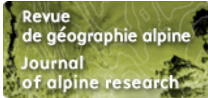

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Why Do People Come to See Mount Everest? Collective Representations and Tourism Practices in the Khumbu Region

Etienne Jacquemet

1 “Because it's there.” It was with these three words, undoubtedly the most famous in the history of mountaineering, that the English climber George Mallory responded to *New York Times* reporters in 1923 when asked about the meaning of his expeditions to the top of Mount Everest. Since the mid-1960s a growing number of tourists have visited the Khumbu region (in the east of Nepal), and it would appear difficult to understand, beyond the truism expressed by Mallory, precisely what it is that draws people to Mount Everest. The hypothesis outlined in this article is that this aspiration is accompanied by different sources of motivation which are much broader than the simple desire to admire a dimension which can hardly be represented. As Jean-Didier Urbain explains, tourists' expectations are unclear and shifting (2011). Nevertheless, a study of collective representations provides a useful way of understanding the motivations behind tourist travel. Unlike individual representations which Emile Durkheim considered short-lived and unstable (1898), collective representations represent “shared cognitive structures,” which is to say lasting knowledge and expertise that surpass that of individuals (Moliner&Guimelli, 2015). These “shared ways of thinking, these standards and myths” are important because they are responsible for regulating and legitimising the behaviour of social groups (Giust-Desprairies, 2009: 43). In other words, collective representations play a significant role in decisions made by tourists.

2 Different studies carried out in recent decades have focused on the collective representations associated with mountains and mountain-dwelling people (Broc, 1969; Bozonnet, 1992; Debarbieux, 1995; Sacareau, 2002; Bernier & Gauchon, 2013). Others have evoked these representations by studying the adventurous and neo-adventurous activities of trekking and Himalayan mountaineering (Sacareau, 1997, 2010; Raspaud,

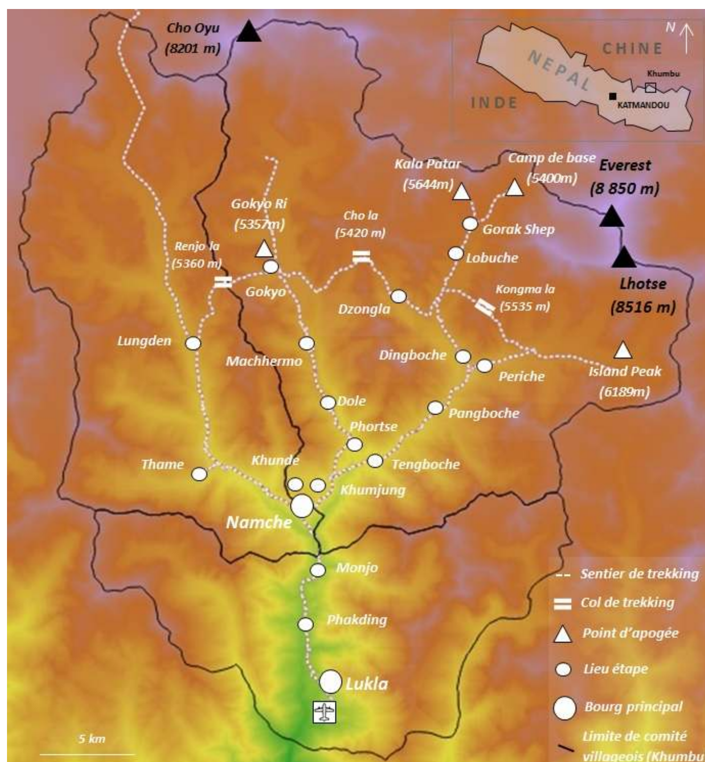
2003; Ladwein, 2005; Boutroy, 2004, 2006). All these authors emphasise the pre-eminence of nature, the authenticity and exoticism in the minds of the mountaineers and tourists who come to the mountain. The effort expended and the satisfaction of the ascent give climbers a feeling of exclusivity and contribute to individuals' physical, mental and social renewal. The mountains therefore provide an imagined, idealised medium which, in many ways, approximates the concept of heterotopias invented by Michel Foucault (1967). According to Foucault, heterotopias, which are literally "other places," are defined as "sorts of anti-locations, sorts of utopias effectively created [...] within the institution of societies." Heterotopias are based on six principles: (1) "In so-called primitive societies [heterotopias form] privileged, sacred or forbidden places." (2) "Heterotopias always imply a system of opening and closing, which at once isolates them and makes them penetrable." (3) In this way, heterotopias function according to "heterochronies," meaning they possess their own unique time. (4) A heterotopia may appear as a space of illusion, or of compensation which is "as perfect, meticulous, and well-organised as ours is disorderly, poorly arranged and muddled." Finally, (5) Foucault writes that "as a society's history unfolds, it can make heterotopias function in very different ways" and that it (6) "has the power of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are incompatible with one another." (Foucault, 1994: 755; 756; 760; 761; 757; 758).

3 After demonstrating how four main principles sustain the collective representations by tourists of the Khumbu region, this article will then focus on the evolution and incompatibility of the spaces discussed in the last two principles. While the difficulty of access and Eden-like dimension of the Khumbu region have contributed to making it a popular destination for trekkers, the increasing integration of the region in a globalised context over the past twenty years has modified the meaning and very functioning of this heterotopia. Trekkers most likely imagine themselves exploring the country of the famous Sherpa[1] community in a "harsh and unforgiving, legendary and sacred[2] [...] mountain range which was long closed to foreigners" and may not necessarily expect to go to a "Comfort Inn", "Yak Donald's" or "Starbucks Coffee." Discrepancies may therefore arise between tourists' representations and those which are produced locally. For, as Bernard Debarbieux points out, "local players are not passive, they take part in constructing these new configurations based on their assumptions about tourists' expectations." Yet these developers "do not carry out their activities in a cold manner [...] they convey their own imagination about the mountain and willingly involve their projects with very ambitious individual or collective endeavours" (1995: 59).

4 Although it will make reference to some of these transformations, this article does not set out to discuss the "impact" of tourism and globalisation on the region and the Sherpa society, a topic which a great number of works have addressed (Fürer-Haimendorf, 1984; Fisher, 1990; Adams, 1996; Nepal et *al.*, 2002; Spoon& Sherpa, 2008; Obadia, 2010). This article's aim is instead to understand the different collective representations which have led to turning the Khumbu region into a tourist destination, and how these representations conflict with one another, especially from the point of view of tourists, against the backdrop of an increasingly globalised heterotopias. The arguments put forth by this article draw on a number of various bibliographic sources, direct observations, and testimonies collected over the course of surveys conducted as part of a broader study of overall changes and access to water and soil resources in the Everest region[3]. After preliminary exploratory fieldwork, these surveys were carried out in the springs of 2015

and 2016[4] in the villages of Lukla and Namche Bazaar with eighty-nine tourists: fifty-three men and twenty-eight women, aged fifteen to seventy-three, with twenty-seven different nationalities. Participants were interviewed either at the beginning or end of the trek, before their ascent or after their descent. The questionnaire asked individuals to express their expectations or perceptions of services available on-site and in accommodation facilities at different steps of the circuit (degree or frequency of different uses of water, electricity and associated services: showers, telecommunications, entertainment etc.) The questionnaire's open-ended conclusion gave trekkers the opportunity to describe their expectations and impressions, and highlight any possible contradictions, or alternatively, consistencies, between their initial representations and what they ultimately experienced in the region.

Figure 1 – Trekking itineraries in the Khumbu region



DESIGN & CREATION: JACQUEMET E., 2017.

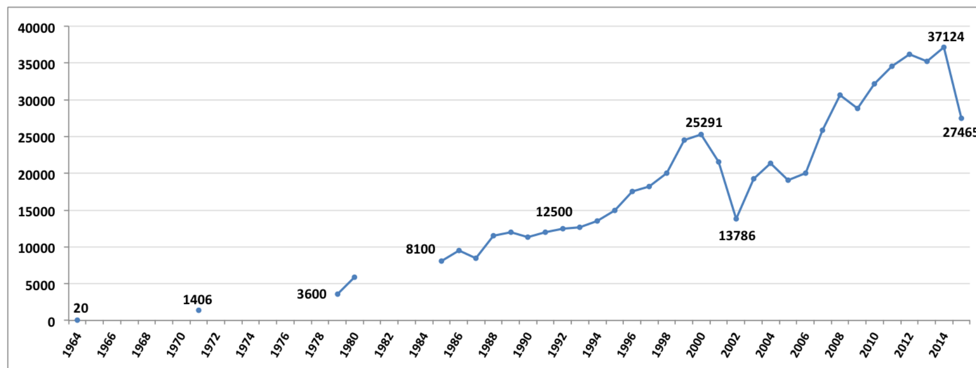
The draw of an unknown, forbidden territory

5 The appearance of Mount Everest in westerners' imagination is a relatively recent phenomenon. In the 18th century, the very existence of the Himalayas was "only vaguely suspected by scholars and completely unheard of among the well-educated" (Broc, 1969: 55). The interest for this "fearsome group of mountains in the north of the Indies" (Pallas, 1779, *in* op. cit.) only developed with the expansion of British colonial rule. And it was not until 1852 that "Peak XV," or *Gaurishankar*, was recognised as the highest mountain in the world[5] (Modica, 2003). Meanwhile, the remoteness, altitude, and harsh climatic conditions of the region, accentuated by the policies of the leaders of Nepal and Tibet –who long feared that they would be invaded and therefore prohibited any foreign

intrusion on their territory– all contributed to making the conquest of the Third Pole especially long and difficult (Raspaud, 2003). The sacred dimension of certain Himalayan villages, regions and peaks, such as Lhassa, the Khumbu, and Mount Everest, accentuated this forbidden aspect. Mountaineers, scientists, and soldiers driven by a taste for research and exploration, would nevertheless help answer an essential question: “Is there a point on the Earth's surface which is too high for man to reach through his own unaided efforts?” (Younghusband *in* Modica, 2003: 44). The first expeditions on Mount Everest would only be organised on the Tibet side starting in 1921. In 1953, when Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay finally conquered “the roof of the world” from the south-western side, Nepal had only been open to westerners for four years and authorities issued only a limited number of safe conducts to expeditions. Lacking any sort of transport infrastructure, Mount Everest and the other great Himalayan peaks were only accessible through long weeks of walking through the country's medium-sized mountains. It was only in 1964 that a high altitude airport was opened in Lukla, a small village once known for its summer grazing pastures, located a few days' walk from the base camp. In the years that followed, only a few dozen lucky hikers would have the privilege of being guided to the Mount Everest base camp (Sacareau, 1997).

6 Today, the Khumbu region no longer seems so remote. An overview of tourism statistics shows that this area has indeed never been so open to the world (figure2). In 2014, 37,124 trekkers from 105 different countries, accompanied by their guides and porters, travelled through the region (Sagarmatha National Park, 2016). Sixty-three percent of these trekkers came in the months of April, October, and November. During these months, the Lukla control tower log books can record more than 700 airplane flights and an equal number of helicopter flights. Nevertheless, the ascent to the Mount Everest base camp still retains an element of adventure, danger, and a sense of the forbidden. Far from being extreme, trekking involves a number of risks and uncertainties[6] (Ladwein, 2005). The Khumbu region still relies on a system of opening and closing, which protects, or creates a facade of protecting, access to the region. Trekking permits, military check-posts, suspended bridges, steep slopes, and high altitude all serve as symbolic or potential obstacles allowing adventurers to test their courage. “We've got to be a bit crazy [...] we set off for better or for worse, which means we know that we'll come up against some challenging conditions at times,” says a mother in a documentary report, before beginning her journey (Grabli, 2017). For many trekkers, the arrival at Lukla, the main gateway for visitors to the region and an airport which has a reputation for being dangerous and subject to volatile weather conditions, represents a dreaded or exciting moment. “The plane ride here was really scary! I'd heard people talking about it but it was nothing like actually experiencing it,” says a young trekker from Hong Kong[7].

Figure 2 – Increase in number of trekkers since 1965



Design & Creation: Jacquemet E., 2016. Source: Nepal et al., 2002 ; Sagarmatha National Park, 2016.

A space of deviation and merit

7 According to Michel Foucault, "crisis heterotopias," meaning those based on sacred and forbidden dimensions, tend to be gradually replaced by "deviation heterotopias," which are occupied by "individuals whose behaviour is deviant in comparison to the average and required standard" (1994: 757). As Jean-Paul Bozonnet points out, "Even to this day, mountaineers are perceived by some as rather antisocial and as masochistic tightrope walkers" (1992: 44-45). Indeed, "by its very definition, mountaineering takes place in a setting which requires climbers, first and foremost, to expose themselves to a configuration of natural constraints which are all the more dangerous since the environment remains irreducibly uncertain" (Boutroy, 2006: 592). Although not one of the most difficult 8,000 metre peaks in technical terms, Mount Everest is widely visited because it is higher than all the others. Itis the scene of accidents on a regular basis and is often portrayed as one of, if not *the* most, dangerous mountain[8]. It is therefore not surprising that Mount Everest has played a role in the story of many heroic figures (Jacquemet, 2016). Nor is it surprising that tourists are attracted to and fascinated by the sites of these heroes' feats or tragedies (Mu & Nepal, 2015).

8 Epic adventures are not, however, exclusively reserved for Himalayan mountaineers. Trekking also appears to be an adventure in which hikers can become heroes (Ladwein, 2005 ; Jacquemet, 2016). First of all, the climb to the region's various peaks[9] is a real "challenge" for many trekkers. Although a third of all trekkers already have some experience hiking in the Himalayas, the Andes, or Mount Kilimanjaro, for many others, this trek represents their first real introduction to high altitudes. Furthermore, mountain sports aim precisely to reproduce the actions of heroes with whom those who practice these sports may identify (Bozonnet, 1992). This idealised, self-representation is based on a game of imitation."An assumed fictional story is played out, in which participants are fully aware that the roles they are enacting do not reflect reality, but nevertheless provide them with an opportunity to symbolically satisfy a desire for identification: to temporarily become someone else, or live someone else's life for a period of time" (Sacareau, 2010: 7).

9 The creation of a narrative also plays a key role in this process (Bozonnet, 1992; Ladwein, 2005). In the Khumbu, as elsewhere, this narrative is increasingly created through the use

of cameras originally intended for extreme activities. Accompanying an expedition bound for Mount Everest, David, a 22 year-old Brazilian[10], equipped himself with a selfie stick attached to a camera so that he too could "become a hero." He explained that he wanted to film the hike to the camp base and planned to post his videos every night on social media. The clips he would post, most likely depicting him landing in Lukla, on a suspended bridge, or during his stay at the base camp, would participate in the production and validation of his own feats as seen through the eyes of an online community (Jacquemet, 2015).

10 We can surmise from this example that strategies of distinction (Bourdieu, 1979) also play a role in pushing oneself to one's limits. Trekking, and mountain sports in general, allow hikers to set themselves apart from ordinary people by gaining admittance to an elite group[11]. For individuals with a certain level of physical, financial, and cultural potential, trekking provides an opportunity to visit areas which are rightly perceived as difficult to access, to which others are not able to go, places which David Goeury describes as "spaces of merit" (2011). As a professor from Pittsburgh explains, "We didn't choose this destination, our 13 year-old daughter did! She asked us after she saw the *Everest* film. She wanted to take a trip to a unique place and have an extraordinary vacation compared to her classmates. And it's true that coming here represents a great challenge[12]."

A lost paradise conducive to physical and mental renewal

11 Trekking not only gives rise to social distinction, it more importantly leads to physical and mental renewal. It provides an opportunity to "replenish body and spirit through a trip that transcends time, away from everyday places" (Sacareau, 2010: 2). "The ascent brings about a change in the status of those who climb the mountain and allows them to transcend the human condition. Individuals find themselves purified, and renewed physically and spiritually. The physiological effects of staying in a high-altitude location (mountain sickness and feeling of intoxication) can intensify this impression" (Debarbieux**,** 1995: 12). "This trip is helping me find myself," says a young American traveller[13].

12 According to those interviewed, the Khumbu region provides a rupture with space and time which is particularly conducive to this renewal. "Why did you choose to come to this region in particular? – For the landscapes, and to get away from my country and all the idiots– What do you mean by that? – You know, our president, the migrants and all that... Here, I'm far away from my work, far from all those problems. I can relax and the people here are friendly," explains a lawyer from Lyon (France) interviewed on the second day of his ascent to the base camp[14]. "I wanted to come in spring so I wouldn't come across too many tourists, I love nature and exploring. I want to live slowly and I think that this is a good place to live that way," explains a doctor from Madrid[15]. Without being described as such, the Khumbu region imagined by trekkers, before or at the beginning of their ascent, resembles an authentic lost paradise[16]. And according to the Buddhist mythology of the Sherpas who inhabit the region, this small area, perched at an elevation of more than 3,400 metres, does in fact represent a *beyul*, a sacred space that can only be accessed by pure souls seeking refuge from the baseness of the world (Sherpa, 2008). With its *kanis* (purifying gateways), *chortens* (sacred buildings), monasteries and prayer walls, flags and

wheels, the landscape is still imbued with this religiosity, thus creating an Eden-like vision. The dual institutional listing of Mount Everest's high valleys, both as a natural park (1976) and as a UNESCO World Heritage site (1979), reinforces this dimension and leads westerners to represent the Khumbu region as a space where nature and the values of the local population have remained authentic[17], sheltered from the corruption of the city, the Western world, and the peoples of the plain. “What do I like about it? The incredible landscapes, and the people are friendly, more so than in India where they're selfish...Yeah, I've found that people here help each other more,” notes a British buyer who is an expatriate in Dubai[18]. Another tourist who was interviewed as he was getting off the plane explains, “We walk with people for whom this is just their everyday life. They aren't playing tourists...We like to visit countries before McDonald’s gets there. So this is a more natural place to meet real people who've lived the same way for centuries and that explains...that's why we like Nepal and hiking in these areas” (Beillevaire& Poulain, 2012).

Figure 3– Entrance to Sagarmatha Natural Park

UPON ENTERING THE BEYUL, VISITORS ARE ASKED TO FOLLOW SEVERAL RULES IN KEEPING WITH THE EDEN-LIKE VISION OF THE REGION.

PHOTO: JACQUEMET E., 13 FEBRUARY 2016

From a heterotopia of accumulated time to an increasingly globalised heterotopia

13 Though tourists portray the Khumbu region as having an unchanging nature, the region's inhabitants, such as caravan drivers or migrants, have always been mobile and did not wait for the arrival of transport infrastructures or tourism to seek to improve their

everyday life, encounter new ways of acting and thinking, or escape their conditions as farmers and porters. However, the development of tourism has led to significant improvements in living standards and has increased Sherpas' travel between the Khumbu region and Kathmandu or to foreign countries, especially outside of tourist season (Stevens, 1996; Adams, 1996; Sacareau, 1997). Forty-four percent of survey respondents during the springs of 2015 and 2016[19] said they had been to a foreign country at least once. In the village of Namche Bazaar, 22% of individuals interviewed had at least one child living in America, Europe, Australia, or Japan. A third of them reported that they had already been to one of these areas at least once and some even travel for tourist or professional purposes with a frequency that probably exceeds that of many trekkers. As a result, a portion of the local population has a very accurate representation of the sorts of activities and places that are popular in major international cities. In addition, the development of electricity over the past twenty years has not only improved living conditions for the local population, it has also led to a significant diversification and upgrading of tourist services and facilities (Jacquemet, 2016). The streets of the centre of Lukla (2,800 m) or Namche Bazaar (3,400m) have thus seen a proliferation of pubs, bakeries, internet cafés, and shops selling outdoor equipment. Their signs promote the "organic" or local consumption popular amongst upper-class Westerners who can afford a trip to Nepal. Others have fun breaking down the dialectics between near and far, between exoticism and the familiar, by combining symbols of globalisation with emblems of local identity. This strategy has given rise to a number of incongruous, hybrid markers: "Everest Burger," "Lukla Starbucks," "Yak Donald's" or Irish pubs surrounded by prayer wheels with their nightclubs and happy hours. The primary objective is obviously to respond to demand from tourists. But we can also consider that these new shops and restaurants reflect the status these entrepreneurs hope to attain: a sort of local creative class, fully integrated into the global system. "Well, it seems Irish pubs are cultural landmarks... they are present in every modern city, from New York to Toronto, and from Cancun to Kathmandu. Every modern city has one, so why not Namche?[20]" as the owners of one of these pubs explains to Sanjay Nepal in an article about modernisation of the Everest region (2015: 255). Along with the vision of a heterotopia fixed in a time "which accumulates endlessly," the Khumbu region also seems to be witnessing the development of places linked "on the contrary, to time in its most futile, most transitory, most precarious aspect and in the form of a festival" (Foucault, 1994: 756).

Figure 4 – Café store fronts in the villages of Lukla, Phakding and Namche Bazaar

PHOTOS: JACQUEMET E., MAY 2014 & APRIL 2016.

A well-accepted global heterotopia

14 One might assume that this rise in tourism, with its accompanying creation of new places and uses, would create tension with tourists' representations, or at least with the characteristics which originally defined trekking: exploring vast natural spaces and exotic populations untouched by mass tourism in a rather basic, simple manner (Sacareau, 1997).

15 Some of the most experienced trekkers do express a slightly nuanced view. "It's unbelievable, all we see here now are shops for tourists! Eleven years ago in the Annapurnas, it was nothing like this –it was much more natural! We'd stay with families and use basins to take showers. And it was easier to communicate with other tourists, here everyone sits at their own table!"[21] "During my visit in the 80s, I stayed in simpler lodges with no electricity, ate mostly local food, and had almost no contact with the outside world [during the trek]. Today, internet can be found in all major villages, and you can call your friends overseas from anywhere on the trail. Everest is no longer remote or inaccessible. The spirit of adventure is still there, but to me personally, it is somewhat subdued,[22] "recalls another trekker cited by Sanjay Nepal (2015: 257). But are these statements not the reflection of a desire to distinguish oneself from other trekkers, rather than the expression of a genuine feeling of disappointment and nostalgia?

16 The observation of practices and analysis of statements, such as conclusions by Sanjay Nepal (op. cit.), has actually found that although they may be troubled or astounded by the development and modernity of the villages along the circuit, most tourists adapt

rather well to the difference between what they had anticipated and what they actually experience once they arrive. More specifically, for many hikers, the trek seems to consist of two parts. First, there is the hike up the mountain. This is a performance-based stage in which trekkers attempt to conform to what they had hoped to see and experience: “nature,” “breathtaking landscapes,” and “friendly people.” They have their sights firmly set on the peaks. “Oh really? There are pubs in Lukla? I hadn't even noticed!” remarks a young Bavarian tourist. “Once I arrived in Lukla I couldn't take my eyes off the mountains –I kept telling myself, "I'm in the Himalayas! I'm in the Himalayas!"”[23] The ascent is also a stage that requires great effort: hikers must remain cautious, focused, and pay close attention to how their bodies react to the altitude. Then comes the descent: once they have achieved their goal, they can relax all their senses. Trekkers turn their sights to the valley floors and anticipate the reward of finishing their trek and sharing (creation of narrative) their experience with loved ones or with other tourists. Throughout these stages, trekkershave been able to gain perspective about the untouched aspect of the region and meaningful encounters with a local population they imagine to be authentic (Ladwein, 2005). They have also taken full notice of the wide range of goods and services available, along with the uses and practices of other trekkers or lodge managers. They may continue to reject these services and practices, but most often, they eventually adopt them and use them quite extensively, especially in terms of regular internet use, visiting pubs and cafes, and a desire to spend time with or develop ties with other tourists. While waiting for his plane in a pub in Lukla, just before a game of billiards with the author, Cédric gives a glowing account of his trip and his ascent of Island Peak, “I had a really great time... But the business behind all of this is unbelievable! The Sherpas are smart – they've realised all the money they can make in the region, especially by using their name.”[24]

Conclusion

17 In theory, the sources of motivation that lead trekkers to come hike in the Mount Everest region are based on the same collective representations as those envisioned for other mountains around the world. The Khumbu region is considered to be conducive to physical and mental well-being, as well as a means for social distinction. Just as tourists visit Chamonix and Zermatt to admire Mont Blanc or the Matterhorn, they come to the Khumbu region to see the world's highest and most spectacular mountains. What sets the Everest region apart is clearly a matter of dimensions. The altitude only amplifies the processes by which individuals push themselves to their limits since the landscapes, obstacles, and sense of commitment take on new proportions. Furthermore, the historical and geographical context of the Khumbu and other Himalayan regions long sheltered them from the development of tourism, thereby preserving a profoundly heterotopian character in addition to the exoticism they naturally possess. Although, as in other tourist areas, the growing integration of the Khumbu region into a globalised context and the increasing number of visitors are often seen as threats (MIT team, 2002) by the trekkers interviewed, these aspects do not have an adverse effect on contemplation or the feeling of renewal. Instead, the development of telecommunications networks has allowed trekkers to share and create narratives about their experiences more instantaneously. At the same time, the juxtaposition in a single area of spaces which are, on one hand, conducive to adventure and a sense of renewal, and on the other, to going

out, meeting people, and relaxing, has given rise to unique, hybrid places in the region'svillages and hamlets. These new places are especially appreciated by the youngest visitors and may serve as an additional draw for tourists in the future.

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NOTES

1. Originally from Tibet, the Sherpas have inhabited the Khumbu region since the 16th century. Widely recruited as porters for the major Himalayan expeditions, their name has undergone a semantic shift whereby the term "sherpa," now refers to any porter hired in the context of Himalayan mountaineering or trekking, regardless of the community to which he belongs.
2. Allibert Trekking Brochure, 2015, p. 216
3. ANR-13-SENV-0005 PRESHINE: *Pressions sur les ressources en eau et en sol dans l'Himalaya népalais* (Pressure on water and soil resources in the Nepalese Himalayas).
4. From 7 February to 3 May 2015 and from 13 February to 9 April 2016.
5. Recorded as 8,840 m at that time. Altitude revised to 8,848 m then 8,850 m in 1990.
6. On 12 November 1995, a group of twenty-six trekkers and porters died in an avalanche near Gokyo (Reuters, 1995). On 8 October 2008, eighteen people died in a plane crash in Lukla (The Associated Press, 2008). In October 2014, forty-three died in a storm on the Annapurna circuit, fifty others were reported missing (Sawer *et al*, 2014). The following spring, the tourist regions of Langtang and Manaslu were devastated by a massive earthquake.
7. Met in Namche Bazaar on 26 March 2015.
8. In 2008, the ratio of fatalities to successful ascents on the slopes of Mount Everest was actually 5.70% compared to 37.91% for Annapurna or 23.27% forK2 (8000ers.com, 2015).
9. Mount Everest base camp (5,364 m), promontories of Kala Patar (5,614 m) or of GokyoRi (5,357 m).
10. Interviewed in Lukla on 4 April 2015.
11. This same distinction can also be made between mountaineers and trekkers, between researchers and trekkers or amongst trekkers.
12. Interviewed on 22 March 2016 in Namche Bazaar.
13. Namche Bazaar, 16 March 2016.
14. Namche Bazaar, 16 March 2016.
15. Namche, during an ascent, 27 March 2017
16. The Khumbu region recalls the famous Shangri-la myth popularised in 1933 by James Hilton in his novel *Lost Horizons* (Sacareau, 2010).
17. And yet, the heroic figure of the Sherpas and their values have not been widely discussed in mountaineering literature (Raspaud, 2003) and the media, nor directly commented upon by tourists.
18. Namche, during his ascent, 26 March 2016
19. Survey of 261 inhabitants carried out from 7 February to 3 May 2015 and from 13 February to 9 April 2016.
20. (Nepal, 2015: 255)
21. A French couple, both of whom are doctors, interviewed on 31 March 2016 in Namche.
22. (27 April [2014])
23. Interviewed on 22 March 2016 in Namche.
24. Interviewed in Lukla on 7 April 2016.

ABSTRACTS

Beyond a simple fascination with the height of the summit itself, this article aims to explore the various sources of motivation that lead tens of thousands of visitors to come to the Everest (Khumbu) region of Nepal every year. Drawing on an analysis of collective representations by tourists, this article will show that the Khumbu region combines various principles of heterotopias (Foucault, 1967). This region, long unexplored and closed to outsiders, and its landscapes infused with religiosity, attracts tourists because it is still largely seen as a genuine lost paradise. These elements are conducive to the processes of physical and mental renewal, in addition to social distinction which allows trekkers –in a more or less conscious, temporary, or performance-based manner– to push themselves to their limits. The popularity and increasing openness of the Everest region and its inhabitants to globalisation, which could theoretically call into question the meaning and very principles of this heterotopia, do not seem to affect the experience of trekkers, despite the fact that their practices are based on a complete break with the places and time frames of their everyday life.

INDEX

Keywords: Everest, Khumbu, collective representations, tourism, heterotopia

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