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### **Hotels as Sites of Power: Tourism, Status and Politics In the Himalaya**

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## **Hotels as Sites of Power: Tourism, Status and Politics In the Himalaya**

The first day of the Water-Horse year in the Tibetan calendar started early for Langtang villagers. While the newly-installed prayer flags were still fluttering noisily in the chilling easterly wind, sending prayers to the gods dwelling high up in the mountain passes, Tashi and his family collected a pail of water from the main village water source, and, together with the bread the family had made the previous night, made their offerings to the gods for their continual protection. Like many of the new breed of Langtang hotel entrepreneurs, Tashi had a humble beginning. His ancestors, belonging to the Shyangpa clan, were among the first settlers in the village. As a boy, apart helping out in cultivating the family land, he occasionally worked as a porter and a cook for trekking groups visiting the Langtang region. In the early 1990s, he started a small teashop on the piece of land he had inherited from his father after his marriage. Luck was with him, for that piece of land was situated along the main dirt path that runs through the village, and his little teashop prospered. In 1995, the teashop underwent extensive renovation and was transformed into a proper hotel with a dining room and sleeping quarters. In 1999, Tashi continued the expansion of his hotel business by renting the government-owned 'Riverside Hotel' at Gumnachok, two to three hours walk down the valley.

On this cold morning on the first day of Losar, Tashi felt especially blessed, for he had just opened his third and grandest hotel, his second in Langtang village. This was why one of the important things he had to do in the morning was to erect a new prayer pole (Tib. *rlung rta*) adorned with the five-coloured prayer flags in the grounds of his newly opened lodge. A lama had been invited to conduct the *Lha Sāng* (Tib. *lha bsangs*) ceremony, Langtang's most popular ritual, to pray to the gods for a long life, good health and material prosperity for Tashi

and his family. While the priest was chanting, at certain prescribed moments Tashi and his second son would venture outside the hotel to throw offerings over its roof to the gods, shouting ‘*Che Buloh!* Please accept our offerings!’

At around lunchtime, I was invited to Tashi’s first hotel located in the middle of the village. When I arrived, he was sitting at one end of the dining room, directly across from the door through which guests entered. Tashi was in his finest *chuba* in the style of a chieftain, worn only for special occasions such as this. He did not get up to receive any of his guests, but remained seated with a benign smile while exchanging greetings with the guests. He would then majestically wave the guests to take up their seats behind the long tables to the two sides of him. Once seated, Tashi’s wife served me some Tibetan butter tea and a plate full of snacks. While we ate and bantered, more guests continued to arrive, greeted Tashi, and were then directed to their places. The people present were Tashi’s brothers, the helpers and cooks in his hotels, and a few other close friends. All the guests—except for his eldest brother, who had a comparatively modest lodge adjacent to Tashi’s—were non-hotel owners, and all were less wealthy than Tashi. After a couple of hours of eating and drinking, guests started to sing and dance in the middle of the dining room. Tashi did not participate, but cheered the people on. Sitting in his hotel, the apparently unassuming and soft-spoken Tashi whom I had previously known, was now transformed into someone who projected an image of authority.

## **Hotels in Nepal Himalaya**

This paper is about the cultural significance of hotels in the Nepal Himalaya. Tourism literature in general tends to treat hotels as sociologically and culturally unproblematic, while the few studies that treat hotels as social organizations in their own right mainly deal with the themes of social control and micro-level interactions between the hosts and guests (Wood 1993: 66-67; Belisle 1981; Stringer 1981). So far, the significance of the hotel in other social and cultural domains, apart from the immediate context of the tourism industry, has not been adequately explored. Similarly, researchers working in mountain tourism areas of Nepal have largely considered hotels primarily as a purely economic phenomenon in the discussion of tourism's impact on local communities (e.g. Fisher 1990; Brower 1991; Stevens 1993). I will show here, however, that a hotel is more than just an economic activity: it is a materiality through which the development ideology that currently pervades Nepal gets embedded into the everyday life of peoples intimately engaged in the tourism. Through a socio-semiotic approach, I show the hotels that have arisen from Nepal's contemporary effort at national development have acquired social and political significance, and should be taken seriously by researchers as sites that are salient to status and power contestations as well as being deeply implicated in the practice of identity formation.

Because communities practising various forms of Tibetan Buddhism inhabit large parts of Nepal's trekking areas, many of the socio-cultural research projects conducted in these communities involve discussion of Buddhism and its attendant religious institutions. In particular, these studies have noted the socially and politically significant role which monasteries and temples play in these communities (e.g. Ortner 1992, 1999; Clarke 1980, 1983,

1991; Adams 1996). For example, Sherry Ortner's *High Religion* shows how the development of Sherpa Buddhism and temple founding were intimately related to violent, strongman politics, especially to fraternal rivalry. A historical study of the Sherpa temple founding reveals to us the relationship between Sherpa's cultural conception of status and the issues of political legitimacy. In *Life and Death on Mount Everest*, her most recent book on Sherpas' engagement with mountaineering and tourism, Ortner notes that 'from a broader perspective, [the monasteries and temples] have done their work in injecting a higher Buddhism into Sherpa religious life, and have now moved into a somewhat more marginal position in the Sherpa community' (1999: 268). Unfortunately Ortner does not go on to say what might have gained prominence relative to the monasteries.

Clarke's (1980) historical study of the so-called 'temple-villages' in the Helambu region north of Kathmandu has shown that the ties between households through the village temple constitute a key principle upon which the Yolmo's political, religious and social lives are based. Clarke further discusses the ways in which the fission of priestly lineages had historically contributed to the founding of new villages in different locales, as settlements formed around the newly established temples. In recent years, however, while the temple in Helambu still remains as the spiritual centre of the village, it has lost its political significance. In a recent in-depth study of the Yolmo, a community which, like the Sherpa, is also very much exposed to trekking tourism and developmental projects, Desjarlais comments that: 'Yolmo villages are no longer "temple-villages" but rather villages with, or without temples...The ostensive political authority once wielded by the lamas has been usurped by secular politicians' (1994 [1992]: 58-9). As a site that is reflective of particular values, and with its current role as the main

structuring agency of socio-economic relations within Himalayan communities exposed to tourism, I show that the hotel has become a locus of status valuation and power contestation, and therefore constitutes an important arena in local political processes.

My analysis below is both historical and synchronic, adopting in particular a socio-semiotic method. Socio-semiotics takes the epistemological position that both the artificially-produced material objects (in our case, the hotels) and our understanding of them ‘derives from codified ideologies that are aspects of social practices and their socialization processes’ (Gottdeiner 1995:26). Socio-semiotics is a field that has developed through the work of semioticians such as Umberto Eco, as well as scholars of the New Archaeology movement (e.g. Tilley 1999) and anthropologists conducting research into material culture (e.g. Douglas 1992; Miller 1987; Keane 2001). Socio-semiotics sees the conception of meaning not as an infinite free play of signifiers, but as emerging from the relationship between the production of knowledge and the power relationships which delimit the operation of signification. In other words, it does not view the signifying process in a cultural vacuum, but seeks to establish the links between sign production and consumption, on the one hand, and socio-historical processes of economics and politics, on the other. Or, as Mary Douglas (1992:7) argues, the interpretation of the meanings of objects necessarily involves the context of persons. Therefore, for us to interpret the social and cultural meanings of hotels, we have to account for the production of their specific material forms and the social interactions therein, and link these to their instrumental functions as embedded within the multitudinous social contexts of knowledge production.

## The Setting

The Langtang Village Development Committee (N. *gāũ bikās samiti*) is located in the Langtang valley just inside Nepal's border with Tibet. The valley stretches in an east-west orientation for about twenty-two miles, carved out by the westward flow of the Langtang Khola that originates from the glaciers of Langshisa. Geologically, this region falls within the Inner Himalaya, while climatically it is in the transitional zone between the southern monsoon region and the arid deserts of the Tibetan plateau. The Langtang valley itself encompasses several ecological zones, from the relatively fertile sub-tropical forests at the western entrance of the valley, to the rocky, wind-swept stretches of Himalayan pasture that support herds of bovines and sheep belonging mainly to the valley's inhabitants. At the town of Syabru Bengsi, about a day's walk from the Tibetan border, the valley intersects with an important trade route that has for centuries linked southern Tibet with central Nepal and the Indian subcontinent. Even to this day, just before the Nepalese national festival of Dasain in October, flocks of Tibetan sheep travel along this mountain route to Syabru Bengsi to be transported further on to the rest of Nepal.

At the time of my fieldwork, the Langtang village encompassed four hamlets with around 540 inhabitants divided into at least sixteen named, patrilineal, exogamous clans, living in 109 households. The majority of villagers trace their ancestry to Kyirong in southern Tibet, and local legend tells of the discovery of the sacred valley by a bull escaping slaughter. 'Langtang' (*'glang phrang*) in Tibetan means 'bull's passage' (see also Lim 2004; Ehrhard 1997). Langtang people refer to themselves as 'Langtanga', and despite speaking a Tibetan dialect, they have been classified in state census as 'Tamang'. According to some villagers, this was



the result of a misunderstanding between the government officials conducting the census in the early 1970s and the village headman of that time: the officials could not speak the local language, but some of them and the headman managed to converse in Tamang, a Tibeto-Burman language widely used in Rasuwa district but not mutually intelligible with the Tibetan spoken by Langtanga. Since then, the identity cards of the villagers identify them as ‘Tamang’. Some other villagers explain that if they do not identify themselves as Tamang, then they would have great difficulty getting the Nepalese citizenship card. What my informants have told me seems to accord with the observation of Tom Cox (1989: 16) in his earlier study of Langtang village, that Langtanga presented themselves as Tamang to government officials so as to be considered as well-integrated citizens, ‘and avoid being disparaged as “squatters from Tibet”’. These days, many Langtang villagers identify themselves as ‘Tamang’ or ‘Sherpa’ or ‘Tibetan’ depending on whether they are dealing with government officials or tourists. How Langtang villagers see the situation is perhaps best summarised by what a friend said to me, ‘We are officially Tamang, but we are actually Tibetan.’<sup>1</sup>

Before the 1960s, the daily affairs of Langtang village were subjected to minimal intervention by the central government in Kathmandu, except for taxation and in times of war. That state of affairs began to change after the isolationist Rana regime was deposed and Nepal embarked on an overall policy of socio-economic development. In 1961, Nepal underwent a major re-organisation for administrative purposes when the whole country was divided into fourteen

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<sup>1</sup> Some scholars have dealt in great detail the complicated issue of Tamang identity. While Macdonald (1989) and Levine (1987) basically share the idea that ‘Tamang’ is an invented label of state administration and of researchers for heuristic purposes, others such as Holmberg (1989) see the Tamang as taking on a ‘tribal character’ in the form of restricted exchange between exogamous clans in the context of state expansion. Ben Campbell (1997) gives an account of the emergence of Tamang identity in terms of their historical role as semi-captive labourers who carry loads for the Nepalese rulers in their trade with Tibet. He also notes that in the Tamang village where he worked, the salient local categories are Ghale and Tamang, even though to an outsider, institutional frame they are both considered ‘Tamang’ on linguistic grounds.

zones (N. *añcal*) and 75 districts (N. *jillā*). Langtang's relative isolation came to an end towards the end of 1963, when the new 'Panchayat' system heralded a period of intensive development that was underwritten almost wholly by foreign aid, witnessing a burgeoning of government administrative capacity. The construction of new schools and roads went hand-in-hand with the expansion of the civil service and a growing number of health workers and teachers<sup>2</sup>. In 1970, the Rasuwa District Headquarters, which had been located at Trisuli, some five days walk from Langtang village, was moved to the present location at Dhunche, a mere two days walk away. With this relocation of the district headquarters, Langtang village began to receive more visits from government officials, and with the panchayat system, villagers could express their demands—for example, for development funds—directly to the district through their village headman, the *pradhān pancha*, who sat on the district council (cf. Cox 1989: 15). By 1973, the incorporation of Langtang into the Nepalese state was more or less complete, when the government established a primary school and police station in the village, as well as an army camp on the village outskirts in the light of the gazetting of Langtang National Park.

## Tourism for Development

In the 1950s and 1960s, while the Nepalese government was taking the first steps towards its eventual entanglement with the project of development, or *bikās*, an increasing number of foreign visitors began to arrive in the country. As the legitimacy of the so-called 'Panchayat' regime at that time was based to a large degree on the promises of bringing *bikās* to Nepal (see

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<sup>2</sup> For a critical assessment of Nepal's developmental effort in this period, see e.g. Macfarlane (1994) and Blaike et al. (1980).

e.g. Pigg 1992; Pfaff-Czarnecka 1997), the increasingly lofty public rhetoric and spiralling number of developmental projects went hand-in-hand with the country's growing dependency on foreign grants, loans, and expertise. With the assistance of foreign aid, in 1968 the Nepalese government set up the Remote Areas Development Committee, whose main aim was to counter possible Communist influence from Tibet by bringing *bikās* to the various Tibetan-speaking communities living along the border areas. An important corollary to Nepal's overall development project was the forest nationalisation programme of 1957 and the subsequent creation of national parks. Therefore one of the Langtanga's most profound experiences of Nepal's initial engagement with the project of development was losing their traditional control over the surrounding forests. Previously, Langtanga could freely utilise the forest produce, and each Langtang household would have to contribute one young man to a pool of people who would, under the direction of the village headman, be organised into smaller groups to patrol the forest to prevent poaching. Under the new system of state-landlordism, forests became the properties of the state, while the Forest Act of 1961 set out to define forest offences. The 1968 Forest Protection Special Act gave policing and judicial powers to officials from the government's Forest Department (Green 1993: 316), as well as the responsibility for harvesting forest products to supply raw material to the forest-based industries located mainly in the lowland Tarai (Malla 2001: 292).

Meanwhile, the Nepalese government also identified tourism as one of the key industries crucial to the country's long-term developmental goals. In the early 1950s, the Western public was sufficiently mesmerised by Nepal primary through the widely publicised Himalayan mountaineering expeditions. Fascination with the Himalaya reached its peak with the British ascent of Mount Everest in 1953. Modern tourism formally arrived in Nepal in 1955, when the

travel agency Thomas Cook offered the first organised tour of Nepal. The Nepalese government published in 1972 a new tourism Master Plan that identified as ‘favourable tourism forms’ activities such as trekking tourism and mountain tourism, comprising of recreational tourism (mountaineering, fishing, trekking, rafting, etc.) and ecotourism (bird and wildlife watching, photography, scenery, scientific tourism, etc.). The 1972 document has since been updated by the 1995 Policy Document for the Tourism Sector that explicitly recognises ‘the strategic importance of tourism, among other sectors (e.g. water resources, human resources, etc) to the national economy’. The main objective of tourism is to ‘increase productivity, national income and foreign exchange currency earnings...[and] create employment opportunities, improving seasonal imbalance...[so as to] project the image of Nepal in the international arenas through development and diversification of the travel and tourism industries’ (MacLennan et. al. 2000: 177). Presently, tourism earnings contribute about 3 percent of Nepal’s Gross Domestic Product and 15 percent of total foreign currency earnings, and the hotel business is one of the main income-generating enterprises in the tourism industry.

For the Langtanga, circumstances largely beyond their control have forced them to engage with tourism, and the operating of hotels has become the primary means of social mobility. With the cessation of the trans-Himalayan trade between central Nepal and southern Tibet in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Langtang villagers had been compelled to rely on the collection and sale of forest products for cash to buy food, since their agricultural produce alone was insufficient for subsistence. While environmental conservation was the stated purpose of the gazetting of certain areas as national parks, the other reason was to support the tourism industry in achieving Nepal’s developmental goals. The creation of the Langtang national park in 1976 put several important restrictions on its inhabitants<sup>1</sup>. One was the prohibition against further

clearing of agricultural land. Since Langtang's system of land inheritance stipulates an equal division of household land among the male siblings, the average land size per household tends to decrease with succeeding generations (unless land is acquired from other villagers), contributing to decreasing agricultural yields for each household. This has been exacerbated by national park rules which prohibit the further clearing of land for agriculture purposes. In addition, Langtanga were forced into tourism by national park rules that banned the collection of herbs for sale<sup>2</sup>. Taken together, all these factors compelled the Langtanga to participate in the tourist trade in order to reduce their reliance on natural resources, which were, in any case, becoming increasingly inaccessible. In the nascent trekking tourism industry, Langtanga gained employment mainly as porters or local guides for the trekkers and a small number of mountaineering expeditions. A villager whom I shall call Pema then opened a small teahouse next to a local government-run cheese factory and from its earnings started the first modest, single-story hotel in Langtang village, in due course becoming its richest man. In the mid-1980s, there were around three to four hotels in village; at the end of my fieldwork in 2002, there were sixteen. When all the hotels operated by the villagers in the whole upper Langtang valley are included, the total number is double that. Approximately 30 percent of the 109 Langtang village households are directly involved in hotel operation.

### *Design of Hotels*

The main purpose of a hotel is to sell hospitality to the trekkers. The hotel design therefore functions to disguise the instrumental exchange relation between the hotel owner and the consumers of hospitality. In other words, the design of the hotel is to present an integrated facade that will induce trekkers to seek out and fulfil their consumption desires. Like all other

business ventures, hotel operation is determined predominantly by the desire for profit and the need to design a machine for the realization of capital under the current realities of Nepal's developmental goals and the global tourism industry. This overriding concern therefore exerts a decisive instrumental control over other aspects of the hotel design, so that the hotel, while a built environment, is also a manifestation of wider discursive practices.



Fig.1: Langtang hotels - trekkers' first encounter with the village

Designers and hotel owners choose the hotel design based upon knowledge acquired from past experience and upon the advice of experts. Many Langtang hotel operators have been to other trekking areas in Nepal, and from their travels have a clear sense of what the common facilities and architectural forms are, as well as learning the art of hotel operation from acquaintances already in the business. Apart from such informal channels, most hotel operators have also attended courses on hotel management conducted by government officials and other experts from the Nepalese and foreign non-governmental organisations who often offer programmes informed by the latest development paradigms. In fact, certificates of attendance issued by these courses are frequently framed and hung on the walls of a hotel's dining room as proof of professionalism. In the case of Langtang, as part of the 'Langtang Ecotourism project' (see also Lama 2000), experts from the Department of National Parks and the U.S.-based Mountain Institute conducted courses for local hotel-owners on matters such as fuel utilization, waste disposal, sanitation, hotel management, and the construction of essential hotel facilities<sup>3</sup>.

Because many visitors to the mountains want to experience the ruggedness of rural living but at the same time expect a certain level of familiar comfort and hygiene, Langtang hotel owners have been advised to build facilities such as clean toilets and solar panels for hot showers. Such facilities are entirely absent from the traditional houses of Langtanga. Another important element that can make or break a hotel is food. All along the main trekking routes, hotels offer a bewildering array of international cuisine, from pizza to chow mien to Mars bar pancakes. A hotel with a 'German' or 'Swiss' bakery will almost certainly see its business improve. When particular elements attain success, they are often copied elsewhere, resulting in the replication of the successful hotel design throughout Nepal's most popular mountain trekking areas. I shall call this the 'Hostel' theme. In its provision of a communal dining area as well as dormitory

rooms, it seeks to create an environment of comfort for the weary trekkers, and to evoke a sense of communal living while at same time offering the option of privacy. The success of this specific motif, as seen in its proliferation throughout the Nepal Himalaya, can be attributed to its ability to satisfy the trekkers' desire to experience the camaraderie and bonhomie of communal and rugged living, while simultaneously able to provide a degree of material comfort that approximates their experience back home.

### *Articulation of Internal Design Elements*

The engineering of space within the hotel articulates the overall motif in order to present a cognitively integrated façade, and it is this that facilitates the realization of capital through fulfilling the consumption fantasies of the trekkers. However, this essentially instrumental exchange between the guests and the hotel owner is also disguised, through a careful utilisation of intra-hotel design elements, to create an environment that provides comfort and creates a communal experience in order to generate a positive mood that will stimulate consumption. To achieve this end, the most important space in the hotel is the dining area. This principal space usually consists of a large room with connecting benches that run along three sides of the wall, with a stove for heating in the middle. The dining area is the place where guests take their meals and where they gather to socialise. For the owner, a well-designed dining area often translates into higher earnings, since the longer the guests linger in the dining room, the more food and drink they will tend to consume. To prolong their stay, cushions or carpets are placed on the benches to provide comfort while the dining room is heated up by firewood burning in the stove. On the walls are often hung posters of various mountaineering expeditions and popular tourist destinations in Nepal, while the 'ethnic' feel so sought after by tourists is



manufactured through the display of exhibits such as Tibetan *thangka* paintings, handicrafts, and photographs of the owner with his family and friends. The resulting cosiness of the dining room functions as a positive contrast to the external hostile environment. As dusk falls, the temperature in the mountains drops drastically, frequently compounded by the wind and snow, and no trekker will venture outside for long. The hotel's dormitory rooms are usually basic and sparse, without electricity and not well insulated from the cold and wind. Apart from sleeping, guests normally do not stay in their rooms for long. Hence, the overall intra-hotel design is such as to make the guests gravitate towards the comfortable, communal space of the dining room, and thus facilitates the maximization of consumption.

### **Hotel, Status, and Personal Identity**

These days, starting a hotel is a major undertaking that can take between two to four years from the planning stage to its completion. In Langtang, there are primarily two ways a person can secure the money needed for building a hotel, assuming that it is to be built on the land one already owns. The money obtained from the sale of possessions such as land or gold would not be sufficient for the Rs.4-8 *lakhs* (approx. US\$ 530-1100) needed to build a hotel. The rest of the money, a significant proportion, has to be borrowed. Banks are normally excluded as a potential source, since the soil quality of Langtang is considered so inferior that they refuse to accept it as collateral. For wealthy families, gold can be used as collateral for loans from the bank, but with interest rates ranging between 13 to 17 percent, it is not a popular option. One of the most common means to raise the needed cash is the sale of valuables; the other is to approach one or more of the local 'big men' for financial help.

Due to the standardization of the hotel design, there are certain essential facilities that should be present for a new hotel to have a chance of business success. In the Lodge Management course, hotel owners are advised to construct separate enclosures for toilet and bathroom, and the latter should ideally have a solar hot shower. The construction of all these essential facilities requires considerable financial and manpower resources. The key skilled workers, such as the master builder and carpenters, are usually outsiders hired on the basis of recommendations from other hotel owners, and whose expertise has been acquired through building projects in other trekking areas such as the Annapurna and the Solu-Khumbu regions. The unskilled workers are usually drawn from the nearby regions and from the village. So while the main builders and carpenters work on-site most of the time, the rest become human mules tasked with the ferrying of building material such as stones, logs and supplies needed by the new hotel. Therefore, any construction project will almost certainly provide some form of employment for Langtang villagers. When a new hotel is being built, one encounters streams of labourers carrying large planks of wood from processing sites, rocks from the river, and other essential construction material bought at nearby towns and further away in Kathmandu.

Construction work is thus one of the primary means through which non-hotel-owning villagers become increasingly tied to the tourism industry and dependent on it for income. When building work is completed, outsider workers will leave while local labourers remain indispensable for the proper running of the hotel. Periodically the owner engages villagers to collect firewood from nearby forests as fuel for cooking and heating, paying around Rs. 50-100 per 30kg of firewood. In addition, around November some villagers also collect animal dung from grazing pastures to sell to the hotels as fuel. The hotel owners frequently engage villagers

for work not directly related to hotel operation. The demanding task of operating a hotel—with chores such as socialising with and cooking for the guests, cleaning the place, walking along the trails to solicit custom, procuring supplies—leaves its proprietor with little time for agricultural work. By offering up to Rs. 100 per day and two meals, hotel owners can hire other villagers to work in their fields that might otherwise be unattended.<sup>4</sup>

As a result of tourism, therefore, two new economic classes have emerged in the village<sup>5</sup>: the hotel owners as primary employers, and others in the village depending on them for waged work. The hotel owners, as the main source of employment for the other villagers, thus constitute the dominant class based upon their economic power. This hotel-centred power relationship is presently made more stable by the absence of a viable alternative source of employment for villagers. Unlike the Gurungs, Rais or Magars of the central hills, whose options for the pursuit of social mobility, apart from tourism, includes recruitment into the various Gurkha regiments, Langtanga do not have this particular option. Furthermore, unlike the Nyeshangte as documented by Joanne Watkins (1996), Langtanga have no widespread national or trans-national business networks to speak of. At the time of fieldwork, no Langtang villager was working outside the village, although there were a couple of young people who were studying in Kathmandu hoping to enter the medical profession upon graduation. Under Nepal's present economic circumstances, many Langtanga see operating a hotel as a means of social mobility and the attainment of greater material comfort. Therefore, a hotel has become a status symbol, and its owner regarded as a step closer to *bikās* compared to the rest of the villagers. As noted above, the hotel owner's economic power rests largely upon his ability to command a labour force and to be a source of loans. This economic power can be translated

into status through at least two ways: the hotel's physicality as an icon for *bikās*, and the social interactions within it.

In the above analysis, I have shown how the hotel, in order to become an effective machine for the realization of capital, assumes a specific design and contains certain essential facilities. This has resulted in an architectural form different from the traditional building style in Langtang:



Fig. 2: New status symbol - Contrast between a hotel and a traditional house

Traditional buildings in Langtang are modest, double-storey structures consisting of stone walls and roofs made from wooden tiles, which are held down by huge stone slabs to prevent the roof from being blown away by the strong winds that sweep through Langtang valley. A wooden staircase leads from the courtyard in front of the house into the upper living quarter, which is a large square room with the various corners allocated to a variety of purposes, such as storage, cooking, sleeping and religious worship. The ground floor is mainly used for storing grain and for keeping household animals at night. In stark contrast, due to functional necessity,

hotels are generally buildings of considerable size with a large dining area and dormitory rooms. The main structure is usually built with huge slabs of stone quarried from the riverbed, while the roof is made of shiny corrugated zinc sheets bought in Kathmandu. Some hotels even have plastered outer walls to act as an additional layer of insulation, as well as allowing for decorative paintwork to be done. Its modern amenities, such as a relatively well-equipped, separate kitchen, toilet, shower room and a courtyard where trekkers can lounge in good weather, have the effect of marking out the hotel as the physical embodiment of *bikās*.

The embedding of the hotel in Langtang's every-day life is further augmented through its dual function as both business and domestic site. Carsten and Hugh-Jones (1995), extending Lévi-Strauss' notion of a 'house-society', have urged us to pay serious attention to the house's material as well as social dimensions—such as its domestic, economic, political, and religious functions. They argue that the 'house operates through its physicality as a complex idiom for defining social groupings, naturalising social positions, and as a source of symbolic power'. In their study on consumption and social mobility among the Izhavas of Kerala, South India, Filippo and Caroline Osella have also described how the house, due to the identity between family and house names, has become an embodiment of worth and reputation, especially for those Izhava migrant workers who have returned to their home communities. Eschewing thatched or wooden huts, these returnees seek to project their newly acquired affluence, status and taste by choosing house designs which are 'reminiscent of the luxury bungalows occupied by the rich and Westernised characters in popular Malayali films' (1999: 1017).

In Langtang, the social significance of the house can be seen from its close association with the definition of the household. A typical household consists of a married couple and their children, often also with the elderly parents of the male householder. In Langtang, it is usually the youngest son who inherits his parents' house, together with the responsibility of looking after them in their old age. The elder brother, upon getting married, will usually move out into a new house built on divided family land. Hence, the house constitutes an important part of a person's and household's identity. When one's house is also a hotel, one's personal identity and the identities of those living within the same household become closely associated with the hotel as well. Just as the hotel can be seen as a physical embodiment of *bikās*, by association so can be its owner and his or her immediate family.

The intimate link between one's identity and one's hotel is clearly illustrated by Langtanga's method of identifying a person. Since certain names are widely used, Langtanga often use epithets to differentiate between those who share common names. For example, a particular man who is the son of a shaman is called *jhankri* Gyalpo (*jhankri* is the Nepali term for shaman), to differentiate him from the many other Gyalpos in the village. Or someone might be referred to as *baru* (Tib. *dba' rus*) Phuntso, the epithet being often used to refer to people from the traditional three prominent lineages of the village. Continuing with this cultural practice of identification, these days hotel owners are often identified by the names of their establishments. Thus when I first arrived in Langtang, I was told to look for 'Village View Pema', the richest man in the village who might be able to help. Similarly, since there are a number of villagers who are called Tenzin, one is referred to as 'Mountain View Tenzin', while the other as 'Langtang Lirung Tenzin', both named after hotels. The important implication is that hotels,

through their dual function as a house and a hotel, have become an important component of personal identity.

I have previously highlighted how the hotel's interior design elements, in conjunction with the overall hotel design, function to stimulate and fulfil trekkers' consumption desires and hence maximise profit for the proprietor. This overriding instrumental concern of internal spatial organisation has implications for status generation and local political activity as well. A comparison with the social organisation of space in a temple with that of a hotel will help to illustrate my point:

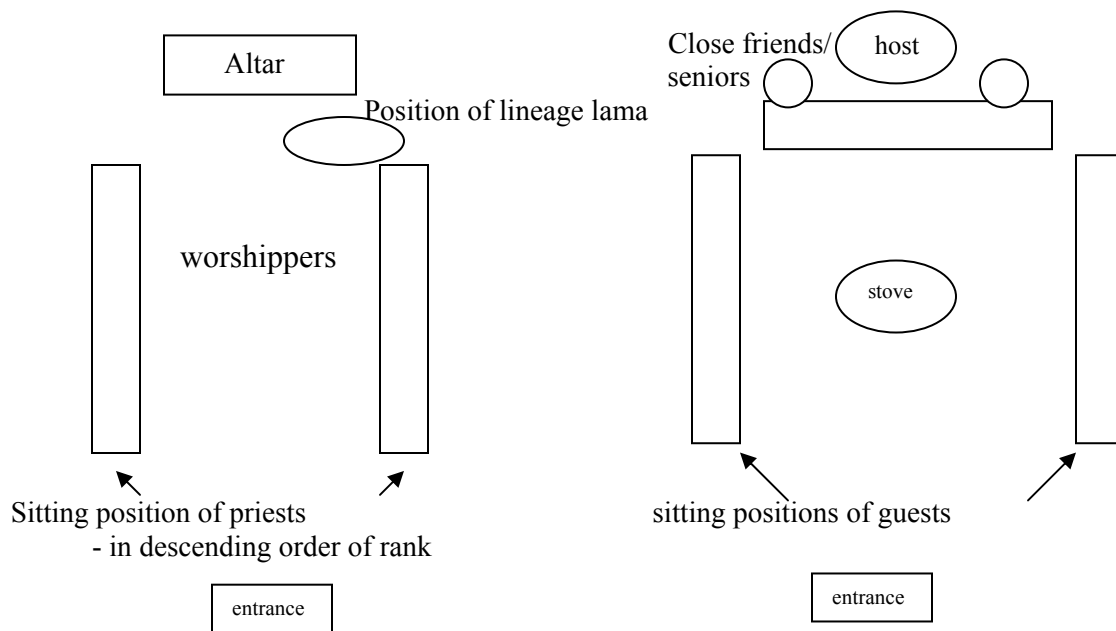


Fig. 3: Seating arrangement of priests and worshippers in the temple

Fig. 4: Seating arrangement of host and guests in the hotel

In the social organisation of temple seating arrangements, a person's status is indicated by his or her proximity to the deities on the altar during communal worship (Fig. 3). The most esteemed position is occupied by the chief officiating priest sitting just in front of the altar, in an elevated seat for senior member of the local Domar lineage of lamas<sup>6</sup>. Other priests follow down the line in descending order of rank. The communal space directly in front of the altar and between the two rows of priests is usually reserved for members from particular wealthy prominent *baru* lineages. Villagers of lower status usually congregate near the door. This arrangement, I would suggest, is one of Langtang's paradigmatic cultural idioms of status.

Now consider an example of social gatherings of Langtang villagers in hotels, such as the Losar (Tibetan New Year) feast held in almost all the hotels. The seating arrangement on this occasion and other large gatherings of villagers bears a striking resemblance to the pattern observed in the temple. The place where the host sits reflects his overall social position, while the rest of the guests are seated generally according to their relative status during the occasion (see Figs. 4 & 5). The hotel owner, by choosing his position and that of the guests in the dining room, wittingly or unwittingly becomes the agency for the spatial organisation of social status, revelling in his own symbolic power. This replication of the temple seating arrangement in the hotel is made possible by the peculiar design of the dining room. The interior design of the hotel dining room therefore serves as a bridge between the two domains of experience, transposing the status symbolism of one to the other.





Fig. 5: Hotel's dining room as site of status generation. The host is the only person wearing the *chuba* reminiscent of a chieftain. Notice that, with the exception of the toddler, a young boy (ranked according to age) and a woman (ranked according to gender) are sitting furthest away from the host.

The internal space of the hotel's dining area makes it an ideal site for large social gatherings during which social hierarchy is continually created and contested. The symbolic power of a particular hotel owner can be contested by his or her peers through their absence from the gathering. A person who considers himself higher in status than the host can choose not to attend the function, for his presence would affirm the host's status to the expense of his own. During my fieldwork, the particular Losar feast as shown in Fig. 5 was replicated in most hotels in the village with their wealthy owners hosting banquets and receiving well-wishers. The feast is what I would call a status-generating event in which the host's perception of his own status is projected and stands to be affirmed by the presence of his guests. Status is a hierarchy of social ranking within which one's position is determined by a constant dialectic between self-valuation and social validation. As successful hotel owners organise feasts at their respective locations, the size and composition of their contingent of guests gives an indication of overall status ranking in the village. The status-generating event of the Losar feast thus manifests a simultaneous double orientation: an inward focus through which the relative social positions of the host and the guests engendered for the host an immediate validation of his own perceived status, which then has to be reappraised through an outward orientation via comparison with the situations in other hotels. What we are trying to investigate here is not just people's social position in this particular Losar feast held within a confined, engineered space. Rather, and equally important, I want to discuss how the hotel takes on political significance as a status-generating site.

### **Hotels as Political Sites**

The transformation of Langtang's economy from trans-Himalayan trade and agriculture to one based mainly on tourism, together with the phenomenon of the hotel as an important status and identity marker, have profound implications for the local political process. Before the 1970s, a priestly lineage called the Domari had been politically and religiously dominant in Langtang village (see Lim 2004 and 2005). In recent decades, however, the Domari's hold on temporal power has been challenged. Following the overthrow of the autocratic Rana regime in 1950 and the creation of a new political system based on democratic principles, all citizens were empowered by state law to select their local leaders in periodic elections. Although in 1960 King Mahendra dissolved the multi-party system and instituted the party-less 'Panchayat Democracy', Nepalese still enjoyed voting rights to elect their local leaders, albeit for candidates who did not belong to any formal political parties. Throughout the first two decades of the Panchayat regime, the members of the Domari lineage managed to get elected to the post of village headman.

However, after the creation of Langtang National Park and the introduction of tourism to the area in the late 1970s, a newly emerging group of rich and powerful tourism entrepreneurs, relying on their newly-acquired wealth and status, began to challenge Domari dominance in local elections. Hence, in the early 1980s, one of these chief beneficiaries of tourism, Pema, managed to get elected as the village headman after defeating a relatively young and inexperienced Domari candidate who was unable to match his opponent's ability to mobilise personal wealth to secure the support of voters. Elections in the next ten years saw the Domari continually challenging Pema in local elections, but to no avail. Throughout this period, Pema

had become the richest man in the village, with his family members owning at least four hotels throughout the Langtang Valley. According to Langtang villagers, because of Pema's tremendous wealth, he was able to out-spend his political opponents to win votes by organising banquets in his hotels for villagers, and distributing sacks of rice and gifts of beer during election periods to increase his popularity.<sup>7</sup>

Following the restoration of multiparty democracy in Nepal in 1990, two parties became dominant in Langtang: the Nepali Congress, led by Pema, and the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist), whose leader was another wealthy hotel owner. During local elections, candidates from these two parties campaigned to be elected to lead the nine wards that make up the Langtang Village Development Committee (VDC), which in turn is one of the eighteen VDCs that make up the Rasuwa District. Simultaneously, villagers also got to choose the VDC Chairman and Vice-Chairman, a two-man team consisting of the party leader and his deputy. Because of Nepal's decentralisation policies, the VDC Chairman has considerable power over local affairs. He controls the funds allocated to the VDC by the central government for local development projects as well as the stipends for all members of the Committee. It is ultimately the VDC's permission that has to be sought for most development projects of the various NGOs. This means that the Chairman often becomes the point person these NGOs have to deal with, thus becoming the mediator between the VDC and the funding agencies of development projects. Given the substantial power vested in the VDC, it is not surprising that its chairmanship is usually hotly contested.

### *Langtang Land-Grab*

As a former headman during the Panchayat times, Pema managed to get elected again in the first multi-party election in 1992, thus becoming Langtang's first VDC Chairman. As the village leader who straddled both the old Panchayat and the new multi-party political regimes, Pema was involved for four years in one of the bitterest disputes in Langtang's history. The case concerned Pema's construction of hotels on what was supposed to be communal land. Not satisfied with his one-storey hotel in the village, Pema decided in the late 1980s to build a new one with better facilities on a patch of pasture that had been reserved for village animals to graze, with the animals' milk being made into butter to cater to the needs of the village temple. In addition, Pema also set his eyes on another piece of communal land, which had traditionally been used by villagers to celebrate the important festival of Drukpa Che Zhi (see below). On these two pieces of communal property Pema began to build the grandest of his hotels, ignoring the protests and indignation of many villagers. For his new hotel, Pema even constructed a stone wall enclosing the main building and the communal land in the vicinity to keep out unwanted intruders, animals and humans alike. What further incensed the villagers was when parks officials arrived to conduct a land survey of the Langtang valley, Pema tried to use his powerful position as the village leader to claim a large swathe of pastures as his own. After Pema's Congress Party had narrowly won the local election in 1992, the villagers took the case to the district headquarters.

The villagers were not only vehemently opposed to Pema's appropriation of communal land as his own. They were also concerned that he might levy an animal grazing tax, and charge the trekkers a fee for visiting a popular viewpoint on top of a hill located within the piece of

disputed land. During the arbitration at the district headquarters, the authorities asked the then Vice-Chairman of the VDC, an ally of Pema, the truth of the villagers' accusation. As can be expected, the Vice-Chairman came down in favour of Pema, who eventually won the case. Undaunted, some villagers, led by members of the opposition party UML, appealed against the ruling by taking the matter to the Supreme Court in Kathmandu. Their persistence and effort paid off, but theirs was not a complete victory. Of the approximately 3300 *ropani*<sup>8</sup> of land Pema had laid claim to, he was allowed to keep around three and a half *ropani*—the land on which the two hotels had already been built. In effect, Pema's new hotels helped stamp his authority over two pieces of valuable communal land to claim as his own. The new hotels, in their sheer physicality and immobility in the Langtang landscape, thus bear lasting testimony to how wealth in the new economic and political circumstances can be translated into social power over the control of valuable resources. Since Pema was the leader of the local Congress party, many villagers who had opposed his effort at the land-grab became supporters of the UML party, whose members currently include also all the village priests, the Domari as well as the non-Domari ones.

### ***Power Contestation***

Since the institutionalisation of multi-party democracy in Nepal in 1990, all subsequent local and national elections in Langtang have been plagued by physical violence involving the two rival political parties. Given the polarisation of the village into two political camps, and with prominent leaders all engaged in the hotel business, hotels in Langtang have become avenues where the horizontal contestation of political power is often enacted. In Langtang the modus

operandi of political parties, like party politics elsewhere, consists of creating party loyalists and effectively utilising their support for electoral gains. In time, the hotels of the two political leaders became the *de facto* party headquarters, where their respective supporters would gather for mutual support, to affirm their political affiliation, and to discuss election strategies. Depending on the outcome of the election, the hotel *qua* party headquarters is also the place where supporters gather either to celebrate their party's political triumphs or nurse its wounds of defeat. Thus, the physical space of the dining room, whose primary function is its provision of a comfortable communal space for trekkers to linger, has in another social domain developed into a political site where the status and power of political leaders are affirmed and where solidarity is generated between their supporters.

The political contestation involving hotels as political headquarters is dramatically enacted annually during the Drukpa Che Zhi (Tib. *drug pa tshes bzhi*) festival, which is usually held in the middle of the monsoon in July. The festival (whose name literally means '4<sup>th</sup> day of the 6<sup>th</sup> month') is one of the most important village festivals in terms of its ritual and social significance. The event is widely celebrated in Tibetan cultural areas to commemorate the day when Shakyamuni gave his first sermon at Bodhgaya following his enlightenment. For Langtanga, it is a four-day festivity during which prayers and offerings are made to local deities and those of the wider Tibetan Buddhist pantheon. Apart from religious rituals, there are also archery competitions on the third and fourth days during which Langtang men pit their skills against one another, while for three nights Langtang villagers gathered at the village temple for songs and dances. Because of the intense competition in party politics, the Drukpa Che Zhi festival has for many years been marred by physical violence, especially during an

election year. The most serious violence erupted in a year when there was a national election for a member of parliament representing the Rasuwa district. On this occasion, after the drinking and merrymaking session in Pema's hotel, a large group of Congress Party members descended upon the UML leader's hotel where the UML's supporters had gathered. The ensuing brawl between the two groups of supporters was of such intensity that a group of English trekkers in the area at that time had to be evacuated by helicopter. In the aftermath of the mayhem, the police and army moved in and arrested more than 100 Langtang men and all the political leaders, some of whom were detained for more than two weeks at the district police headquarters.

During the Drukpa Che Zhi that I attended in 2002, it became evident to me why this particular festival was so prone to the outbreak of violence between supporters of the two opposing political parties, revealing the fraught processes of the status contestation between their leaders and the political polarisation of the village. On this last day, as the evening approached, individually or in small groups, Langtang villagers depending on their political affiliation would make their way bearing gifts of beer and ceremonial scarves to either of the political leaders at their hotels, which after some time were swollen with two separate groups of villagers. There, in the large communal space of each hotel's dining room, the party supporters—both men and women (some with their children)—entertained themselves with songs, dance and drinks throughout the night, presided over by their leader sitting in his appropriate place. On this particular occasion, the two hotels were transformed from businesses catering for tourism consumption into sites that were simultaneously generative of two axes of



power and its contestation: a vertical status hierarchy based on wealth and status, between leaders and followers, and a horizontal opposition between the two rival political factions.

### **Conclusion**

One of the main aims of this paper has been to explore the process through which the development ideology that pervades Nepalese society has become embedded in everyday life. In the Himalayan communities of Nepal, religious institutions such as the temple have historically been socially and politically significant. But when the bulk of social, economic and political activities in tourism areas have shifted largely away from the temples, scholars conducting research in Himalayan communities most affected by trekking tourism have so far persistently ignored the phenomenon of the hotel. From this Langtang case study, I have highlighted the importance of treating the hotel as a new materiality that has emerged in Himalayan communities affected by contemporary economic development through tourism. Appadurai has cogently pointed out it is not possible to understand the meanings of things without situating them in contexts of human activity, attribution, and motivation:

The anthropological problem is that this formal truth does not illuminate the concrete, historical circulation of things. For that we have to follow the things themselves, *for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories*. It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things. Thus, even though from a theoretical point of view human actors encode things

with significance, *from a methodological point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context*" (Appadurai 1986:5, italics mine).

While Appadurai refers to 'things-in-motion', the materiality this paper is concerned with is a fixed, solid entity that is not literally in motion, unlike the case of say, money and other smaller portable artefacts. But since hotels, as I have shown, are sites for various sorts of social events, they can be seen as metaphorically moving through the diverse semiotic domains and discursive contexts underlying varied forms of social interaction. Hence, the hotel, whose property as a material form is necessarily semiotically underdetermined, can act as a bridge between domains of knowledge and experience (Keane 2001:69-70; Geismar and Horst 2004: 5). Studies on tourism tend to either restrict the interpretation of the hotel phenomenon to the one specific domain of economic production, or to treat the hotel as culturally unproblematic. However, economic activity is never conducted in a cultural vacuum, and the materiality of the hotel that has arisen from one context can be 'recontextualised' in other social and symbolic domains to take on additional meanings. This analysis of the hotel as an architectural form that mediates different social domains thus throws into sharp focus its role as an 'ideological practice' (McLeod 1985: 7), producing the power relations that would in turn generate their very contestations. By treating the materiality of the hotel as an anthropological tool, we are thus able to more fully understand how a community's pursuit of development and its intense engagement with tourism have resulted in the creation of new forms of subjectivity as well as social and political relationships.

**Notes**

1. For a discussion on the management issues of the national park, see Bourradaile *et. al.* (1977).
2. The punishment for illegal smuggling and sale of herbs was harsh: for a first-time offender it was a week's jail in Dhunche, the district headquarters.
3. During my fieldwork, one foreign female development expert who had helped convene the Langtang Ecotourism Project in 1996 came back to Langtang for an inspection tour. News of her imminent arrival in the village preceded her, and some hotel owners were apprehensive about how she would evaluate the various programmes she had put in place previously, such as bottle recycling, the Women's Association, and the kerosene depot. Since none of these were functioning properly, one hotel owner told me he was afraid she would be angry, 'since she had spent lots of time and money in Langtang.' When this expert arrived, she went into most of the hotels to inspect the facilities.
4. In the village of Kag of Baragaun, west of Langtang, Rebecca Saul (1998: 187) has similarly noted that many hotel owners do not perform manual tasks and hire hands for purposes such as looking after household animals and fields.
5. For the Sherpas, Ortner (1999:254) has noted that as a result of a history of engaging with mountaineering expeditions and tourism, there has arisen amongst the Sherpas a new class of 'big people' who are not the old traders and landowners but successful leaders of expeditions.

These people, after earning enough money to retire early from mountaineering, usually go into hotel and restaurant businesses.

6. In temple rituals, this lineage lama is the representation of his 'spiritual lineage' (*bla rgyud*) and considered the personification of a Buddha.

7. Bribery in elections is rife throughout Nepal. In her work on Kag village in Baragaun, Mustang, Saul (1998:85) has noted that there has been an increase in tensions between local village factions, and between and within households after the institutionalisation of multi-party politics. During an election, the Congress candidate gave several hundred rupees to villagers who voted for the party.

8. 1 *ropani* is approximately 0.13 acre.

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