A Road to Somewhere: Changing Trade and the Adaptation to Survive in Humla

Sophie Louaillier

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A Road to Somewhere: Changing Trade and the Adaptation to Survive in Humla

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Abstract
This paper is an investigation of the changing trade in Humla, one of the most remote regions in Nepal. I particularly focus on the road being built from the village of Hilsa, which lies on the border of China and Nepal, to Simikot, the main town. This road will be accessible by all the villagers who live on the link trail now – the trail they walk on with their animals in order to reach the border site. Trade is especially important in Humla; there are no roads available to get there from the Nepal side, so everything must be flown in by propeller plane, or bought in Purang in China, and carried back to the village with the help of animals such as zopas and horses. By having conversations with shopkeepers, businessmen, and villagers, I hoped to gain insight into how their lives will be affected by the completion of this road, how they have adapted to live in Humla thus far, and how they will adapt to survive once the road brings new economic changes. Sections of this paper include voices from the villages of Muchu and Khangalgaun, and opinions of businessmen working in the Tumkot Bazaar. It also includes an important section that discusses what might happen when the road ultimately enforces modernization. This paper highlights the positive and negative effects of this new road, and also discusses the Tumkot Bazaar and its shopkeepers, noting what will happen to this bazaar once the road is completed.
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade in the Past</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before and After the Road from Tumkot Bazaar to Hilsa</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muchu</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khangalgaun</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Effects of Modernization</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The Rosy Days of the Tumkot Market are Gone”</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government-Supplied Rice</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Road to Nepalgunj</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Cash Economy vs the Traditional Barter System</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Interviews</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Research</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Methodology
Throughout this research process, I relied mainly on interviews I conducted while out in the field to gain knowledge about trade and its effects on the people of Humla. Almost all of my interviews were translated by my guide, Sonam Lama, except for one translated by Wangdak Lama, and two in which the interviewees spoke English. In the interviews, Sonam Lama explained who I was and what my research was about. Since most interviewees could not speak English, Sonam obtained consent and then translated the permission to proceed with the interview. All interviews were conducted with the consent of the interviewee, and consent to use names and pictures, if taken, were given orally to Sonam, who then translated that it was ok to use their name and picture in my paper.

Examples of some questions asked during interviews include: how do you make money?; were you or your parents a part of the barter system?; what do you think about the new road being built?; what are some positive and negative effects of the road?; how has your lifestyle been affected by trade?; do you think the completion of the road will affect traditions or cultures? Notes of the interview, including direct quotes translated by Sonam, were written my fieldwork notebook and were later reviewed. The majority of interviews were conducted in the home of the interviewee, or in their shop or hotel. Interviews were mainly conducted in the Tumkot Bazaar, Muchu, and Khangalgaun, but there were a few done in Hilsa, Yalwang, Kermi, and Simikot.
Introduction

According to Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf in his book *Himalayan Traders*, “The whole of upper Humla is dependent on trade” (von Fürer-Haimendorf 250). The salt-trade between Nepal and Tibet, now China, whose collapse he expresses in his book written in 1988 “is not yet imminent,” has ended. Now, everything requires money. This past trading system, which supplied peoples of Humla and Tibet with the necessities to survive through the exchange of food crops and grain for salt and wool, is no longer a viable solution to get goods from China because of the Chinese’s strict border control. The people of Humla have had to find alternative ways to survive in the cash economy put in place and controlled by the Chinese. They have adapted and changed their lifestyles in order to thrive in this new system, and will continue to adapt in order to utilize the road that will ultimately shape the next system of trade.

This paper is a presentation of changing trade in the Humla region – the uppermost region of Nepal in the northwest corner that borders China, and how the people of Humla are affected by this evolution of trade. Because trade is constantly evolving, the people of Humla are forced to adapt in order to survive in such a remote area. This study focuses on the new highway that is being constructed, which will connect the main town of Simikot with the border site at Hilsa. This road will pass through multiple villages currently located along the link path, which is what villagers, businessmen, and tourists use to walk from village to village, ultimately arriving at the border site between Nepal and China. The people of Humla rely on trade in order to get supplies and food that they are unable to produce themselves. Although the villages are all farming communities, crops yield barely enough to last the year, requiring that villagers travel to Simikot, Nepalgunj, or Purang in China to buy their food, clothes, shoes, and other household items.

According to Chewang Lama, a politician for Humla and an advocate for community development in Humla, there used to be a food shortage in Tibet a long time ago. This is why the barter economy was successful – because the people of Humla needed salt and wool from Tibet, and Tibetans needed grains and other food crops from Humla; they had a symbiotic relationship. But, Chewang Lama says, now there is a food problem in Humla. Farmers’ crops last a mere couple of months, let alone a full year. People of Humla need to go to places like Purang and Simikot to get the extra necessities they require. Purang is the most popular place to go because they have a much wider, and less expensive, selection than Simikot. However, since Purang is in China, those Humlis who choose to travel there must follow the Chinese rules. The Chinese controls taxes, the amount of goods allowed across the border, the sole use of money, and the exchange rate. Because of this, the barter economy has switched to a cash economy.

According to Chewang Lama and countless villagers, villagers can make a little
bit of money in order to purchase goods from Purang. There are a few ways that people can earn money, he says. The most popular are collecting and selling herbal roots, such as *katukai*, a bitter root, and the caterpillar, *yarsagumba*, both used for medicinal purposes. The other popular way to earn money in the off-season when villagers cannot farm due to the cold weather is to collect wood from India and other areas of Nepal in order to make a wooden cup. These cups are either sold to businessmen who then sell them at Purang, or are taken straight to Purang by the villagers themselves. This need for money, Chewang Lama says, has made people greedy and has caused corruption among the people of Humla. “Humla,” he says, “is in serious transition,” in regard to the evolving trade and cash economy, and the construction of the road.

Tenzin Sagar says the reliance on Chinese goods and the Chinese-controlled border is so great that if the border closes, people will die from the lack of food. But, he says, the reliance on just Chinese goods is not good, as it may crash Humla’s economy due to the increasing exchange rate and tax rates. The road is a welcome sight to Tenzin. “The road needs to be built,” he says. It will boost Simikot’s economy and can supply more jobs to the 50,000 people living in Humla. The road from Hilsa to Simikot, as well as the other road being built from Simikot to Nepalgunj, a city located on the southwestern border of Nepal and India, will allow trade to flow through Nepal, rather than halting it at Simikot, and will decrease the reliance on Chinese goods at Purang.

In order to study this changing trade and how the construction and completion of the highway will affect villagers and businessmen alike, I traveled to Humla, trekking along the same link path that villagers use to travel to Hilsa. The map below shows the trekking route taken. The majority of my research was conducted in the village of Muchu, the village of Khangalgaun, and the Tumkot Bazaar. I trekked all the way to Tumkot from Simikot. It takes my guide three hours to travel from Simikot to Khangalgaun, but for me it took at least eight hours; it takes four hours to travel from Khangalgaun to Yalwang, but ten for me. From Yalwang to Muchu it typically takes two hours, but I took four hours to arrive. These numbers show that this path is a difficult path to walk on, and it is made even more difficult when there are animals traveling along the same path. From Tumkot, I took the truck to Hilsa; the road is as dangerous as the villagers describe. Tight turns and steep cliffs make it a frightening ride, but a necessity in order to arrive at Hilsa. The road will certainly make traveling from villages to Purang much easier and will improve villagers’ lifestyles. But using the road via vehicles will bring new challenges and fears, and will affect the cultures and traditions that are already fading away. It is important to learn about the evolving trade and the construction of the highway in Humla because of how much it affects individual villagers, their families, and their neighbors. The people of Humla have adapted so many times to new systems that it
is clear they will continue to adapt and change their way of life in order to survive.

*Image provided by Patricia Owens. The red dotted line shows the main trekking trail that goes west to Hilsa.*
Trade in the Past

Many villagers from Muchu, Khangalgaun, or shopkeepers in the Tumkot Bazaar spoke of the past barter system with either first-hand experience or with knowledge handed down by their parents or grandparents. Trans-Himalayan trade is inherent to Humla’s history; it was how people all across the border between Nepal and Tibet on the Nepali side were able to receive salt and wool from the Tibetans, either in order to keep or to trade for other food or home necessities in other areas that would help them have enough to survive. All along the border, these exchanges were the same. For example, in Kamal Ratna Tuladhar’s book *Caravan to Lhasa: A Merchant of Kathmandu in Traditional Tibet*, “The Tibetan town of Kuti was also a key emporium where merchants came together to barter Nepalese rice for Tibetan salt” (Tuladhar 38). For Tuladhar and his family, Kuti, and Lhasa, in Tibet was where these exchanges took place. For the villagers I spoke with from Humla, Purang, or Taklakot in Nepali, is where Nepalese grains and crops were exchanged for salt and wool. Trade relations, Tuladhar says in his Foreword, were opened “following the royal wedding of Nepalese princess Bhrikuti and Tibetan King Songsten Gampo in the seventh century” (Tuladhar, Foreword). Since then, trade relations between Nepal and Tibet have been strong, and allow villagers to travel freely across the border.

In his article, “Adaption to a Changing Salt Trade: The View from Humla,” J.L Ross says, “In the last 15 years, the character of the system has changed substantially. Politically the most important event was the Chinese coming to complete political power in 1959... new policies were made regarding exchange of commodities between Nepal and Tibet” (Ross 45). This centuries-old system was suddenly banished because of the Chinese control of the border, forcing the people of Humla to adapt to a new system – a new economy. While the majority of this trade was Nepali grains – local rice – for salt and wool, many villagers spoke of how they would bring different goods to Purang in Tibet, such as wooden beams and butter, to trade for salt and wool or other items. As many villagers will describe, the border was free to cross without papers or passports, which made traveling to Purang much easier. Villagers were able to describe what trade was actually like before the Chinese control of the border and the introduction of a cash economy. According to David Citrin in his dissertation "The Anatomy of Ephemeral Care: Health, Hunger, and Short-Term Humanitarian Intervention in Northwest Nepal," the exchange rates between Tibetan salt and Nepalese grain increased, which also reduced the amount of trade and exchange of salt and wool for local grains (Citrin 207). As Citrin says, “people have become much more dependent on food and other goods coming from Tibet and China, and have engaged in new economic activities and foodways” (212).
Bahadur Lama, a man from Muchu, says, "In olden days [there] was exchange – barter systems. [We would] bring rocks, wood, different furniture materials to China. [Tibetans would] bring salt. These days, there is no barter system. [We] pay for things in cash. The barter system stopped 15 years ago. Because of this, China is being quite rich. In olden days," he says, "[we] would bring wood and building materials [wooden beams] to Taklakot [Purang] in exchange for salt and flour. [We traded] only with Tibetans. In olden days, Taklakot is not like today. It was a Tibetan settlement. At that time, there were only one or two government officials... I would help and go with my father to learn the business. [There were] not many shops to buy things, only two – Tibetan and Chinese-owned. Things [were] bought from only these stores... At that time [we] could only buy cloth – not clothes. These days [there are] many buildings and shops. [Then, we] could only buy tea and flour. These days [we] can buy more food." This description of trade in the past and of Purang, the place where exchanges took place, shows how developed trade is now, and how much dependency there is on imported goods from China.

Kyamjok Lama, a farmer from Khangalgauin, also shares what trade was like before the Chinese occupation of Tibet, and what it is like now in Purang. Kyamjok Lama says, "I went to Purang. The border was free – no [need for] passports, papers, or permits. I would take animals to Purang. But now [they are] not permitted. I used to buy wool. For half a kilogram of wool it was three Yuan. At that time I sold two zopas\textsuperscript{1} to the Chinese – Tibetans. From that wool I would make my own clothes. I get things from China [now]. Now a days I don’t need to take horses and zopas as before. Now I need to spend money for all the

\textsuperscript{1} Zopas are male large animals that look to be a cross between a cow and a yak. They are used to carry goods along the link path and to help plow the fields.
things – transportation and food. Before, Purang was a rural place – no road or any facilities. Tibetans at that time would bring salt with help from sheep and goats. Now it is very developed – a huge city. Before people were good and nice. Now people are rude.” A big factor in trade in Humla now is that villagers and businessmen must cross the border controlled by the Chinese. It is a very strict border and it is expensive to pay both Chinese and Nepali taxes. As some other villagers described, the cash economy has made people greedy and not very nice on either side of the border. The exchange rate has also drastically increased over the years. Phurbu Lama describes a bit about the exchange rate and how much things cost before and after the Chinese took control of the border.

Phurbu Lama, a 76-year-old from Khangalgaun, says, “At that time there was not much trade. We used to sell butter to Chinese people and villagers of Limi. If I go to China I take some kind of crops or beans and exchange with salt and wool. At that time, [it cost] five Nepali Rupees for one kilogram of butter. But right now it is around 1,300 Nepali Rupees for one kilogram due to economic growth. Now lots of people have lots of money. When I was young, at Purang it was all Tibetan. Chinese didn’t occupy Tibet at that time. I would take yak and horses to Tibet. At that time the border was free. Now the border is very tight – strict. At that time when Chinese occupied Tibet, there was a huge war. Chinese killed lots of Tibetans – Tibetans ran away. Some ran away from this border and from Limi. For Nepali people it was easy to trade. But now it is hard for them as well as Tibetans.” Phurbu Lama has also recounted the Chinese occupation of Tibet and how it has affected trade between China and Nepal.

Thukchi, also from Khangalgaun, really recounts the goods for goods exchange, saying, “My parents participated in the barter system. They would take local rice and exchange with salt and wool. At that time, one container of rice is equal to five containers of salt. If they had enough [rice], they would exchange for one or two goats for meat and our grazing area. At that time they would go one time per year [to get goods]. Now I go two to three times to Purang.” It is important to recognize that while Phurbu Lama spoke of using cash to buy butter and what economic growth has done to the exchange rate, the majority of families were doing what Thukchi’s family did – exchanging goods for goods rather than goods for cash.

Bahadur Lama describes the trips to Purang and describes what accommodations were like on the way. He says that people would go as a group rather than individually. “One leader would go with the group. [If the] group leader says we have to stay in a place with cattle, we have to stay. If he says go, we have to go. [He] looks after cattle and herds. [He] takes care of everything – food, buying goods, taking care of everyone. These days, [people] don’t go with leaders. [They] go

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2 Limi is another area in the Humla region.
their own way. In olden days, [you] could see ten to fifteen groups going up and down – to and from – from Hilsa... In olden days, no teashops, hotels, motels. [They] stayed outside on their own.”

Now, it is clear how different trade is. Not only has there been an increase of trade, but also there are more facilities along the way for villagers and shopkeepers. There is a pure reliance on cash rather than what is grown off your own land. The main reason for this shift was the Chinese occupation of Tibet and their strict control of the border. Now Humlis require passports and papers, which they must go to Simikot to procure. Trade commodities have also changed from salt, wool, and flour to all food items, as well as more commercialized clothing products and items such as rugs, blankets, kitchen utensils, the wood-burning stoves, among all other goods. The villagers of Humla rely completely on the Chinese for everything; if the Chinese close the border, then people will have to find a new place to get all of their food, clothes, and household necessities. Trade has changed completely from the old barter system, and will continue to evolve especially now with the construction of the highway from Simikot to Hilsa.
Before and After the Road from Tumkot Bazaar to Hilsa

Although the road has not been fully completed, connecting Simikot to Hilsa, a small portion has been completed and is used regularly: the road from Tumkot Bazaar to Hilsa. This has already affected the villagers’ lives, cutting off days from each trip to Purang – to China – making traveling to get goods a much more efficient task. Even with the road, it takes multiple days to get to Purang. According to Thukchi and Pema Thongdol, it takes around two days to reach Tumkot with animals. Then by truck it takes one day to get to Purang to purchase goods. Then they must return to Khangalgaun with the animals and the goods. Depending on how close a person’s village is to the border, the amount of time it takes them to make a trip to Purang varies, but it is clearly a lot of hard work and a struggle to get the goods they need to survive.

Lhamu, a 72-year-old woman from Khangalgaun says that it took her husband 15 days to go to Purang and come back before the road was built. This amount of time seemed typical as many others also said it would take around 14 or 15 days to reach Purang and return home before the road was built. Many people discussed the positives and negatives of the road, and only some are represented here. Lhamu shared that she would worry a lot because even the link path is not particularly safe.
to walk on, especially with animals. The path is steep and tiring. It cuts through sides of mountains, and edges along cliffs; one wrong step and you or your animal could fall down the side of the mountain. The terrain is extremely dusty and rocky and is difficult to walk on even when you aren’t carrying pounds of goods on your back. There are rickety suspension bridges and the path is extremely steep. But now with the road, Lhamu, and many others, says she worries even more now than before. The vehicles are old and not good, and the road is very narrow. Many say that there can be accidents and injuries, and the possibility that the driver could be drinking before driving is just too great. Other women whose husbands, brothers, and sons travel on the road, and men who actually travel on the road, agree with this drawback. But still, many say, it is worth the risk. The benefits outweigh the detriments of the road.

While there are a lot of risks associated with the road, Lama Tsering talked about some benefits. Almost every person I spoke with also gave these reasons as to why the road is good for all villagers – all people of Humla. “[With the road] we don’t need to walk,” she says. “We don’t need to carry things. We don’t need to keep animals. But we need to pay money. There will be no use for horses and zopas [anymore].” Lama Tsering highlights how everyone’s lifestyle will become easier; physically it will be easier to get places, but it seems like people will need to be more creative and work harder to figure out how to make money in order to actually utilize the vehicles on the road, since using vehicles will be much more expensive.
**Muchu**

The village of Muchu is located on the link path that the people of Humla use to reach Hilsa, the village on the border between Nepal and China. Many people pass through Muchu with their animals – *zopas*, horses, donkeys, mules, and goats. According to Martin Saxer and his article “Between China and Nepal: Trans-Himalayan Trade and the Second Life of Development in Upper Humla,” traditional traders used goat and sheep caravans (Saxer 38). Saxer claims the caravan system is slowly dying out. The village of Muchu resides between two main areas, the first being majority residential homes, the second containing the government school – Khasarpani Middle School – the students’ hostel, some homes, and a few shops and hotels. There are 27 different houses and approximately 200 people living in Muchu. It is only a 20 to 30 minute walk to the village of Tumkot and the Tumkot Bazaar. While the link path passes through Muchu, the new road being built is located on the other side of the Karnali River. Two shopkeepers and one farmer spoke about their experiences living in Muchu and how they think their lives will be affected by the completion of the road from Hilsa to Simikot, essentially creating a highway that will be traveled by all. They speak of how other villagers of Muchu will be affected. Other people of other villages, including Khangalgaun, Yalwang, and Kermi, echo much of what these three say about the benefits and drawbacks of the road, proving that the majority of villagers will be affected in very similar ways. These are their stories.

Bahadur Lama smiles and shows off the gap between his front two teeth. A puff of gray and black hair sits on top of his head. He is sitting on a small block of wood, leaning against the thin tin wall of the kitchen and dining area for the teachers of the school at Khasarpani Middle School in the village of Muchu. His hands rest on his legs, his belly pushing over his belt. He has lived in Muchu for the last 40 years, but is originally from the village of Yari, located approximately halfway between Muchu and Hilsa. He is a farmer, a furniture maker, and looks after his sheep and goats. The wind blows and rattles the tin roof as Bahadur Lama tells me about his childhood, trade in the past, trade in Muchu now, as well as what he thinks will happen to the village of Muchu once the road connects from Hilsa to Simikot. He tells of his anticipations about the road, and how he and his family will be affected once the road is completed.

Bahadur Lama describes how he earns money, and shares how the road will affect him and his way of life. “I earn little income looking after sheep. [But there are] alternative ways to earn money. I can earn more money elsewhere. I did trekking work. From that I make better money than going after sheep. If I go after sheep, [while sleeping we] might be hunted by tigers. With tourists I am able to learn things – learn of tourists – [and] be much smarter.” Like many farmers in Humla, Bahadur Lama collects herbs to sell and wood to make furniture. He sells both the herbs and the furniture to different communities, such as China and within
his own village. However, Bahadur Lama explains that before, the Chinese did not accept the herbal roots, and many people were unable to legally sell the herbs to make money. Now, he says, the Chinese allow herbal medicine to be sold at Purang. He says that by selling furniture and the herbs, he can earn decent cash income, which is much more than he can earn by farming. “It is enough to make ends meet,” he says.

He has five children and, like many other people, sends them to school outside of Muchu, in places such as Simikot, Kathmandu, or India. Bahadur Lama makes enough to live day-to-day – to survive – and is able to have some savings. But like many other businessmen and farmers, savings are not usually very much. Bahadur Lama continues: “[The road] won’t affect collecting herbs and wood. [But] I need enough money in order to transport. If I don’t have enough money to pay for tax, [my] goods will stopped. Whatever work I’m doing is enough. I can have savings for my family and 5 children... I will continue to work [because] I don’t have an alternative [to make money]. To educate 5 children is difficult. This is the only [way] to manage things in my family.” Although Bahadur Lama may not know if what he does to make money now will be enough to transport his furniture items and herbs in the future, he must continue to do this work because he has no other option. If the money he makes ends up not being enough, then he will adapt and change or add jobs in order to ensure he can continue to support his children, his family, and himself.

Bahadur Lama says what almost everyone in Muchu, the Tumkot Bazaar, and Khangalgaun agree with. Many other people speak about how the road will provide certain abilities to those with money, but may severely affect those with no money to their name. Bahadur Lama explains: “The road is good for the rich people. Bad for the poor people because [they] lack certain opportunities. [People] carry certain things [goods] on horse – [they can] make a little money. Now if the road comes, everyone goes by bus or truck. [It] would be bad economy.” What is shifting is that before the road, animals and their owners carried all goods – food items, clothing, household items, etc. Those who are poor can carry other people’s items in exchange for money, therefore earning a little income to provide for their own family. Once the road connects, Bahadur Lama says, the trucks will carry the goods, and what used to be a small source of income for some will be gone. Even he will be affected. He says, “I have horse and I have zopa. Now [with the road] I don’t have work. Now that work will be done by road – by trucks.”

He describes further how the road will affect poor people versus how it might affect richer people. “When there is transportation to Simikot, it will create a bigger gap between poor and rich people. Because rich people – they buy vehicles. They bring things on their own vehicles. Poor people rely on rich people’s vehicles. Whatever is earned so far will go into pockets of rich people. In olden days, [we’d]
take horses and zopas to transport free of cost. To go and come [now], we pay every time. [That] money goes to rich people, and their income will grow.”

He explains even more how the road will affect those living in Muchu: “If the road comes through Muchu it may have some benefits.” He says the road will only provide an easier lifestyle. “[We] don't have to walk and only carry load on our back, on our horse... [But the road] will not improve way of life [economically]. [Villagers] can make little business now with shops – teashops and guesthouses. People can make money.” However, the road – the highway – is being built on the opposite side of the Karnali River of Muchu, and so ultimately the road will not pass through Muchu.

Image of the new highway, located opposite to Muchu on the other side of the Karnali River.

The link trail that everyone travels on will still exist, but will not be as widely used because of the option to use a vehicle. Based on what Bahadur Lama and other villagers and shopkeepers of Muchu say, it seems like the local economy of Muchu will be in a decline once the road is completed, as there will no longer be many people using the link road – therefore not passing through Muchu. Although the road will most likely have a negative impact on Muchu's economy, many people, including Bahadur Lama, want the road to be completed – and soon – because it will
make trade and doing business much easier and more efficient, and will provide the people of Humla more options to choose where to get goods from.

Bahadur Lama expresses that he thinks shopkeepers will be strongly and negatively affected with the completion of the road. Nyima is a shopkeeper in Muchu and shares what she thinks will happen to her shop, and her life, in the future once the road is connected.

Nyima’s shop is small and rectangular, but has big windows that let in the light and makes it seem bigger than it is. There are three benches and three thin wooden beams set up to act as tables under the windows and along two walls. Along the back wall are shelves filled with goods for sale: whiskey, Chinese alcohol, instant noodles, and cigarettes, among other items. A round baby lies wrapped in blankets on the furthest bench from the door. Nyima sits on the bench near the wood-burning stove, a huge silver teakettle rests on top of the stove, and a fire blazes within. Nyima’s long graying hair has been twisted and tied up; turquoise earrings hang from her ears. Her chupa – traditional Tibetan dress – is ripped along the side and pinned, which is easily viewable when she leans to replace the teakettle with an open pot. She fills the pot partly with water and then adds pellets of tea and powdered milk to the water. She stirs it with a big ladle and then turns to face me. She laughs before answering any questions, her responses paired with a smile.

Nyima has lived her whole life – 53 years – in Muchu, and has worked as a shopkeeper and hotel owner for one year. Before being a hotel owner, she was a farmer, like everyone in Muchu. She says she does not like owning a hotel because, as she explains, at home she has to wash clothes and do dishes. “Here, also, I have to wash clothes and do dishes,” she says. But for her children owning the hotel is beneficial. “Being a farmer, we have to do very hard work. I don’t like it,” she shares. “Before, I struggled a lot in this village more than other villagers. I was poor before... No one helped with anything – any problems economically – when I was young and now. I struggled by myself. I’m raising my kids by myself and with my husband... I am profitable [here]. Sometimes many travelers travel through here. Now a days customers decrease. It is according to the season,” she says. Because the weather is starting shift to much colder weather at this time, usually the middle or end of November, there are less people traveling to the Tumkot Bazaar or Purang to get their goods. They have already made their final trips for necessities and are preparing to face the cold winter where the path and roads are blocked by snow.

Nyima shares her past with me, telling how she and her family got supplies that they were unable to grow or produce themselves. “When I was small, my parents didn’t have boys. Only three girls. We had goat and sheeps. We used to go with sheep for grazing. I would go with my father... Sometimes they would go to Hilsa to get salt and sell [it at a place] very far away from Humla [and] bring back rice. When I was young I went to Hilsa. But not now. At that time there was nothing at Hilsa. No
hotels, no shops, nothing. [I would] take wood from here to Hilsa [and] sell to Chinese people. With that money I could by salt. At that time [there was] a shortage of food in Tibet. From here [we would] take tsampa\(^3\) and food crops and wood [and] sell to Tibetans. [We would] get salt and Tibetan tea [in return]... Most people in Humla at that time would sell wood [beams] to Tibetans. Even I carried beams. I’d change for clothes and shoes. Taking beams to China was illegal... because cutting forest and trees was illegal because trees and jungles [are] needed in the future... [We] would cross the border by hiding at night. It was difficult to carry long beams and to travel at night. People [were] very scared of the [Nepali] policemen. [They would] dominate people at that time and have power to do anything. At that time [there were] no rules, no regulations.” Here, Nyima highlights how important the barter system was to her and her family, as well as other villagers. It was the only way she and her family could get cloth for clothes and other necessities besides food.

However now, with the border controlled by the Chinese, people must cross the border to go to Purang, or go to the Tumkot Bazaar to get goods such as rice, flour, clothing, blankets, shoes, and other household items. “I don’t go to Purang or Hilsa,” Nyima says. “I bring things from Simikot and Tumkot.” She describes how the road will affect villagers, such as how they can get their goods and how it will affect her business, repeating again what Bahadur Lama noticed. “[For] those who have money [the road] is good. [For] those without money, it is bad. Those without money [could] take horses and zopas as transportation. They [didn’t] need to pay for transportation. [With the road,] even if they have horses and zopas, [they will] need to travel through vehicles. Even [if they have no] money – [they] need to borrow from other people...

“If the road connects to Simikot, my profit decreases. The road is on the other side [of the river]. Travelers [will] travel by highway – not the link road. I would still keep hotel for the police and villagers. [The road] will benefit villagers. They don’t need to walk by foot. They don’t need to carry load or go by animals. It is difficult to travel to Simikot. With the road it will be easier to travel on the way. Right now, it takes two to three days to get there. If I don’t have zopas or horses it would be difficult to get things. If the road connects it would only take one day. [The road] saves time – I would [be able to] bring things on time. [Farmers] can sell fruits, vegetables, and crops to all the places. To the Chinese.” However, Nyima says, the road has a negative effect. “If [we] need to travel, [we] have to pay for fare. Sometimes there are accidents [on the road] – injuries.” Nyima echoes what countless other villagers have also shared with me – it will be expensive to travel by

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\(^3\) Traditional Tibetan food made of barley. It is powdery until Tibetan tea, milk tea, milk or hot water is added, making the consistency like thick pudding.
the road, which only widens the gap between poor and rich, as Bahadur Lama described.

While Nyima wishes to keep her hotel after the road is completed. Lama Tsering, another hotel owner and shopkeeper in Muchu, says that she will go back to farming once the road is finished. Another shopkeeper, Kinzon Doma in Yalwang, repeated much of what Lama Tsering said about the road, reasons for going back to farming after the road is completed, and how the road will affect the business of owning a hotel. Lama Tsering has owned her hotel and shop for four years – ever since the road was built from Tumkot to Hilsa, and like Nyima, does not like owning the hotel. But, she says, it is the only way to make money. Lama Tsering farmed with her family when she was young, and with her husband before the road was built.

“Before,” she says, “I used to go for herbs and sell them to businessmen. Now all these things are finished [the resources are depleted]. It is very difficult to get herbs; I have to pick even when it’s raining. It takes four to five days if there are a lot of herbs in jungle. If no herbs, it takes one month to fill four to five sacks.” This was how Lama Tsering made money while still farming, before owning her hotel. She describes her childhood, including her and her family’s participation in the exchange of goods before Humla was introduced to a cash economy.

We sit in the kitchen of her hotel. It is much more spacious than Nyima’s small shop and much darker. The wooden beams are decorated with pyramids of white dots, and hanging on a wooden pillar are utensils to make Tibetan tea and other food and drink items. Tin cups, big pots, and hot water thermoses sit on shelves along the back wall. We sit on a bench covered with a rug and drink hot water out of handle-less cups, resting them on a wooden table painted red and blue. A large wood-burning stove sits in the middle of the room, the fire slowly going out, the coals burning bright. Two calves stand tied to a post outside the kitchen, mooing often. Men with zopas, horses, donkeys, or mules travel down the dirt road outside the hotel kicking up dust, the animals’ bells tinkling gently as they slowly make their way to Tumkot. Lama Tsering’s face is round and weathered but kind, her hands calloused from farming for so long, her dark hair is tightly tied into a bun on the back of her head.

“When I was small,” she says, “I used to farm and help my parents in farming. I had no chance to study. I wish I could have [because now] it is difficult to calculate bills. If I had studied I wouldn’t be running a hotel and a shop. If I had studied I may or may not be here. Now a days I regret not going to school. [There] were schools, but mostly people didn’t go to school. They needed to help their family. My father was a lama and my mother used to farm. He passed away when I was ten. My father used to do pujas⁴, and sick people [would] offer money. From this money, [we were

⁴ Buddhist practice to worship and express devotion.
able to buy food. My older brother would farm and go here and there for money. My mother is from Yalwang. My mother’s family was rich. I was raised by my mother.” Lama Tsering says that the community did not treat her any differently once her father died. As she explained, her family did not suffer as her mother’s family had money and was able to provide for her and her brothers and sisters to help them survive.

“My grandfather would go to Purang with wooden beams. He would bring salt, clothes – old woolen clothes – shoes, and Tibetan tea. We would farm potatoes, beans, and maize, but [they] wouldn’t last the year.” As Lama Tsering explained, the received money from her mother’s family, which allowed them to buy the extra food they needed to make it through the year. She continues to buy extra food and supplies from Purang. She says, “From Purang I can get hotel items and food. Things are cheaper at Purang. I can buy anything I want because Purang is a big city. Tumkot is a small bazaar.” But, she says, “the number of customers has decreased over the four years. Because of the [partially completed] road, people don’t stay a night here. When traveling this way they go directly to Tumkot and stay there.”

Already the road is affecting shopkeepers in Muchu, and the road hasn’t been completed yet. People still travel through Muchu with their animals via the link path, but it is clear there are not too many customers for Lama Tsering, or for Nyima. Once the bridge is built connecting the road from Hilsa to the in-progress highway on the other side of the river, Muchu shopkeepers will feel the effects of the road long before it reaches Simikot. “If the road connects, travelers will travel through the road. People won’t come through here. They won’t buy goods or food. I’ll have no customers,” Lama Tsering says. “I will farm after the road connects. I can’t make money from farming, but I can earn food to survive.”

When the bridge connects the road, keeping the road on the other side of the Karnali River and out of Muchu, Lama Tsering and everyone else in Muchu will need to adapt to survive. She has already adapted to the conditions brought by the road by opening a hotel, and so by going back to farming, Lama Tsering is merely adapting again to the conditions brought by the road and will work desperately to grow enough food to survive. It is unclear, and even she does not know, how she will earn money to buy goods once the road is connected. Herbal root resources are declining with the amount of people collecting and selling them, and Lama Tsering makes barely enough to feed herself and her family for more than a few months. She says she is not worried – that she has always done everything, taken care of everyone – but it is troublesome to wonder how she, and other villagers of Muchu, will survive and take advantage of the road when it is already so difficult to live.

Even in Walung, as Martin Saxer writes in his article, “Pathways: A Concept, Field Site, and Methodological Approach to Study Remoteness and Connectivity,” villagers are experiencing change. Saxer writes, “Should the road... finally be built,
the yak and cobblestone forecourts may disappear, houses may be rebuilt, and
tucks may no longer stop here in the way the yak caravans do.” For Humlis, it
would be zopa, horse, and goat caravans. Saxer continues: “Over the past fifty years,
markets, traded goods, and border regimes underwent several radical
transformations. Neither salt and grain, nor Tibetan antiques are the mainstay of
trade through Walung any longer; and nobody knows whether the current demand
for medicinal herbs and the border regime allowing to trade them will last” (Saxer
9). It is clear that the economic transitions such as the ones Muchu – and the rest of
upper Humla – are experiencing have been happening all across the Himalayan
border. Animal caravans, medicinal herbs, and economic markets are all evolving
and changing, and some are ending, especially here in Humla.
Khangalgaun
In his article, “Between China and Nepal: Trans-Himalayan Trade and the Second Life of Development in Upper Humla,” Martin Saxer states, “almost 75 percent of Humla’s population was classified as “highly food insecure” (Saxer 34). While this is the case in all of Humla, the villagers of Khangalgaun express how much of a food shortage they actually have. They are much more susceptible to a larger food shortage than other villages such as Muchu, based on the reality that they do not have access to a water source for irrigation for their crops; they rely solely on rainfall and snow melt. Khangalgaun is a village of around 80 houses and sits high at the top of a mountain. They have a small amount of electricity through solar power. There is a middle school and a monastery in the village, but no formal shops or hotels. Because of this, there are limited opportunities to make money within the village, unless you can provide a service to other villagers, such as being a carpenter, tailor, teacher, etc.

Farming is a seasonal job in Khangalgaun, and in the rest of Humla. Once the winter season comes, farming stops. Many people leave and go somewhere else for business, such as getting the wooden cup from India or other places in Nepal, or collecting herbs such as katukai or the medicinal caterpillar. Others still have other jobs, such as carpentry, that they do in the off-season when farming is not a possibility. When farming is no longer an option, people must leave their village in order to make money to buy goods once the road and paths are clear of snow in the spring. Like Muchu, the new road will be built on the opposite side of the river as Khangalgaun, requiring villagers to build a road that links their village with the highway if they want the vehicles to be able to access Khangalgaun. The majority of people living in Khangalgaun have lived there for their entire lives, helping their families when they were young, farming, and looking after their animals. Because of this, many people living in Khangalgaun are uneducated, which makes making money difficult. Because the economy in Humla revolves solely around cash, it is a struggle to survive. The major drawback of the road for villagers of Khangalgaun is the fact that renting vehicles to carry goods back and forth, or using a truck to get to Simikot in a health emergency, is very expensive. Since it is difficult to make money in Khangalgaun, this could pose a problem in the future to actually utilize the road. But the majority of people living in Khangalgaun welcomes the road and believes that it will bring facilities that can greatly improve their lives. Unlike Muchu, villagers do not need to worry about the road affecting how many customers come to their hotels or shops, because there are no hotels or shops. Because of this, it seems like many villagers cannot find many faults with the road. The following are stories, thoughts, and opinions of the villagers of Khangalgaun regarding education, money, trade, past, present, and future lifestyles, and the new road.
Kyamjok Lama has lived in Khangalgaun ever since he was born 45 years ago. “When I was young,” he says, “I studied until class one. For six years I went with sheeps and goats. Because of this, I didn’t get the chance to study… Right now, I regret not getting a chance to study. Because of that it is difficult for calculation and anything. If I want to go to other places, [like] big cities, I can’t read the sign boards… I worked for the wooden cup for eight years. After that I farmed and did some business work with herbal roots and caterpillars.” The work Kyamjok Lama describes here is typical of what most villagers I spoke with do to make money, both in Muchu and in Khangalgaun. Both the herbal root and the caterpillar are used for medicinal purposes and can be sold in Purang. Kyamjok Lama continues: “I went after sheep and goat and used for transport. Sheeps used to carry salt and loads just like the vehicles. The wooden cup is best for business because now herbal roots are difficult to find – they are rare.”

Currently, Kyamjok Lama picked herbal roots and caterpillars until very recently. He speaks about his lifestyle before and after the introduction of a cash economy, and the importance of having money. “Before, [there were] no facilities. We didn’t need to use money for everything. I earned a living through farming. Now I need money for everything – anything. [There is] a problem of earning money. [There is] no source of income. My life depends on money. The road has just started. Maybe the cost of things will increase. If [there are] more facilities, [in order] to
utilize, I need more money. If no money I will farm and earn a living... To do business [you] need a huge amount of money. I don’t have much money for doing business. Here I can’t save money. It is just for food and paying fee for my children at school. [Sometimes] my expenditure is more, income is less. Sometimes, I face problems like shortage of money. I borrow from other villagers – relatives – and pay back within a month, maybe a year. Before, when I had no money, I used to take beans and crops and exchange with salt and wool from China. At that time it would be enough to last the year for clothing and food. Now it is difficult for it to last a year.”

Kyamjok Lama also gives his opinion on the road and how he thinks it will affect villagers, including him. Like the majority of villagers in Khangalgaun, Kyamjok Lama likes the road, and thinks it will change his lifestyle in a positive way. He says, “Before when there was no road, I thought there would be no road [ever]. Now it is like a shock. The road is good. It is made our lifestyle easier... We don’t need to walk. We don’t need to carry load and don’t need to go with animals like before.” Many people spoke of how traveling with animals to Tumkot or Simikot is very difficult. But just because the road is connected does not necessarily mean there will be no need for the animals whatsoever. Instead of using the animals for transportation of goods, they are needed for fertilizer for farming, since farming will most likely not stop even with the completion of the road. They will also be needed for the production of butter and milk. However, as Kyamjok Lama says, some people may choose to leave Khangalgaun permanently to do business at the border site or in Simikot. In that case, there would be no need for his animals at all.

Kyamjok Lama highlights how difficult it is to truly live off the land in Khangalgaun. Crops such as beans, maize, corn, millet, potato, and barley only last a few months out of the year, maybe one year depending on the production yield, especially because half of those crops are used to feed animals. Martin Saxer writes in his article “Pathways: A Concept, Field Site, and Methodological Approach to Study Remoteness and Connectivity,” that traditional Himalayan life is set up in such a way that farmers are forced to rely on imported goods, or food from different areas. Saxer writes, “Himalayan ways of life are understood as based on sedentary agriculture, supported by pastoralism and supplemented, if necessary, by trade... Francis Lim makes this point with utmost clarity: ‘Rather than saying that the Langtangpa and other similar peoples are ‘natural traders,’ it would be more accurate to describe the situation as ‘enforced trading’ for they almost have no choice but to trade in order to survive” (Saxer 6). This quotation proves that people in Humla, and across the Himalayas, are and have been constantly adapting in order to survive, adapting as trade and economies change. Kyamjok Lama continues,

5 People of the Langtang area in Nepal.
saying, “There is a major reliance on Chinese goods and imported food such as rice and white flour to sustain villagers the rest of the year. The economy in Humla right now already focuses so much on cash money, and the road will only increase that reliance. Without money, it is extremely difficult to get enough food and the necessities to survive.

Namdak is 38 years old, and has also lived in Khangalgaun his whole life. Like Kyamjok Lama, he farms and collects herbal roots and maple wood to make the wooden cup. He grows millet, beans, potato, barley, maize, and wheat. These crops only last for five months, he says. He brings extra food from China or Simikot. This year he has been to Tumkot three times with his animals, and one time to Purang to sell wooden cups. Wooden cups, much like the herbal root and medicinal caterpillar, are another means to making money. Thukchi returned to Khangalgaun after studying in Simikot to farm and to collect wood to make the wooden cup. He describes the process of making and selling the wooden cup. “Going after” the wooden cup is a common alternative to make money during the winter season. As expressed by many, making money is extremely difficult in Humla, but since survival depends on a cash economy, people must learn to find another option to make money in order to support themselves and their families.

“We go as a group,” Thukchi says. “If it rains then it is dangerous, but if no rain or snow then it’s easy. First we need to find a tree [usually a maple tree]. Then we cut with an axe and make a square shape [by] hand, then use machines to make the shape. Then we have to make it smooth with rubbing. We have to put special oil to polish. At last it is a wooden cup.” The process he says takes four to five months. Usually, the cup is sold to a businessman who then takes the cup to China, but sometimes Thukchi goes himself to Purang and sells the wooden cup to the Chinese. “A long time ago,” Thukchi explains, “it was very cheap. 25 to 50 Yuan per cup. Now a days it is around two to 300 Yuan [5,000 Nepali Rupees].” With the money made from selling the wooden cup, Thukchi and Namdak, along with others who sell the wooden cup, are able to buy the necessities for his home and his family, such as food, clothes, salt, and household items.

We sit on the roof of Namdak’s house, his three daughters and neighbors surrounding us. One daughter sits on his lap, the other two play on the ladder leading to the next level of the house. The sun shines bright, the mountains rise tall above Khangalgaun, and the Karnali River rushes swiftly below. All around we can hear the animals’ bells jingling and the shouts of children on their way home from school. Namdak describes what life was like in Khangalgaun when he was young. “Before when I was young, people were nice. [Kids] were unable to differentiate between wrong and right…. [Now they know they] shouldn’t do things because they will harm others. When I was young I would take things, apples, other things, from other farms. Now kids know they will be punished. Before, the society and
community – people were very close. Every person had good relations. People were uneducated. Right now all the things are different. Most [younger] people are educated... My lifestyle [now] has totally changed. Life has become easier. At that time, there were no facilities and we worked off own hand. Now we have facilities – road, vehicles for traveling, and we grow a lot of things in farming. Before we would only grow barley or maize. Now people are educated and know what to grow. The road is a good thing for us to travel here and there...

He continues, discussing how a necessity of the road is to have money in order to utilize it. If you do not have money, he says, you must be creative in order to either earn more money, or utilize the road in a different way. “Those who can make money now,” he says, “[their] lifestyle will be good. For those who can’t, it will be difficult to live. Before we need to go with animals. [There was] lots of dust and hard work with the animals. Now life has become busier than before. Now I need a lot of money to buy something. Before I ate food for 20 Nepali Rupees – dal bhat\textsuperscript{6} increased by 200 Nepali Rupees. Before people were not busy. People gathered together. I [didn’t] need money to pay for food. I [didn’t] need to work for money. Now we have facilities and modern technology and different kind of clothes and food. [We] need a lot of money to use the road. Those who can use ideas to make money can make a lot of money and use the road. Those who can’t, can’t use the road. I’m not sure if I will have enough money to use the road. I make money even from farming by selling food crops – beans, potatoes, apples. We can use machines for farming, like tractors. Now people plow with animals; when the road connects we can have tractors.” Namdak mentions that the road can bring a lot of modern technology that would be beneficial to the lifestyle of villagers in Khangalgaun. This sentiment about the modern technologies and benefits of the road is echoed also by Paldon and Diki, two married young women living in Khangalgaun.

Paldon and Diki say that if the road connects, they will no longer need to walk with their animals to Tumkot or Simikot. Instead they can travel in vehicles. Their lifestyle will improve, as the pain in their knees and backs from walking and carrying loads of goods will be gone if they ride in the trucks. Paldon and Diki say the most difficult work they do is cutting grass, but if the road connects, they will no longer need to do the work themselves. They say the road will bring machines and more modern technology that will help cut the grass. Other machines to be brought by the road include televisions, refrigerators, and gas to cook with, rather than using wood-burning stoves. If there is gas to cook with, they will no longer need to collect firewood. “If you don’t like [modern technology], you are mad,” Diki states.

\textsuperscript{6} A food dish consisting of rice and lentils, usually served with vegetables and potatoes, mostly eaten in Nepal and India.
But these modern technologies and modern machines can only be possible if a link road is built from Khangalgaun, down the mountain, across the river, and up the opposite hill in order to reach the highway. Pema Thondol, a 24-year-old Tibetan language teacher at the local school in Khangalgaun, stands holding his baby daughter, pacing the room to lull her to sleep. He has a black earring in one ear and spiky black hair. He sits down, his daughter finally asleep. The coals in the wood-burning stove warm Tibetan tea. A cup of tea and a cup of thick honey sit on the wooden block of me. The honey is fresh from his local hive, and has wax in it. Pema says that the link road depends on the villagers. “They’ll need to construct the road,” he says. “After, the government will help us by bringing bulldozers. It is not sure that the government will [help] us; we have to ask.” The link road, it seems, is not a guarantee. Without vehicles, being able to bring these heavy machines and heavy pieces of technology up the mountain to Khangalgaun is impossible. Without the link road, the modern machines that Paldon, Diki, and Namdak are talking about will not be possible.

Besides discussing the link road, Pema also talks about his life in Khangalgaun. He lives with his wife, baby, parents, and grandfather, and says that he did not think he would have a baby or a family that he needed to take responsibility for so soon. But, as the only son to his parents, the responsibility to care for his elders, as well as his own wife and daughter, falls on him. Pema says he gets all of his household goods and food from Purang in China. His family goes to Purang three or four times in a year to get rice, white flour, food items, and clothes. Each time they need to buy around one lakh of things. They get 12 packs of white flour, clothes, blankets, and nine to ten packs of rice. Pema says that he leaves the goods from Purang with a relative in Tumkot while he returns to Khangalgaun to get his zopas. He then travels with four zopas to Tumkot and back to Khangalgaun around three or four times in order to get all of his goods back home. It takes two days to get to Tumkot, two days to return, and at least two days to let the animals rest. “The road,” Pema says, “is good. It is easy for surviving. We have to spend more money, but for facilities it is good. Before it takes a long time but now it takes a short time to get [to Purang]. It is a big, big struggle. We struggle a lot on the way with animals. There is a lot of dust. Now it’s easy to travel in three to four days. It is easy to transport. We can save time. We don’t have to go with the animals. We don’t need to struggle.”
However Pema mentions a fear and drawback of the road that not many people addressed. He says, “Drivers don’t have driving license. It is risky. When [it is] driving time, they take drinks. It is very dangerous. Vehicles are all old vehicles imported from China. The road is rough… and also narrow… It will become more polluted than now. Pollution is a bad thing, [but] pollution is worth having an easier life… For my daughter the road will make her life better. She can have a lot of facilities because the road. [We get] tired by walking. [If we] travel by vehicles – [we] don’t feel tired. We can make money with the help of the road by selling food crops like apples.” Many villagers, such as Pema, Paldon, and Diki, among many others, claim that the road will allow them to sell their vegetables, fruits, and other crops easily. Whether or not they will actually be able to sell their crops once the road is built is unknown information, but it seems if these villagers wish to sell their crops in order to make money, then they will find the means to do so.

Some information about the past are wrapped up in stories told to the younger generation, but the most important information about what life was like in Khangalgaun and in Humla before roads, before vehicles, and before the introduction of a cash economy comes directly from those who lived during that time. I was fortunate to speak to a few older villagers of Khangalgaun, but there were two whose stories of their lives as young boys versus their lives now are most intriguing. Their descriptions of how their lifestyles have changed show how difficult life was before versus how it is now, and their opinions about the road and need for money versus the barter system and old ways of life are perhaps more telling, since they have lived through both. These are the stories of two men in their 70s, Phurbu Lama and Rinzen Lama, and their thoughts on how trade will change because of the road.

Phurbu Lama sits on a rug in the sun, his red cap just barely covering his short gray hair. He wears a red coat over a white turtleneck, his gray pants rising to just above his ankles. His face and hands are weathered and wrinkles surround his eyes.
Next to him a log buzzes with honeybees going in and out of a hole. He waves a stick in the air, waving them away from his face and body. He is 76 years old, all of which were spent living in Khangalgaun. He spoke with me about when he was younger – what he did, what life was like, and what trade was like – about what life is like now, and how his life has changed, as well as his opinions about the new road being built from Simikot to Hilsa. Before, when he was younger, he was a hunter, but now is a farmer. He hunted from the age of 15, and usually used to kill wild animals such as wild yak, deer, bear, and tiger for their meat. Before the area surrounding Khangalgaun was a thick jungle and there were a lot of wild animals. But now, there are more people than animals; they have cut the forest areas down to use as firewood.

“If I shoot an animal, I don’t miss it,” he says. I killed two to three wild yaks around Limi. If I go alone, a wild animal would attack. This is why I go with a friend. It was dangerous – wild animal attacks. Sometimes for hunting I had to climb a rock without a rope. In the snow also [it is dangerous]. I saw a yeti a long time ago. It looks like a person, a man, with long hair on its body. I tried to shoot the yeti. There were five yetis – just like people – children, mom, and dad. They ran away somewhere else in the mountainous area with ice and snow. Their food is the same. Their nail is round shaped. The yeti used to throw stones at me. While yeti is hunting for food, they kill animals by throwing that stone. I was very scared. For my safety I had to shoot the gun. If not, the yeti would throw stones and kill us. At that time, I would buy the gun – a steel gun pipe – and I would make it here. Blacksmiths would make the gun. It was an old rifle. When I was young – around 11 years – I went with goat and sheep as well as hunting. I would go with elder people, sometimes alone. When I was young I had to work very hard. I had to look after goat and sheep. Sometimes [they] were attacked by tiger or other wild animal. Right now I have grown old – life is better than before. I don’t have to work very hard as before. Sometimes I go to Kathmandu for roaming. I sit and relax here. But now his life has totally changed, he says. “Before [there were] no clothes made of cotton or fiber – only handmade woolen clothes. When it snow[ed] – heavy snowfall. Now a days sometimes [there is] snow, sometimes no snow; even the weather has changed. Before we would eat only local food – only what was grown on their own field – [such as] barley and sweet carrot. Not even potato. Before most people were poor. [There was] no imported food, only barley [to make the local pancake], carrot – sweet carrot – and local rice. For barley, [there was] not much land. All the area was forest. [We] burned the jungle to cultivate barley in [that area]. I like the change of clothes and food because a long time ago we had to make by hand. We didn’t have a lot. Now we can make fashionable and many clothes. We have a variety in food – sweet food and tasty food.
“For us [older people] life is already gone. For younger ones it is better. They can have enough food. They don’t need to work [as] hard; they can work with machinery. [The road] will make much profit for businessmen. We can bring a lot of things at one time with the help of vehicles. Even for villagers they can trade. Food crops will change to cash crop. They can sell local food to other people. For me, life is already passed. Maybe I have one or two years. I don’t want to think about [the future].” Phurbu Lama has clearly lived a full and interesting life, hunting and farming, as well as witnessing the change in food, clothing, and trade. Rinzen Lama discusses more the economy of Khangalgaun and the need for money, as well as how the road will benefit villagers.

Rinzen Lama is 73 years old. His face is deeply tanned and weathered and wrinkled, showing his age. His hands are gnarled from farming and working his whole life in Khangalgaun. His smile is big, showing off yellowing teeth. His orange and gray jacket is dirty and worn. But still he has happy living in Khangalgaun. It is his home and it is his children’s and grandchildren’s home. Rinzen Lama is a farmer, like the majority of people in Khangalgaun. He is a tailor, too, stitching only local and traditional clothes. He explains how life was completely different when he was a
young boy. The modernization that Khangalgaun has experienced even before the road is good, he says, because it has made living and working easier. He discusses trade and the positives and negatives of the road. He says, “Before when I was young, most people survived from their own land. They didn’t buy food. I had a lot of sheeps and goat. Now a days things have changed... people don’t have sheep and goat; they have more zopa, zuma, and horses.

“Before I used to stitch with my own hand without a tailoring machine. Once a tailoring machine was produced I bought it to use. [Tailoring] is seasonal work. I still do it. Now it is easy. Before it was hard to earn a living. There was a shortage of clothes, food – even no shoes. At that time we would wear handmade slippers. It was very hard to live. We just survived from our own land. Now it is totally changed. If we have money we can buy things like food and clothes. We don’t need to struggle as before. Before we would bring crops to Chinese people. Now we buy all the things from them. Now we have a lot of new things like a cooker for cooking food and many kinds of machines. We used to cook food [with] three stones. There was no equipment for cooking. We used to use a pot made of mud. At that time there was no steel things, [or things] made of copper and aluminum. We used things made from wood and mud for cooking. We ate only barley and local rice. We only eat stinging nettle as vegetable and a leaf from the jungle [yalo plant]... The road,” he says, “and vehicles are beneficial to all people except poor people. We don’t need to struggle as before with the animals. Because of the road, people will give more focus on doing work. After the road is connected, people will be more busy. It will be modernized – modern technology. [People] will forget to focus on local tradition.” Many other people, both young and old, also feel that tradition will be lost due to the road and the modern machines and technology brought by the road. It is interesting to think about how some modernization in the past, modernization that transitioned Rinzen Lama from stitching cloth by hand to sewing with a sewing machine and villagers from using mud pots to wood-burning stoves, allowing an easier lifestyle, is, in a way, happening again with the construction of the road.

The villagers of Khangalgaun expressed to me five main things: the necessity of money, the difficulty of making money, the difficulty of farming and the reliance on imported goods, the easy lifestyle that the road will bring, as well as the effects of modernization that the road will no doubt influence. Farming and having enough crops yield enough is difficult here in Khangalgaun. Because of the fact that crops will only yield enough food for approximately four to five months, villagers living in Khangalgaun are forced to rely on trade and on Chinese goods. It is a vicious cycle, as to be able to buy goods at Purang, or at the Tumkot Bazaar, requires money,

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7 A zuma is the female version of a zopa, and is used for only for its milk, not for plowing or carrying loads.
8 A plant found in the jungles of Humla.
which is also difficult to obtain. Villagers rely on selling the wooden cup, herbal roots, or the medicinal caterpillar, whose resources are swiftly depleting. In addition to having to buy the goods, with the introduction of the road, villagers will need to also pay to use the vehicles for transport, which will be very expensive. However, the road will make things physically easier for villagers, as they no longer need to walk with animals and carry their goods. The road will also bring modern technologies that will make living in Khangalgaun easier. It is difficult to say that the road will only be a positive effect in the lives of villagers, because it is clear to see that the road will bring its own challenges in the form of dangerous vehicles, dangerous roads, and expensive fares. The road will obviously be beneficial, but how detrimental will it be to lifestyles of those living in Khangalgaun?
The Effects of Modernization

While some people had no opinion on whether or not the road will affect culture and tradition, others had very strong opinions that the road would affect culture and tradition negatively, and ultimately those traditions and their cultural identity would be lost. People also spoke of the modernization of their villages, and how the road would bring modern technology to their villages, which they view as a positive effect of the road. This section serves to present how modernization brought by the road can be beneficial to villagers and have a negative impact on their culture.

Norla Lama is from Khangalgaun, but is in Hilsa helping to construct the road.

He has strong opinions about loss of culture and tradition, and in the changes that are contributing to that loss. Much of what he says sums up what other people say as well. “Everything has changed,” he says. “Clothes used to be handmade with wool from sheep. Now there is a shift to more commercial clothes, imported clothes. We used to eat local food before, [but] now people eat only imported food [from China]. Before, there were no vegetables, only potato. We used to eat stinging nettle by boiling it and mixing with local flour. [It had a] very good taste… Before there were no schools. People were illiterate. Now there are lots of new schools and people can get educated. People are clever… Villages are more developed now than before… Before people used to sing local song, dance local dance. Now, younger ones
have forgotten that. At time of war, maybe ten years ago, [there was] Maoist control over villages. They wouldn’t let us sing [our] songs... Younger ones [are also] sent abroad for education. That is why they are forgetting culture. I feel bad because the younger ones have no respect for their elders. There is no close relation between villages [anymore]. Now a days, people are trying to conserve culture. They are celebrating losar⁹ and other festivals together... we celebrate and gather together so that younger ones will learn the culture and won’t forget the culture. I blame it on ourselves. We are forgetting our culture over time. [It’s the] technology – the modern technology our culture is facing. The younger ones have no respect for culture. The road will certainly cause a change in lifestyle. The road is a facility to make our lifestyle easier. But the road from China to Nepal is not good for the culture. The Chinese culture is following the goods.”

Bahadur Lama sits cross-legged in front of his wood-burning stove, the heat from the stove warming the room. Three other men sit at tables on the perimeter of the room drinking Tibetan tea or chang, an alcoholic beverage typically made from barley. Outside, the sun sets and the air grows thin with cold. The inside of the spacious room grows dark, shadows growing longer on the shelves of tin cans of spices and seasonings, knives, pots, pans, and eating utensils. Bahadur Lama describes the gap between the younger generation, the generation that has been most exposed to modernization, and the older generation, which Norla Lama says is a contributing factor in the loss of culture and tradition. Bahadur Lama says, “The younger generation try to imitate modern things. The road does have an impact. People try to learn the foreign tradition. [Because of this] old tradition will be lost.”

He continues, sharing his insight on changing cultures and losing traditions. “Change will be definitely there. Changing is a good thing. This is due to the cause of other people. Two strangers – when meet – become close. In olden days they don’t take smoke. The younger generation takes company, [and] learn from each other. Both sides lose traditions.” He shares what traditions he thinks will remain and what is changing. “The songs we always sing during celebration will remain forever. [The] younger generation respecting old age – what old people say will be respected – will remain to younger generation. In tradition, old age people is like god. Our big festival is New Year – losar. [This] festival might be lost some day. In olden days, we’d invite every villagers in [our] own home [and] celebrate for many days. Now it’s celebrated for two to three days – a shorter period of time. In olden days, we’d go to many homes. Now, just one. We’re losing traditional dress. Now [people] want to wear modern jackets. We used to have [handmade] shoes, jackets, chupas. We are losing that tradition.”

⁹ Tibetan New Year
The farming system, Bishnu Prasad Acharya, among other villagers, says, will be modernized and people can sell their crops. Farmers can use pesticides and grow more crops. There will be all sorts of benefits – improved technology, kids can get a better education, and there can be development in multiple sectors, including improving hospitals and schools. Bishnu sees only the positives of the road and the modernization of Khangalgaun. How soon this modern technology will come, or if it arrives at all, is unknown, but his optimism about the road is also what most people expressed. Thukchi also says that the road will most certainly affect culture and tradition. “Now a days,” he says, “[culture and tradition] is fading away and the road is not built. With the road, culture and tradition will surely fade away. The younger generation will forget everything if the road is completed. There is change in food, clothes, songs, dance - every activity. Farming even. Before people didn’t grow potato or green vegetables. After the road we can grow many kinds of vegetables. Fruit too. I feel bad. It is our own culture and traditions. We should not forget those things... People will follow modern things. People will be separated in different ways. [The road] will bring new things – machinery things. We can build new designs of houses. It will bring new food – new varieties of food. It can bring modern things – modern technology: television, gas for cooking food, and machines for beating crops. We will have to struggle less with facilities.”

Kyamjok Lama remembers what life was like when he was young and the differences in how the community worked together. He uses the changing education system and modernization to highlight how people and lifestyles have changed over time. “When I was young, I used to play a lot. At that time people were nice. If I did something wrong, [they] wouldn’t say anything. Now there is a huge difference. Children can understand what is wrong and what is right. Now a days people are rude. If someone does something wrong, [they] call the police and make a big deal. Before society [had] no modern technology, no facilities. Most of the people were uneducated. People were foolish – not clever. Due to education and modern technology and facilities, it has totally changed.”

Rinzen Lama only corroborates what others have said, and speaks about the marriage tradition and how it is becoming more modernized, and how the road will ultimately cause the loss of tradition altogether. “Tradition and culture is totally changed. For example, before when people used to get married, the father of the boy would ask for the girl’s hand in marriage. They would take chang or a khatak\(^\text{10}\) and request the girl’s parents. The parents can’t say no. The parents would give her [away]. We used to sing local song, dance local dance. Those things are totally changed now. Before we celebrated lots of local festivals. People drink a lot of

\(^{10}\)Traditional Himalayan scarf given to show respect, or given before a long journey to ensure a safe journey.
alcohol. People sing or dance in their own local way. Now we celebrate in a modern way. Before when celebrating festivals, we would wear local clothes, local garments. Now people were different clothes, fashionable clothes. At that time people were not educated. Now a days younger people, they study. They go somewhere else for further studies. The younger ones forgot [this tradition]. That’s why this tradition is lost. I feel bad because we are losing [sic] our tradition and culture. We can’t show our identity. Even the road is not connected now – we are still losing [sic] culture and tradition. If the road connects [traditions] will be completely gone.”

The construction of the road and the modernization it will bring to villages is clearly a cause for debate. On one hand, according to villagers, the road will bring modern technologies and machines such as television, refrigerators, and even tractors and machines to help farm. These modern machines will allow for the production of new vegetables, fruits, and other crops and will enable villagers to sell the crops to travelers along the highway, which will contribute to their income. However, there is a major drawback of the road and its modernization besides the expensive ticket fares and possible accidents: loss of traditions and culture due to modernization. Although the loss of culture and traditions is a negative effect of the road and extremely sad, everyone, including those who commented on the loss of tradition, is happy to see the road completed, and thinks it will be beneficial for the lifestyle of all villagers, whether poor or rich. It seems as though the loss of tradition – whether it be traditional dress, food, or celebrations - is worth the benefits of the road and its inherent modernization of villages in Humla.

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11 The poor will have their own problems with utilizing the road, but it will be easier and less physically taxing to travel to Purang.
“The Rosy Days of the Tumkot Market are Gone"¹²
The Tumkot Bazaar is located just below the village of Tumkot, along the Karnali River. The market has been there ever since the road was connected from Hilsa to Tumkot, around three or four years ago. The market consists of around 30-40 shops and hotels. Shopkeepers pay rent to Tumkot, but own the personal items inside. The tents are typically large blue or brown tarps that are held together with beams of wood. Inside is usually pretty sparse, with a wood-burning stove and a few wood benches and tables made of a thin beam of wood for the customers. Shopkeepers typically have other tents that serve as places to sleep for their customers, as well as tents to store all of the goods they bring from Purang, such as Lhasa Beer, hard alcohol, chang, blankets, clothing, shoes, white flour, rice, cigarettes, instant noodles, and juice, among many other items. At this time of year as winter approaches, the market is becoming more and more desolate, as shopkeepers close their shops, gather their leftover goods, and return back to their village for the winter.

Only a front door has been left of a shop torn down for the winter, the trading season being over.

Being a dual shopkeeper and hotel owner in the Tumkot Bazaar is a seasonal job since not a significant amount of customers are able to come to the market with their animals to buy goods. Occasionally, some shopkeepers, like Pasang Tamang, a shopkeeper and hotel owner from Zang village in Limi, will stay throughout the winter because of a significant amount of rice and other goods leftover. There was too much left for him to take back to his village, and so he decided to stay through the winter with five other shopkeepers to look after his items. He said that he had customers from Tumkot, Muchu, Yari, and Yangar, all villages extremely close to the market area. From the Tumkot Bazaar, businessmen and villagers can pay 1,000 Nepali Rupees for a seat in one of the old trucks in order to reach Hilsa. There are two forks of the river, and for now, the trucks that leave straight from the bazaar must cross one of the forks by way of a bridge made of wood and stone in order to reach the highway that goes to Hilsa. On the other side of the other fork, however, there is a portion of the highway that goes all the way to Kermi, but it is not yet connected to the portion of the highway that travels to Hilsa. The bridge that will ultimately connect the two sides of the highway is only halfway completed. Of the six Tumkot shopkeepers I spoke to, all of them said that once the bridge is connected, most likely in the next year or two, Tumkot Bazaar will no longer exist.

The half-completed bridge that will connect the two sections of the highway, causing the road to pass around the Tumkot Bazaar instead of through it.
Many of the shopkeepers and hotel owners at the Tumkot Bazaar do so simply to earn money in order to survive in Humla’s cash economy. A lot of them used to pick the herbal root or caterpillar, or would go to India or other parts of Nepal to get wood in order to make the wooden bowls, just like the villagers of Khangalgaun and Muchu. They have found that they can make more of a profit, however, here at Tumkot rather than collecting the herbs or making the wooden bowls. Even if a shopkeeper has the option of owning a hotel at Hilsa, he would choose to stay in Tumkot. As Pasang Tamang says, “Tumkot is better than Hilsa for making money. It is warmer here. Even when it snows, people come. In Hilsa, the road is blocked… Before when [there was] no road, zopas and horses were good for business in Hilsa.”

Villagers would bring their animals all the way to the border and leave them at Hilsa while they traveled to Purang, creating business in Hilsa. He continues, “After the road [was] built, people don’t go to Hilsa for buying things, they come here.”

While Tumkot used to be a profitable market, shopkeepers have begun to notice a decline in both customers and in other shopkeepers. Chhukel Lama attributes the decline in the number of customers coming to his store to the fact that custom tax has increased; when shopkeepers at Tumkot travel to Purang they bring back a lot of goods in order to keep their shops stocked for villagers who do come to Tumkot. Because they are crossing the border with so many goods, they must pay a lot of custom tax. Lately, too, as Chhukel Lama says, the custom tax has been increasing. Because of this increase in price to bring a large amount of goods across the border back to Tumkot Bazaar, shopkeepers must increase the price of their goods in order to gain a profit. “People,” Chhukel Lama says, “buy things themselves at Purang. It is less expensive to bring a small amount of goods.”

Villagers also expressed that they go straight to Purang because it is cheaper, even with the truck fare, to go to Purang rather than stop at Tumkot. Ravi Budha says that people used to have a lot of money and were able to come to Tumkot and buy things. “Now people don’t have money… The herbs and caterpillar resources have decreased. Even big businessmen don’t have money, so workers don’t have money… It is difficult to sell things this season,” he confesses. Wanglen Lama attributes the decrease in the number of customers to an alternative reason. “There used to be many people. Business was going well… [Now there is] a shortage of people walking because of helicopters,” he says. There are now helicopters that take people – mostly Indian tourists using Humla in order to get to Mount Kailash – from Simikot directly to the border site at Hilsa. Because of the helicopters, less people than before are coming through the bazaar staying at hotels.

If there has been a decrease in customers, then there has been a double decrease in shopkeepers, says Wanglen Lama. “People make money from herbal medicine, the caterpillars, and the wooden bowls. But resources are decreasing,” he says. “If people don’t have money, they don’t spend money. They don’t come to hotels… that
is why so many [shopkeepers] have left. If people can’t make profit, they leave [their] hotel.” Ravi Budha has also seen a decrease in shopkeepers in Tumkot.

This decrease, he says, that is due to the same reasons that there has been a decrease in customers. If customers are not coming to Tumkot to buy their goods, whether it is due to lack of money or that it is less expensive to go directly to Purang, then shopkeepers cannot make enough profit to balance what they spend at Purang and in crossing the border. His brother, Kamal Budha, gives three reasons for the decrease in the number of shops. The first reason he gives is that Chinese alcohol used to be free to bring across the border – free meaning there was no tax on the alcohol. But now, the Chinese have blocked the border and do not allow alcohol. In addition, other shopkeepers say that getting a permit to bring the alcohol across is also very expensive. The second reason is that the market in Purang for the medicinal roots and caterpillars is finished, or at least is decreasing. The third reason is that there has been a huge increase in the exchange rate from Yuan to Nepali Rupee. Because of this, Kamal Budha says, people have started to buy things from other areas such as Simikot or Nepalgunj. Even Martin Saxer in his guest lecture entitled “Remoteness and Connectivity Across Himalayan Borders” gave multiple reasons as to why there has been a decrease in customers, and therefore shopkeepers. Saxer attributes the decrease to many of the same reasons the businessmen do, citing the increasing exchange rate, making Chinese products more expensive, the crackdown of liquor on the Nepali side and making it difficult to get a license to import alcohol, and a side effect of the 2015 earthquake.

Not only do the businessmen face the problem of declining numbers of customers, but they also face other struggles crossing the border. For one, it is very expensive to bring goods across the border due to the increased custom tax. Wanglen Lama says that he pays 33% tax to the Nepali custom officer. Chemel Lama,
among other shopkeepers, says that the Chinese only allow a certain amount of goods across the border. For example, he says, they only allow eight bags of white flour across the border; white flour and rice is limited and restricted in bringing them across the border. Chemel and Kunsang, his wife, also describe how they bring their goods across the border; the goods are brought by vehicle from Purang to the border, where shopkeepers need to find and pay porters to carry their goods across the suspension bridge to Hilsa.

“The suspension bridge that crosses the border at Hilsa. Porters must cross this bridge multiple times to bring the goods across.”

“So far I haven’t lost anything,” he says. “Some porters steal things. While unloading things at Hilsa, [we] have lots of things. [We] have to wait with our things [while] the porter carries the things across.” He then describes how one of his friend’s blankets was lost when his goods were brought across the border. Even though they searched the porters’ homes for the blanket, they could not find it as there were too many porters and they did not know who took it. Although stealing does not happen often, Chemel says that it is a worry of his when he travels to Purang.
Ravi Budha says another struggle for shopkeepers is the possibility that he will not get a truck to load things to bring them back to Tumkot. “Vehicles,” he says, “are damaged on the road. Lots of customers demand specific things. [I am] not able to bring things back on time due to truck.” Others, such as Chhukel Lama, say that they have no problems crossing the border, or in Tumkot. Chhukel Lama does say that at times he faces difficulties traveling to Purang. For example, on one trip, the road was blocked with a lot of ice, and the truck was unable to pass. Fortunately, they were able to break the ice, and the vehicle continued, but it is stories like this one that show the possibility of a difficult journey to Purang. Others still discuss some of the same drawbacks of the road that villagers do, such as the bad road to Hilsa that could cause vehicles to topple over, old vehicles that break down, and the possibility that drivers could be drinking beforehand.

Despite these difficulties shopkeepers face, they are able to earn quite a profit by owning shops and hotels in Tumkot Bazaar. As Chhukel Lama says, “I am earning money for surviving.” Many, such as Ravi and Kamal Budha are earning money for their parents, their wives, and their children, in order to feed and clothe them and provide a better lifestyle for them. These shopkeepers’ professions depend on the road. Many said that they would discontinue being shopkeepers and hotel owners, but others, such as Chemel and Kunsang Lama, say they will keep their hotel and shop. Their shop in Tumkot, they say, is only temporary. As many expressed, their future is according to the road, and is according to where the vehicles god. Kunsang says, “When the road is connected – the bride – the bazaar won’t be here. Tumkot will be like a bus station… Tumkot Bazaar will shift with the vehicles.” What she means is that just because the bazaar is unable to survive at Tumkot does not mean it is gone. Instead, there will be another bazaar open somewhere else, shifting with the road and running where it is able to road. “I will go with the road” is a common phrase here in Tumkot, and only further proves that shopkeepers, along with villagers, will find a means to adapt in order to earn money in order to survive.
Donkeys resting at the Tumkot Bazaar.
Government-Supplied Rice

As some older and middle-aged villagers who participated in the barter system said, Tibet used to have food shortage. As laid out by the “Trade in the Past” section, Nepalis would bring food crops, among other items, to Tibet to exchange with wool and salt. But now, the situation has reversed. Humla now has a food shortage. However, instead of the people living in China bringing food crops to trade – since the barter system has stopped, the people living in Humla have no choice but to buy food from China. Due to the food shortage, the Nepali government has been supplying rice to the villagers. But not enough. Countless villagers expressed that the government supplies rice, but not nearly enough to make any positive impacts in their lives. There is local rice that is farmed, but that does not last long enough to last a family through the year. There is also rice flown in to Simikot, but because it is flown in it is much more expensive. As Anguk tells me, it is very expensive to bring goods through Humla – to pay for the flight to Simikot and the horses to carry the goods. Because the government pays for the government-supplied rice, villagers do not need to pay for the airfare, only the actual value of the rice. They depend on Chinese rice in order to have enough for the rest of the year.

Pema Thongdol is passionate when he tells me about the rice shortage. “The government supplies [rice] but a little amount – only 15 kilograms [to each family] one time a month. It is not enough. I have to buy Chinese rice from Purang. Sometimes I buy from Simikot. There is a shortage of rice. We have to buy from Simikot during the wintertime because the road is blocked to Purang. I have to go to Simikot, [where] it is more expensive than Chinese rice because it is flown in. 15 kilograms will last maybe five to six days if we eat rice regularly.” Namdak, who does not bother to rely on the food-aid rice delivered by the government, echoes him. He says, “Rice provided by the government… it doesn’t distribute enough so I need to buy from China… I don’t depend on government rice for food.”

Others, such as Kyamjok Lama, say that even though the government-provided rice is tasteless, it is cheap, making it worth it to buy – especially if the government provided more. He says, “Rice provided by the government is cheap but tasteless. Rice from China tastes better but expensive… If the government delivers more rice I would be glad. It is cheap and can taste better with the beans here.” But since the government is not providing more rice to each family, they must rely on Chinese rice, since even that is cheaper than what is flown in to Simikot. This only contributes to the money that is flowing to China, boosting their economy but making it difficult for Humli people to afford the rice and all the other necessary goods.

David Citrin writes extensively about the food-aid from the government in his dissertation. He accounts stories of other Humlis speaking about how people no longer eat local food, not only because of imported food, but also because of the food
aid. One villager expressed that because food aid rice is delivered directly to Simikot, people think, “Oho! We are poor now, here there is a famine.’ So now people say more that ‘We are hungry,’ and they don’t eat our own local foods. They don’t grow local foods” (quoted in Citrin 203). Citrin and his sources associate this with Humlis becoming lazy and greedy, and not willing to work hard in order to produce enough local foods, but, as many villagers, especially in Khangalgaun, told me, how much food can be grown is based on the year and on the weather and rainfall. The government-supplied rice is enabling Humlis to not use the own food they produce, but still, it is not enough to last them more than a couple of weeks, let alone for the rest of the year. This only further enforces villagers to trade and to go to Purang to buy more rice, which further reduces their reliance on their own land and food they grow themselves. However, with the introduction of the road, hopefully Humlis will be able to produce more vegetables, fruits, and other crops that they are able to sell some for profit, but also so that they can keep their crops to feed their own families for the year. This would essentially move reliance for food back to their own land, rather than rely on imported food.
The Road to Nepalgunj

While this paper is focusing on the road to Simikot to Hilsa, there is also another road attempting to be built from Nepalgunj to Simikot. If this road is connected, the road being built now through Humla will essentially link China and India. While there are other border sites in Nepal, those sites are mainly linked with Kathmandu, not India, in order “to forge closer ties with China to counter balance Nepal’s historical dependencies on India” (Murton 13).

Bishnu Prasad Acharya is the headmaster of the Motiran Primary School in Khangalgaun. He has lived in Khangalgaun for 27 years and works to educate students. He studied horticulture and economics in Simikot after getting a basic education in his home in the Dhang district of Nepal. The exchange rate from Yuan to Nepali Rupees is very expensive he says, around 17 Nepali Rupees to one Yuan. Before, he says, it was a very cheap exchange rate, but is now rapidly increasing. Purang is the nearest place where people of Humla can buy all the things. While Simikot is close, it does not have a wide selection. Mostly, too, things are more expensive because they must be flown in, rather than brought by truck. Bishnu says that he thinks if the Chinese close the border that the people of Humla will die of hunger. “If the road is connected it will be very good for the people here. Here and all around the country.” Because the road would connect India to China by way of a new road from Simikot to Nepalgunj and from Nepalgunj to India, Bishnu claims it could be an international road. Nepal, he claims, could be developed. It could export things to China and India rather than mainly importing goods. It would have more economic power even though it sits between two powerhouse countries. Nepal, he claims, could have more economic growth. He thinks the road will be beneficial to all people. There can be more tourism, people can get jobs, and people can make a lot of money from owning

One of many construction vehicles left along the road from Simikot to Hilsa.
hotels and restaurants. However, through conversations with people in Muchu, it is clear not everyone will benefit economically.

Different from Bishnu Prasad, Namdak thinks that rather than linking China to India, the road from Simikot to Nepalgunj will link the Humla region with India, opening trade routes from India to villagers in Humla. He says, “If the road connects from Nepalgunj to Simikot, the Chinese border is not needed. Things are cheaper from India and Nepal. Right now, things are expensive from China. If the border closes, we won’t get rice, flour – basic things. Even for businessmen – if border closes then no business. My and my family’s lifestyle will improve if road connects to Nepalgunj. Now a days it is difficult to work in other countries [China]. If road connects to Nepalgunj, it will be easier to work in our own country. If the Chinese border closes, and there is no road from Nepalgunj, we will face different kind of problem – shortage of food and clothes. We must utilize our own land.” Namdak discusses a few different things, but an opinion is clear: if this road connects, villagers of Humla will no longer need to go to Purang – China will not be a necessity to survival. As Namdak mentions, right now, the people of Humla rely on China to provide them with the necessities of life – food, clothing, other necessary items such as blankets and rugs and kitchen utensils.

If China closes its border, which does not seem likely since they are benefitting so much from this system, the villagers will rely on Simikot and items being flown in, which could be extremely expensive – more expensive than traveling to Purang. The road to Nepalgunj is a far off idea, since the government is slow to complete projects, but important in thinking about how trade will evolve over the next 10, 20, or 50 years. This road could be a complete game-changer in the economy of Humla, and will certainly allow more trade route options, rather than just the trade route to China. If this road is built, China will need to either lower taxes or make it easier to cross to Purang, or face the fact that Humlis will now travel to India to get there goods. Obviously, the road to Nepalgunj would be a dangerous one as well, traversing across the mountains in order to get to the low plains, and could bring its own share of drawbacks, opening Humla up to even more modernization and pollution, and the price for vehicles going to Nepalgunj would probably be very expensive. But it would allow goods to be easily imported from other areas of Nepal as well as India.
A Cash Economy vs the Traditional Barter System

Humla has been a part of the trans-Himalayan trade and barter system for a long time. Now its economy is solely an international cash economy controlled mainly by what the Chinese decide to do with the border and how their economy profits from doing trade with the Humli people. The economy is transitioning to using vehicles, making it especially impossible to return to a barter system. For some, mainly with money, this transition is welcomed, and going to Purang to buy Chinese goods is not a problem. However, others wish that the barter system were still in place. Others have no preference between the two. As Yurzjom, a 58-year-old from Kermi, expressed, the barter system and the cash economy are both equal in her eyes. “Because,” she explains, “in the barter system, we had to work hard. Right now, also, I have to work hard to make money. I can use money to get the things. For me, it is the same.”

As I came to know, both systems require an intense amount of work in order to survive; in the barter system a farmer must make sure he has a beneficial crop season and that his animals produce enough milk in order to make butter to sell, but also to sustain his family through the winter. In this cash economy, farmers still work during the farming season, and also work incredibly hard to gather herbal roots or the medicinal caterpillar or wood for the wooden cup in order to make enough money to buy the necessities for their families.

Phurbu Lama, one of the older men from Khangalgaun, says he thinks the cash economy is better for Humla and for his family. He says, “Cash economy is better because in barter system, we had to do a lot of hard work for making money. For example we had to carry huge beams to China by ourselves. But now we can make money and buy the things. [For] those who can make money, cash economy is better. For poor people it is not good.” Preference depends on how much money you can make in Humla’s current trade economy, and if you can’t find a means to make money, or your job does not make very much then it is certainly difficult to buy food, clothing, and other items needed to survive. For example, Rinzen Lama, another older man living in Khangalgaun, says, “For me, the barter system is better than cash economy. Before with the barter system I can survive of my own land. Now without money it is hard to buy things. Things are getting more expensive. Those who have money, cash economy is good for them. [For] those who don’t the barter system is better.” Because right now it is fairly difficult to make money from farming, it is easy to understand why some believe the barter system is better. If you have no other means to make money, then you are unable to buy goods from Purang or Simikot.

However, since Humla has transitioned to an entirely cash economy, there is no returning to the old system. Those without money will need to learn to adapt their lifestyle, if they have not done so already, in order to keep up with the changing trade system and survive. It is hard to say which is truly better, especially having not
experienced either. But both require a different means of living, and are both
difficult in their own way. The cash economy may be easier physically than the
barter system, but seems to require more effort from villagers. This cash system
may even shift from a reliance on trade and imported goods, to wanting to buy
goods from Purang. Especially with the new highway, traveling to Purang will be
easier, and trade may become even more commercialized.

A horse carries supplies on the link path in Humla. Soon witnessing animals on the
trail will not be a reality.
Photo by Wensday Berman.
Conclusion
This study was conducted with the intent to focus on people’s stories and their experiences in order to learn about how they think the changing trade and the construction of the road, will affect them. Each person I spoke to was unique, with varying background stories about their lives, such as being a hunter who had a run in with a yeti or a teacher-turned-shopkeeper. Each person has their own individual opinion about how their lives will be affected by the evolving trade, as well as benefits and drawbacks of the road and the modernization brought by the road. Many of these opinions, however, happened to have a similar underlying message: the construction of the road is good. The reliance on imported food and other items forces villagers to travel to China to get these goods, walking with their animals. The consensus that the road will allow an easier lifestyle because walking with animals will no longer be necessary, it will take a shorter amount of time to get to and from Purang, and villagers can bring more goods back to their families. According to an article from *The Kathmandu Post*, even the Chinese are willing to help and assist in the completion of the road. The article discusses how the completed road will allow continued trade and will open more trade opportunities. It also notes how after the road is completed, more focus will be spent “on ways to improving [sic] our existing trade partnership with Taklakot [Purang]” (“Chinese help sought for Humla road” 2016).

Many villagers and shopkeepers noted their positive feedback of the road, and a few, including a truck driver himself, noted negative effects of the road, such as extremely dangerous conditions, drinking and driving, expensive fares, and the extreme loss of culture and tradition. However, although there are many negative aspects to the road, everyone I spoke with said that these negative aspects are worth an easier lifestyle; loss of tradition is worth having modern technology and modern machines that will make the lifestyle of living in Humla easier.

But it is difficult to truly know the effects of the road until after the roads completion. There is a dangerous dependency on trade. This dependency on Chinese goods will turn into a dependency on the road and on vehicles, which will further the reliance on money. Many villagers can speculate that it will make their lifestyle physically easier, but how much will the need for more money affect them?

The completion of the road will have an effect, either negative or positive or both, on villagers, but it will also affect shopkeepers and businessmen at the Tumkot Bazaar. However, those hotel owners and shopkeepers have already adapted to making money at the market once the road was partially connected with Hilsa, and they will surely be able to adapt again when the connection of the bridge forces the trucks to pass around the bazaar. And like the seasonal businessmen of the Tumkot Bazaar, villagers will no doubt find a way to make more money in order to cope with
changing trade and their changing economy. They will mold their lifestyle in order
to adapt and survive in a changing Humla.
Bibliography

All photos were taken by author, November 2016, unless otherwise noted.


List of Interviews


Future Research
There are many future research topics that could be done in the Humla region, and many subjects I came across that I did not have time to focus on or learn about. The following are some suggestions that could prove to be a fruitful Independent Study Project (ISP).

Because the road has not been completed, it is impossible to know how, exactly, the road will influence life in Humla, but there can be speculation and opinions. It would be interesting to return to see how the road affects life and the trade economy five or ten years after the road is built. It may not be feasible for an ISP, but it would also be interesting to do a case study of one village in Humla along the highway and return to the village five, ten, 20 years after the road is completed to see how they have been affected in the short and long run.

Many people expressed how they think local traditions will be lost once the road is built. It would be interesting to do an ISP that focuses on the changing culture and tradition. Documenting specifics about what the older generation thinks about tradition, and what the younger generation thinks about tradition, as well as what those traditions entail would be extremely interesting. It would also be important to note how and why the traditions are being lost, or why the younger generation chooses not to engage in local song and dance or other traditions, if that is the case. Since many say that traditions and culture are fading away even without the completion of the road, it would be best to conduct research before the road is completed, or before the older generation moves on.

With the evolving economic system, traditional roles in the household are being shifted. It would be interesting to research the social structure of the household, looking at how women and men’s roles in the family have changed, if at all. Men traditionally are the ones who travel to and from Purang, but will that change with the road? How much will women be involved in trade? There were women at the Tumkot Bazaar, but their role was extremely similar to what their role is in the village. It would also be interesting to look at the social structure of the village, noting community and community relationships and how those have evolved.

It would also be interesting to research the farming culture of the villages along the new road. For example, investigating what villagers used to farm, if it is different, and what they farm now, as well as if they sell crops using the link road and what those crops are. It would also be good to note exactly how much they produce in a season, gathering numerical data, if possible, to show how crop yields have varied over the years. In addition, gathering information on how the dependency on imported food products or government-supplied rice and how that contributes or affects farming practices would be an interesting investigation.

In addition, if you think you would like to travel to Humla to conduct your ISP, please do not hesitate to get in contact with me if you have any questions about traveling to, trekking in, or doing research in Humla. Also, please note below the contact information of Sonam Lama, my guide and translator, and Prem Dorchi Lama who helped with getting permits and plane and bus tickets. They are more than willing to help SIT students travel to and conduct research in Humla.
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*Photo by Wensday Berman.*