

Crossroads of the World: Intersections of Power and Privilege in the Khumbu

GEOG 331 – Final Paper
March 18, 2014
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Introduction

The Khumbu region of Nepal is one of the most beautiful and celebrated places on Earth. Nestled in the high Himalayas it has been sought by adventurers and explorers for centuries, who were convinced that the mythical kingdom of Shangri-La must lay hidden somewhere amongst the tallest mountains in the world. Is home to Sagarmatha National Park, which encompasses the entire region, and three of the fourteen 8,000 meter peaks: Cho Oyu, Lhotse, and Mt. Everest. Its inhabitants, who are colloquially referred to as Sherpas but actually belong to a number of ethnic groups, are widely considered to be among the finest high-altitude pastoralists and athletes in the world.

The Khumbu is a fascinating place for other reasons as well. From the beginning of recorded history, it has been a meeting place of cultures, a gateway between the empires and kingdoms of the Indian Subcontinent and East Asia. As the result of 19th century colonialism and 20th century globalization it has become rather less remote and mysterious than it once was, opening the way to a world of possibilities but also inviting environmental concerns and cultural and economic upheaval. Because of the West's continued fascination with the region, it has become a popular destination for foreign trekkers and mountaineers. Much of Nepal's economy, especially in rural areas, has become dependent over the last half-century on an international tourism regime and the tour programs, guide companies, and expeditions that comprise it. Many Nepalis work in hospitality as shopkeepers and lodge-owners, but many of their more famous countrymen work as high-altitude guides and porters. As the country moves towards increasing modernization and connectivity with the rest of the planet, it has also become a significant recipient of foreign direct investment, humanitarian aid, and international development attention.

Over the past several months, I have examined the scope and operations of the Khumbu Climbing Center (KCC). Located in the village of Phortse, off the trekking path to Mt. Everest, the

KCC is a nonprofit project that seeks to provide affordable mountaineering training to Sherpa villagers to build technical competencies and improve high-mountain safety. Though managed from the United States and conceived by European and American guides, over a decade of operation the organization has taken on a distinctly Nepali flavor as more and more graduates of the program return as instructors. Many are now employed as guides and expedition managers in Nepal and around the world. The work of the KCC, understood against a greater historical, social, and economic backdrop, is having a disruptive effect both on traditional geographies of power in the Khumbu and on the international expedition mountaineering paradigm. Though it is too soon to render a final verdict, the social and economic implications of the Center's work are upending widely-held and preconceived notions of an elite sport and starting a global conversation around the ways in which the international community is implicated in, and responsible for finding solutions for, some of the region's most pressing humanitarian questions.

It is to these cultural encounters and exchanges – those between Nepalis and Westerners, guides and porters, Sherpas and non-Sherpas – that we will turn to in this investigation. Although communities in every corner of the globe have experienced the benefits and brutalities of globalization, the intrinsic conflict and contradictions in the imaginaries of the international expedition mountaineering paradigm demands our attention. The unseen and often unacknowledged interconnections between societies half a world apart and the framings of power and privilege have been some of the most acute and timely lessons of this course, and we will explore them here through a relational, care-ethical narrative. Tronto's criteria for gauging care-ethical outcomes – attentiveness, responsibility, competence and responsiveness – becomes particularly valuable here, but so too does Robinson's exploration of claims-making and policy-framing and Massey's analysis of geography, identity, and responsibility. Throughout this investigation I have woven these analytical approaches together to build a holistic appraisal of the KCC's work.

In order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the topic at hand, I will examine the existing body of scholarly literature that has been produced around issues of development in Nepal. I will then turn to the work of KCC and to what extent its interventions engage the larger social, political, and economic issues facing the Khumbu, as well as the consequences – both intended and unintended – that these interventions have on the people and places it serves. I will conclude with some general thoughts on the central themes of course and the ways in which I, though my research and beyond, continue to grow by posing these tough questions of both myself and my society.

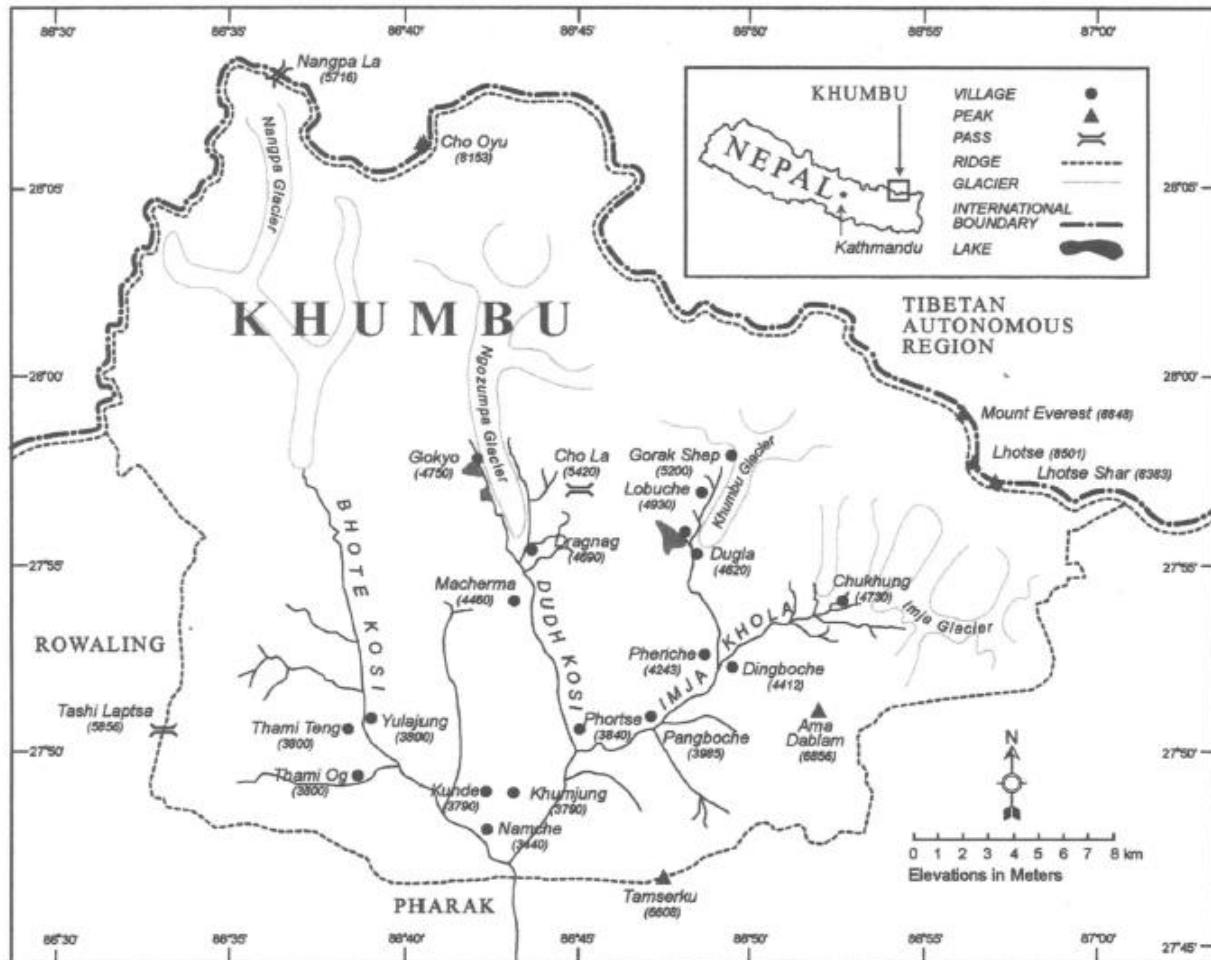


Figure 1 The Khumbu Region of Nepal. *Courtesy Byers 2005, 114*

The Literature: Place, People, Environment, and Economics

One of the most significant concepts presented in the course is the importance of relationality. Our analysis stresses the importance of critically examining spatial, historical, and cultural interconnections and unpacking the intersecting identities that have been created by them. Although I am able to draw substantial conclusions from both my background knowledge of expedition mountaineering and my contacts with the KCC, it is also valuable to consider the opinions and findings of other scholars and the scholarly corpus that has been articulated around international tourism and development throughout Nepal in general, and in the mountainous, well-visited Khumbu region in particular. The Khumbu is intimately shaped by its unique history and geography, and I will seek to uncover these interconnections and the impact they have on both residents and visitors.

Existing literature on the Himalaya encompasses a broad range of topics and tends to focus on one or more of several areas: background and demographics, ecology, international tourism, mountain economics, and development encounters. Analyses of these topics, either singly or in combination, tend to be complementary and self-reinforcing, and thus lend themselves well to a relational analysis. Taken together, they provide a variety of entry points into the discussions surrounding the past and future development and tourism regime in Nepal, and create a well-rounded – though uneven – portrait of the historical processes and contemporary interactions at work in the Khumbu. What follows is not so much a linear exploration as a narrative one.

Today, the Khumbu is home to approximately 3,500 inhabitants, mainly Sherpas, who live in eight major villages and more than 80 smaller settlements. They are believed to have migrated from eastern Tibet within the last 500 years, possibly as a result of political instability and an economic depression associated with the Little Ice Age cooling (Byers 2005, 115, Stevens 2003, 258). A local economy developed around local trade with the lowlands of Nepal and long-range

trade with Tibet. Salt and wool were transported on yaks over the Nangpa-La Pass in exchange for products like rice, sugar, cattle and yak butter from Nepal and India (Jefferies 1982, 275, Malville 2005, 423). While many Khumbu residents were traders, the majority were subsistence farmers who cultivated potatoes and buckwheat and raised yak and cattle (Stevens 1993, 411).

This arrangement persisted largely unchanged until the 1950s, when two significant events occurred. In 1959 the border between Tibet and Nepal was closed, leading to the abandonment of traditional trade networks (Jefferies 1982, 275, Stevens 1993, 411). In the same decade, Nepal opened its frontiers to foreign visitors, allowing in scientific and mountaineering expeditions after two centuries of isolation (Bjønnes 1983, 264). Nepal has drawn international mountaineers since 1950, individual tourists since 1956, tour groups since 1957, and trekkers since 1964. Many of these early trekkers were “counterculture travelers” attracted by the mysticism and esotericism of the East (Stevens 1993, 5, Zurick 1992, 613). Better access to the Khumbu itself dates to the building of the airstrip in the late 1960s at Lukla, a 30-45 minute plane ride from Kathmandu and one day's walk from the region (Pawson et al. 1984, 238-9). With the sudden spike in the number of tourists, the rural Nepalese economy shifted rapidly from subsistence farming and barter to cash-based transactional tourism and entrepreneurial enterprises (Bjønnes 1983, 264-7, Pawson et al. 1984, 237, Stevens 1993, 411-2).

With the shift away from trade, economic opportunities became marginal. In the 1950s many Sherpas migrated to Darjeeling in India, seeking training and work in trekking, portering, and on mountaineering expeditions. With their skill and ability to function at high altitude, they quickly established themselves as strong and reliable porters and guides, known as *sirdars* (Bjønnes 1983, 267, Hochachka et. al. 1996, 215). Thanks to the wealth generated in the early years few ethnic Sherpas continue to work as porters today; most are involved in running lodges and providing services to trekkers and mountaineers and are often in a position to hire porters

themselves (Malville 2005, 421-3, Stevens 1993, 414). In nearly all regions of Nepal except the Khumbu, portering work is instead done today mainly by tribesmen of Tibetan or Indo-Nepali origin including the Tamang and Duiyaa, who were historically forced to work as porters by the Kingdom of Nepal and British Raj (Malville 2005, 421-3). Portering and guiding in the Khumbu and throughout Eastern Nepal has generally been less coerced than elsewhere, due to a history of voluntary travel and trade. Though Nepali porters are famous around the world for their stamina and hardiness, perceptions of porters within Nepal range from embarrassment over the appearance of national poverty to acclaim for porters' ingenuity and resourcefulness (ibid.)

In addition to raising the general wealth of the Khumbu, the advent of the tourist trade in Nepal has had a number of significant economic consequences. The rise of international tourism has brought great prosperity to eastern Nepal, but this development has been highly uneven (Pawson et al. 1984, 244, Stevens 1993, 417, Zurick 1992, 612-3). Growth and employment opportunities have become concentrated in Kathmandu and in certain villages like the district capital of Namche Bazaar (home to the headquarters of Sagarmatha National Park), which by the 1980s boasted grocery stores stocking surplus expedition food and luxury items, numerous tea and beer shops, a bank, a telegraph office, and a dozen tourist lodges (Pawson et al. 1984, 244). These travel gateways tend to accumulate and concentrate great wealth, as tourists pass through them on their way to increasingly remote areas (Price 1993, 87, Zurick 1992, 625). By contrast, many rural villages off the beaten path have not seen any significant growth in decades (ibid.).

As a result of this uneven development, little of the wealth generated by tourism trickles down to ordinary Nepalese. In 1982, for instance, tourism in Nepal generated US\$50 million in revenues, but the country expended approximately US\$35 million on imported goods and services for the tourists, while the remaining US\$15 million went mainly to a small number of travel agencies, lodge owners, and individuals well-situated to profit from the infusion of outside money

(Karen and Mather 1895 94-5). Even in cases where local individuals profit, much of the revenue from trekking and mountaineering is not reinvested into further development. Instead, as Sherpa affluence rises, newfound wealth is expended in pursuit of the “Khumbu good life”: business, pilgrimage, or pleasure trips, private education, land purchases, wedding expenses, and status symbols like mountaineering gear (Price 1993, 90, Stevens 1993, 417, Zurick 1992, 615).

Likewise, the increase in the tourist trade has disrupted traditional social and cultural arrangements. The Sherpas' fame and reputation as outstanding mountaineers have given them easy access to mountaineering and trekking work, and the ready availability of good-paying trekking work in Khumbu and in other parts of Nepal has made it possible for virtually all adult men who are interested to obtain it (Stevens 1993, 414). Almost every household in Khumbu has at least one person involved in the trekking business, and many spend as much as ten months of the year away from home (Bjønnes 1983, 267). Numerous talented and ambitious Sherpas have left the region for work with trekking agencies in Kathmandu or have used trekking income to support themselves and sometimes their families for multiyear periods of residence in the capital. Some have migrated to the United States or to other countries in search of work (Stevens 1993, 425-6).

The greater spatial mobility provided by tourism employment has impacted family and gender roles. Men from the Khumbu involved in higher-paid, higher-status wage labor than their countrymen enjoy greater social and marital freedom compared to men from other regions in Nepal (Ortner 1989, 206). Services and industries that cater to tourists tend to be seasonal and migratory, decreasing the amount of work done by men in agriculture and forestry and for the benefit of neighbors and the community and altering household economy and family labor allocations (Stevens 1993, 420). Historically, few women have ever served as porters or *sirdars*, only recently have begun to gain employment as cooks or packstock drivers. In this way the advent of wage labor have exacerbated gender divisions of labor (Stevens 1993, 414). In the absence of

men demands on women increase, and seasonal workers are often hired to do the necessary tasks that would otherwise be left undone or local people would prefer not to do (Price 1993, 92).

On a regional scale, the tourist trade has had other major impacts on traditional geographies of environment and economy. Outside of power centers, villages must bear the indirect costs of tourism – like a rise in the prices of commodities like food, fuel, and other basic staples – even as they are denied its benefits (Stevens 1993, 418). Environmental degradation is commonly cited: the tremendous amounts of trash generated by hordes of backpackers and climbers, including the infamous dump at Everest's Base Camp which persistent efforts have been unable to clean up, is a particularly salient example (Karen and Mather 1895 94-5, Stevens 1993, 423). Likewise, numerous scholars (Bjønnes 1983, 264, Byers 2005, 113, Fürer-Haimendorf 1975, 97-8, Hinrichsen et al. 1983, 204, Jefferies 1982, 274, Karan and Mater 1985, 93, Pawson et al. 1984, 242, Stevens 2003, 255-7) has ascribed great significance to apparent deforestation in the region, though exactly what this significance is varies widely. Though construction of tourist infrastructure is widely believed to have played a contributing role, of equal or greater importance was the nationalization of the Khumbu's forests and the loss of traditional management institutions in the 1950s and 1960s (Bjønnes 1983, 267, Jefferies 1982, 275, Thompson and Warburton 1985, 205).

A number of solutions have been proposed to address some of these pressing challenges posed by development. The Nepalese system – one that relies on the importation of goods, the use of local natural resources, and the formation of new social and economic arrangements – is clearly seen as untenable (Zurick 1992, 618), so in its place sustainable solutions must be found. To alleviate environmental concerns, it is seen as important for local people to gain a stake in conservation outcomes (Basnet 1992, 393), for traditional institutions to be reinstated (Pawson et al. 1984, 242), and for local activism to be fostered (Stevens 1993, 424). Likewise, investment in solar and hydroelectric project is widely seen as a means of combating deforestation (Basnet 1992,

393, Pawson et al. 1984, 242, Smith 1981, 5, Stevens 1993, 429), as is the requirement that all visitors to the region pack in their own fuel (Karan and Mather 1985, 94, Pawson et al. 1984, 242).

To solve poverty problems, it has been suggested that revenue from park fees be diverted to fund infrastructure like schools, roads, and cottage industries (Basnet 1992, 393). Education in particular is seen as significant, and interventions such as Nepalese government and Sir Edmund Hillary's Himalayan Trust are credited with increasing access to schooling (Jeffries 1982, 281, Stevens 1993, 410). With the help of tourism earnings and philanthropic scholarships, many children leave the Khumbu for schooling, often following a government-created curriculum in English. While this may prepare young Nepalis well for a life in the tourism industry, the loss of traditional knowledge and educational systems is alarming to many villagers (Stevens 1993, 425).

Though existing scholarly works provide a fairly comprehensive portrait of the Khumbu's history, the methodological approaches of the works I examined tended to be uneven. I was struck by the ambitiously broad scope of the majority of the articles. Some focused heavily on single topics, like deforestation, and subsequently provided contextual and historical evidence to support their findings. Others tried to present an overall picture of regional development by covering many topics, only later zeroing in on one or more issues. The results were a mixed bag, but illustrated an interesting dilemma. Do scholars cast a wide net to broaden their outlook and risk losing depth, or do they focus exhaustively on one or several areas and risk losing breadth?

The value of broad, relational approaches rapidly became evident. Narrowly-focused environmental articles tended to be the worst culprits; idiosyncratic readings of regional and development histories led to a wide range of findings and lack of scholarly consensus. Articles that sought to present a broad historical background tended to be much more useful to my research and to gaining an overall understanding. Though they may not have delved comprehensively into every topic they mentioned, they provided myriad entry points and valuable references for further study.

In this way, I too have attempted to build an overarching narrative of the life and times of the Khumbu. Though my brief review is far from comprehensive, it nevertheless is revealing of a number of topics that will become important as I conduct a care-ethical analysis of the work of the KCC. The story I have assembled illustrates the complex interactions between the West and Nepal, and the ways in which foreign travel and interventions have disrupted or reinforced traditional landscapes of power and privilege. The environmental, health, and development outcomes that we see in the Khumbu today did not occur in a vacuum; they are very much a product of historical and contemporary hierarchical relationships between men and women, Sherpas and non-Sherpas, locals and foreigners. In this way, dominant groups – unconsciously or deliberately – are able to claim tradition, cite expertise, and profuse inevitability in order to shape society and economy to their own ends.

The Khumbu Climbing Center: Origins, Work, and Impact

Now that we have gained a basic understanding of the complex landscape of development in Nepal, we can situate the Khumbu Climbing Center within it. As well as exploring the KCC website and associated media, I interviewed Steve Mock, Co-Director of KCC in the United States. Steve has an impressive mountaineering and exploration resume spanning nearly three decades, including first ascents in the Alaska Range and a transect of Iceland. Between trips, he is a Professor of Chemistry at the University of Montana and resides in Dillon, where I reached him via email. He has taught as an instructor at the KCC since 2008 and is well-acquainted with the organization's mission and history. His comments are synthesized in this section.

The origins of the KCC date back to 1999, the year the world-renowned mountaineer Alex Lowe was killed in an avalanche while climbing in Nepal. His wife, Jennifer Lowe (later Lowe-Anker), and climbing partner, Conrad Anker, founded the Alex Lowe Charitable Foundation in his

memory for the purpose of “providing direction and financial support to sustainable, community-based humanitarian programs designed to help the people who live in remote regions of the world.” To this end, the ALCF has supported a number of programs in Central Asia, but its most ambitious project to date has been the KCC (ALCF, 2014).

In 2003, the KCC was founded “to increase the safety margin of Nepali climbers and high altitude workers by encouraging responsible climbing practices in a supportive and community-based program” (ALCF, 2014). Broadly stated, the purpose of the KCC is to provide technical mountaineering training to Nepalis, so that those employed as high-altitude guides and porters can operate more safely. However, just as we examined the trends in Nepalese tourism, the work of the KCC should be understood within the international expedition mountaineering paradigm. Though the 600 foreign mountaineers that travel to the Khumbu each year comprise less than 3% of the total tourists to the region, the implicit and explicit structural features of expedition mountaineering presents a unique set of conundrums that deserve further background and attention (Byers 2005, 115, Smith 1981, 4, Stevens 2003, 259).

Any type of climbing is an expensive pursuit, but the cost for expedition-style mountaineering in the Himalayas is astronomical. American, European and increasingly Asian clients routinely pay tens of thousands of dollars for the chance to summit some of the world’s highest peaks. Expeditions are generally led by highly-trained guides, most of whom are American or European, or organized by local cut-rate outfitters that promise to deliver successful summits for a bargain. Both clients and guides are accompanied, often in a ratio of 1:1 or greater, by Sherpa high-altitude porters. These men (as we have seen previously, participation of women in high-altitude work is nearly nonexistent) do much of the hard work to ensure the success of their expedition, including carrying gear and cooking meals. They are also often called upon to do more hazardous tasks, like setting fixed lines and participating in high-mountain rescues.

Though the life of a mountaineering guide might be glamorous, it is not an easy one. Though they are generally well-paid, guides' expenses also tend to be high. To pay for gear, insurance, and other expenses they must work constantly, taking positions on expeditions or as outdoor educators when and where they can. All professional guides spend a lifetime training technically and physically, and many spend up to a decade and \$50,000 to be certified by the International Federation of Mountain Guides Associations (IFMGA) as a professional guide. Because of the high costs of becoming and staying a professional guide, many live extremely frugal lives back in the United States, living out of cars and shared condos during the few weeks they spend back home in the States every year.

Though the life of a guide is economically unenviable (though most do not seem to mind), the financial situation of Nepali is more precarious than those of their wealthier employers. Compensation for porters and other employees is marginal, with annual wages for Nepalese high-altitude workers averaging \$7,000 per year. While very low by the standards of more developed countries, this amount is much higher than the average per-capita income in Nepal of \$1,100. Hospitality work in the Khumbu, especially high-altitude work, is highly-paid and highly sought-after. Many Nepalis take such work very seriously, as supporting foreign tourists and outfitters ensures financial security for them and their families.

Though profitable, high-altitude work of any kind is extremely dangerous. Both guides and porters face constant physical danger, and many die on the tallest peaks in the world every year. Though personal experience and advanced training, guides are generally able to manage risk effectively in the mountains to keep their parties safe. Though high-altitude Nepali workers they might have experience, they almost always lack the means, opportunities, or requirements to receive the same technical training as their Western counterparts. This lack of formal training has been demonstrated to have dangerous, even fatal consequences.

Using Mt. Everest as a case study, Firth et al. confirmed previous reports that more foreign climbers died than Sherpas overall on the mountain, but that these raw data had to be disaggregated. Upon further inspection, the team found that foreign climbers tended to die of illnesses and injuries (HAPE, HACE, fatigue and exposure being particularly deadly), while Sherpas tended to be killed by objective hazards (avalanches, rockfall, and other natural occurrences). Almost twice as many Sherpas (1.18 vs. 0.54) died per incident involving objective hazards than foreign climbers. The greater number of deaths per incident were attributed the greater amount of time spent by Sherpas transporting equipment through dangerous areas, or otherwise carrying out hazardous tasks in exposed places (2008, 1432). Another explanation, much more salient for our analysis, is that Nepalis must perform many of the same hazardous tasks under the same conditions as their European and American counterparts, but often with far less training. As a result of this wide disparity in formal preparation, they suffer proportionally worse health outcomes: fully one-third of those who die every year in the Khumbu are Sherpas.

Because of the deep dependence on portering revenue, the incapacitation or death of a (male) breadwinner generally proves catastrophic to families and even entire villages. The need for more training to obviate risk was recognized early, and a school of sorts developed at Darjeeling during the 1950s to train and equip members of British expeditions. But as the Golden Age of Mountaineering ended the expedition mountaineering regime began more and more to mirror neoliberal shifts that were manifesting themselves around the globe: national governments abdicated the planning and execution of expeditions to private firms and outfitters who could lead wealthy climbers to the summit for a price. As these nationalized interventions ended, training opportunities became scarce. The KCC was the first significant program of its kind to be established in decades and was the first to be overseen and funded by an NGO rather than a government, mirroring trends in care interventions elsewhere.

Through its outreach and education efforts, KCC seeks to provide mountaineering training to Nepali villagers that is both relevant and affordable. These courses, derived from IFMGA standards for guide certification, are a mix of classroom and practical instruction, and cover not only subjects like mountaineering, ropework, and recognition of objective hazards, but also more general skills like organizational planning and expedition management. This training package is provided for a fee of Rs 2500 (about \$25.21), and includes food and insurance. All participants must be Nepali citizens and have a referral from a trekking or guiding company. Personal climbing gear is required, but can be rented from KCC's gear library for an additional Rs 2000 (\$20.17) (ALCF 2014). At the end of course, each graduate is presented a certificate of completion in a festive ceremony. Since 2003 one course accommodating about 80 students has been offered yearly, usually in late January. Over the last decade some 800 Nepalis have been served by the program, and now work throughout Nepal and around the world (ibid., Wilkinson 2013).

The programs of the KCC are made possible through a mix of private donations, corporate sponsorships, and Foundation support. Although relatively small, the KCC maintains a number of assets in-country. In addition to its modest headquarters in Bozeman, the Center rents a small office in Kathmandu, and is in the process of building a common house in Phortse. This building was designed in 2009 by engineering students at Montana State University to use locally-sourced, sustainable materials. Currently being built by locals on land donated by locals, it will eventually house a clinic, library, and KCC's "field office." In the village itself, the KCC maintains a library of mountaineering gear which was variously bought and donated by various outdoor outfitters. Travel expenses for foreign instructors are paid for by the Foundation, who volunteer their time while in-country. Donations and financial support allow Nepali participants to participate in the program at little cost to themselves.

Although the KCC was originally envisioned as just a yearly seminar, Steve told me that it

has since grown to become much more than that. The inaugural class in 2003 consisted of just 34 participants, and Anker and Lowe-Anker were unsure if the program would catch on. It did in a powerful way, so much so that the Center must turn away applicants every year. Attendees come from all over the Everest region and beyond to take part in the program, attracted generally through word-of-mouth. Likewise, the idea of the Center hit a chord in the international mountaineering community, and the program has received worldwide interest and publicity. Many notable alpinists have voiced their support for KCC or served as instructors, and the organization was recently hailed in National Geographic for its ingenuity in addressing some of the region's most pressing social needs (ALCF 2014, Wilkinson 2013).

Steve believes that the organic nature of the KCC is what has allowed it to prosper during the last decade. The most important resources, he tells me, are not the KCC's gear or buildings but the people that work with and support the organization. The backing of the international community enabled the launch of the program, and local support and interest is what has sustained it. The village has been very receptive to the presence of the KCC, as locals view it as a way to further their careers by making them not only safer but more employable. Most importantly, more and more Nepali graduates of the program are returning as administrators and instructors. 26 Nepali graduates are now qualified to teach their countrymen, including some of the first IFMGA-certified guides from any Himalayan country (Nepal's national climbing association was admitted to the IFMGA in 2012, and there are now 31 certified Nepali guides). Nepali instructors now outnumber foreign guides three-to-one, and in recent years the program has taken on a distinctly Nepali flavor and is on the verge of becoming completely self-sustaining at the local level.

Despite the successes of the KCC so far, there remains a high potential for growth and expansion that the KCC is not yet ready to meet. As with so many NGOs and nonprofits, the lack of steady funding sources limits its potential impact. Its common house in Phortse remains

incomplete even after five years, mostly due to lack of funds. Likewise, the number of participants in each year's course is limited by budgetary constraints and hampered by the highly seasonal availability of both participants and instructors, who are generally employed elsewhere during the spring and summer. The region's climate and subsequent difficulties in travelling makes running courses outside of a narrow window during the winter almost impossible.

The Obscuring and Transformative Power of Paradigms

Over the course of the past decade, the KCC has been a highly successful NGO by all accounts. Hundreds of Sherpas and other Nepalis have graduated from its training programs, and it has attracted widespread international interest and support for its mission. By providing this training, the KCC is opening up new pathways for employment and advancement that would have been otherwise unavailable. Many Nepalis have achieved great success as guides in their own right thanks to the expertise they gained through the KCC. Graduates of the KCC continue to rise to new challenges and new heights, both in Nepal and around the world. The popularity of the program among Nepalis, and the fact that graduates are returning to support it, speaks volumes about the ways in which this program has touched their lives and inspired them to pay it forward.

By viewing the experience of the KCC through the lens of the Khumbu's history, it is evident that the organization exists firmly within the context of the expedition mountaineering paradigm. What we have not explored, however, is the dialogue between the KCC and the greater environment of development, politics, society, and economics within which it is situated. Though the KCC has been unquestionably *shaped* by its relationship with its environment, the real question for the KCC, and the one that should be posed of any nonprofit, is how it is actively involved in *shaping* its environment. We have seen glimpses of how it does so, but now we can bring our care ethical analysis full circle to reveal both the explicit and implicit impacts of the KCC's work.

Outwardly, the KCC seems to provide a credible challenge to the power relationships and hierarchies inherent in the expedition mountaineering regime. Just as there is a clear divide between guides and clients, there seems to be a growing recognition that there is an equal, if not greater, divide between these foreign visitors and the locals that have made expeditions possible for the last half-century. This hierarchy was created as a result of colonial encounters between unequals, but has been maintained because the inaccessibility of advanced training to Nepalis has limited their ability to achieve financial and status parity with the Western counterparts. The fact that they have given their livelihoods and often their lives to support some of the greatest human triumphs of our time is a story that has largely been forgotten.

This growing recognition of need – and subsequent response to it – is unquestionably positive from a relational, care-ethical standpoint. However, the conclusions here are superficial because they engage solely with well-known tropes and histories, rather than profoundly confront the ways in which these histories are perpetuated today. The fact that the entire expedition mountaineering regime is a purely Western normative construction is often overlooked; the Khumbu (and in fact nearly all high-altitude regions around the world) entirely lacks any indigenous notion of sport climbing. It has been suggested that many Sherpas in fact view high-altitude work as inherently distasteful or even profane since incursions into sacred areas is antithetical to their Buddhist cosmology; the Western preoccupation with reaching the summit has thus created a clear religio-philosophical divide between locals and foreigners. Even famous mountaineers have climbed without permission, causing alarm and resentment in the local villages (Bjønnes 1986, 298, Pawson et. al. 1984, 246). While KCC participants might be more bemused than offended by the strange preoccupations of foreigners, the donors to the KCC who hoped that Nepalis would gain a greater appreciation of alpinism for its own sake or think of climbing as fun are sure to be disappointed. Instead, it is seen solely as a tool for improving employment prospects

and gaining vocational skills. High-altitude and hospitality work, after all, is really the only viable economic option in an economy where labor has been commodified and socio-political interactions made transactional. This shift is consequential to the Khumbu's incorporation into a global network of power, and the ways in which it has been made peripheral within it.

While the KCC's goal of increasing safety is important, perhaps more significant is that its training ultimately seeks to improve the employability of its graduates. The emphasis on creating guides, or at least guides-in-training, prepares graduates to assume of the most prestigious positions on the mountain. This sustained and focused effort to empower a small number of Nepalis for this purpose has been a major reason why the KCC has received so much attention. This work may be admirable and is unquestionably beneficial to some, but this process generates unforeseen and unintended repercussions that extend far beyond Phortse or even the Khumbu.

The vocational focus of the KCC's training has a number of possible social and economic ramifications. The KCC's effort towards creating guides bestows knowledge and privilege on a select few, instantly transforming them into an elite class that is a tier above their non-trained Sherpa neighbors, and at least several tiers above of other Nepalis who lack the Sherpas' international reputation and history of uncoerced wage labor. These less-fortunate workers become comparatively less employable, and may be relegated to more intensive or dangerous care work as a result of their lower status. If all of those who voluntarily serve as cooks and porters go on to become guides, this begs the question of who, if anyone, will voluntarily take their place. The expedition mountaineering paradigm has been traditionally unconcerned with these dilemmas, and similarly leaves unquestioned traditional patriarchal systems and the disruptive effects that comparatively greater mobility and income have on traditional education systems, existing social structures, and the environment. The KCC has largely remained silent on these issues, preferring to toe the line of the community that supports it. The organization has indeed transformed the

Khumbu's economic and health hierarchies, though certainly not in the ways it had foreseen.

In a sense, the fact that the KCC works to reform the expedition mountaineering paradigm is indicative on an implicit acceptance of its authority to determine health and economic outcomes. The KCC does not question the paradigm itself; the expeditions its instructors and graduates will take part in after they leave the program will still be part of a rigid, hierarchical institution where guides, clients, and support staff each enjoy certain responsibilities and privileges according to their categorization. The KCC simply seeks to position its selected beneficiaries in a higher category within the existent hierarchy, so that they may transcend the epistemic violence perpetuated by the epithet of 'Sherpa.' Unspecified others will doubtlessly fill the lower rungs on their departure. While many of its supporters are undoubtedly genuine in their concern for Sherpa wellbeing, the KCC continues to remain in the climbing community's good graces because their work seems to merely bend the rules of the established order, rather than break it down altogether.

Despite this, and with more than a little irony, the KCC's work actually can and should be considered a threat to the established paradigm. For the past sixty years foreign insiders have maintained a monopoly on skill and legitimacy, but as Nepali guides and outfitters gain technical and organizational parity the carefully-constructed, artificial binary between Westerners and Nepalis is increasingly thrown into sharp relief. It has proved far more convenient for the international community to blame their regime's flaws on the abusive policies of the Raj, the excesses of the early expeditions, and Nepal's corrupt government than to indict itself for perpetuating it to this day. The complex absurdity of the Khumbu's care cycle – foreign guides are flown in from around the globe to care for clients and teach Sherpas, clients are cared for by guides and Sherpas, Sherpas care for everyone – reflects historical precedent but actively obscures collective accountability for maintaining the institutions that grant it determinative power. Each guide and outfitter simply becomes seen as an autonomous, skilled, and expert node within a

temporal network, rather than an active participant in a radically interconnected spatial one.

It is this arrogance of privilege that allows the international mountaineering community to absolve itself of responsibility for perpetuating inequities (and thus being responsible for solutions), while retaining control of the enormous profits from tourism and even monopolizing human achievement itself. To define the imaginary of care in the Khumbu otherwise would raise painful questions that the community would rather not confront. As Tronto so presciently points out, “such an admission would undermine the legitimacy of the unequal distribution of power, resources, and privilege of which [majority society members] are beneficiaries” (1993, 111). Though the work of the KCC may be considered an atonement of sorts for historical injustices, it is more likely accepted because its impact is ultimately seen as too insignificant to upset the balance of power but a poster child for progress that can be loudly trumpeted. But the KCC is becoming much more than a poster child; after ten years of operation it is clear that the KCC is not going away, and that the number of its graduates will only continue to grow. The climbing community is rapidly approaching a day of reckoning where its stark privilege and ongoing complicity in the reproduction of inequality cannot be concealed any longer from this new paradigm.

While we can speculate on the broader impacts of the KCC, its actual achievements towards its stated goals remain largely unknown. The valuable feedback provided by employees, instructors, and graduates is taken into account when planning future programs; however, all the insights gained are ‘soft’ since no specific metrics for measuring and quantifying program success currently exist, and feedback is only gathered informally. In the beginning, the KCC simply sought to test the viability of its concept against the rigors of the real world. Now that the organization is maturing and has a proven track record of qualitative success, it might be valuable for the organization to develop quantitative measures. Steve acknowledged that the KCC has little data on how effective they were at making Nepalis safer as they work in the high mountains and making

them more employable at higher wages, but that they were interested in obtaining this information. “If you're looking for a good research project, that one would be quite useful to us,” he wrote. I might just take him up on the offer (Steve Mock, email message to author, March 2).

By stepping off the beaten path, the KCC has become something of a maverick within the paradigm of expedition mountaineering. While intended solely to improve health and economic outcomes, its work is profoundly altering existent local geographies of power in the Khumbu. At the same time, it is supported by the international mountaineering community because it appears progressive while remaining static, while in reality it is undermining, quite subversively and most likely unintentionally, the very fabric of privilege that holds the paradigm together. I imagine Khumbu residents, the KCC, and the international climbing community are only dimly aware of the destabilizing and revealing paradigm shift that is taking place, with unpredictable end results. It is only through a profound, comprehensive, relational, and care-ethical analysis that its potential impacts can be revealed and its seemingly inscrutable linkages uncovered. And it is perhaps only from thousands of miles away, sitting in front of a computer with a stack of books and articles, that the process by which it does so can be both appreciated and speculated upon.

Conclusion

Throughout the course of this essay, we have gone on a whirlwind tour of development processes in Nepal and how it relates to the work of the Khumbu Climbing Center. Through an analysis that not only looks to care ethics but also considers powerful imaginaries that shape perceptions of geography, identity, and responsibility, we have revealed a rich history of idiosyncrasies, uneven development and intersections of poverty, care, power, and privilege. We have seen that these structural geographies of power impose constraints both on the individuals and societies affected by their existing and evolving paradigms – in ways both explicit and

implicit – and on what interventions might be appropriate or necessary to engage them.

Researching the KCC through a relational and care-ethical framework has forced me to look deeper and articulate where I personally stand on the issues and questions that matter to me. The social and economic questions surrounding the international expedition mountaineering paradigm interest me as a scholar, but as a mountaineer and a Westerner I am intimately connected to the people, places, and processes I write about. My reactions as an individual are informed by a multifaceted set of responsibilities that I cannot separate. Confronting these challenges is not only thought-provoking but essential to understanding how I am personally implicated both in the reproduction of inequalities and the formulation of methods by which they might be addressed.

In a sense, my exploration has forced me to go beyond a relational, care-ethical stance to a care activist one. It is not enough that I examine relationships and intersections and challenge prevailing discourses; instead I must actively seek out ways I can make a difference. Good intentions are necessary but not sufficient to fight for change on a global scale. Instead, it is earnest introspection that will ultimately make this possible. Though cursory, my foray into studying development in Nepal has revealed deficiencies in literature, in perceptions, and in interventions. Each of these areas is an opportunity to have my voice heard, in concert with many other people calling for a more peaceful, thoughtful, and careful global society. Only by acknowledging one's own place in a world of interconnections, and our relationality to many others, can we discover together some way forward. Only by gaining a comprehensive understanding of people and places can we begin to inaugurate a cross-cultural dialogue and begin to mobilize our respective privileges – cultural, educational, technological, and monetary – for our collective liberation. This course, and the one that preceded it, have given me the tools to view the most pressing challenges facing our society not as impediments but as opportunities for growth, discovery, and action.

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