascinating results. I would suggest that further research on this topic should aim to focus on gaining an understanding of how the greater ethnic community, most especially the elderly population, perceive the pageants by analyzing the tension that exists between the older generations and the new as they both attempt to preserve their culture in divergent ways. I only briefly mentioned the strained relations between ethnic talent contests and the general pageants, but this too, is an aspect that would be fascinating to examine in greater detail. Further research could also be conducted on pageants that attempt to reinforce caste identity within ethnic groups, like Miss Khadgi, a caste of Newar; my limitations did not allow me to pursue this further.



Two Miss Newas, Suneeta, Sudina and me after our meeting!