

# **The Need for Otherness**

## **Spaces of Tourism in Nepal**

**Master thesis at Department of Social Anthropology, University of Oslo, Autumn 2006**

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## *Thesis Summary*

As the title implies this thesis is about the “need for otherness.” This need can be seen in tourists desire to go further than other tourists in the achievement of an understanding and familiarity with the places visited.

The fieldwork leading to this thesis is based in Thamel a district lying centrally in Kathmandu, Nepal. It is an area generally perceived as very artificial and touristy. The fieldwork is a qualitative study carried out by of participant observation as means of collecting and producing data.

In this thesis seek I to find identify and explain relationships between tourists and the places visited, consumption and identity. To a lesser extent I go into how features of Nepal such as the Himalayas and aspects of Nepali culture commodified and marketed to the tourists.

Theoretically the thesis rests on a several theoretical fields, primarily studies of tourism, concepts of place, space and landscape as well as theory on consumption and how the latter is relevant for the making of identities.

I show how the there can be said to exist a moral order among tourist. In this order status is best achieved in finding a balance between frequenting places perceived as authentic and off the beaten path, while not appearing to be overly concerned with doing so. Tourists’ experience and sense making of the places visited are also influenced by the degree in which these places can provide resolve to the moral dilemma of being a tourist.

The Nepali tourists industry’s practices of commodification and marketing largely revolve around finding features of Nepal can either be perceived as “exotic” from a tourist’s point of view, or be favourably compared to similar features of other countries. The best examples of the latter are Mt. Everest and the Himalayas. Both of these can be seen as “other” to modern society.

These features are in turn commodified and imbued with certain meaning. The tourist’s consumption of these and subsequently the imbued meaning are also a factor in the construction of identities among tourists.

# Introduction

## *Introduction*

This thesis is a study of tourists and their relations to the places and spaces they visit. Of these places and spaces the one given most attention is Thamel. Thamel is a small area in central Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal. Thamel is characterized by its many hotels, guest houses, restaurants, shops and travel agencies all of which offer goods and services to the tourists and others. It is thus generally seen as a very touristy and artificial place. Tourists who come to Nepal generally use Thamel as a springboard to other places. Thus to a lesser extent this thesis goes into tourists' relations to some of these.

As mentioned already Thamel is generally seen as a touristy and artificial place. It can be said to have come to be as a means to an end which is catering to tourists. Most tourists generally do not find it very interesting or at least do not admit to do so. At the same time Thamel is a place where the tourist can find a range of goods and services available few other places in Nepal. Thus it is a relatively comfortable place to stay and one would think that tourists, who are on holiday after all, would find it all right. This however is far from the case.

One does not have to stay in Thamel very long to understand that it is a place that is disliked by many. Or at least they claim to dislike it. It would seem a bit strange that a place constructed to accommodate to every conceivable need on part of the tourist in general is not appreciated much by the tourists.

Like the ugly duckling in the namesake fairy tale, no one wants to claim Thamel as their own. Nepalis often call Thamel "our western part." Westerners, while usually agreeing that Thamel resembles the West more closely than rural Nepal for instance but, would never identify the culture of Thamel, whatever that is, with themselves. Usually they call it "tourist," negatively loaded as something mildly despicable, highly commercial, fake and inauthentic.

Why then, is Thamel so little liked? Why do tourists regard it as artificial, and why is it so commonly used as merely a springboard rather than as a destination in itself?

## *Theoretical Framework*

This thesis could be described as multi-themed. As a consequence I opt to use diverse theory. While this is a study of tourists it is also a study of tourists' spatial relations, commodification and marketing aimed at tourists and tourists' consumption practices. It is my view that

employing a narrow range of theory in the attempt to grasp these phenomena would be quite restricting. Thus I find it appropriate to employ a wide range of theory to better understand these phenomena and how they interact with each other. The various chapters each in their own way attempt to illuminate tourism and tourists as phenomena. An advantage of this approach is that it allows the object of study to be perceived from several angles. An obvious disadvantage is that the thesis could appear to be going in different directions. It is my view though, that the different themes explored in the different chapters and themes are tied together in many ways. Another disadvantage is that covering a wide range of theory will perhaps can take place at the expense of going into greater depth in a smaller area. Still in this thesis I have chosen to adopt a pragmatic and selective stance towards theories. Thus more comprehensive discussions of theory will be found in the individual chapters. As such I will for now only give a brief introduction to the relevant theoretical fields.

### **Tourism and consumption**

In the attempt to conceptualize the tourist I primarily make use of writings of MacCannel, Graburn, and Smith. A central point in MacCannel's (1976, 2001) theory on tourists and tourism is how the tourist is in search of authentic experiences and "otherness." These two goals in many cases coincide due to ways in which the "other" is constructed as authentic. Graburn (1989, 2001), building on the works of Van Gennep and Turner, primarily sees tourism and travel as ritual. The tourist becomes subject to forces of liminality and *communitas*. Smith emphasizes the leisure aspect of tourism. Tourism in this sense becomes what work is not.

Tourists are also can also be seen as consumers. This view is presented by among others Bell & Lyall (2002) and Gottdiener (2000). They also understand consumption as significant in the making of identities. The various commodities which the tourist consumes in can accordingly be seen as having impact on the tourist's sense of self.

### **Place and Space and Landscape**

A theoretical point of departure throughout this thesis is the tourist's experience and perception of space. To better get an understanding of how tourists make sense of themselves in relation to their surroundings I primarily make use of writings by Augé (1995), Favero (2003, 2005) Hirsch (1995) and Ingold (2000). Both Augé (1995) and Favero (2003, 2005)

operate with somewhat postmodern concepts of place. Still they have rather different views on how spatial compositions affect interpersonal relations. Ingold (2000) and (Hirsch) both make use of a landscape model. While their respective models are a bit different they both have the merit of showing how certain meanings can be projected onto the landscape.

### *Thamel as field*

Fieldwork shares with other human endeavours the trait of being temporally and spatially situated. Although the boundaries in space and time concerning the fieldwork may be blurry and difficult to pin down, fieldwork will in some degree take place at a certain time and at a certain location or set of locations. Humans, it has been claimed, possess a drive towards making sense of their surroundings (Geertz 1973). It does not seem unlikely that this sense making indeed includes orientation in space and, perhaps to a slightly lesser extent, time. As anthropologists are humans, though arguably unusual ones, we too must subordinate ourselves to this assumption. We too have learned to depend on space and time as true features of our surroundings.

This section will discuss Thamel as location and arena for fieldwork. What implications does Thamel, considering its geographical and social characteristics, pose for the task of carrying out fieldwork? How can Thamel as field be constructed?

Thamel being a relatively small place is distinct in that a large part of the people present there at any given time are visitors, tourists or otherwise. With its location in central Kathmandu Thamel is very much an urban setting. My informants include both permanent residents and visitors. Among the permanent residents, mostly Nepalis but not exclusively, nearly all had lived, worked, travelled or been educated in other Asian countries or in the West. Those who hadn't were often very eager to do so. Among these people, none left Thamel for extended periods of time. Hence they were more or less available to me from when I established contact with them. Among the visitors it was a bit more complicated. Several of my visitor informants stayed in Thamel for several months, many working as volunteers in pretty long term commitments. They didn't regard themselves as visitors, and neither did I after a few months. As some of them stayed in Thamel almost as long as I did, close relations could be formed. It is also among these some of my most important and valued informants (and friends) can be found.

Then there are all the other visitors who stayed for shorter periods with whom I didn't have the chance to meet more than a few times, sometimes as few as once or twice. Being sort

of a tourist place Thamel sees a lot of people coming and going. Thamel is often used as a springboard to various activities in many parts of Nepal, especially trekking and mountaineering. Thamel is where one can kick back in relatively comfortable surroundings in between the more strenuous but exiting activities. Many did complain about Thamel as a boring place but appreciated the soft beds and wide range in foods one can get at a price. I thus got the chance to speak to a great many people, many more than I had the chance to forge relations with.

The comings and goings of people also meant that my informants during one month would be someone else than my informants in the next. Of course the degree of contact I had with the permanent residents would also escalate and decline as weeks and months went by. These however, were usually available to me. With the more short term visitors on the other hand it was often a case of meeting with them relatively frequently over the course of a few weeks up to the outside of a month perhaps. Then they would depart leaving me with the task of getting in touch with new potential informants. These periods however, didn't commence and finish separately. They always covered each other. But there were times when I had fewer informants than at others. These fluctuations were nonetheless just part of the picture. I also had a core of informants, residents and long term visitors during more or less the whole study. This draft of people in and out of Thamel would at least in terms of the ideals of the traditional fieldwork seem like a disadvantage. Forming long term relations with people has since Malinowskian times been seen as central, even necessary for a successful fieldwork, and is today still highly valued. It is a very good idea to get to know people. To see how they react in different situations and to discuss the same issues several times and see if opinions and attitudes change according to circumstance for example, is more of a challenge with informants one meets only a few times. At the same time the endeavour of ethnography or anthropology rests to a certain extent on peoples' general good will to speak truthfully. Of course, people often seek to portray themselves favourably and there is often a discrepancy between sayings and doings. Of this the anthropologist should be and usually is, I dare say, aware. There is still some distance from this awareness to the discerning of lies. An approach where the anthropologist is constantly second guessing his informants statements would probably not lead very far. While long term relations are important for comprehensive understandings, data gathered from brief meetings, is data nonetheless. It must and should be taken at face value within reasonable limits.

In this way the social draft in Thamel also presents possibilities for the ethnographer. The opportunity to be able to speak with a large number of people, albeit in some cases as one



time occurrences, can be of use in grasping a bigger picture than would be possible otherwise. Long term relations, while being rich sources of data also entail some commitment on the part of the anthropologist and can also be very time consuming. One of the first things I usually asked people was for how long they were staying in Thamel. With this very natural unsuspecting question it was possible for me to instantly know if this was a potential long term informant or just a conversation. This can sometimes be an advantage in that one doesn't risk losing valuable informants because of saying the wrong thing or asking questions too directly. Neither need fear the same because they know they'll be moving on soon and are as such not subject to the usual mechanisms of social control. Perhaps this can produce more honest statements which can lead to more precise data.

The large number of people one meets rather randomly in this way are obviously not connected or related in any way. Their statements will therefore be quite varied compared to what one might find internally in more close knit groups where there can be a tendency towards "inbreeding" of opinions. Speaking, though briefly, with many unconnected or unrelated people can possibly produce data to support a wider and more nuanced understanding, perhaps but not necessarily at the loss of depth, compared to studies where the ethnographer moves along the lines of social networks and is at chance, for better or worse, of meeting people 'of the same kind'.

The problems of informants being temporally and spatially unstable in this fashion are probably something all anthropologists carrying out urban studies have to deal with in varying degrees. I believe that for Thamel's sake these difficulties are mitigated by Thamel's relatively small size. It's possible to walk from one end of Thamel to the other in about 15 minutes (counting in the time needed to negotiate the ever-present heavy traffic). Since nearly all of my informants either lived or worked somewhere in Thamel, they were within arms reach most of the time. As I lived in Thamel I spent what I think must have been incredible little time travelling compared to other fieldworks in urban settings. Because of Thamel's small size it was easy to meet people very frequently. Both the close informants and other people who I got to know. Every day on the street or in a café or bar, I met by happenstance people that I knew but didn't know well enough for it seem natural to make arrangements to meet unless I presented myself formally and asked for an interview. Running into people in this way was kind of an excuse for a small chat which sometimes resulted in useful data. I was in this way able to maintain the more peripheral relations, which otherwise in a more conventional urban setting, probably wouldn't have been established at all. Making the arrangements to meet and the travel time involved would have made this too much to juggle,

if not outright impossible given the limitations on time. Running into people by chance became so frequent that it became a joke between me and one of my informants to actually make a point out of for once make arrangements to meet. I might add that the lack of need for arrangements in order to meet people proved very convenient in a country where phone lines are shut down on a whim by the King.

## **Informants**

Primarily my informants were tourists in one way or the other. I wanted to find informants with a wide range in age, gender and outlook and preferably not only from the West. This, I think, was only partially achieved as the tourist season during my stay could be seen as a disaster caused by the King's coup d'état in terms of the number of arrivals. Most of my tourist informants were relatively young people, typically 19-30 years old and almost exclusively Western. I also managed to speak with some of older ages though. Most of my main informants were also tourists travelling for relatively long periods, typically four to eight months rather than short term "charter tourists." Some of these were also working as volunteers. Considering that a central theme in my study is the tourists' relation to Thamel I think the focus on longer term tourists proved some interesting cases as these had had ample time for reflecting on their role in conjunction with Thamel. To these the ambivalence towards Thamel becomes more present than to those who stay for two weeks. While there can be said to be a bias in age among my informants it is my impression that I managed to interact with or otherwise get account from people with dramatically different opinions and views. I consider this one strength in my material.

My informants also include Nepalis. While the study is mainly about displaced people or tourists, not having any Nepali connections would not be a very good idea. In a way the Nepali informants constituted a corrective to some statements done by my Western informants. Nepali perspectives were, I think, particularly useful as a contrast to the more or less "orientalist" (Said 1978) views some tourists were entertaining.

## **Remarks on language**

While staying in Thamel I took a course in Nepali lasting four weeks. This did not make me an expert by any means but allowed me to say and sometimes understand words and short sentences. At the same time my Nepali informants had a better command of English than I

had of Nepali. In Thamel most Nepalis are quite able to get by in English. My very limited Nepali skills came into play in a few odd situations during the fieldwork however and were in some cases even directly useful.

Still my fieldwork is carried out by and large in English. This worked out fine with my informants. However there are also tourists in Thamel who speak very little English. It is with regard to these that one can talk of real language barriers. Consequently there were tourists in Thamel I had little chance of communicating with. There are for instance no Japanese among my informants even though there were a fair number of them in Thamel. While language barriers are a factor to be aware of, I do not see such as a very significant weakness in the thesis.

### **Methodical approach**

This thesis is based wholly on a qualitative approach. For example I make no attempt to show how big or important tourism is. It is simply there. Likewise during this thesis I will present some cases and statements that are not always typical of large amounts of people. I hope however that the significance of the statements and cases will be clear. On the other hand I have refrained from using material which not at all seemed representative.

During the fieldwork I was staying at a pretty cheap hotel in the middle of Thamel. It was an unending struggle with cockroaches and mosquitoes but it was affordable. The hotel also had a rather spacious common area which was a good place to meet and chat with new arrivals. The manager of the hotel was also a sociable fellow and had many years of experience in the tourist industry.

The first two weeks was quickly spent in getting to know ones way around Thamel and establishing the initial informant relations. The next month I was occupied with the language course from late morning to early afternoon on weekdays. After this I had the entire day at my disposal.

Many of my informants were spending much idle time around the many cafés, bars and restaurants. I thought it a pretty good idea to spend as much time with them as possible. Thus much time was spent at places like this, drinking coffee, tea, or beer sometimes while chatting with informants and others. My Nepali informants were working most of the day. Those who were working in Thamel I would sometimes visit on their places of work. In the evening though they, like the tourists, would gather at the bars and pubs to spend time with friends.

A typical day would consist of getting up at ten or eleven. If I did not have any appointments I would simply hang around in Thamel looking for people I knew well or slightly, and try to initiate conversation. Usually my day would last until about one o'clock a night. In this way I tried to achieve a degree of participation, which I think it is fair to say that I did. As I looked like a tourist myself integration among them presented little difficulty.

I also conducted around 10 lengthy interviews most of which were done with tourists. While what I learned from them did not seem like much at the time, this information proved valuable in time. Most of these interviews were done rather early in the fieldwork and as a result I moved away from this approach in favour of more informal interaction. I did not use any recording equipment.

When studying tourists it is necessary to follow in the tourists footsteps. Thus I went on a few daylong trips to sight around Kathmandu in most cases together with other sightseers. As I realized the significance trekking had for large numbers of tourists I decided to go trekking myself. When trekking, one is walking along a predefined path. There is thus the potential to experience such spaces in the exact same way as others have before.

## **A Royal takeover**

February 1<sup>st</sup> 2005 King Gyanendra decided that the current government had proven unable to deal with the Maoist threat. They would wake up the next morning in house arrest. Radio, TV, phone, and internet were all shut down. The shutting down of the internet was probably the biggest concern of most tourists. Indeed the coup d'état effectively showed how Thamel to some extent is a kind of bubble, some tourists I talked to two days after it happened had still not heard of it. To the tourist industry the coup d'état was something of a disaster.

To some of my informants the incident became almost an attraction. Wayne and Thomas were going to different places in Kathmandu filming with Thomas' camera. They found filming at a place called Democracy Wall which is actually little more than a bus stop particularly hilarious.

## **Ethics**

When I first met people that I saw as potential informants I would as soon as I had the chance, let them know that I was doing. I would also explain to them that all names would be changed. Many times people would comment that it did not matter whether I replaced the

names or not as no one they knew was likely to ever read this thesis. Nonetheless all names of persons have been changed. In the thesis a few place names.

## ***Terminology***

### **The “Tourist” term**

Throughout the thesis I will use simply “tourist” to refer to all visitors in Nepal except those that are there to do paid work. While many, of my informants would be slightly uncomfortable being referred to by this term, I will do so for the sake of simplicity. It is not my intention to force this term on them. What terms individual tourists refer to themselves by and are comfortable with is a discussion of its own as we shall see. If I should accommodate to all these views I fear the thesis would be littered with a confusing range of term all referring to some kind of tourist. The Nepalis also consistently use simply “tourist” to refer to the whole lot.

### **“Otherness”**

I define “otherness” as follows: “Otherness” is some form of difference made relevant depending on context.

## ***Thesis Outline***

The attempt to answer the set of mentioned questions lies at the centre of this thesis. To answer these questions I will look into how tourists relate to Thamel. How they experience it as a meaningful or meaningless place. Or perhaps the dislike is not caused by Thamel but by other factors? Maybe it is “cool” to say that Thamel “sucks”? Why are some places seen as artificial while other places seen as genuine? And why do tourists seem to prefer the latter? To find out this I will examine some consumption choices made by the tourists. Which commodities attract them the most?

Chapter one will focus on the tourist. First I will present a bit of history of tourism as well as looking into some anthropological theory on tourism. I will then move on to some motivations people have for travelling. After this I will attempt to explain that ambiguities and anxieties in the tourist role are contributing to the establishment of a tourist morality.

Chapter two will put the tourist into the setting of Thamel. Through the use of some different theories of place, space and landscape I will try to give an account of how Thamel is experienced and understood.

In chapter three I move the focus slightly away from the tourist onto some features of Nepal which is commodified and imbued with meaning. It should by this point be clear that these features are representative of “otherness” and that this is what the tourist is under a moral obligation to desire. In this chapter I also look at some aspects of marketing and how these are affecting the sociality and perception in Thamel.

In chapter four I leave Thamel for a brief period to describe how the greatest products Nepal has to offer is consumed and how this consumption is a way if self definition and adjusting boundaries between nature, self and the “other.” I conclude this chapter with a brief discussion of Thamel, Himalayas and authenticity.

In as conclusion I summarize some of the main arguments of the thesis and look at some connections between chapter.

# 1 – The Tourist

## *Introduction*

In this chapter I will discuss the tourist. One reason for this is the majority of my informants fall into this role. That said tourists are diverse people with different reasons for travelling.

Smith defines the tourist as “a temporarily leisured person who travels away from home for the purpose of experiencing change” (Smith 2001:16). What the tourist does can thus be seen as some kind of leisure activity as opposed to work. Indeed, the dichotomy between work and leisure has been noted as a universal trait of culture (Smith 2001:3).

The purpose of this chapter then is to learn more about who the tourist is. I will have a brief look at the some history of tourism as well as some theory of tourism. In the study of tourism it is worth noting that not everyone had the capacity to become a tourist. Thus I will discuss the means necessary. The definition above states that tourist leave home to experience change. What “change” are they looking for? To answer this I will look into some motivations for travelling. I will also discuss some types and trends of tourists and how these are connected to moral issues of being a tourist.

## *A Bit of History of Tourism*

Exactly when tourism started is not easy to accurately pin down. Some scholars point to the rise of mass tourism in the post World War two period, though some argue that tourism began at a much earlier stage, the pilgrimages and crusades of the middle ages being prime examples (Graburn 1989).

From a European perspective the Renaissance can be seen as an important period of shift, as it implied a change in world view, from introspective spiritual pursuits to an outward materialist perspective (ibid.). Also paving the way for this were the astronomical and territorial discoveries of the same period.

The Industrial Revolution was important in several respects. First, it created a demand for raw materials which contributed to an already growing imperial expansion (Nash 1989). It also increased the access and demand for commodities, which gave rise to what has been referred to as the “Consumer Society,” in which production takes a second role to consumption as mankind’s defining activity (Gottdiener 2000). Ultimately, with machines

doing more and more of the work people, other than the obscenely rich, finally had the opportunity to travel. Lastly, the Industrial Revolution with its many side effects gave rise to a romanticism of unspoilt nature and countryside (Graburn 1989).

Contemporary tourism is usually traced back to the Grand Tour of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Bell & Lyall 2002). The “Grand Tour” refers to aristocrats going to continental centres of culture to enhance their education (ibid.). A highly fashionable activity, the bourgeoisie soon followed, though these were generally more interested in sightseeing, particularly monuments of classical history (ibid.). Travel was however, still reserved for the reasonably wealthy, making it a fairly exclusive endeavour (ibid.). Travel was thus another way of showing off wealth and buying social status. The longer, further generally more exclusive trip, the greater the gain in status. Some speculate that this snobbery can be traced to contemporary debates of tourists vs. travellers (ibid.). In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the Grand Tour declined due to political unrest in Europe, and lost its significance as new, better means of transportation became available (Bell & Lyall 2002, Graburn 1989).

The World’s first packaged tour was probably orchestrated by the Baptist minister Thomas Cook (Bell & Lyall 2002). Thomas Cook, a firm believer in democratic travel, organized several railway tours around Britain promoting sobriety (Graburn 1989). More and more the destinations shifted from cities to picturesque landscapes and the countryside (Bell & Lyall 2002). The wilderness that had during the Middle Ages been seen as a highly dangerous place was more and more coming into demand by travellers, as a place of reprieve from the unhealthy environment of the city. By the 1870s the Thomas Cook tours took people as far as the Middle East (Graburn 1989).

The 1920s saw a glorification of the common folk, while aristocratic trends were increasingly seen as old and stiff (Graburn 1989). Tastes and trends of commoners, such as jazz music, were romanticized (ibid.). Middle class people went ‘slumming’ with the common folk and the ‘discovery’ of the virtues of other ethnic or “primitive” groups paved the way for so called “ethnic” tourism. Even anthropologists, such as Bronislaw Malinowski, wanted to see these “primitives” themselves.

Post World War period saw a decline in puritan work ethic (Smith 2001). It was perfectly all right, even encouraged by peers and advertising, to spend hard earned money on mere enjoyment. The production surplus and many years of union struggles enabled people to work fewer hours, so that they had sufficient time to engage in leisure activities such as travel. This can be seen as part of a bigger picture of which the consumption of many “unnecessary” commodities became increasingly legitimate. This process has been labelled



“consumerism” or “consumer society” (Gottdiener 2000, Smith 2001). A critical point in this theory is the idea that consumption is the most important means of defining selfhood and distinguishing oneself from others (Durning 1992).

### ***Theoretical Approaches***

Various attempts have been made in order to grasp tourism and tourists theoretically. Tourism is generally seen as another form of leisure which in a sense is the opposite of work. The work vs. leisure dichotomy has been identified as a universal cultural figure (Smith 2001). Of the early theoretical approaches to tourism Dean MacCannel’s *The Tourist* from 1976 is worth mentioning. MacCannel puts a huge emphasis on the transition from traditional ways of life to the paradigm of modernity. The shift from industrial to modern society, he claims, is shown in the “devaluation of work and in the rise of tourism and leisure” (MacCannel 1976:58). As people became more and more detached from their traditional family and ethnic relations, they needed other means of constructing identity and belonging, such as to “organize themselves in groups around world views provided by cultural productions” (MacCannel 1976:30). The tourist is, by MacCannel, seen as a somewhat confused person restlessly searching for authentic experiences gone missing with the collapse of norms and social structure of the industrial epoch (Franklin 2006). Tourism as phenomenon is hence seen as a kind of slightly unfortunate side effect of modernity, which in itself is viewed upon by MacCannel as an almost pathological condition. While this view may seem a bit stale and deterministic today, some tourists are highly critical of modern society, seeing it as a place where life has gone seriously off track. Maggie, one of my main informants, expressed herself like this:

“Virtual reality is not a thing of science fiction. It’s how lots of people in the West lead their lives. They live on the top floor of giant skyscrapers. They never go out. They order food which is brought to them and all their so called social life is done through the internet. They have become alienated from themselves and their own lives. They live virtual lives.”

Critical attitudes like this are often matched by a grand romanticism and awe towards non-Western societies. This will be dealt with in a bit.

Graburn (1976) also recognized the work vs. leisure dichotomy and placed it analogous to profane vs. sacred. Both of the pairs are mutually constitutive. Vacation and

travel is seen as the modern equivalent of traditional festivals or rituals often of the religious type, such as rites of passage. Indeed *communitas* has been pointed out as an effect indicating that tourism can be seen as having elements of ritual (Franklin 2006). It is very much my experience from Thamel that outsiders especially tourists formed close relations in relatively short time. Pat and Luke, two people I spent a fair amount of time with in Thamel, had not known each other until they met at Heathrow Airport. After about two minutes of conversation it had turned out that they were both heading for Nepal. In Thamel I never actually met one of them without the other also being present. At a glance it seemed the only thing they had in common was that they were both British and 19 years old. They were from opposite parts of the country, had different accents and dressed differently. While travelling in a foreign country however, these differences did not seem to bother them much. It is, according to Victor Turner, precisely the homogenization or disappearance of rank and other social differences that enable close relations, typical of the state of *communitas*, to be formed (Turner 1969). The state of *communitas* is often associated with rites of passage. In these rites the initiates are tried and tested in various ways. As such they are for a limited period subjected to the same environment and generally get the same treatment. Thus they can relate to each others experiences as these are similar. Shortly after I had met Maggie she told me how great she thought it was to have someone Western or at least foreign to Nepal to share all new impressions and experiences with. She had arrived in Nepal only around a week earlier, and had been staying and spending all her time in Patan, a city originally south of, but now practically grown together with Kathmandu. I was pretty much the first non-Nepali person she had met in Nepal. While she already had made some Nepali friends, she said that they could not relate to being in Nepal as a visitor. "All the weird things we notice are nothing special to them," she said. Whether travel is a form or ritual or not, is not the main question. It is my impression however is that tourists in Thamel are quick to find the tone. Indeed, I think they have so much fun together that it socially gravitate them away from the Nepalis.

Chris Rojek (2000:53-60) sums up theory on tourism in what he defines as generally three distinct positions, voluntarism, structuralism and postmodernity. Voluntarism focuses on the tourists as free willed individuals in a searching for authenticity and capable, to some extent, of changing the places they visit. The tourists are seen as conscious consumers choosing freely among different services, thus stimulating a diversity rather than standardization of tourist settings. Structuralism is a somewhat opposite position focusing on the large scale industry. The tourist industry is also, according to this view seen as critical in the development of the tourist's desires and preferences regarding where to go and what to do.

The tourist is then drawn into a standardized tourist environment, sometimes referred to as a “tourist trap.” The tourist has little ability or desire to influence or change these environments and the experiences offered. Tourist environments are seen as artificial as opposed to authentic. The only authenticity available is so called “staged authenticity” (MacCannel 1976), which the tourists mindlessly accept and gorge down. The postmodernist position sees both voluntarism and structuralism as reductionistic views. It stresses that tourist experiences are too ambiguous and diverse to have any dominant meaning. Consequently, tourism itself cannot be conceptualized by grand theories such as class domination or dependence theory. The distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity is not seen as stable or absolute. Rather, there is a focus on representation.

While these three positions constitute a grossly simplified picture, they have some relevance to how tourists participate in their own experiences. They also say something about the relations tourists have with the environments they visit and their capacity to influence these. There are also hints as to why people want to travel in the first place.

### ***The Means to Travel***

It is clear than far from everyone has the means to travel. While travel has become more available for many people in rich countries, there are many people around the world who will never enjoy the luxury or leisure travel. According to statistics of 1996 the wealth of the 358 richest people in the world is equal to the wealth shared by 2.3 billion people (Rojek 2001). In the global picture, travel is still a somewhat exclusive endeavour.

Several of my informants from Western countries such as the UK, Ireland and Australia had been working for quite some time, often around six months, and saving up in order to be able to travel. To travel then, requires some degree of effort and planning. This period of working and saving up money, can also be seen as part of the journey. The first step in consuming a commodity is appropriation, meaning that the consumer establishes a mental connection with the commodity to be consumed (Carrier 1996). The commodity, in this case a trip to Nepal, takes on a personal meaning for the consumer.

Many of my informants were in their early twenties. Some were still occupied with studies while others did not have any higher education. Therefore the period of work prior to travelling often involved unskilled, low paid work. Several complained about the dullness of their jobs prior to travelling. As I did not meet my tourist informants until they were in Nepal I can not be certain of this, but it is my suggestion that this period of work is mitigated by the

anticipation of the trip. The trip also lives on, after returning home, in memory, pictures and in telling about it to friends. This remembering may serve as a mitigating factor in saving up for the next trip.

The period of work was something many of my informants were stressing. The means to travel had not simply come to them effortlessly. However, taking such jobs somehow made them deserving of travelling. It served to justify their role as tourists, a role that can be seen as somewhat decadent and pleasure oriented, and thus slightly ethically questionable. Wayne, a twenty year old from the UK, half jokingly related his six months of working and saving like this: “I worked in the longest corridor in Europe. It was a really boring job a public office, moving paper.” It did indeed sound like an incredibly, almost sublimely boring and meaningless job. The concept of the sublime, while usually reserved for more aesthetically perceived landscapes than offices, has something to do with vastness bordering on being beyond comprehension (Bell & Lyall 2002, Crowther 1989). What could be more boring than an almost infinitely long corridor? In this respect, Wayne had indeed worked for and earned his trip.

Even if one has enough money to travel one needs the time to do so. Time itself is sometimes metaphorically equated with money and can thus be seen as a valuable and relatively scarce commodity (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). Those who have steady, long term jobs at home need to be able to get time off work. While holidays are now an institutionalized part of Western societies, they vary in length according to type of work. Aslak, a Norwegian in his late mid fifties was working as an engineer on an offshore platform. He was in Nepal with his wife mainly to go trekking. His work was organized so that he was at the platform a few weeks and then at home an equal number of weeks. He seemed happy about this arrangement as it made travelling easier to accomplish. The point is that some types of work make people more susceptible to travel than others. Other things such as raising small children may also make travel difficult to accomplish. Travel opportunities then, are quite unevenly spread out on a given country’s population.

The state Nepal was in at the time of my fieldwork favoured those tourists who had much time at their disposal. From time to time the Maoists were announcing *bandhs*, a variant general strike, at short notice. These *bandhs* meant that most businesses are compelled to shut down for a couple of days. Those who refuse to do so risk violent sanction by the Maoists. Road blocks are also set up around the country, by the Maoists, to enforce the *bandhs*. Needless to say, unforeseen events like this can really ruin a two week vacation. If one, on the other hand has a few months available, all one needs to do is to stay put, in Kathmandu or

wherever one is, for a couple of days. Conditions like this make certain destinations more or less accessible and suitable for different people. Together with money and time such conditions, as well as distance and preference of course, go some way in determining who will go where.

### ***Motivations***

What motivate people to travel? Much literature on tourism has been trying to come up with reasons for why people care to travel in the first place (Rojek 2000). Enquiring into peoples' reasons for travelling seems to be part of a foundation for understanding the social practices of travel and tourism. So, why do people travel?

### **The perils of work**

Not only has there been a decline in protestant work ethic in many Western societies (Smith 2001). Taking time off work is nowadays seen as healthy and necessary in order not to become something called a "burn-out" or "work addict." Taking time off enables one to "charge one's batteries." Leisure is thus a vital part to one's well being.

An activity that is popular with Westerners in Nepal is to stay in Buddhism monasteries and do courses in Buddhism and meditation. Howard was an American economist who the last few years had been spending about a month in Nepal. He explained how the strain and intensity of working as a stock broker in London paired with a rather hedonistic lifestyle somehow had gotten the better of him. Coming to Nepal and learning about Buddhism, he said, was a way for him to find more real and lasting values in his life. He seemed utterly convinced that this was the place to find what he needed. "The lamas, they need just look at you to know everything about you, your history and your issues. They can tell you exactly what you need to work on to improve your life."

For Howard then, the things he needed to cope could not really be found in London the way they could in Nepal. While people often resort to travel when the opportunity to get time off arises, there are many other forms of leisure than travel. As such the need for time off cannot alone account for why people choose travel as a form of leisure. Sometimes however people seem to think that a change in scenery can be beneficial. It can be good to get away from it all.

When travelling, tourists have a tendency to collect documentation of their journey. This is for instance done by taking pictures and buying trinkets. One day I met again two

Australian girls in the alley outside the place I was staying. I had met them before on occasion a few times around Thamel. They were busy taking pictures of the alley and the hotel they were staying at. They told me that they were leaving Nepal in a few days and it had suddenly occurred to them that they had very few pictures of more “mundane” things like the hotel they had stayed at and the surrounding streets and alley. “This place is so different from home. We thought that we needed some pictures of it so that our friends and family back home can better get to know about our trip.”

### **Travel as achievement**

It may seem like travel is in itself an achievement (Bell & Lyall 2002). When one returns home friends and relatives want stories and pictures. One had better not disappoint them. Pictures and other forms of evidence like souvenirs become objects by which to remember stories and make them more tangible. The more exotic or far out these stories are the better. Some experiences might be uncomfortable or even dangerous. This makes for better stories because they show that the tourist has put in some effort or successfully negotiated tricky situations. Aslak and Lisa, a married couple in their fifties had said that they though travelling in Nepal was a bit of an adventure in that one were, in some situations, at the mercy of happenstance. As example of this they told about how the plane they had taken from Kathmandu into the mountains had had some brake problems during takeoff. According to them, the plane was barely able to take off and there could easily have been a crash. I asked them if this being at the mercy of forces beyond ones control made for a more exiting trip. They both said quite clearly that the plane incident had not been exiting. Still they seemed relieved to think back on the episode. It was also Aslak who first used the word “adventure” in our conversation. Many tourists, I think, like some degree of uncertainty and excitement in their travels, but not too much. Such adventures make for great stories. Both the storyteller and the audience can relive the thrill without the danger or uncertainty.

Travelling to various places while intensely collecting evidence enables one to be perceived by one’s peers back home as worldly and well travelled (MacCannel 2001). The knowledge gathered about the places visited makes one into something of an authority, among friends, on other more exotic societies (Bell & Lyall 2002). Like in the days of the Grand Tour, travelling can be seen as accumulation of cultural capital (Bugge 2002). This capital has its uses both at home and when travelling among other tourists.

## **Inverted Orientalism**

The central theme in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is how Westerners see the Orient and "Oriental" people. Said also shows how this conception of people from outside the West became, and arguably still is, crucial to Western peoples construction of own identity.

Unpopular and questionable personality traits were given to the "oriental," so that the image of the flawless Western man formed. A good example is how the white European man came to be seen as rational and in control of impulse and emotion while the African, for instance, was seen as capricious and irrational or governed by some other, less developed form of rationality (Loomba 2002). Such constructions of identity enabled the West to position them on top of the World (consider the World map), better and more advanced in every way than any other society.

Nowadays people in the West generally seem are less ignorant of other societies and peoples. We like to think that othering the making of negative stereotypes of other societies and people is less prevalent than for instance during the Colonial era when such constructions also served as part of legitimizing Colonialism (ibid.). Like nature, indigenous peoples needed harnessing and cultivating. However processes of othering seem far from extinct. While the Orientalism described by Said for the most part characterized other societies and peoples in negative terms, the view of the other can in many cases go hand in hand with a considerable romanticism. Things that some people see as lacking or in poor state in the West suddenly become the expertise of elsewhere. The other is elevated and admired.

One day I was visiting Maggie at the guest house she was staying. Also present was Achanda, a friend of hers, who worked at the tourist information desk at Kathmandu Airport. Achanda had a MA degree in English literature and was thus familiar with Said's *Orientalism*. He said he had found it a fun and interesting read. While we were talking about the book and other things, Maggie mentioned the book she was reading at the time which was called *Autobiography of a Yogi* by Paramhansa Yogananda<sup>1</sup>. She said that it had been really interesting to read about the author's first impressions about California and Western society. He had been particularly marvelled by TV and compared it to his own and other yogi's ability to teleport; to instantly disappear and reappear, regardless of distance in between, at a completely different place. Yogananda had thought that this was a bit similar to TV on which people, actually being elsewhere, are broadcasted. On another occasion Maggie said that she

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<sup>1</sup> From what I have gathered, Paramhansa Yogananda was one of the first Indian gurus to really make it as a spiritual guide for Americans in the USA. His perhaps most famous achievement was the founding of the SRF, the Self-Realization Fellowship.

though that when Nepali people saw Westerners it was, to them, like watching TV. There and then about the teleporting she said “I so believe in it!”

Achanda laughed at her remark and called the *Autobiography* a “bullshit book.” Though, he was quick to courteously say: “No, I am really not making fun of your book. You should read what you like the most.”

A couple of weeks later Maggie went with Achanda to his village some hours drive outside Kathmandu. She returned delighted a few days later. She told me how the people there did not have much but still they were always happy and smiling. The women in the village had particularly impressed her. “They do all the work in the house. They take care of their husband and children and work in the fields, but they never complain. They are happy because they know what their role is.” Following the women’s example she had decided to fast. “They fast regularly.” It lasted one day.

One evening at a bar in Thamel called *Tom & Jerry’s* I was sitting at a table with a group of four American students who were in Nepal doing a study on a forest conservation project. They had been in Nepal for a couple of weeks at the time. At some point, one of them said: “I really like the Nepali people, they are really friendly peace loving.” I asked him what made him think so at which he replied: “For instance, you wouldn’t see any of them start a brawl in here.” About a month earlier Wayne had been acting as DJ for one night at the place. The staff had been pretty restrictive about the volume of the music. In some corners of the place the music completely drowned in the chatting. I went over to bar and asked if he could turn in up a bit. One of the staff standing there said that he should not play louder because when Nepali men were drinking and the music was very loud, fights had a tendency too erupt. As he explained this he was slightly nodding to one of the tables where a group of young Nepali men were agitatedly discussing something. Fortunately the evening went by without any brawls.

While bar brawls were a rare occurrence during my stay, they did happen, much as they do elsewhere. I do not know how many tourists I spoke with who mentioned “friendly people” as one of the best things about Nepal. The only person who did not as far as I can remember was Inga, a Finnish girl in her mid twenties. She was volunteering at a hospital in Patan. When I asked her what she liked best about Nepal, she replied: “The weekends.” It seemed such a straightforward and unpretentious answer that it made me think about why virtually everybody else were stressing the friendliness of the Nepali people. I pushed the point further and asked if she did not find the Nepali people and their culture at least a little exotic and fascinating. No, she did not really like the Nepali culture, or at least her own



conception of it. While she said that individual Nepalis such as her host family were friendly enough to her, she saw the culture as a whole rather hypocritical. There might of course be a number of reasons to why people refer to the “friendly people” when pressed for coming up with good things about Nepal. One would not mention poverty or pollution for instance. It is also quite understandable that Nepalis treat tourists, in many cases potential customers, the best they can. Still considering all the remarks about Nepalis as peace loving and friendly there is clearly a process of making stereotypes at work. Many of the sights visited by tourists around the Kathmandu valley are temples complexes and other sites of religious significance. I believe that this contributes to an image of Nepalis as a highly religious people, which might be true in some cases for that matter. A Western married couple who were in Nepal for a few week for trekking said that although they were not sure, they liked to think that the Nepali people’s religion was more peaceful and less oppressive to women than Islam. The notion of the peace loving and friendly Nepali might have something to what tourists understand as cultural and religious constraints working to control than from behaving violently or unfriendly. The Nepali are in some cases I think, by tourists, seen as having more religion and culture than a Westerner and therefore more controlled by religion and culture.

Several of the accounts above suggest that the other is an attraction in itself. The construction of the other societies and peoples as rich in things lacking in the modernized West may provide some of the explanation for why they appear so appealing. The tourist’s “need for otherness” (MacCannel 2001:380) is not so easy to get to the bottom of. Maybe the need for otherness actually has more to do with the tourist than with the other. One tourist I spoke with said: “I’m on an emotional quest.” Perhaps travelling and encountering “new” things allows for the tourist to get to know oneself better; to find oneself.

Christine a Danish girl in her mid twenties had, after travelling a couple of months around Nepal, managed to get an internship at the Danish embassy where she was working at the time of my stay. She knew had been at the same monastery as Howard. The two also knew each other. She was a bit more sceptical than him though. She said that at the monastery they had received very little food and sleep, especially considering the amount they had paid to be there. She had been, at the time, and was still speculating whether this was a conscious tactic by the monks in order to make the people attending more susceptible to accepting Buddhist truths. “When you don’t get enough food and rest your mind becomes more suggestible.” At the end of the stay all the attendees had been given the choice of taking a Buddhist oath, which all the about twenty attendees, except she and one other person, had taken. She called the whole business of people taking the oath the work of mass suggestion and brainwash.

Christine is an example that not all the tourists I met shared the enthusiasm and romanticism about the other. In general she was not very impressed by Nepal, except for the mountains. She had not expected she said that the Buddhism course would revolutionize her view of the World. Neither had she ever thought of herself as very religious. Still she had spent almost a month at the monastery. I asked her why then she had done this. She said: “Oh, what the heck, its fun to try new things.”

While a few partially overlapping motivations for travelling have been discussed, I would like to point out that tourists’ motivations are as varied as themselves. To give a complete account of every reason to travel as a tourist would be practically impossible. Still I think for most tourists at least one of the motivations discussed would at least be of some relevance.

### ***Types of Tourists or a Moral Order***

Several works on tourism have made classifications of tourists. One such is presented by Smith (1989:11-14). On one end of the continuum is the “Explorer,” on the opposite end is the “Charter Tourist” In between one finds for instance the “Unusual” tourist and the “Mass” tourist. The merit of such a classification is that it says something about well the different kinds of tourists adapt to the tourist setting. In short, the “Explorer” adapts well while the “Charter” tourist do not adapt at all but actually expects demands the tourist setting to be adapted to him or her. MacCannel notes that “tourists dislike tourists” (1976:10). This dislike he says comes from a desire “to go beyond other “mere” tourists to a more profound appreciation of society and culture” (ibid.).

While *communitas* has been identified as a force at work among tourists (Graburn 1989, 2001, Franklin 2006), this only accounts for part of the picture. There also seems to be intense rivalry and segregation among tourists.

### **Of tourists, hippies and other beasts**

To negotiate the social and moral landscape the tourists make use of stereotypes in order to assert one’s own position as superior of those of one’s fellows.

The tourist stereotype probably does not exist except as a myth. To distinguish it from real tourists I opt to call it the “monster tourist” instead.” The monster tourist is everything the

majority of my informants wanted to distance themselves from. It embodies the image of the inconsiderate Western tourist, gluttonous, lazy, demanding, drunk, inconsiderate, and polluting and completely lacking knowledge about the travel destination or its cultural nuances. As such he or she will almost constantly violate local customs and norms.

The monster tourist then, exists as a myth, a stereotype of the “other” which is vital for the construction of tourists’ own identities. The monster tourist can be thought of as a kind of mythical beast like the medieval dragon or the savage as constructed through colonial discourse. How this “other” was constructed as being everything the European was not is aptly discussed in Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, where a point is made of the indispensability of the “other,” whoever it may be, in establishing and reproducing own identities (Said 1976). Thus all European anxieties and poor traits of character were projected onto the black man (ibid.). Myths about dragons and other beasts have also been explained as a way for society to expel unpleasant things like violent or sinful behaviour, placing it at safe distance outside the city walls or similar boundaries. This process is clearly depicted in Homer’s epic *Troy*. Of course, the beast can return at any time. The monster tourist likewise represents tourists’ anxieties. It is what one must avoid being perceived as at all costs. Other tourists were constantly wary of the monster tourist, not least since its appearance provides ample opportunity for the reaffirmation of one’s own moral superiority.

Wayne, one of my main informants, told me that he had once come across, in Thamel, two American women teasing a street kid by pretending to give the kid money through the window of a taxi, and then quickly withdrawing their hands. This routine was repeated several times while they were laughing as they watched the kid turn more and more desperate. Upon seeing this Wayne had walked over to them and told them how incredibly stupid he thought they were behaving. The women had replied that he should “loosen up” and that it was “just for fun.” He did manage though, to put an end to the situation. The women’s taxi started driving and the kid walked away empty handed. While telling me this story Wayne was visibly annoyed, especially by their answers, clearly showing no remorse. Had they at least acted the way they did because they had gotten carried away, and then appeared slightly shameful when caught, I do not think Wayne would have minded it so much. The fact that they did not, was proof enough for Wayne that these people had to be of some alien morals if any, or lacking in knowledge about how to behave as visitors in a foreign country. He did not neglect to point out that the women were American. The encounter also provided an opportunity for him to place and orientate himself socially and morally. Such behaviour was to him completely inappropriate. They were like this, he was certainly something else.

Of my informants, those who perhaps fit the tourist image the most were the Norwegian married couple Aslak and Lisa, both in their mid fifties. They resembled tourists in terms of age and appearance. The couple stayed in Nepal for about two weeks time, most of which they were busy trekking in the Everest range. I spoke with them briefly before their trek and more at length after. Their incentive for coming to Nepal was the trekking. When I first met them they were a bit concerned about the political situation in the country. They had arrived only few days after King Gyanendra's coup d'état which put the country into serious turmoil. They did not object to being called tourists and had no pretensions to be anything else while travelling. They were living at a pretty nice hotel but found most of the other guests at the hotel rather boring because these were so typically tourist. Thamel was dismissed almost as easily along the same reasons. "One quickly gets tired of shopping for souvenirs." Even though they were fulfilling most of the criteria commonly used by people in Thamel to identify tourists such as length of stay, consumption pattern etc., they were still distancing themselves from other tourists.

"Hippie" is another often derogatory used term. One day I ran into Wayne and Gary. The two told me that they had been out to one of the bars the night before. At the bar they had met Maggie who they did not know very well at the time. Wayne and Gary related a few of the things Maggie had said during the evening one of which was that the hippie movement was humanity's last chance against the "machine." She had also said that no matter what happened she was confident that the Universe would provide for her. Saying these things had clearly marked her as a hippie in the eyes of Wayne and Gary. Another day I discussed hippies with Wayne. He thought of them as people out of touch with reality who at the same time pretended to be authorities on travelling and other cultures. "I think there's a lot of snobbery involved as well. It's like they're attitude is: I'm better than you because I can understand cultures on a whole new level." On another occasion Wayne and I met a group of tourists in their twenties. The four of them were from different European countries and had been travelling together for some time. At some point in the conversation the only girls in their group said to us: "You got to hear this." And then to one of the others in the group: "Say it Peter!" Proudly Peter said: "It's the journey, not the destination." Needless to say Wayne, I and everyone else we told about this had a great laugh at such a pompous stating of the obvious. In discussions about hippies with Wayne, Gary, Chris and others this story seemed to come up as evidence that hippies did not really know what they were talking about, only pretending.

An often used term in referring to a type of tourist is “backpacker.” Backpacker is commonly referred used to refer to people who travel for longer periods than the typical tourist. Backpackers also often travel on tight budget. A common view is that backpackers are very concerned with going beyond the typical tourist settings and into spaces of authenticity where they can get to know the people and the culture visited. As such the term “backpacker” has built in meanings that distance and assert it as superior from common tourists. However backpacker tourism has also been encompassed by the tourist industry. This is most evident in the publishing and use of guide books such as the *Lonely Planet* or *Rough Guides*. Going to places of great authenticity and getting to know “real” people with “real” cultures while avoiding places spoilt by the tourist industry is an ideal that in most cases is impossible to achieve. Most of my informants did not call themselves backpackers although they in many ways resembled what is commonly meant by the term. For instance, they were travelling for long periods on restricted budgets. I think being prospect of being called backpacker made them a little uneasy. The backpacker is seen as a somewhat pretentious character because he or she is seen as under the impression that “untouched” places still can be found and should be preferred. Backpackers are “hippies” in that they attempt to employ their way of travelling as evidence of their superiority in knowledge and morality. The term “backpacker” was for the most part used as an ironic statement by my informants to distance themselves from this type. The backpackers were in conversation made into comical characters stressing their independence and individuality at every opportunity but always ending up together in the same places because they were all travelling by paths defined by guidebooks.

Many of my informants opted instead to refer to themselves as “traveller.” I think they found is a more neutral referent. A traveller is simply a person that is travelling. The term leaves preferences and pretensions undecided. It was also a word by which they could distance themselves from common tourists. At the same time most of my informants probably would not feel terribly offended by being called “backpacker” or “tourist” as long as they would get the chance to clarify that they were pretty different from other tourists.

### **Tourist morality**

Moral vocation can be seen as a reason for existence (Crowther 1989). In this sense, tourists too need to define their moral purpose or justification for being. It seems like being a tourist entails a fair bit of moral anxiety. A way of reducing this anxiety can be to construct a moral continuum which the individual tourist can place him self on top of. There seem to be

primarily two concerns. On one hand one should understand and adapt to the host culture to some extent. To some degree, tourist morality is measured in the ability to achieve this. On the other hand one should realize that the places and people visited are prepared to cater to tourists. Thus going to “untouched” destinations and getting to know the locals intimately is not only snobbish but also not really possible. As such this ideal is seen as pretentious. To many tourists this negotiation of the moral landscape is effectively done by distancing one themselves from and finding some middle ground between the “monster tourist” and the “hippie” or “backpacker.”

The moral anxieties of tourists can also be explained as stemming from the conception of the tourist as a liminal. The tourist role is characterized by anti structure while he or she interacts with many people such as waiters, guides etc. who are all “carrying out their structured roles” (Graburn 2001:47). When travelling the tourist is not subject to norms and social regulations present at home and it is the lack of these, the anti-structure which leads to the anxieties about one’s role. A way of resolving this situation is to sign up for volunteering, which several of my informants did in varying degrees. It is my impression that volunteering serve to legitimize the role of tourist. It is also a way of adapting to the host society in a more formal way than just being another tourist and getting into a structured role. As such volunteering can be seen as a way of asserting moral superiority. Volunteering was not by my informants seen as pretentious. Perhaps this was because volunteering in a way is work. Thus those working as volunteers would be regarded as having a strong work ethic, especially considering that volunteering is unpaid labour. In fact one volunteer I spoke with had paid 400 Euro to the organization he was working as part of. This fee had not covered anything else than simply getting a position as a volunteer. All other expenses he had paid for separately.

This makes volunteering look suspiciously similar to some form of tourism. Several volunteers simply said that they wanted to help out, when I asked them why they were doing it. Still, they had come all the way from Europe in order to do so. Helping out at the local community centre in one’s home town is perhaps not as exiting. Considering Smith’s (1989, 2001) universal dichotomy between work and leisure, the latter of which tourism is part, volunteering then do not seem to entirely fit in. Volunteering, as I see it, has similarities with both work and tourism. It is an example of the ambiguity and diversity in tourist trends and among tourists.

## *Summary*

In this chapter I have discussed the tourist. Some remarks on the history of tourism have shown that this is not a very new phenomenon. Rather many of the aspects of tourism and tourists have been around for a long time. Anthropological theory on tourism sees it in a variety of ways, but common focus seems to be ways in which the tourist relates to the host setting and to other tourists. Another central issue regarding tourists is the desire for otherness, something that is apparent in tourists' motivations to travel. I have also attempted to show that tourists' critiques of other tourists is at least partially based on a degree of moral anxiety experienced in the tourist role. It is also my impression that the attempt to straightjacket tourism and tourists into dichotomies such as work vs. leisure and sacred vs. profane can only yield a partial account.

In the next chapter I will focus on the tourist setting Thamel. While we have now seen some ways in which tourists relate to each other, the next chapter will deal with how they experience relate to Thamel.

## 2 - A Forlorn Place

What kind of place can Thamel best be described and understood as? Much has been said by anthropologists and other theorists concerning place; the anthropologist has many options.

This chapter will discuss Thamel with regard to a few concepts of place. To what extent are these concepts applicable to Thamel? Are they sufficient aid in achieving a better understanding of Thamel or is Thamel in need of a theory of place of its own? The concepts concerned are Eric Hirsch's (1995) and Tim Ingold's (2000) somewhat different concepts of "landscape," Tim Ingold's "taskscape" concept, Marc Augé's concept of "non-places," explained in his namesake text (1995), and Paolo Favero's concept of "starry place," used in favour of Augé's concept to better describe the Janpath Market in New Delhi (2003).

Can Thamel thus be described and conceptualized using any of the theories mentioned? How do these theories fit with the tourists' experiences and perceptions of Thamel?

### *Place and Space*

Before going further it might be a good idea to have a look at the elusive concepts of place and space. These concepts represent something of a problem since they are often used rather differently by various writers. As there is no clear consensus as to what these concepts imply, the various writers each need to spend time and paper in the attempt to clarify them. This text is no different.

Hirsch describes the relationship between place and space as a relationship of opposites (Hirsch 1995). Place is something seen from a subjective point of view, while space is separated as far as possible from the subject's point of view (ibid.). Space forms, in this way, a background which lies outside the boundaries of the place (ibid.). According to this view, space becomes a somewhat unbounded and undefined figure.

Tilly (1994) describes places as constitutive of space. Place is thus prior to space. Places are given meaning through human activity and experience, while space derives its meaning from places (ibid.). Space, he says, is a much more abstract concept than place, and provides the context for places (ibid.). He also claims, however, that: "Space is created by social relations, natural and cultural objects. It is a production, an achievement, rather than an



autonomous reality” (Tilley 1994:17). While he sees space as more abstract than place, he still sees it as produced by someone.

Gray (2000) also notes that constructions of space are personalized and situated. However Gray (ibid.) does not regard space as an abstract phenomenon. He criticizes the notion of space as an a priori, neutral and homogenous entity (ibid.). While space is not at all an abstract according to his view, he seems to agree with Tilley that constructions of space are historically and socially located. Gray also sees spaces as the medium in which people make their local places and themselves (ibid.). Thus he disagrees with Tilley in that place is prior to place. As to his own use of the concepts of space and place, Gray says:

“I am reserving the notion of space for the location or setting that people experience as largely externally produced and that acts as a medium or constraining setting for their everyday actions. The notion of place is reserved for the personally, socially and/or historically meaningful locations that people experience as the outcome of their own actions.” (Gray 2000:9)

This usage of the space concept is interesting with regard to tourism, because being a tourist means that one often is frequenting locations that have been externally produced and prepared. While he does not discuss the relationship between place and space, Gottdiener (2000b) consistently refer to such locations as spaces. Used like this, the concept of space in some ways cover the same ground as is referred to by Augé (1995) as “non-place.”

While a lot more could be said about place and space, this is not intended to be an exhaustive discussion of the two. Neither do I see much point in attempting to pin down once and for all their meaning, as there likely will be differences in how they are used in the foreseeable future. Where necessary I will apply Gray’s definition.

## ***Landscape***

Landscape, as a word, was originally a technical term used by painters (Hirsch 1995). The word gradually got its contemporary meaning as people were reminded of landscape paintings when looking at what is now referred to as landscape (ibid.).

In anthropology, geography and elsewhere landscape is often used to refer to “natural” environments or topographies, or environments marked by some degree of human activity such as the countryside. Considering the meaning of the word this is not at all strange. In

anthropology the terms has perhaps been especially apt because of a traditional bias toward the study of small scale societies such as villages. In settings of this kind the rural landscape is more immediate and geographically close to the people studied than in cities for instance. There is an assumption that might be true to some extent that landscape thus plays a more active role in the lives of people in rural societies than in the lives of city dwellers.

At the same time such a use and meaning of the word implies that urban and rural environments, closely resembling culture and nature, are somehow different entities and thus need to be theoretically treated in different ways. While a cityscape may look different from a landscape both are at the same time abstract concepts and human constructs. Nature itself is also “created, appropriated, imbued with meaning(s) and transformed into a socially significant category mirroring images of human identity” (Lovell 1998:54). This suggests that one can not take for granted any inherent difference between environments of varying degrees of “naturalness.”

Considering this, could it be that Hirsch’s landscape concept can be of any relevance to Thamel? Central to Hirsch’s idea of landscape is the distinction and relationship between “foreground actuality” and “background potentiality” (Hirsch 1995:4). This pair is analogous to others namely “place – space, inside – outside and image – representation” (ibid.). There is, he says, “a relationship between an ordinary, workaday life and an ideal, imagined existence, vaguely connected to, but still separate from, that of the everyday” (ibid.:3). In this way the landscape provides a context for social life. Landscape is also a process in which people try to “realize in the foreground what can only be a potentiality and for the most part in the background” (ibid.22-3).

In the case of Thamel the foreground is the everyday life there. While many people there are actually on holiday, negotiating the traffic and hawkers may present a bit of an ordeal. To others, such as Nepali people or Westerners volunteers, who live or work in Thamel, the routine of everyday life is probably even more pronounced. At street level the sheer overload of buildings, vehicles, people, signs and advertisements efficiently block out any view of the background. But on clear days, especially early in the morning, one can see the edge of the Himalayas from the rooftops of Thamel. The view is a spectacular one. The many “rooftop restaurants” around, suggest that it is an attraction in some demand. One of these restaurants has the privilege to call itself “highest rooftop in Thamel.” From the top that seem true enough. The rest of the time, when the weather is overcast or one is not at a suitable vantage point, one is constantly reminded of the mountains with their opportunities for trekking and other adventures. One is reminded by postcards, maps, pictures, books and

DVDs featuring the Himalayas sold, and by the nearly omnipresent trekking hawkers. There are also a vast number of shops selling trekking clothes and equipment. In this way the background can be seen in much of the imagery around Thamel.

An important aspect of Thamel is that it works as a springboard for trekking and other activities around Nepal. Nearly all the Westerners I talked to had either been or were planning to go trekking. Thamel itself impressed no one. It was referred to by several as “just another boring artificial tourist place.” Wayne came back to Thamel after a couple of months of travelling around South East Asia. The reason for his return was to meet his friends and change his plane ticket from Kathmandu back to the UK to an earlier date. He had injured his foot in a bike accident in Cambodia and was using crutches when he came back to Thamel. While eating lunch one of the days he said: “I don’t think I’ll be able to stay here very long. I’ll be bored to tears.” Like he said, it is not terribly much to do around Thamel for tourists, aside from hanging around at cafés and bars or buying trinkets and clothes. If one is, like Wayne at the time, using crutches then short excursions and sightseeing trips around the Kathmandu valley become more work than fun. Thamel is in many ways what an attraction is not. It is however, a link from which attractions can be reached.

At the same time Thamel is a somewhat handy, practical place to rest and prepare for more exiting activities. In other words, it was a foreground from which to realize “background potentiality.” For many tourists, Thamel is merely such a means to an end. The end in this sense is represented by the great experiences of trekking, compared to life in Thamel, an “ideal existence.” Rather than just looking at postcards of the Himalayas one can virtually “step into the picture” (Green 1995:36). The omnipresence of the Himalayan imagery is a significant trait of Thamel as it emphasizes it as a place of transit from which to reach other more picturesque, exiting, authentic or “real” environments. It is striking how easily the Himalayan images can be realized in the “foreground actuality,” or made “real” and tangible. All one needs to do is to go to them.

Nepali people working in the tourist industry, and that is a considerable share of those in Thamel, the mountains is a marketing symbol proven to work. While they can not sell the mountains themselves they can sell a whole range of other things: food eaten while looking at the mountains, pictures of them, the clothes and guidance necessary to be in them. In this sense they too participate in realizing the “background potentiality.” To the Nepali residents, on the other hand, Thamel is obviously not a place of transit. While one might assume that they are not as keen as the tourists to get into the mountains, several Nepalis I spoke with, and not just those working as guides, had enjoyed trekking and mountaineering themselves. The

foreground – background model thus appears most fitting for those who want to spend as little as possible time in Thamel and get into the mountains as soon as possible.

I turn now to Ingold's landscape concept. His use of the concept has the merit of not making the distinction between "naturalistic" and "culturalistic" views of landscape (Ingold 2000:189). Instead he wants to apply what he calls "a 'dwelling perspective', according to which the landscape is constituted as an enduring record of - and testimony to – the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within it, and in so doing have left there something of themselves" (ibid.). Thus, "landscape is the world as it is known to those who dwell therein" (ibid: 193). Dwelling can be understood as the sum of people's activities and being in their surroundings, as well as reflections on themselves and their surroundings. This process is roughly the same as what has also been called "place-making" (Gray 2000:9). According to Ingold, all the activities performed and added together comprise the "taskscape" (Ingold 2000:195). Taskscape is then what makes the landscape into what it is. The activities forming the taskscape are without end. Therefore the landscape is never completed "neither 'built' nor 'unbuilt'" (Ingold 2000:199) but constantly changing.

The concept of dwelling is an interesting one because it points to a number of things people do, but do not reflect on terribly much. It is easy to take for granted the ways in which people "merely" are in their environment. What many things taken for granted have in common is that one do not notice them until they are missing. While this is a tedious remark, it is nonetheless true in some cases.

One of the problems with Thamel and other similar places is that they from a tourist's perspective appear extremely fixed. Many tourists, I think, feel that they are being relegated to being homogenous consumers.

Sarah, one of my informants said having already lived in Thamel several months at the time: "We will never feel at home because we'll never fit in." She went on describing how the hassle never ended no matter how many times she rejected the trekking hawkers, the rickshaw puller, the hash dealers and other petty street traders. "I'm not a tourist. I work here helping this country, but they still see me as a walking ATM machine."

While she and others do not refer to themselves as tourists, it is clear that such self proclaimed labels are not seen as relevant from a seller's perspective. Many tourists come to Thamel without any aspirations to volunteer or in other ways make a difference. For those that stay for longer periods the inability to affect their surroundings, to dwell, or even define one's own role to a larger extent can be a frustrating experience. Sure, tourists are engaged in a number of activities but these are usually already prepared and produced. They are, for the

most part, commodities. What the tourists do have little effect on the landscape. Tourists as visitors are in this way cut off from dwelling in the locations they visit. According to Gray's definition locations like Thamel can never be more than spaces to them. If the tourists can not participate by dwelling, how then do they perceive Thamel?

### ***“Non-place”***

To find out whether Thamel can make sense as a “non-place”, we must first seek to understand what is meant by the term. Augé's concept of “non-place” can to some extent be recognized as the opposite of his place concept or what he calls “anthropological place” (1995). Non-places are or become non-places through their lack or loss of certain characteristics possessed by places. The characteristics concerned are characteristics which have been central to anthropological conception of place, generally summed up by Augé in what he calls the Maussian tradition, and for that matter, the whole ethnological tradition (ibid). We shall not linger on this tradition too much. The most important characteristics of place relevant to this discussion is that place has been thought of as a bonded locality and to some extent a prerequisite for culture. Linked to this was the idea of culture as something closely linked to place. This place was inhabited by indigenous people, though the term indigenous, now highly problematic, was probably at some point redundant since most people were indigenous, unless otherwise specifically noted. This was added with the common idea of culture as a pluralistic term, prevalent in anthropological thought throughout the history of the discipline, as opposed to the singular concept of culture more associated with the arts and humanistics (Barnard & Spencer 1996). When speaking of different cultures, this usually implied their ties to their respective localities. Culture was something localized in both time and space, and was consequently somehow created in a certain location both temporally and spatially. Places have, according to Augé, both a lived and a created history Augé (1995). A notion that fits with the idea of culture as localized if one accepts that history is part of culture.

The concept of place is by Augé thus defined as “relational, historical and concerned with identity” (Augé 1995:77). This implies that a certain place will by its residents seem like a somewhat “natural” order of things. The main idea is that people have some form of relation to their environment that they experience and think of as meaningful, within reasonable limits. A point is made, following Baudelairean ideas of modernity, that places created in a context of modernity are integrated in earlier places (Augé 1995). In this way a temporal or historical

continuity is constructed. History is made relevant and employed in the explanations and justifications of the current state of affairs.

“Non-places” on the other hand lack the characteristics of place. The two, as presented by Augé, can be said to mutually constitute each other in this sense. To complete Augé’s quote above: “then a space which can not be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place” (Augé 1995:77-78). Non-places are then produced outside the context of modernity, but rather in the context of what Augé calls “supermodernity” (Augé 1995). Supermodernity is a condition characterized by the excess of events and space and the individualization of references (ibid.). If something is to make sense as modern it needs to have a past. Non-places do not integrate in earlier places (ibid.). The past is unnecessary or irrelevant to the production of a non-place. Prime examples of non-places include as airports highways, refugee camps, luxury hotels, hospitals, supermarkets or ATM machines (ibid.). They are often places of transit or places built to meet a certain problem or need. “Anthropological places” thus produces what Augé calls “the organically social” while non-places produce “singular contractuality” (ibid.). An important point of distinction between the two is thus the kinds of relations they produce and facilitate counting both place/person and person/person relations.

Is Thamel perceived and experienced as a “non-place?” During my fieldwork it quickly became clear that Thamel, in the eyes of many, does not represent how things should be. Mary, a girl in her mid-twenties from Australia said this about Thamel the first time I talked with her: “This place seems so forlorn!” I asked her what she meant by that. She replied that she found Thamel to be a hollow place in which large amounts of poor people had nothing else to do than carving out a living from the tourists. It was late in the afternoon and we were playing pool at one of the many pubs in Thamel. The place was empty except for the staff, busy playing cards over money, and a few Nepali boys drinking beer at one of the tables. The room was rather dark, compared to the bright afternoon outside, mostly lit by sunlight seeping through open windows half covered by red curtains stained with candle wax and smoke. She had told me that she had just arrived and was to stay in Nepal for a month. She was not into tourist stuff so she would probably do some volunteering or yoga course, she said. Unfortunately she had not found any courses giving lessons in the particular branch of yoga she was interested in.

I had explained to her that I was doing a fieldwork about Thamel without caring to go too much into detail. It was in response to this I think, that she made the remark about Thamel as forlorn, half looking out the window into the distance as she said it. All the while we could

hear all the noise from the streets outside; traffic, car horns, loud music from the piracy music shops. She had arrived the evening before and it seemed she was summing up her first impression of the place. She went on about how she felt sorry for the people working in the streets of Thamel because they did not have any lives for themselves, always having to accommodate and adjust to tourists. It was clear that she saw them as little more than passive receptors; people without choices locked in an endless struggle to make ends meet.

Looking up the relatively little used word “forlorn” in the dictionary reveals the following: “**1** sad and abandoned. **2** in a pitiful state; of wretched appearance. **3** desperate, hopeless, forsaken.” (Oxford Concise Dictionary)

I think she efficiently summed up how a lot of my western informants regard Thamel and what features they tend to emphasize. In its own way, all of the meanings are equally valid ways to describe Thamel according to how my Western informants talk about the place. They might not have used the exact words but their views have been clear. For instance, Wayne described it like this: “It is a mix of Nepali culture and all the worst parts of the West.” Sarah, while living in Thamel for practical reasons, found the place to be “pretentious and lacking in character.” In all she had little positive to say about Thamel, apart from Nepali food which was nice and made Chinese food taste like “dog food” by comparison. She did, however, like Nepal. The people, the mountains, the food and the disabled children she worked with. None of these things could really be found in Thamel unfortunately. She did have some good Nepali friends there, a few of whom were also friend of me, but most Nepalis she met were out to sell her something. She explained how she was “tired of Nepalis grovelling to tourists,” in a way that implied that this was not the “natural” thing for them to do, clearly they had been forced into this behaviour by outside forces. From these accounts it is almost as if the Western presence is seen as keeping Nepalis from living worthy lives realizing themselves and creating sense of self worth.

As mentioned above Sarah expressed dislike for Thamel but not for Nepal. To her and many others I spoke with, Thamel seems to make sense as a contrast to the “real” Nepal. Where Thamel is seen as artificial and corrupted, Nepal is genuine and pure. This notion of the “real” Nepal seems pretty vague. It is, it appears, most appropriately expressed in being what Thamel is not. This dichotomy seemed to sit strongest with Westerners living in Thamel, such as Sarah, as opposed to volunteers living outside Thamel. The latter often lived with Nepali middle class families in suburbs or semi-rural areas scattered throughout the Kathmandu Valley. Their stay had usually been organized by some development organization, whereas Sara and her co-physical therapists were working independently of any larger

organization and as such had not been appointed a family to stay with. It was therefore convenient for them to stay in Thamel which is rife with cheap guest houses, although their place of work was located in another part of Kathmandu. The tourists volunteers who were staying outside Thamel regularly came to there in the weekends to eat Western food do some shopping and attend the various bars and nightclubs. Thus they must have appreciated Thamel as a place of leisure. Those that did not live in Thamel generally were not as eager to criticize it at every opportunity. To those who lived there it was evidently necessary to distance themselves from Thamel and the perceived role of the Western consumer. An efficient way of distancing oneself seemed to be to express one's awareness that Nepal and Thamel were two very different things. Of course, this might seem like an obvious point to make and most would agree on it. This was, nonetheless particularly important to the tourists staying inside Thamel. Failing to express this knowledge along with a certain dislike for Thamel, could mean loss of position in the moral order among tourists, or one be regarded as an ignorant or fool.

From a lot of tourists' points of view Thamel does indeed appear to have some of the hallmarks of a non-place. It is not a historical place by Augé's terms. Rather it has been erected during a relatively short period of time in order to serve as a means to an end, being the catering to tourists. A bigger problem is however, the lack of concern for identity. The tourists are generally treated similarly as consumers or, in Sarah's words, "walking ATM machines. Conversely the tourists themselves do not see Thamel as having any identity that appears "natural", earned and authentic. Few if any of the many different things located in Thamel – goods, services, people – seem to have a logical explanation for appearing, aside from commerce and consumption. These two reasons are strangely not seen as entirely legitimate. That Thamel appears to be run by market logic seem to really irritate many tourists, perhaps because it reminds them of the home they wanted a change of scenery from. The commodification of many features of Nepal, especially the Himalayas, is also apparent. From tourists point of view this further detracts from the authenticity of the place.

At the same time Thamel can hardly be described as a "non-place" in the most archetypal sense used by Augé. The people who live there interact socially with each other. It is not a "non-place" in the sense of, for instance, an airport where people communicate with the environment through information screens and receive boarding passes with their individual names on them, though are treated in the same mechanical way at the desk (Augé 1995). Thamel as a place has the ability to produce other social relations than singular contractuality (ibid.). A point little explored by Augé is whether the same space can be a



“non-place” to some, and an “anthropological place” to others. His perspective is that of the traveller at the airport. What about the people who work at the same airport; day after day, year after year? Is it imaginable that they perhaps form relations to this particular place that are different from that of the traveller? Do they to experience their place of work a place of transit and singular contractuality or do they form some social relations with their co-workers for instance? Is it conceivable that they through time can produce what Augé calls the “organically social?” (ibid.). I for one would not rule this out.

Can this be achieved In Thamel where people not only work but reside? Though most people who work in Thamel probably live somewhere outside of it partly due to the comparatively high rent in Thamel, some of my Nepali informants lived inside or in the outskirts of Thamel. Though they had lived elsewhere earlier, most of their lives were happening in Thamel. Of course they had relations, both socially and to their environment; to their employees, employers, place of work, places of leisure and so on.

I too found that Thamel was a place in which relations could be made. My Western informants, especially those who lived in Thamel were also for the most part quite integrated in society in terms of work or other activities and socially. Using Augé’s terms I think that Thamel can create the “organically social” (ibid.). I think though, that this requires time and some effort. To a lot of the tourists who spend relatively short time in Nepal, Thamel seems like very much like a place of transit; a means to an end. A place constructed to cater to them rather than a place of interaction on equal terms. And a place in which to relax in relatively comfortably surroundings before and after trekking in the “real” Nepal represented by the Himalayas. The applicability of the “non-place” concept thus appears to decrease with the amount of time spent by any individual tourist in Thamel. Through time relations are built, but even after several months Thamel can still experiences as a kind of “non-place” through its lack of a concern with identity. All visitors, tourists especially experience how it feels to be just another face in an endless line of arrivals and departures. For the many tourists who regard individuality as an important value this can be a frightening experience. Though I formed some relations during my stay I arrived and departed alone, caught in the solitude and similitude that Augé describes as the prevalent relations, or lack of such, created in the space of “non-places.”

### ***“Starry place”***

It is in the context of these ideas that we can move on to look at the concept of “starry place.” Favero rejects the concept of “non-place” as part of a bigger argument against commonly held notions of deterritorialization and globalization in which identities are among the first to be dissolved (Favero 2003). Recalling that one of the defining traits of non-places is that they are not concerned with identity we can see the reluctance against this concept. Favero’s case is not against the idea of “non-places” as such, but it is not, in his view, fit to describe the setting of the Janpath Market which is very much an arena for making and playing with identities (ibid.). The Janpath Market is located in Connaught Lane in central New Delhi. It is New Delhi’s most popular souvenir market while it is also a historical place because Janpath Road crosses Delhi from Connaught Place to the area of the Parliament and the India Gate (ibid.). Along with Rajpath Road it is one of colonial New Delhi’s two central arteries (ibid.). It is thus a place saturated with imagery and connotations of tradition and modernity, and of India and the West (ibid.). To better capture Janpath Market, Favero opts for the “starry place” metaphor. Having described the Janpath Market he goes:

“[The description of Janpath Market] does not seem to offer a single stable point of reference but rather a playful merging of confusion, chaos, and mimicry. This mode of narrating space, which follows closely my lived experience, attempts to capture Janpath Market as a “starry place,” where one “point,” as John Berger has suggested, rather than being “an infinitely small part of a straight line,” is instead “an infinitely small part of an infinite number of lines, as the centre of a star” (1974:40).” ( Favero 2003:553).

Favero has tried to give a description of the Janpath Market that is close to his own experience and understanding of the place. His account resembles what Augé calls the situation of supermodernity, but Favero does not want to see Janpath Market as a non-place. Rather he views it as a space reformed by the opening and globalization of India’s economy (Favero 2003). Janpath Market is the place where all the lines cross. What are these lines then? Following Favero’s notion I think these lines could be seen as intersecting images coursing through time. This could be images of modernity and tradition, the local and the global, India and the West and infinite others. Janpath Market is then the place where everything comes together. An important point about Janpath Market is that it questions both

conventional ideas about the relation between space and culture and referents such as local – global and tradition – modernity, “it makes us wonder whether we are in India at all” (Favero 2005:11).

From Favero’s description, Janpath Market seems relational, historical and concerned with identity. The concept is thus a bit of a departure from the “non-place” concept. Indeed, Favero talks about the Janpath Market as a place which as much as any other, permits the production and redefinition of identities and positions.

“Thamel is our Western part.” The first of several people to tell me this was Mohan, my Nepali language teacher. He had worked eight years in Thamel, currently as language teacher and previously as trekking agent and guide. Speaking of Thamel he emphasized the force of globalization and that Thamel was run by all kinds of people. Not all of whom he approved. He seemed especially suspicious of people from Pakistan and Kashmir. He found Thamel very noisy himself and felt sorry for the tourists being exposed to the constant hassle from street traders, trekking hawkers and so on. The people occupying these positions he said, was useless and/or illiterate people, drunks and drug addicts. These people were attracted to Thamel because of the way tourists were throwing their money about. It would be better if the tourists would give money to aid organizations instead of handing it out at random on the street. Thamel was also a place of weak morals, more so than Nepal in general. From his account of Thamel it seems that Thamel has a kind of identity in that it is associated with the West. But it was also a scene for what he called “nonsense behaviour;” harrying the tourists, drunkenness and other, in his eyes useless activities. I asked him if he thought that such Western or even global influences could be gainful to Nepali people and understanding between them and foreigners. He seemed a bit surprised by the question and after a while he said that he thought that it might be so.

The first time Maggie was in Thamel we went out to eat. Having listened to her for a while about the artificiality of the Western lifestyle, I thought it might be a good idea to go to a place serving Western food. When we came inside she exclaimed: “This place is so European! I had no idea there were places like this in Nepal.” While contemplating the menu she asked me if I was going to order a drink. I said I thought I would. As it turned out she ordered a Martini with her meal. It was almost like watching a kid eat candy while disapproving parents look the other way. Her expression was a mix of excitement and slight guilt.

These are just two examples of the starriness of Thamel, many more could be mentioned. Thamel could definitely be seen as “starry” with an abundance of signs, people, and representations. One can easily find oneself in an Irish Pub listening to a Nepali band

playing an American song while drinking Spanish beer. Next to me sit two of my Nepali friends Rinzen and Jeevan, who is the owner of the place, as well as a friend of theirs who has just returned after seven years of living and working in Canada. At the moment we are making jokes about “little Bangkok” which is what a street a couple of blocks away is commonly called. Such an abundance of representations in the immediacy is typical of Thamel.

However the excitement of being in the midst of images quickly wears off for most tourists. From enquiries into tourists’ knowledge of Nepal prior to arriving I learned that mountains, religion and poverty were the three things most often associated with Nepal. Thamel represents much of the opposite of what they were expecting. I think that MacCannel is on fairly safe ground when claiming that at least a considerable proportion of tourists travel because they want something different from what they have at home, preferably something authentic (MacCannel 1976, 2001). While Thamel might be rather different it is not perceived as very authentic. Rather it is my impression that it is perceived as artificial and commercial. Hence Wayne’s description: “It is a mix of Nepali culture and all the worst parts from the West.” Such traits of modernity do not really fit in with tourists’ preconceived ideas about Nepal. They are somehow out of place. Moreover:

“conditions of modernity are even more glaringly prominent on the Third World periphery, in places like Kathmandu, where they stand starkly outlined against memories of earlier, suddenly “traditional,” ways of being” (Liechty 2003:9).

The modern and global imagery of Thamel can do little to impress the tourists who themselves usually come from fully modernized countries. The economical and material benefits of modernization are also very unevenly distributed in Nepal. Thus, when leaving a convenient store in Thamel there are usually beggars at the ready asking for spare change. On the street outside a spotlessly clean ice-cream parlour in the middle of Thamel there lived, during my stay, a man with no legs, using instead his arms to push himself about on a home made wooden trolley. Much like Liechty notes then, conditions of modernity can emphasize contrasts in ways that are not always terribly pleasant.

Keith Basso (1996) describes in a much rejoiced work, how the Western Apaches relate to their landscape. This landscape is, like Thamel, inscribed with meaning. This meaning sometimes takes the form of stories of morality. These stories are tied to specific physical features in the landscape. Gazing on these features thus implies to the Western

Apaches remembering these stories (Basso 1996). Similarly in the case of Thamel, all the Western images become at best irritating reminders to the tourists of the shameless commercialism and lack of authenticity of the place. To those tourists who are more critical of Western and modern values and ways of life these images turn into symbols of capitalist domination. Thus Thamel becomes an immoral landscape. Not seeking out places more authentic or exotic than Thamel is simply immoral according to tourist values.

In many ways Thamel can be described as a “starry place.” One of Thamel’s greatest assets in this sense is that its starriness is easily observed, so that the tourists can define themselves in relative opposition to it. Favero’s (2003) informants are young middle class Indian men. I think they may be more inclined to see the starriness of Janpath Market in New Delhi in a more positive light than how Western tourists regard Thamel. As Favero notes the composition of Janpath Market is largely a result of the opening of India to a global market economy (ibid.). The starriness then can easily be seen as sign of progress. To my informants the starriness is less appealing as it detracts from the authenticity and “otherness” of the place.

### *Summary*

In this chapter I have tried, applying some concepts of place and space, to better understand how Thamel is experienced and reflected on by my informants. The various concepts all have strengths and weaknesses but all of them to some extent contribute to illuminate aspects of Thamel. One aspect that all the theories to some extent show is that Thamel is a bit of a problematical location for my informants to relate to and deal with. A word that comes to mind is “topophobia,” or strong aversion to place (Tilley 1994:15). There seem to be both dislike and moral anxiety in tourists’ relations to Thamel. Near the end of my stay people were shocked to learn that I had stayed there, almost continuously, for nearly five months.

Another point that appears to crystallize it how the tourists are cut off from participating in the place-making of Thamel. In this sense the production of Thamel as a locality could in a bigger scope be seen as a bit of a struggle (Appadurai 1996:182).

In the following chapter I will look into some of the marketing practices found around Thamel as well as how selected features of Nepal are commoditized. These also have impact on how Thamel is experienced and perceived.

### **3 - Commodification and Marketing**

#### ***Introduction***

In order to attract tourists to Nepal in the first place and then extract as much money from them as possible Nepalis need to carefully consider their approaches. They need to make Nepal stand out in a positive way for people to be interested in coming. As such they need to find some ground on which they can be favourably compared to other destinations. This done they need to market their commodities in such a way that the tourists will buy them.

In this chapter I will look at couple of features of Nepal and the way in which these are made accessible as commodities. The features concerned are representations of “traditional” Nepali culture and the Himalayas. Both of these could be seen as “other” to the modernized Western World. I will then try to show how their way of marketing a variety of commodities is done and how this to a considerable extent is affecting interaction and relations in Thamel.

#### ***Commodification and Commodities***

Commodification is a process in which objects and services become subject to exchange; they become commodities. What a commodity is has been defined as follows: “A commodity is a thing that has use value and that can be exchanged in a discrete transaction for a counterpart, the very fact of exchange indicating that the counterpart has, in the immediate context, an equivalent value” (Kopytoff 1986:68). Usually the counterpart is money which among other advantages has the ability to give most things a value across a common scale, making them exchangeable with each other through the medium of money. The more commodified a thing is, the more readily it can be exchanged with a counterpart, money or otherwise.

Commodification can also be reversed so that the thing in question becomes less or not available for exchange. The slave trade is an example of the latter (Kopytoff 1986). While the most obvious commodities are physical objects in daily use such as clothes or easily defined services like a haircut, most things imaginable have the potential for commodification.

#### ***Closing the deal***

In order to generate profit, certain features of Nepal are singled out for commodification. By making turning them into commodities they are turned into items that are readily

exchangeable for money. It is important to recognize that this process can take many, both overt and subtle, shapes. One of the most obvious examples, as we shall see, is how the Himalayas are marketed as trekking and climbing tours, while the physical landscape is transformed into trekking paths complete with places for the tourist to eat and sleep. A more subtle form of commodification is perhaps taking place when visitors are asked to give a donation after sightseeing at a temple or an orphanage. Although in these latter instances the experiences i.e. the commodities, are not given a fixed price in money. I suspect this is partly because appealing to the visitors sense of charity and relative high degree of monetary wealth, will often yield higher profits than a fixed price ever could. Secondly the brokers, the people running such facilities are absolved from putting a price on the sacredness or emotions present. Following the definition of commodities above, it is obvious that many things do not have all the hallmarks of being thoroughly commodified. Shades of grey do exist and the process of commodification is not always initiated by conscious effort. At the same time It would be hard to argue that some things or experiences, such as visiting the Living Goddess (see below) for instance, does not possess any elements of being a commodity. Moreover, in Thamel and in Kathmandu in general for an item to not possess a fixed price does not disqualify it from being a commodity. Indeed few items have. Throughout Kathmandu, fixed non-negotiable prices are usually found in western style supermarket or in expensive brand stores which are the only places where one can find non-replica products, for instance brand clothes and cameras. Another place for fixed prices is the most upmarket hotels, where guests do not mind if they are paying \$150 or \$200. At such places, prices have often been agreed upon prior to the arrival of the visitor, often mediated by some travel agent.

As such, the vast amounts of items bought by tourists have prices that are subject to haggling. This is often initiated by the seller asking the visitor to name a price out of the blue. Visitors often have a poor grasp on the price level of most items in Nepal, at least shortly after arrival. At the same time Nepal is incredibly inexpensive compared to, well probably almost any country, most visitors are likely to have visited. India for instance, is in many ways a more expensive country with regard to what items visitors are likely to purchase. If the seller is compelled to name a price this will be several times the price he can suffer. The visitor then manages to get the price down a bit and leaves with the impression of having made a good deal, while the seller knows he has made a good deal. There are however, certain indications of this strategy backfiring. During my stay in Thamel, due to the catastrophic tourist season, it was very much buyers market. Thamel is clearly tuned to meeting a much higher demand than has been the case the last few seasons. When face to face with the seller, he will always

lament being robbed even if he gets a good price. More trustworthy is perhaps accounts by sellers in more than a few newspaper articles (*The Himalayan, Kathmandu Post*) focusing on the poor sales in Thamel in the months following the royal takeover. In these several sellers were complaining how the tourists nowadays always were haggling more and more aggressively. “Yesterday I had to sell a carpet with loss just so I could pay the rent,” one said. Tourists, it seems, are getting better at haggling while competition among sellers, for the few who arrive these days, is fierce.

The main point in this discussion however, is that although many items do not have a fixed price to begin with, such a price is defined at the point when money changes hands. Similar when a visitor leaves a donation at some place as thanks for the hospitality. The amount paid, however random, will serve as a point of reference in later transactions of similar items. A range of value has been established with which future transactions will be compared. When the transaction takes place the item is assigned a value and thus turned into a commodity. Following this argument it is possible to conceive of a wide variety of things as being or becoming commodities.

### ***Commodifying Otherness***

There is little doubt that culture in many ways can said to have become some sort of commodity (Harvey 2001). This is as apparent in Kathmandu as elsewhere. Together with foreign aid, tourism is Nepal’s biggest source of income. The tourist industry can easily be seen as the major catalyst for processes of the commodification of culture. Much is done to generate profits from selected features of Nepal, emically loosely addressed as Nepali culture. It is not easily done to exactly pin down what is meant by “culture” in this context. What exactly is it that is commodified? As discussed above this can be almost any conceivable thing. Often though, this thing is some sort of practice or institution, usually adjusted somewhat in order to make it more accessible to consumers. Emically the term culture is used frequently and not very consistently. In Thamel it is used by Nepalis and Westerners alike, often to explain why other people are different from themselves. There seems to be consent towards what culture means. When the term is used the people present seem to accept and understand. “Nepali culture” on the other hand is associated with the life and customs in mountain villages. Traditional food, dress, music/dance and ways of life; religion and religious festivals are all valid representations of Nepali culture, the way this term is used and understood Emically. Almost everything connected with tradition, things that have been



around longer than people can remember, seems to fall within its boundaries. By contrast, everything modern is usually associated with the West. That “Thamel is completely different from Nepali culture,” has been stressed a number of times. Thus, in Thamel Nepali culture at least regarding what usually is implied by these terms, is best represented by ethnic Nepali music/dancing shows at restaurants often serving Western or Mexican food.

The choices as to which features of Nepal or Nepali culture that are singled out for commodification seem to be driven by an eye for the unique and peculiar. The tourist industry in general, not just in Nepal, is attempting to satisfy the need for otherness (MacCannel 2001). One of the tourist industry’s in general largest dilemmas is probably that while they try to offer experiences that are unique, authentic and exceptional, the experiences are also usually made exceedingly fluffy, comfortable and accessible. In this strive for convenience, lies also the threat of destinations becoming standardized and homogenous, perhaps ultimately coming to resemble “non-places” (Augé 1995).

When looking for cultural features to put forth as unique, the tourist industry of Nepal seems to have a tendency to select the traditional. Features which from a Westerner’s point of view are likely to appear highly exotic. Perhaps this is because modernity in Nepal seems strongly tied to globalization and Western images. The industry is thus playing on Western stereotypes of Asia, marketing otherness, from an outsider’s perspective, to a huge extent. True enough, it is these traits that traditionally have attracted Westerners to Nepal. After all, why travel to a destination that looks exactly like home? As such there is no effort on part of the industry to present Nepal as the modern, globalized country it could be argued it is, at least regarding Kathmandu and other cities. Rather the opposite is done. The exotic is emphasized at every opportunity.

However, should not this search for the unique and peculiar lead to Nepal being different from other destinations rather than becoming just another tourist trap? Many would say that the World has more than enough of these already. Many do exist and competition among them is fierce. One way of getting ahead on the marketplace of is to establish what Harvey calls “monopoly rent” (2001). The more unique and authentic a commodity is the greater is the potential for monopoly rents to be realized. If a commodity is in possession of some special, un-replicable quality it can beat the competition by virtue of this quality. If the demand for this commodity simultaneously is present enough, monopoly rents can be achieved and profits are assured. The French wine trade is a prime example (Harvey 2001). The Nepali tourist industry has, as I see it, realized monopoly rent only with regard to Mt. Everest and, by extension, the Himalayas. Regarding the so called cultural aspects they have

had less success. This is probably not due to the lack of trying though. The point is that should not this striving to present the unique and particular ensure that countries - tourist destinations - remained distinct, rather than becoming standardized homogenous adventure park style places as foreseen in dark prophesies made by globalization critics? While the unique is emphasized in Nepal tourist places and commodities can be said to have been constructed within a common world wide tourism formula. Perhaps then, are the distinctions between Thamel and other tourism heavy places superficial and cosmetic. The process of commodification of culture in tourism has been summed up as follows: “The drive to embrace everything that once secured a sense of ‘locality’ or local distinction, everything that was once symbolic of cultural or natural distinction is central to tourism.” (MacCannel 2001:385). And then “the local is killed by the very desire to embrace it” (ibid.). However if destinations become standardized and homogenized enough, the foundation for the capturing of monopoly rents is surely lost. Thus two conflicting drives can be identified. One seeks to distinguish, while the other seeks to homogenize. The two are, as we have seen, largely dependent on each other, and it is in between these two drives Nepal with its tourist industry are located.

### **Durbar Square and the Living Goddess**

The Durbar Square in Kathmandu is one of the city’s main tourist attractions. While central Kathmandu, especially Thamel, is experienced by tourists as noisy, polluted and “lacking character,” Durbar Square is a relative peaceful place. It is off limits to vehicles and has surprisingly few hawkers and sellers compared to other places in Kathmandu. The square consists of about thirty temples and palaces (durbar literally means palace in Nepali) some which date back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century though most were built during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. The temples all have elaborate carvings and adjacent statues depicting various deities. This location is also the centre of Old Kathmandu; the Old Royal Palace is found here for instance. It is a traditional and exotic place in every way. “Coming here is like time-travel,” one visitor I talked with said.

The square has an entry charge of 500 Nepali rupees, approximately 6 Euro for non-Nepalis, though policemen will sometimes attempt to charge tourists who are only walking by or in close vicinity. Nearby is also the notorious Freak Street, the hangout for the Western hippies who visited Nepal in the sixties and seventies. These people were in fact the first tourist to visit Nepal in considerable numbers, seeking spiritual enlightenment, cheap hash or both.

Most importantly though, Durbar Square is in many ways fulfilment of the visitors dream of ultimate other, highlighting figures that are often thought of as lost, “dead” or lacking in the industrialized West, such as wisdom, spirituality, tradition and religion. It is in many ways a reconstruction of the past bearing in mind, for instance, the restrictions on traffic here compared to other places. The Square has also been reconstructed in a physical sense, not always true to its original form, after much of it was damaged by the great earthquake in 1934 (*Lonely Planet Nepal*). It is nonetheless perceived as sufficiently authentic, in the sense that it has a historically grounded reason to exist, to warrant curiosity. Being grounded in the past in this way gives Durbar Square as commodity a credibility that an item made purely with profit in mind could scarcely get. Kopytoff has stressed that things, like persons, have their distinct biographies (1986). Ideas of authenticity seem to have something to do with the biography of things, its origin, past and future potential.

This impression of authenticity and reality is further driven home by the presence of the Kumari Devi. The Kumari Devi or “Living goddess,” is said to be an incarnation of the goddess Durga. She is pointed out from a group of candidates at very young age by means of astrology and scrutiny of physical traits: shape of teeth, eye colour, tone of voice etc. The potential candidate is then run through several ritualistic tests. She is, for instance, presented with items from which she has to choose the ones owned by her predecessor(s), in a ceremony somewhat similar to the one used to pick the Dalai Lama. She then holds this position until her first period, at which point she steps down and her successor is located. The position has several important ceremonial functions in Nepal, especially in connection with the royal family. The King annually bows down to receive her blessing for example.

She lives in the Kumari Bahal palace in the outskirts of Durbar Square and is undeniably one of the main sights, that is, if she chooses to appear on the balcony in the courtyard while you are visiting. By the entrance to the courtyard, guarded by two statues of lions, there is a box to put donations in. No one is forced to give anything but others present will not look kindly on those who does not offer some token of appreciation, whether the Kumari Devi makes her appearance or not. The donations are used for the maintenance and running of the Kumari Bahal as well as supporting the Kumari Devi and her servants, though these donations, suspect only stand for a fraction of the budget.

While being serious business to Nepalis, the Kumari Devi has also become a commodity of sorts. Money is paid to gaze upon this mysterious being. While it is not allowed to take her picture, photos and postcards featuring a close up picture of her wearing full ceremonial attire are sold throughout Nepal. Pictures of her are also commonly seen on the

walls inside restaurants and shops in Thamel, to the extent that she could be seen as symbol of Nepal, or indeed a marketing symbol of Nepal. Her presence in Durbar Square also adds to the authenticity and wonder of the place. More than a mere museum pieces Durbar Square's temples and stupas are still in use by Nepali people. The past and the present are blurred together. Many Westerners I spoke with found the notion of having a living goddess incredibly cool. Clearly this would have been unthinkable in the West. However, the Kumari Devi's mere existence let alone her ceremonial responsibilities, indicate that she is an institution of some importance to Nepal. Bearing in mind how she is presented to Westerners this highlights otherness regarding both Nepal and its people.

While being commodities of sorts, Durbar Square and the Kumari Devi have clearly not been subjected to the standardizing mechanisms regarding the commodification of culture described above. There is no look-alike Kumari Devis running around giving mock blessings to tourists for instance. It is not inconceivable that this could be the scenario at some point in the future, though it seems unlikely. While places like Durbar Square can be found elsewhere in Nepal, they and the Kumari Devi still seem unique enough to capture a local distinction.

### ***The Greatest Product***

Of all the commodities in Thamel the most important and heavily marketed is the Himalayas which can only be accessed though trekking and/or climbing. While the mountains cannot be sold, there are many other things along the way which the tourist requires such as lodging, guides etc. The activities are in turn facilitated and legislated by the various trekking agencies and the government. In Thamel the trekking hawkers are seemingly everywhere. The same with pictures and posters of the mountains, especially the Annapurna and the Everest ranges. They are inside most shops and restaurants, on t-shirts that people wear, on postcards etc. Snow covered mountains is probably the one thing that most people anywhere associate with Nepal more than anything else. Of all the people I got the chance to ask what they knew about Nepal prior to their visit, probably around 30, nearly all would name "mountains" among their bits and pieces of knowledge. People were thusly quite well informed on this feature, even though they often knew rather little about the county in general. Several, especially among those who had arrived before King Gyanendra's takeover on February 1<sup>st</sup> 2005 for instance, had known nothing about country's the political turmoil, the royal assassinations of 2001 or the Maoist insurgents. Trekking is also the most common reason for people to visit Nepal.

From a seller's point of view, this makes the Himalayas a wonderfully pre-sold product. The demand is already present all he really needs to do is to deliver. Much of Nepal's association with and mountains likely originate in the auspicious coincidence that Nepal is host to the highest peak in the world, the Mt. Everest, surrounded by the Himalayas, the World's greatest mountain range. They did not even have to build it first, as is necessary with many other tourist attractions.

### **Himalayan dreams**

I cannot remember speaking with anyone visiting as tourists without going on some form of trek. In general people I spoke with were very impressed with the view of the mountains. When it came to other aspects of the trek, such as getting along well with porters and guides, level of comfort, quality of food, standards of hygiene, people impressions were mixed. Aslak and Lisa a married couple from Norway in their mid-fifties had been trekking in the Everest range for about ten days. When I spoke with them a couple of days after their return, Erik said:

“We feel really privileged to have had the opportunity to walk in the Himalayas. You really have to pinch yourself in the arm when you're thinking: Now we are in the Himalayas. It feels a little unreal or like a dream come true.”

At the same time both of them were appalled by the lack of hygiene at the different lodges. “People were throwing dried dung on the fire and then walking off to prepare food without washing or anything.” From their account it was clear however, that a few negative experiences could never do much by way of detracting from the sheer joy and wonder of being in the Himalayas.

A few weeks later I met Safal a trekking guide in one of the bars in Thamel. His agency was connected with another in Stockholm, Sweden, so he was usually guiding larger groups of package tourist from there. The one thing he said that stood out from the rest of the conversation was: “I make their dreams come true,” referring to the tourists. A bit drunk at the time, as many trekking guides between jobs are, he said this with a peculiar mix of joy and sarcasm. It is my understanding that him along with many guides often know precisely what many tourists are looking for. The better they are able to accommodate the more they will earn.

## **Learning to appreciate**

At some undisclosed point in the past, probably around the mid nineties, Mohan had by coincidence been in the vicinity of a group of tourist led by a guide around the Durbar Square, an area rife with temples to several Hindu deities and other old architecture.

Unfortunately the guide leading the group was really able to convey most of the stories connected to the place due to his poor grasp of English. Mohan standing nearby had thought to himself that he would have been able to do this so much better. It was this experience, he claims, that led him to take the official tourist guide course back in 1997. The instructor at the course had said that the tourist guides were the real ambassadors of Nepal, something Mohan had been very motivated by hearing. The main point for this discussion however, is that Mohan, until he took the course, had been completely oblivious to the term “culture.” In the sense that Nepali culture was somehow distinct and unique compared to other cultures. Neither had he been aware that there was anything particularly special about the mountains. All they did was to make life especially travel more difficult and strenuous. During my stay Mohan was actually one of six climbers in a group including fifteen additional support personnel who were making preparations to climb Mt. Everest.

It is consequently clear that appreciating “exotic” cultures and the Himalayas is something that has to be learned. While walking in the mountains one can observe tourists being meticulous about not leaving any garbage such as plastic bottles behind. At the same time locals are mindlessly throwing chocolate paper and other, more serious, garbage seemingly anywhere. Having had the chance to enjoy the scenery their whole lives it is probably difficult for them to understand tourists amazement. It is also my guess that they react similarly to environmentalist ideas imposed by NGOs and trekking agencies although the latter’s preoccupation with this obviously stems from keeping the trekking routes clean in order not to offend tourists.

While fewer in number some tourists does not seem to have learned about or accepted the greatness of the Himalayas. Two Norwegian girls had this to say about their trekking experience:

“It was very hard. We were tired and cold much of the time. And the people we ended up walking with were real health freaks, walking as fast as they could like it was some

kind of race. They got really mad at us for smoking a cigarette and insisted that we took the butts with us.”

They did not even mention the mountains. In all fairness it can be mentioned that the reason why they came to Nepal was that Tibet turned out to be too expensive a destination, so Nepal was kind of a consolation.

There is hence much that indicates that people’s fascination with the Himalayas derive not from the mountain itself but from the meaning to which it has been ascribed. It is apparent that the nature vs. culture dichotomy is merely another way of structuring the environment in a way that appears meaningful.

### **A sublime commodity**

Views of the mountains can really be spectacular. Even seeing them on a postcard is almost awe inspiring, let alone to actually walk in them. At that point it becomes clear that no picture taken during the trip can ever do the slightest of justice to the real thing. The sheer size and scope of ones surroundings become dizzying. This way of perceiving the environment is the work of the sublime. Central to the idea of the sublime is its ability to defeat imagination and cognition (Crowther 1989). The object simply becomes too much to grasp. The Himalayas can certainly be seen as such. At the same time the sublime is not an inherent property of the mountains themselves but a way of looking at them. In this sense it can be said that the appeal of nature is a social construction.

When gazing at the Himalayas however it is easy to be deceived into thinking that their picturesque qualities are caused by “natural” forces. In this way the grandeur of the Himalayas come to be seen as the work of nature. As nature is not perceived as man made, it can achieve “a far greater constancy of authenticity” (Bell & Lyall 2002:180), than manufactured commodities.

### **The symbolic power of Mt. Everest**

The only thing than can match the size of Mt. Everest, and the Himalayas by extension, is the grandeur of its biography and symbolic meaning. New Zealander Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Norgay Tenzing were the first to reach the summit of Mt. Everest, in 1953. Coming down the mountain they found that representatives of their countries were keen to know who had

reached the summit first. The two were caught in something of a power struggle between their respective countries, both of which wanted to have one of their nationals as the conqueror of Mt. Everest. Hillary and Tenzing said that they had reached the summit practically at the same time.

While most climbers agree that K2, one of the world's highest mountains, in Pakistan is a much more difficult and dangerous mountain to climb, it cannot compete with the sheer fame of Mt. Everest as being the highest peak in the world. What the underlying reasons as to why people again and again want to climb the highest mountains, reach the poles and so forth is not very easy to guess at. The nature vs. culture dichotomy does seem to stand firm however, and for hundreds of years man has been preoccupied with conquering and harnessing nature. The reasons for this could probably be explained socially, religiously and economically all at the same time. This is not the focus of this text on the other hand. Suffice to conclude that Mt. Everest enjoys immense fame. Had the highest peak in the world not been located in the Himalayas I doubt the latter, or even Nepal as a whole, would ever have become such a popular destination. Mt. Everest is also facilitated as commodity for those that are unable to climb it. A way in which this is done is through so called "mountain flights." The tourist is flown around the mountain for about half an hour. Afterwards the tourist receives a certificate reading: "I did not climb Mt. Everest but I touched it with my heart."

David Harvey (2001) has argued that places, just like people, could be in possession of symbolic capital in the same sense as this term was invented by Bourdieu. Mt. Everest of course being distinct from every other mountain has incredible potential in this regard. Its status can thus be seen as a discursive construction. In any event it is worth noting that Mt. Everest and the Himalayas, the greatest national symbol of Nepal, is also its greatest commodity.

### **Commercial realization and regulation**

Culture has obviously become some sort of commodity (Harvey 2001). The commodification of culture has often been seen as one of the many bad side effects of tourism (Jafari 2001). The commoditization of the Himalayas, I would say, is not regarded as problematic. The only concern here is with the natural environment. Commodification of individual cultures is seen as wrong because it entails some degree of commodification of the people constituting the respective culture which is, as we have seen, regarded by many as morally questionable. The



Himalayas are, on the other hand, seen as part of the domain of nature and therefore not subject to the same problems, perhaps due to the long tradition of man's conquest of nature.

The various trekking routes draw on the symbolic power of Mt. Everest. Trekking permits and Mt. Everest permit serve to make some locations more special by limiting access. If reaching Mt. Everest was less difficult or expensive than it is, it would gradually become less attractive as more and more people had been there. To retain its value it is necessary for it, to maintain some degree of scarcity.

“If monopoly rents are to be realized, then some way has to be found to keep commodities or places unique and particular enough” (Harvey 2001:396). The Himalayas are kept relatively accessible through the various trekking routes, while retaining a degree of exclusivity drawn from the symbolic capital of Mount Everest. As it turned out Mohan's climbing expedition was cancelled due to lack of funds. He seemed particularly annoyed that the Nepali government had refused to give any financial support. To climb Mt. Everest one needs an individual permit costing \$ 10000. Almost at the same time as Mohan's expedition was cancelled there was a Finnish team climbing Mt. Everest. I met them in Thamel before and after their climb. When they were celebrating at one of the bars in Thamel after the successful expedition I told one of them about the cancellation of Mohan's expedition. He replied that yes, it was pretty expensive but it was worth it.

## ***Marketing***

In now turn to marketing. Marketing in Thamel and the rest of Nepal is done in a variety of ways and it would be almost impossible to cover all aspects. I will thus focus on some aspects that appear to affect interaction between the tourist and the marketer as these also have implications as to how Thamel is experienced.

## **Knockout**

An important feature of how Nepalis market their commodities is the omnipresence of it. The potential customer is never allowed to rest. As soon as you step out of the airport you are approached by a crowd of people working for various hotels and guest houses in Thamel. All of them shouting the greatness of their place of accommodation and showing pictures as evidence. Before you know it some of them have already taken your luggage into their van just in case one would consent to going to their place. The chaos of the situation is aggravated

by the people from the different hotels and guest houses pushing each other away and pulling your arms. After a long journey it can be a rather tiresome experience.

Mohan, my language teacher and also trekking guide and agent had witnessed this scene a few times was, more than anything else, incredulous to it. “This is how we greet out visitors? I think this is knockout for the tourist.” He also said that he believed this practice to be both unfair and undesirable because it served to constrict all the tourists and all the money in an already filled up Thamel. It would be better he said, if the tourists could decide for themselves were they wanted to stay allowing for a more even distribution of tourism profits.

For many visitors, the tone is set at the airport. In Thamel the street traders and especially the trekking hawkers are almost as aggressive. “Having the trekking hawkers is a very bad idea,” Mohan once said, grinning as to imply not a small amount of ridicule at the people who had come up with the idea. I asked him how he then attracted clients. Through recommendation, he replied. To my knowledge, he did not have any trekking clients during my stay. Working as a trekking guide was more and more becoming a thing of the past for him, but he did not mind as he was involved in a number of other projects including running the language course with his nephew and establishing a centre for orphans in Patan. He was also one of six climbers in a team of twenty people planning and organizing an attempt to reach the Mt. Everest summit. This expedition was cancelled late in the spring due to lack of governmental funding.

Pragun was working as a trekking agent in one of the more conventional agencies in central Thamel which employed several hawkers. Sometimes he was standing in the main square of Thamel hawking. I asked him why they were using this approach and if he ever had thought that the tourists would be annoyed by this, so that it would work counterproductive. He told me that sometimes it worked and sometimes it did not. “There are good tourists who like to spend and bad tourists who don’t.” Anyhow they needed all the clients they could get. The guides at his agency were also getting jobs through recommendations, but these days tourist were in short supply “because of political problem.” I think his assessment of the situation was quite precise. He did not seem to have very much work to do as he was often going about Thamel getting drunk with his friends and colleagues.

Competition between the various agencies is as fierce as ever from what I could gather and hawking is probably necessary in order to be able to compete. Even if they recognize that tourists often are angered or annoyed by this approach, they need to keep at it. Nobody wants to back off first; sort of a prisoners dilemma problem. And then, since it is working, at least sometimes, what is the reason to quit?

## The Bagpiper Concert

Early in my fieldwork I went to a concert with one of Nepal's major pop stars called Deepak Bajracharya. The concert was held at one of Kathmandu's more luxurious hotels. The most striking feature of the concert to me was that it was sponsored by *Bagpiper Whisky*. The concert looked more like a big promotion party for this particular brand. Ads were everywhere and free drinks were handed out. A big screen was repeatedly showing Deepak's latest music video which looked more a TV commercial than anything else. It featured Deepak, at times riding a heavy motorbike through open spacious landscapes and at times singing and playing his guitar.

Before the concert Deepak gave an interview to Neil who was doing a series of articles about the music scene in Kathmandu for a New York based online music magazine, and was one of my informants throughout my stay. Both he and I were baffled by blatant advertising. After the interview Neil told me that Deepak had expressed no embarrassment on this issue. He had told Neil that he did not have any reservations about partnerships that were beneficial to both *Bagpiper* and himself. Neither did he think the partnership with *Bagpiper* could cause any problems to his credibility as an artist.

The concert commenced much to the appreciation of the audience who were all Nepalis except from Neil, I and two of our friends; Nick and Gwen. Nepali people of both sexes and most ages were represented, though as usual at public gatherings men vastly outnumbered women. Some adults had brought their kids along, some perhaps just three or four years old. The majority seemed to be males of about twenty to about forty.

To me the songs, all of them love songs, sounded somewhat similar. The music was very much guitar based (no bagpipes), rather soft and ballad-like with some degree of Mediterranean influence. Also on this, Deepak had been very forthright during the interview. He had openly explained that his latest record was very influenced by *The Gypsy Kings*, rather than making some claim to originality or profundity as one might expect from a musician.

While Deepak certainly got his share of the attention, most of the people present were just as busy queuing up to buy drinks which were instantly tossed back. The ticket included one complimentary drink. This however, was only a warm up. We saw people buying whole bottles of *Bagpiper* which were rapidly consumed straight from the bottle. When I later, having negotiated the crowd to reach the stall, bought a drink myself, the guy chucked three

drinks standing at the ready into the fourth plastic cup and handed it to me. Everyone was getting very generous drinks at a very low price.

Later Neil and I met with Ravi, a Nepali of around thirty who was running a management office in Kathmandu, organizing concerts and such. From his account he had been central to the booking of this concert and was also the person who had supplied all of us with free tickets a few days earlier. He was very pleased with how things were going. He introduced Neil and me to a number of people, making a big point of Neil writing for an American magazine. It was obvious that he was prodding Neil into the role of the big shot journalist, something that made Neil very uncomfortable.

Slowly but surely the place was becoming more and more rowdy until a huge brawl involving around thirty youngsters broke out and started moving about the garden, sucking in all who stood in the way. At this point a DJ playing trance had taken over the stage after Deepak was finished. We decided it was time to leave. As such I don't know how the thing ended but my guess is that it dissolved quietly as people were getting tired and the premises were shut off for the night.

## Spheres

In the West a concert held in this way would immediately be seen as selling out. It would probably mean artistic suicide for the artist. As if he was using his position and popularity purely for profit rather than having anything important to say with his music.

To risk a generalization: In the West money, especially one's own, is not considered good form to openly discuss at social gatherings. Neither is asking about someone else's. Money is almost like a taboo in a sense, a separate sphere to be kept at distance in conversation and not to be mixed with the social sphere. Social relations or art for that matter should be an end in itself rather than motivated by financial gain. I think in Nepal, people are more inclined to see partnerships like that of Deepak and *Bagpiper* as a sign of success, progress and modernity. None of the Nepalis I talked to at the concert expressed any scepticism towards the *Bagpiper* presence. To them it seemed to go down like any other concert or party, a cool happening and an opportunity to have a good time. There was nothing to indicate that Deepak's popularity or even credibility diminished as a consequence of the heavy *Bagpiper* presence. Indeed, I believe that rather the opposite was the case. I think that the people behind the partnership correctly assumed that the two brands, so to speak, Deepak

Bajracharya and *Bagpiper* would lend each other strength in expressing associated values of freedom, cosmopolitanism, high standard of living and, above all, masculinity.

In *The Impact of Money on an African Subsistence Economy* (1959), Paul Bohannan writes about spheres of exchange among the Tiv. The main spheres are the subsistence sphere consisting of goods necessary for everyday survival, the prestige sphere consisting of slaves, cattle, magic and metal rods to name a few, and the marriage sphere in which women were exchanged. Normally trade or barter was conducted internally in each of the separate spheres, by Bohannan called “conveyances” (ibid.). Transactions across the boundaries of the spheres, called “conversions,” had a strong moral quality (ibid.). To purchase downwards in the hierarchy was very much frowned upon and would mean loss of prestige for the person who did so. Hence it was only done as a last resort, to escape starvation for instance. Conversely, purchasing upwards was seen as wise and clever and as morally highly valued, perhaps partly due to the relatively low frequency of opportunity to do so. The subsequent introduction of money had many effects, mostly negative ones according to Bohannan (ibid.). Arguably the most important effect was the deterioration of the spheres. Money made it possible to give each and every item a value on a common scale. As a result, it became much easier to exchange across the boundaries of the spheres. In Thamel, my impression is that such spheres, if they ever existed, have been done away with or made irrelevant.

In the West, or in Nepal for that matter, money has been a common denominator of value for quite some time. In the West however, the possession of money is not without its problems. Most people would agree that not everything can be bought. Whether people agree with it or not, the old cliché that money does not make you happy still stands along with the myth of the unhappy, detached rich person who at some point realizes the hollowness of money. Dickens’ character, Ebenezer Scrooge is a prime example. In Thamel, and likely in all developing countries, this is a luxury most people can ill afford.

## **The Jeweller**

One day while walking through Thamel I was approached by a man who seemed to be around forty. He was slightly plump and had black hair and a thick black moustache. He introduced himself as Vaibhav and invited me into his nearby jewellery shop. I was reluctant at first thinking: “here we go again,” but after reassurances that he just wanted to talk, I accepted.

He took me to his nearby shop. Again, I made it clear that I was not interested in buying anything. He said that all he wanted was to make friends. We talked for a while. He asked me what I was up to in Nepal. I explained him about the fieldwork. At some point he asked if I was hungry, which honestly I was, so he invited me over to one of his other shops just outside of Thamel. Nearby this shop, he explained, was a place one could get very tasty momos<sup>1</sup>. I agreed. Walking over there he said that if I needed anything I should come to him, because that was what friends were for. He seemed a bit too friendly. What does he want, I thought? We arrived at his other shop and he quickly went out and came back with the momos. We ate and talked. He seemed very interested in items of value and wanted to know if I had a CD player or laptop computer, if I was using travellers' cheques while travelling and so on. I evaded most of these questions, as they made me feel a bit uncomfortable, while trying to find out more about him. It turned out he was from India and had been in the jewellery business for quite some time. As we finished eating he told me that he was turning 46 in just two days and invited me to his birthday party at his house which lay just outside of Thamel. He said he was going to cook himself and wanted to know what I wanted to eat and drink. I asked if I could bring a friend or two, on which he answered that I could. We agreed to meet outside his shop at six, the one just outside Thamel, on his birthday which was the following Saturday. Walking away I still could not figure out why he was acting so friendly. What was his agenda?

Saturday came and I set out towards his shop together with Maggie. We had agreed beforehand that we would tell Vaibhav that we had an appointment in Thamel later in the evening and therefore suggest that we go for a drink at some restaurant or bar nearby. This was for safety reasons. We did not want to go to his house or wherever he would take us, as I was not completely sure of his motives.

Outside the shop was Vaibhav together with one of his co-workers and their boss, which it turned out later, was actually the owner of both shops. Also present but about to leave was an American backpacker at about my age called Brad who I had met in a bar a few days earlier. Brad left and the rest of us were introduced. Vaibhav and his colleagues happily consented to our suggestion and took us to a restaurant just around the corner. The place was very simple and Nepali style, as opposed to the lavish western inspired restaurants in Thamel, with simple chairs and just two tables covered with wax tablecloths. Maggie ordered a meal of dhal bhat and the rest of us drank beer. I was also given a pack of cigarettes. Vaibhav, not really listening to anyone but himself, was dominating the conversation talking pretty philosophically about the worthlessness of money and material value compared to love and

happiness of the soul and the universe. This topic was eagerly followed up by Maggie who was also of, what one might call a somewhat spiritual inclination. Conversation shifted between English, Nepali and French. All the jewellers spoke French as did Maggie though not so good. I think a few jokes in Nepali were passed across the table on my and Maggie's expense, though English was the prevalent language. Then at some point Vaibhav asked if we could help them traffic gemstones and jewellery between Nepal and abroad. All of it completely legal we were assured. Suddenly everything made sense. This was what they wanted of us. Both of us politely refused. Not much later we excused ourselves and left. Vaibhav and the others refused to let us contribute to the bill.

Later the same evening I incidentally met Brad who, it turned out had been asked the same thing. A week or two later I met Vaibhav on the street in Thamel next to one of his shops and nearby my hotel. He told me he was waiting for a friend of his arriving from Bangkok. Remembering that I was Norwegian he told me that she was Norwegian too. While we were chatting she appeared out of a taxi. She seemed to be in her mid thirties and was dressed in loose colourful garments. We were introduced and after a short chat I was on my way.

Some days after this I met him again in street. This time he asked me if I could lend him 30 US dollars which he needed to pay the electricity bill for a shop he had recently bought. I refused. Later the same day while walking back to my hotel he hailed me again. Tired, I walked over to him and asked him what it was. He demanded that I should buy him a beer and a pack of cigarettes because he had bought the same for me on his birthday. I told him that the beer and cigarettes he had given me was a gift and that I would buy him a gift if I wanted to, but I did not want to. Then I left. I did not speak with him again.

## **Confused Relations**

Many westerners I spoke with were annoyed by the blurring of social and economical relations. They would be invited to tea or in some cases a meal by people working as trekking guides. Then as soon as friendly contact is established they would be bombarded with various offers of trekking, rafting, jungle safari and so on. To make one thing clear: Nepalis did recognize that business was business and that friendship was something else. However, working under the guise of wanting to establish relations of friendship; of being genuinely interested in the person, not just his valet, people in the tourist industry have found a back

door in. Of course, visitors quickly got used to this tactic and learned to recognize it. However, there is always new blood arriving who make ample targets for this approach.

In doing things this way people in the tourist industry have created an atmosphere in which it is very difficult to draw a line between social and economical relations, at least as such relations usually are conceptualized by the tourists I have talked with. In this sense one could say that there is a blurring of a social and economical sphere. Many tourists often found themselves in difficult situations because they quickly learn how to protect themselves from unpleasant surprises. The most effective way of doing this was to completely ignore approaches from unfamiliar Nepalis. However, sometimes Nepalis were interested in just a chat or having a cup of tea with a foreigner. Many tourists were aware of this as well and they did not want to come across as impolite. Thus it is was careful balance between protecting oneself from the pressure of the salesmen and trekking hawkers, while being friendly and polite. One Nepali man working in a handicraft shop close to my hotel said that he thought that some westerners were rude because they never answered when he spoke to them. All he wanted, he said, was to chat. While I suspect that he would not pass on an opportunity to do business, this is not always the primary motive. Many Nepalis I talked with expressed keen interest in the state of affairs in other countries, especially in the West.

As in the case with the Vaibhav and myself, there often seems to be a discrepancy in the motives and goals of the respective sides in an encounter. Erwing Goffman (1971) has claimed that in every encounter the situation needs to be defined in a way of which both sides can consent, if continued interaction is to be successful. Clearly, this did not happen in my first encounter with Vaibhav. Mauss' (1995) theory of exchange offers another way of looking at it. Vaibhav had offered me a "job" which I refused. By refusing this offer I had already demonstrated my inability to yield something of significant value in return. In the competition of gift exchange I had already been defeated (Mauss 1995). Furthermore the food drink and cigarettes he had likely given to make it more difficult for me to turn down the "job." These gifts had been wasted, so he wanted them back. Clearly there was no foundation for continued reciprocal relations, or any relations.

In this ways then, tourists became confused about roles and expectancies. In the protection of oneself I think most would err on the side of not answering approaches. Thus negotiating the streets of Thamel is a risky business as it is very difficult to distinguish friend from foe so to speak. The aggressive style of marketing also contributed, it seemed, to tourists experiencing Thamel as a non-place. Few were interested in them, only their money.



## *Summary*

In this chapter I have discussed what features of Nepal that are commodified and why. The features that are commodified to some degree match tourists' desire for otherness. These features are also to some degree national symbols. In this sense one could say that there is an ongoing production and commodification of Nepal as a country. A consequence of this is that the tourist industry is contributing to the construction of Nepal as "other" to the West and. From a postcolonial perspective (Loomba 2002) one could say that they are forced into this as tourism is a vital part of the economy, it is still their right to do what they think best can generate profits. In this chapter I have also taken a look at some marketing practices in and around Thamel and tried to show how these have impact on interaction among tourists and sellers in Thamel. Perhaps the most important of these is how they "train" the tourist to become less willing to engage in conversation with a Nepali, suspecting that the latter is out to sell something.

In the next chapter I take a look at how some commodities, particularly spaces are consumed and how this consumption is a means of constructing identities.

## 4 - Consumption, Space and Identity

### *Introduction*

The relationship between consumption and identity has been noted by several writers (Bell & Lyall 2002, Durning 1992, Gottdiener 2000a). While most see consumption as important, there are differences as to the emphasis these writers put on the importance of consumption for the formation of personal identities. Gottdiener (2000a) points out that if anything is to be consumed it needs to be produced first, implying that work still plays a certain role in identity formation. Still he holds consumption as necessary and important albeit not to the extent of exclusion of all other identity markers. Others such as Bell & Lyall go further claiming that: “In the postmodern period, consumption (seduction!) has usurped production as the force that defines individuals and that provides their social integration” (Bell & Lyall 2002: 153).

The idea of consumption as important in identity construction has entered the discussion partly as response to the way in which consumption plays a larger and larger part of many peoples’ lives. Also central in this respect is “fetishism,” how commodities are imbued with meanings and powers and how these then are bought in the belief that they will increase the consumer’s abilities or qualities.

According to Gottdiener the consumption of space is “the use of a thoroughly commodified and/or regulated environment, commodified by capital and/or regulated by the state” (Gottdiener 2000b:268). Tourist settings seem particularly fitting to this description. Prime examples include Thamel, or even micro-settings in Thamel such as themed restaurants, as well as the trekking routes and national parks. However, as Thamel has been already been dealt with in some detail, it is now time to leave it behind in favour of spaces where the tourist rather be. In this chapter I will hence discuss how the tourist relates to spaces through consumption. As these spaces often are inscribed with certain meaning the consumption of them also become a means of making identities.

### *Chris and Johan’s Virgin Mountain*

Chris a man in his late twenties from Denmark and Johan, an Austrian in his early twenties, had been planning and discussing to go on a climbing trip for a couple of weeks. I usually met them every night at one of Thamel’s pubs where we hung out, played pool and had a few

drinks. As such I was able to follow the developments in the preparations for their climbing adventure.

Almost every day they went climbing on an artificial climbing wall somewhere in Kathmandu. Sometimes they could tell me about some new climbing equipment they had purchased. “I’ve spent a hell of a lot of money on this climbing gear so now I really want to get into the mountains and start climbing before I have to leave Nepal” Chris told me after buying new ropes. The biggest issue however seemed to be where they were going to climb. One of the days, as I met them again Chris told me he had found a perfect peak. When I asked him what was so great about it and he replied that it had never been climbed before. I asked him if he thought it was important to climb a peak which no one else had climbed before and so forth. He answered that it was more a question of evading expenses. When climbing outside the established climbing areas, he said, one does not need an expensive permit.

When trekking or climbing in Nepal one usually needs multiple permits. Trekking permits are generally not terribly expensive insofar as tourists’ budgets go, while climbing permits can amount to several thousand US dollars.

Some days later Chris and I were at a café waiting for some friends of ours. We were practically alone at the place. I asked how the climbing business was going and Chris told me that the unclimbed peak was out of the question. “To get a permit for climbing the unclimbed peak you need a guide. Both are too expensive,” Chris said. He and Johan had found another peak which had been climbed before and for which affordable permits could readily be fetched. This seemed of little comfort to Chris at this point seemed genuinely disappointed about this and was keener to talk about the peak that was now ditched than the peak he and Johan were actually going to climb. He went on about the unclimbed peak: “No one has ever been near it.” He was also repeatedly stressing that “there aren’t any pictures of it.” The unclimbed peak, as it turned out, was far from among the really high ones. Why was it such a big deal then, I wanted to know. “It won’t be the same adventure to climb a peak that is already climbed and known,” Chris said.

With all the talk about going to locations un- or little visited, be they mountain tops or “exotic cultures,” that impregnate discussions among climbers and tourists I remember not really being too surprised about this confession. As we have seen in Chapter one moral standing among tourists is to some extent based on the ability to go higher, deeper and further than one’s peers. Still, perhaps Chris’ account may say something about the consumption of space.

It seemed an important quality of the unclimbed peak had not been photographed. Taking pictures is perhaps the most common form of consuming space (Gottdiener 2000). If this is the case it implies that the unclimbed mountain had not yet been consumed. While going to “untouched” places is seen as a bit snobbish by many tourists, and Chris did not intend to fall into this trap, it can also be said to exist a desire to do this. Of course calling such activities as snobbish can be seen as a way of legitimating one’s own lack of ability to do this. An “untouched” mountain peak or any landscape feature can be seen as the ultimate “other” in relation to humanity.

Ortner has said that the first Western climbers in Nepal were climbing at least partially as a “critique of modernity” (1999:36). They felt that modernity was a condition in which the self was losing its “definition, edge, purpose and honesty” (ibid.:37). Mountaineering was then a way of retaking such qualities.

While many years have passed since the time of the first Western climbers set foot in Nepal, mountaineering is as popular as ever. There also still seems to be strong idea that that nature and society are two quite different things. Chris was during his stay in Nepal also writing on a children’s book about a Newari<sup>2</sup> boy. Some time after his climbing trip he had finally come up with an ending to the book: “In the end he walks off hand in hand with the yeti. He chooses nature over society.” Thus nature is seen as having some qualities absent in society. This way the “conquest” of mountains becomes a way of consuming qualities already inscribed or fetishized in “nature.”

### ***Consuming Helambu***

Trekking is undoubtedly the one thing that draws most tourists to Nepal. Though I cannot say for sure I would estimate that there in Thamel probably are around 100 trekking/travel agencies. In addition most hotels and some guest houses have their own “travel desks,” to make sure they get a cut from the tourists’ activities apart from staying at the hotel. The enormous interest in trekking has in turn, over the years, led to the establishment of not less than around 20 separate trekking areas, each with different route options. In order to sell them all some distinctions need to be made on part of the trekking agent. Folders supplied by trekking agencies usually list the different trekking areas with each one getting its own profile. These profiles can, for the most part, be read within a nature vs. culture dichotomy. Some areas, such as Everest or Annapurna, are emphasized for their mountain splendour

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<sup>2</sup> The Newari are the major ethnic groups in the Kathmandu valley.

while others such as Gorkha – Pokhara or Helambu are described as areas where one can experience culture and village life. Consider for instance the profile on Helambu as it is written in a folder supplied by one of the most competitive agencies in Thamel.

“Helambu (6 -9 days)

One hour drive from Kathmandu brings the trekkers to Sundarijal, the starting point of this trek, where there are sparkling waterfalls flowing down through an Oak Forest.

This trek offers the experience of being in a typical Sherpa village and many ancient monasteries to learn about life in our villages. The trek ends at Melamchipul Bazaar on the banks of Indravati River.”

In this way Helambu was presented to us as a commodified space ready for consumption. As the place is profiled clearly with selling in mind on part of the agencies, it is far from unreasonable to see it as this. Still, how a place or other phenomenon is experienced lies with the person or group experiencing it. There can be few doubts that the area is very differently experienced and perceived by a local and a tourist for instance.

It is very much my impression that most tourists, myself included, on trekking exist inside a sphere; detached from the places they visit somehow. One could say that they are not “dwelling” in the places they visit. As such they usually have comparatively little knowledge of the places apart from what be gathered from brochures, guidebooks and guides. Information of this kind often has a somewhat static quality to it. Considering this, trekking can actually be said to share some traits with “non-places” discussed earlier, especially when it comes to singularity, meaning how everyone gets the same predetermined treatment and attending a series of predetermined locations as is very much the case with airports and other places of transit. Moreover, relying on sparse information from guidebooks or guides also add to this. One gets the exact same information as everyone who visited before. What is really then the difference between the information on a screen at an airport and the information related by a guide for the thousandth time? Is the difference between signs at airports pointing direction to gate this or that all that different from a map of a trekking route?

Though there are similarities, trekking is generally thought of as having more than this to offer as we will look into in a bit. Viewing trekking routes as spaces of consumption can make clearer how tourists as consumers relate to the places visited along the course. In the following I will relate some occurrences from me and Maggie’s trek in this area. Perhaps

these can give an account of a trekking experience with regard to the consumption of space and identity.

## **Choosing**

Given the many offers the first task was to decide where to go. For my part, I did not actually get to read the profile above until after I had been trekking in this area. As such it was not this text that enticed me and Maggie to choose this trek. As is often the case with tourists, I read about it first in the *Lonely Planet*.

Maggie and I had for a while discussed going on a trek. For me, I thought it would be necessary for my fieldwork. It also presented a nice break from Kathmandu. Maggie was also interested in going having chatted with others who mostly had good experiences with trekking themselves. A few years before during a shorter visit to Nepal I had been trekking in the Annapurna area which is the most popular and accessible with regard to quality of lodging. While incredibly developed tourist wise and as such perhaps fitting for my study, I thought it could be interesting to go somewhere else this time. In the end, all the trekking routes are facilitated for tourists and, at least to my knowledge, basically built according to the same scheme. Lodges are set up in villages which are separated by some few hours of walking. Density of villages is higher at lower altitudes. There are no places which seriously can pretend to be untouched by tourism. Neither is being untouched or unspoilt in this manner used much as selling point for treks. As is however often seen, for instance in Chapter 3, there is attempt to give places an image of authenticity; an emphasis on the typical and particular.

Another reason for choice of trek was the practical aspect. The Helambu trek is fairly lowland so you do not need all kinds of warm clothes and other equipment. This seemed to sit well with Maggie who, true to form, was travelling on budget. Having turned down a rather expensive package including guide, meals and much of the equipment we obviously did not need, we decided to go on our own. Every other agency we visited for information strongly recommended us to take a guide because of “Maoist problem.” We rejected feeling confident that we could handle ourselves. While it is true that the Helambu region is one in which the Maoists are present, we had talked to a number of other westerners who had run into them in different places. Brad and his friend Tom related this story:

“Yeah, we met the Maoists but we did not realize who they were until after. All we knew was that these guys in standing in front of us demanded money. We couldn’t see

any reason why we should give them any, but we sat down and smoked a joint with them instead. It wasn't until after this that we heard talk about the Maoists."

This incident, although not typical, reflects the level of drama in most of the tourist meetings with Maoists I have heard about. Several accounts I've heard from people running into the Maoists describe the situation as even less tense. In retrospect it is not inconceivable that the people we talked to down-played the significance of such meeting to better appear as worldly, experienced travellers able to deal with any situation. Indeed I think I might have detected a certain pride in some of the people who had run into them. After all the political issues including the Maoists were pretty much the talk of the town in Thamel. Actually having met them could perhaps be turned into some temporary social recognition or capital if you will. Still there were reports of people who had to turn back or being forced to take a different route having refused to "donate" to the Maoists' struggle. In the spring there was also a rumour circulating in Thamel and elsewhere perhaps about a Western couple shot and disposed of at an undisclosed location in Nepal; "somewhere in the mountains." To my knowledge this rumour has yet to be proved true or false, though there is no evidence that I am aware of to support the tale. Anyhow, if the situation was really dangerous, the agencies would probably have discouraged us from even going to this area. Instead the "Maoist problem" was used as another argument supporting the need to hire a guide to stay safe.

Our preference of not choosing a guide could also be seen as a way of making a statement that we were brave and experienced travellers, who dared go into "hostile" or "unknown" territory. While choices in consumption often have practical reasons, such as a travelling funds running low, it is difficult to entirely rule out personal preferences of taste. In Chapter one I discussed morality among tourists and how this morality to a great extent is based on ways of adapting to the visited setting. Ways of adapting could as easily be seen as ways of consuming. Consumption practices in this way contribute to the establishment or a moral hierarchy (Bourdieu 1984) among tourist. Consumption choices and preferences become markers by which the tourists distinguish themselves.

### **Redefining identities**

Chris, a friend of mine in Thamel, put into words what I guess many tourists already knew: "You can make yourself into whatever you want to be when travelling. No one at home will know." Neither, of course, would any of the people one would meet while travelling. Chris'

point suggests that a person's home environment has some meaning as to who one is. When travelling, one need not make this relevant however.

One of the first days on our trek Maggie and I met and had lunch with a small group consisting of two Canadians and an American. The three had already been in Nepal longer than two years and were doing various language and Buddhist studies. Between mouthfuls of noodle soup the American asked me if I was carrying any spare copies of my passport and if he could have one if I did. Unfortunately for him I did not have any. The reason he wanted one was that he had heard that being American could be a problem if one should run into the Maoists. I told him about a rafting trip I attended on my previous visit to Nepal on which the instructors had met some Maoists while shopping for liquor in a village nearby our camp. Me and one of the other rafters had just left the village after buying some whisky ourselves when the Maoists showed up, the instructors told us. The Maoists had also asked the instructors if there were any Americans in our group, which there was not. They had also taken the shopkeeper, who was selling the liquor, with them when they left. According to the rafting instructors, the Maoists want fathers in the villages to spend their money on food for their families rather than getting drunk. He told me that he had heard stories of Americans who had been firmly asked by the Maoists to "donate" to their cause or been taken aside and questioned by the under the suspicion of being CIA agents.

After the group had left Maggie told me how much she felt sorry for him. She thought he seemed ashamed of being American. He liked Nepal and all he wanted was to study aspects of Nepali culture but just because he was American this was difficult she said. Then Maggie, who is from Canada herself, told me that she had met a few fellow "Canadians" travelling in Australia which had confessed to her that they were in fact Americans. While travelling, these had been met with bad responses and prejudice, especially from other backpackers, simply for being American. Thus, they had adopted fictional backgrounds. By reading books about Canada they had found their fictional home towns and grounded other "facts" of their reinvented background in a spatial context, such as where they had lived and worked. Maggie did not have too many details about this but I assume that the more elaborately revised the background the less chance of getting exposed as an American.

While most tourists do not lie about their nationality, they have to present themselves to the people they meet, one way or the other. The above examples show that one has, when travelling, greater freedom than at other times when it comes to how one wants to present oneself. While consumption is important for defining who one is at home, it is perhaps even more so when one is detached from one's home environment.



The tourist folder said that Helambu was place of Sherpa villages. According to Parker (1989:12, cited in Ortner 1999:256) the “Sherpa” category has been imposed by the government on other groups of Nepalis. Sherpas are probably the most well known ethnic group among tourists and famous for their abilities as climbers. As such there have also been examples of people from other groups calling them “Sherpa” to better accommodate tourists’ expectations and imagination (ibid.). I was not able to find out if this was happening in Helambu, for instance most of what I learned suggested the contrary. The hostess at one of the lodges we stayed at had a son about eight years old. He was very eager to show Maggie and I his writing skills. Among other things he wrote his name “Tendi Sherpa.” While it is not unconceivable that he had been instructed by his mother this seems rather far fetched. In other villages such as Melamchigaon people I would tell me the how their village had been founded by Tibetan expatriates about five hundred years ago. This fits pretty well with what I have been able to gather about the history of the Sherpas. What I now have mentioned are only examples however. Bogus Sherpas or not, the term is in any case used by the trekking agency as a selling point for treks in certain area. Anyhow about thirty percent of the trekking agencies in Kathmandu were owned by Sherpas in 1990 (Fischer 1990:115, cited in Ortner 1999:258).

If the practice of calling non-Sherpas Sherpas, became widely known among tourists I think this could have been a serious blow to tourists’ perception of the authenticity of the group as a whole. However, identities of tourists, Sherpas and others are continuously redefined. Such is also the identity of things. They can be perceived as authentic or inauthentic according to the situation.

## **Into the Hills**

A couple of days later we were really starting to ascend the hills of Northern Helambu. For most of the day we had been trekking up steeper and steeper hills but late in the afternoon the path in front of us was going slightly downwards. During the day we had reached vantage points that had offered some particularly breathtaking vistas. In the last couple of hours of walking it had also started to snow as we had reached a more temperate altitude. At the pass we took a break. We were both fatigued from walking upward all day but very pleased with the experience the same time. We also knew that the next settlement consisting of the usual cluster of trekking lodges offering accommodation was less than half an hour of walking

downhill “It was like magic today.” Maggie said while we stood there. I pretty much agreed with her.

At this point we had realized the background potentiality of the landscape (Hirsch 1995). What had been in Thamel and early in the trek merely a far away background was now a foreground of a striking immediacy. The ascent had offered comprehensive sensory input. Especially the light snowing, encompassing us on all sides, was contributing to the impression of being thoroughly inside the environment. Somehow this experience was an achievement on our part since we had fatigued ourselves by getting there. We had tangled with “nature” and thus earned out right to gaze upon the sublime landscape. Still I could not help but thinking what it would be like to be behind the next mountain range which formed the present background.

### **At Melamchigaon**

Melamchigaon was a small village we stayed at for almost two days midway through the trek. Early in the afternoon the second day we saw the arrival of an American couple, Stephen and Andrea, both in their late twenties. When they arrived they immediately started doing yoga stretches and moves in the porch outside the lodge we were staying. I was sitting just a few meters away and I remember thinking their behaviour a little odd, as if they were putting up a show of some kind. Such performance can be seen as an expression of role or identity (Goffman 1992). There is a bit of an irony in that the only show put up at this place was performed by visitors instead of the hosts.

At some point during the evening the same day the hostess announced that she would make a special, typical Nepali dish for breakfast the next morning. The dish was called “dholi” and is a bit like rather dry uncooked dough, often served with some soup on the side. I suspect it is not terribly nutritious. Nepalis I had talked to in Thamel had made fun about this dish. “The people who are so poor they can’t afford dhal baht<sup>3</sup>, they eat this.” One had laughingly said.

Next morning and breakfast came. As I walked over to the building where the eating room was, I met Stephen. He had just finished his serving and was on his way to the water pump to wash his hands. “How was breakfast?” I asked. He smartly replied: “D-licious.” When I came to the eating room the dholi had already gotten cold, and to be honest I did not

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<sup>3</sup> Dhal bhat is the most common dish eaten in Nepal. It consists of rice (bhat), lentil soup (dhal) and some vegetables. It is what most Nepalis eat every day.

really like it very much. Out of hunger and courtesy I ate a fair amount, though obviously not enough because the hostess had complained about this to Maggie afterwards.

While tastes in food are varied, I do not think that the dholi would have had such a tremendous appeal had it not been presented and accepted as a traditional and typical Nepali meal. As part of consuming spaces “the tourist may literally eat representations of the visited culture” (Bell & Lyall 2002:139). Otherness is explored using all available senses. Achieving identification or “oneness” with the “other” is in this way done through consumption.

### ***Thamel, the Himalayas and authenticity***

Thamel and the Himalayas represented by the trekking routes are opposites but also connected like the foreground – background relationship in Hirsch’s (1995) landscape model. The two are morally and economically dependent on each other. The way the two spaces are inscribed with meaning serve to mutually reinforce the contrast between the two.

At some point during the trek Maggie and I experiences heavy snow. The terrain was very difficult to move in and all of a sudden we had lost the path. Confused, fatigued and frustrated we tried to find the path again. Being unable to orientate oneself spatially is not pleasant feeling. At the same time one could say that we were lost in the landscape. We did however find the path again and got back on track. The next day Maggie said: “If something would have happened we surely would have died.” I asked her if she was trying to make the incident into a bigger adventure than it was. She replied that maybe she was. There is undoubtedly a fascination with danger and death in the consumption of “natural” spaces. At the same time getting lost and being in a bit of danger can feel very real when one is otherwise accustomed to the relative comfort of Thamel. Compared to Thamel then, the Himalayas become almost hyper authentic. Thamel with its mixed and detached imagery, confused relations, and moral anxieties in many ways can be perceived by the tourist as standing directly in opposition to the Himalayas as offering unchanging views, a clear cut physical relationship to nature and moral fulfilment.

In most of the lodges we stayed at during the trek there were posters on the wall showing mega cities and trains. An elderly hostess on one of the lodges showed us a picture of her daughter in the foreground to a background of skyscrapers. Inspecting the picture more closely I could see that she was also standing on cheap a linoleum floor. The skyscrapers had been cut and pasted from another picture. Many people it seems, share the dream of the “other” and the elsewhere.

## *Summary*

In this chapter I have looked into the relationship between the consumption of space on one hand and identity on the other. I have tried to show this by use of Chris and Johan's unfulfilled ambition of climbing an unclimbed mountain. I have also used examples from my own trekking experience to show how natures and cultures are consumed by the tourist. Lastly I have made a comparison between Thamel and the Himalayas as the latter is experienced through trekking.

## Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this thesis has been to answer some questions about how tourists make sense of themselves, their environment and how the two influence each other. Tourists and tourism are diverse beings and things that touch into several areas of anthropological theory. I have thus not limited the theoretical framework only to studies of tourism but applied various theories of tourism, space, landscape and consumption.

Tourists reasons for travelling are diverse but most seem to have in common a degree of desire for “otherness.” This “otherness” can be constructed in several ways. I have been discussing the “exotic” and “nature” as two broad themes. There could be more depending on point of view. I have tried to show how tourists in coming to terms with their role and purpose have constructed a morality which in some cases can establish a moral order or hierarchy of tourists. It is my view that this hierarchy is not as institutionalized as hierarchies of class for instance. Thus this hierarchy to a greater extent depend of point of view. Tourist morality is like other moralities defined by making favourable comparisons with an “other.” In this way there seem to be either a sympathy or antipathy in the perception of the “other.” The morality or purpose of the tourist is thus to get a better understanding of the host than other tourist. At the same time other tourists are quick to sanction individual tourists who stand out in this respect, marking them as snobs or “hippies.” This can be seen as a drive to find the authentic. Familiarity with or even mastery over the “other,” whether it is nature or the “exotic,” is crucial to the moral fulfilment of the tourist role. At the same time the tourist must take care to balance his need for “otherness.” The need for “otherness” must be tempered.

It would likely be possible to find tourists in Thamel and elsewhere who either do not care of know about these norms. I do not wish to present it as a general theory of tourists. Still in Thamel this morality seemed to be present and controlling behaviour among significant amounts of people. As such I think its place in the thesis is warranted.

Tourists relate to Thamel in different ways, though most react with dislike. This dislike can be explained as an insufficiency in ability to fulfil tourist morality or purpose. The way tourist is treated in marketing practices contribute to the perception of Thamel as a “non-place” (Augé 1995). “Non-places” can be seen as defeating of tourists identities. Expressing antipathy for Thamel is also a way showing or performing ones morals. Another way of looking at it is that Thamel is lacking authenticity which in turn is often a perceived feature of the “other.”

An important aspect of Thamel is undoubtedly its widespread use as a place of transit. I have attempted to show how Thamel is constantly contrasted to the Himalayas in such a way that Thamel become a means to an end which is the Himalayas. In the Himalayas the tourist can realize background actuality (Hirsch 1995) in the foreground by consuming spaces and other commodities sometimes representative of a notion of Nepali “culture.” As conceptions of “otherness” quickly collapse with increased familiarity, the tourist must constantly find new spaces.

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