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BUILDING THE ROAD TO KATHMANDU: NOTES ON THE HISTORY OF TOURISM IN NEPAL

This paper considers the rise of mass tourism to Nepal in the 1960s in light of the historical processes that created images of the Himalayas in the Western imagination. By the 19th century critics of modernity had begun to look to “The East” in search of the spiritual authenticity they believed lost in the increasingly “disenchanted” West. From the Transcendentalists to Spiritualism, to Theosophy, disaffected anti-modernists found a new global axis mundi in South Asia generally, and the Himalayas in particular. By the early 20th century this Himalayan fixation found expression in the creation of Shangri-la and a growing fixation on supposedly Tibetan occult sciences. These images and others helped create the spatial imaginary that launched hundreds of thousands of Western youth on “The Road to Kathmandu” in the 1960s.

When I first visited Kathmandu in December of 1969 the city made a big impression on me. Even for a nine-year-old, Kathmandu in the late 60s was a place of wonder and my memories of the valley stand out from those gathered during a year spent living on the subcontinent.

But what has *since* fascinated me the most about my first visit to Kathmandu was not so much what I noticed as what I didn't notice. What I didn't know at the time was that in 1969 Kathmandu had become known variously as “the Mecca of hippydom,” “the Amsterdam of the East,” “the capital of the Aquarian Age,” and even “the New Jerusalem” (Hollingshead 1973:230). Wandering around the valley in 1969, I was oblivious to the fact that I was probably often within a stone's throw of some of the leading figures in Western pop and counterculture. Cat Stevens wrote some of the songs from his first album, including the song *Katmandu*, while sitting in a teashop in the old city in 1969. Michael Hollingshead—the man who turned Timothy Leary onto LSD and a leading figure in the Harvard University LSD experiments in the early 1960s—was holding court in a house near Swayambhu hill. Zina Rachevsky—a Polish princess, former New York socialite, and in 1967 the first western woman to be ordained as a Buddhist nun by the Dalai Lama—was busy setting up what became known as the Kopan Monastery. Today the Kopan Monastery has hundreds of branches around the world and many people point to its founding as

the origins of the massive spread of Tibetan Buddhism to the West. A few years before I was there the famous “beat” poet Gary Snyder had visited Kathmandu, and just one year before I visited, Richard Alpert himself had been spiritually transformed in a Kathmandu restaurant. Richard Alpert was Timothy Leary's right-hand man at Harvard and like Leary, was fired in 1963 in the scandals surrounding the Harvard LSD experiments. By 1968 Alpert had wandered overland to Kathmandu where he converted to Hinduism, became “Baba Ram Dass,” and authored the famous book *Be Here Now*, which became a huge bestseller after 1971 and one of the defining books of the hippie era.

The point is that by 1969 Kathmandu had become a key site in the Western countercultural imagination. It was the final destination of the so-called “hippie trail” that led overland from Europe and North Africa to S. Asia. In fact more often the overland route was known simply as the “Road to Kathmandu” or even just the “RTK.” By the late 1960s Kathmandu had become a kind of screen onto which Western young people projected all kinds of dreams of otherness. Similar to the role Tibet had played in the Western imagination forty years earlier, by the late 1960s—with Tibet closed and Nepal now open—Kathmandu became the home of utopian otherness for a new generation of counter-culturists.

I propose in this paper to ask how this countercultural projection came to be. I will try to follow the

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"Road to Kathmandu" back to its source. Why Kathmandu in the late 1960s (and not Quito, Mombassa, or Muscat)? Why were people like Cat Stevens, Michael Hollingshead, Zina Rachevsky, and Richard Alpert going to Kathmandu? I will also describe the hippie "scene" in Kathmandu in the late 60s and early 1970s, as well as some of the responses that Nepalis had to this invasion of exotic foreigners.

This paper is part of a larger project on a history of tourism in Nepal from 1950 to 1980. Within those decades I have identified three distinct periods. The first begins in 1951 with the founding of the modern Nepali state. In the century before 1951 Nepal had been ruled by an extremely xenophobic regime that viewed a strict isolationist policy as a key element of its national defense. Even the British, the only country to have established diplomatic relations with Nepal before 1950, were only allowed 3 or 4 visitors a year to the British residency compound in Kathmandu. (In fact by 1950 about 5 times more Westerners had visited Lhasa—the extremely remote capital of Tibet—than had ever set foot in Kathmandu.) But in 1950 and 51 a popular revolt, inspired by the Indian independence movement, swept out the old regime in Kathmandu, reinstated the King as head of a constitutional monarchy, and gradually began opening the country to foreigners.

Tourists began arriving almost immediately although it wasn't until 1955 that the government issued the first official tourist visas. The average tourist during these early years was of retirement age, very wealthy—usually on round-the-world tours—and American. In fact, about 80 percent of the early tourists were from the US, which indicates who was leading the postwar global tourism surge. But the total number of tourist arrivals remained low and the average annual growth rate in arrivals was only about 15 percent.

In the mid 1960s a very different tourism pattern developed. The elderly elite continued to come to Kathmandu for brief stays in luxury hotels, but in 1965 there was a sudden surge of youthful, budget-class arrivals that quickly far outnumbered the old "blue-rinse set." Between 1965 and 1970 the average annual growth rate (in tourist arrivals) shot up to close to 40 percent while the average age of visitors dropped steeply. After 1965 around two-thirds of western visitors in Nepal were less than 40 years old and in some years almost half the arrivals were between 16 and 30. When one considers that older tourists usually stayed only a few days, while the younger ones stayed for weeks or months, it becomes clear how the tourist scene became overwhelmingly youthful.

1973 marks the end of the hippie "golden age" and I will discuss the transition to a new era of "adventure tourism" later in this paper. Here I will focus mainly on the so-called "hippie era" and the emergence of the "Road to Kathmandu."

THE ROAD TO KATHMANDU

One question that I've been intrigued with is "When and where does the Road to Kathmandu begin?" One might

argue that it begins in Europe and N. Africa in the mid 1960s but in fact the geo-historical imaginary that launched people onto the RTK has much deeper roots. In many ways, the longing that lured people to Kathmandu was as old as the Western belief that "The East" is the land of spiritual origins. For centuries Jerusalem was the source of the "light of the East"—*ex lux oriente*—but certainly by the 19th century more and more people critical of Western modernity were looking further east for their spiritual *axis mundi*. Colonial knowledge systems that spawned a host of Orientalisms, and eventually Anthropology itself, inevitably made "The East" not just the focus of scholarly and administrative scrutiny, but a resource for the Western popular imagination.

In his book *The Myth of Shangri-la*, the historian Peter Bishop does a wonderful job of tracking the growing Western fascination with the Himalayas from the 18th century onward. Probably most relevant for this discussion are the growing links between 19th century European and American anti-industrialist, anti-modernist countercultures and The East. From "high-brow" types like Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Transcendentalists who read Indological works on Vedanta Hinduism and Buddhism, to more popular fringe movements like Spiritualism and Theosophy, you see a swelling of interest in Eastern religions and the Himalayas. In fact, Madame Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott, founders of Theosophy, claimed to have direct psychic links with "The Masters of the Universe" who they said resided in the uncharted vastness of the Himalayas. With Tibet and Nepal closed to them, in 1879 Blavatsky and Olcott chose the next best thing, and traveled to India in search of "authentic" ancient spiritualism. Blavatsky and Olcott's pilgrimage to India certainly isn't the first instance of disaffected Westerners looking to The East for spiritual meaning, but the movement they founded, and the success of Theosophy in the US and Britain around the turn of the 20th century, are examples of the growing popular countercultural rejection of Western modernity and concomitant turn to an essentialized, Romantic vision of The East, and especially, of the Himalayas.

The next great wave of Western countercultural angst came after WW I when again there was a powerful turn to The East in general, and Tibet and the Himalayas in particular. The "roof of the world," the last remaining *terra incognita*, practically the only part of the globe still free of Western colonial domination—the Himalayas of Tibet and Nepal—came to be a place of what Bishop calls "imaginative escape" (1989:7). For disillusioned Americans and Europeans, the Himalayas were still home to the "happiness and wisdom now lost to the West" (Bishop 1989:235). What Max Weber spoke of as the disenchantment of modern Western civilization seems to have created an almost desperate need for one last supposedly untouched, "enchanted" land.

Consider just three examples of the Western fascination with the Himalayas during the inter-War years. In 1927 the eccentric English Orientalist Walter Y. Evans-Wentz published his translation of the Tibetan *Bardo Thodol*, the so-called

"Tibetan Book of the Dead." This book on the transmigration and reincarnation of souls became an immediate occult classic but also attracted scholarly interest. For example, Carl Jung quickly published a translation and commentary of the work in German. The book fit nicely into Jung's ideas of the *anima mundi* and archetypes and indeed much of Jungian psychology has been described as part of a larger Western response to the experience of disenchantment, and the desire to reclaim its "lost soul" in other times and places. Of the *Bardo Thodol*, Jung wrote in about 1930: "It is good that such to all intents and purposes 'useless' books exist. They are meant for those 'queer folk' who no longer set much store by the uses, aims, and meaning of present day 'civilization'" (Jung 1958 [c.1930]:301). Jung recognized the "Book of the Dead" as being overtly countercultural in his own day and, as we'll see, it remained so into the 1960s when it was reincarnated as one of the key texts of the psychedelic era.

In the early 1920s the British launched three expeditions to Mt. Everest, via Tibet because Nepal was closed. All were unsuccessful with the last, in 1924, ending with the mysterious deaths of Mallory and Irvine who were lost near the summit. These climbs not only riveted world attention onto the Himalayas, but also provided a new countercultural hero in the person of George Mallory. Mallory, who famously said that he wished to climb Everest "Because it's there," was the very model of the modern disaffected youth, brilliant but critical of the modern West. Many people believe that Hugh Conway, the hero of James Hilton's best selling 1933 novel (and later Hollywood hit) *Lost Horizon*, was modeled on Mallory, the spiritual idealist of Everest (Bishop 1989:216). Needless to say, Hilton's *Lost Horizon*, and the explicitly anti-modern Himalayan utopia of Shangri-la, resonated powerfully with a general Western malaise and longing for spiritual meaning. Orville Schell has called Shangri-la "the most powerful utopian myth of a largely dystopian century" (2000:243). In fact—with a nod to Raymond Williams—Shangri-la has to be one of the "key words" of the 20th century.

At about the same time that mythic heroes like Mallory and Conway were making their spiritual pilgrimages to the Himalayas, the German novelist Herman Hesse published his hugely popular allegory *Journey to the East* (1932). Hesse wrote of "the eternal strivings of the human spirit towards the East, towards Home," "towards light and wonder," "towards the Home of Light" (Hesse 1956:13). Hesse, a self-professed Hindu (Hesse 1974:177), located the East as the destination of a personal spiritual quest. All of these people—Evan-Wentz, Jung, Mallory, Hilton, Hesse, and others—are important figures in constructing the general cultural geo-imaginary that led to the Road to Kathmandu.

If we fast-forward now to the early 1960s, it's clear that the post-war "baby-boom" generation inherited not only the countercultural longing of these writers of the 1920s and 30s, but, in fact, often took direct inspiration from them. Probably the most spectacular example of this is the appropriation of Evan-Wentz's "Tibetan Book of the Dead" by

Harvard psychologists Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert. In the early 1960s Leary and Alpert were heading the "Harvard Psychedelic Research Project" that was testing various hallucinogenic drugs for the potential to bring about behavior change in areas like alcoholism and criminal recidivism (Hollingshead 1973:16). This project and the people involved in it are fascinating topics in and of themselves, but for our purposes, what is perhaps most amazing is how people like Leary and Alpert began their careers very much in the scientific mold, but then made a clear break toward religion, and Eastern religion in particular. To make a long story short, most members of the Harvard group found in their LSD trips an experience *not* of simple altered brain chemistry, but of shattering ontological revelation. Of his first LSD experience (courtesy of Michael Hollingshead) Timothy Leary wrote, "Since that time I have been acutely aware that everything I perceive, everything within and around me, is a creation of my own consciousness" (1990:119). In other words, rather than viewing drug induced states as neuro-chemical hallucinations, Leary and his colleagues came to the conclusion that material reality itself was a brain-induced hallucination. Needless to say this position is not far from the Hindu/Buddhist metaphysics of *maya* or material illusion and it wasn't long before the Harvard group made the connection. It's also crucial to note that they weren't the first one's to link drug states with "oriental transcendentalism." Most notable was Aldous Huxley who from the 1930s onward had been "the world's most influential advocate of psychedelic drugs" (Leary 1990:36), and the "patron saint of LSD." Not coincidentally, Huxley was a personal friend of both Leary and Hollingshead, and advisor to the Harvard project.

Anyway, it was in this context, and with these precedents, that members of the Harvard group shifted toward oriental mysticism and soon found Evans-Wentz's "Tibetan Book of the Dead." Leary and Alpert were convinced that the *Bardo Thodol*, with its account of the soul's journey to reincarnation, was a perfect metaphorical description of the experiences they had recorded with psychedelic drugs (Alpert 1971:13-14). In 1963 Leary and Alpert published *The Psychedelic Experience*, a book that Alpert describes as a paraphrasing of the Tibetan Book of the Dead and as "a manual for psychological death and rebirth" with the aid of LSD.

But what does all of this have to do with the Road to Kathmandu? What I have been trying to do is assemble some of the key cultural trends (and trend setters) that contributed to the great "journeys to the East" of the mid 1960s. Among these are, of course, the general prefiguring of the East as the "Home of Light" and spiritual discovery, the rise of psychedelic drug use and its association with Eastern metaphysics, the ties between all of this and the baby boom counterculture, and finally people like Leary, Alpert, and Hollingshead who were themselves some of the most important figures to personally travel the Road to Kathmandu.

But why did people actually set out on the RTK? The answers range from the sordid, to the sublime, to the mun-

dane. For example, for many of the early travelers on the RTK drugs were less a metaphysical stimulant than an addictive lure. Many people hit the road in search of the fabled hashish homelands. One American who went on to become a major Nepali hash smuggler in the 1970s describes how in the mid 1960s he got his first world geography lessons from reading the labels on the hashish being sold on the streets of New York City (Pietri 2001:1). In fact the major hashish supply regions of Morocco, Lebanon, Turkey, Afghanistan, India, and Nepal literally map out the Road to Kathmandu, which was also known as the “drug trail.” But cannabis was only part of the story: cheap, unregulated supplies of opium, heroin, and especially five-rupee vials of pure morphine and methedrine were what drew serious addicts. Especially in the early years, many on the RTK were on a drugged out crash-and-burn trajectory even before they left home.

But many of the others in the early years were “seekers,” people who saw themselves as embarking on some kind of spiritual journey (very often inspired by Hesse’s *Journey to the East*), even if in retrospect they acknowledged themselves to have been very naïve. During the first few years of the “hippie trail” the majority of travelers were Americans and Britons, with Americans alone making up almost half the population. By 1973 more Americans than ever were heading to Nepal but their portion of the total had dropped to only about 16 percent. By the early 70s continental Europeans were traveling to South Asia by the hundreds of thousands. Compared to their Anglophone fellow travelers, Europeans tended to be “escapers” more than “seekers.” Most of the escapers had some vague knowledge of South Asia but their motivation seems to have been, as much or more, to simply leave home, than to go to India or Nepal. One person recalled, “Seekers wore sandals and such-like: foot-shaped shoes. I wore escaper’s shoes ... the kind that gave you shoe-shaped feet. Seekers sought the inner life; escapers, The Life” (Tomory 1996:23). The point is that, especially as time went on, fewer and fewer people went looking for Eastern spirituality, while more and more were looking for “freedom,” and simply a good time. Many of these were directly or indirectly inspired by Jack Kerouac’s desire to simply be “on the road.” For them, the travel was as important as the destination.

If the trend was generally from seekers to escapers, there were good reasons for more and more people wanting to escape. From early on some people left the US to escape the war, but many other young people stayed at home in the mid 60s. Even if they hadn’t actually joined the Civil Rights Movement, some progressive political cause, or become active “flower children,” by 1966 and 67 there was a general feeling of optimism within western youth counterculture, a feeling that change, maybe even radical change, was in the offing. That feeling changed dramatically in 1968. The assassinations of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy not only eliminated two heroes of the youth counterculture, but also shattered many people’s hopes and dreams for real social change. These blows were followed by race riots, burning cit-

ies, police brutality and, with the Tet Offensive, the Vietnam War went from bad to worse. Government crackdowns in France, and Nixon’s victory in the US were the last straws for many and the arrival statistics for 1969 and 70 in Nepal show a sudden spike as more and more people simply “got out of there” and went to “Katmandu,” to quote Bob Seeger.

THE KATHMANDU “SCENE”

Who exactly was it that was visiting Kathmandu during these years? One somewhat cynical elderly visitor in 1971 offered the following four-part tourist typology: 1) the “blue-rinse ladies” who stay for 2 or 3 days and rarely leave their hotel or bus, 2) the “short-term experimenting drop-outs,” or what I would call “travelers,” 3) the pink, shaved-headed religious devotees, or “dharma bums,” and 4) the “true soft-centered, blown-head hippies” (Mayne 1975:241). From what I can tell this categorization is actually quite accurate and probably even roughly approximates the proportions of tourist arrivals. It’s worth remembering that even though the Kathmandu scene was overwhelmingly youthful, by no means were all of the young tourists full-blown freaks: true “hippies” may have represented only 20 to 30 percent of the visitors. But even so, the lines between the categories of travelers, dharma bums, and hippies weren’t always very clear—especially to Nepalis—and there was a lot of movement from one category to another. There *were* fairly distinct communities but they all came for many of the same reasons.

One of them was simply cost of living. For a generation of disillusioned, Western seekers and escapers, Kathmandu was more than just a “far out” destination: it was also dirt cheap, a place where a person could live for weeks, months, even years on a tiny fraction of what it would cost at home. With strong western currencies and readily available jobs, people could spend a few months waitressing or working in a factory at home, and then spend the rest of the year hanging out in the East. By the late 1960s one could take a charter bus 11,000 miles overland from Amsterdam to Kathmandu for 150 dollars, and some bragged of hitchhiking the RTK for as little as 6 dollars. In fact, many describe the general ethos of the “hippie trail” and the Kathmandu scene as one of rampant “one-downsmanship” where travelers proudly swapped poverty stories. The goal was to live as long as you could on as little as possible. But for now, the point is that strong western economies and currencies were major factors in opening up places like Nepal to mass youth tourism in the 1960s.

During the so-called “hippie era,” a person could easily get by in Kathmandu for less than a dollar a day. A single woman might rent a private room at the Globe Inn for \$4.50 a month while the super budget travelers could stay in the dormitory at the Camp Hotel for \$1.50 a month! If that was too expensive, most people staying more than a few weeks quickly found their ways to one of the many local “crash” houses which revolving groups of dozens of people rented by the month. Most of the early lodges were located in the Jho-

chen area of Kathmandu, just south of Durbar Square (the old temple/palace complex), and by the late 1960s the area had been re-christened “Freak Street,” a name that is still used today.

Few people got very excited about the budget-class accommodations in Kathmandu, but food was another matter. Starting around 1966 Kathmandu residents began opening food shops and restaurants catering to the young budget tourists. The first of these were the pie and cake shops of “Pig Alley,” an ultra-low caste neighborhood just west of the old city center and an easy walk from Freak Street. Some of the low-caste men who had worked in the homes of American “aid” personnel became excellent cooks and it was these men who set up pie shops (like the famous “Chai and Pie”) in Pig Alley

By the spring of 1967 a handful of restaurants had opened (often attached to lodges) catering to budget travelers in and around Freak Street and by 1972 there were literally dozens. These restaurants offered Nepali and Tibetan food but most specialized in Western dishes. In fact, for a lot of visitors, food and restaurants were some of the most notable and memorable parts of their Nepal experience. Just one example comes from a journal entry from November 1968 that a British visitor has posted on his personal web page. (In fact there are many detailed reminiscences such as this scattered around the Web.) Having gotten off the bus from London he raves about how he went to the Camp Hotel Café and had steak and chips for the first time since leaving England four months earlier. Later he wandered down to Pig Alley and gorged himself on apple and apricot pie. A few months later a New Yorker visited the Camp Hotel Café and wrote: “The atmosphere is more like a café in Greenwich Village than anything else, and the clientele looks and talks as if it might have been transported bodily from the Village” (Bernstein 1970:71). What fascinates me is how, with the help of enterprising Nepalis, cutting edge Western youth counterculture was indeed “transported bodily” to this exotic Asian outpost where it became a continuation of the same “scene” being lived out in London, San Francisco, Amsterdam, and New York.

Another key location in the Kathmandu “scene” was a restaurant called “Tibetan Blue.” A noodle-shop that had originally served grungy Tibetan muleteers, and which happened to have blue walls, “Tibetan Blue” was more or less

commandeered by young tourists who gave it its name. For thirty cents you could get a buffalo steak, tea, and a stack of Tibetan bread. In 1969 one observer wrote, “Most of the clientele were bearded young Europeans or Americans, along with girls of varying dress and nationalities. The men often wore yellow monk’s robes” (Bernstein 1970:70-71).

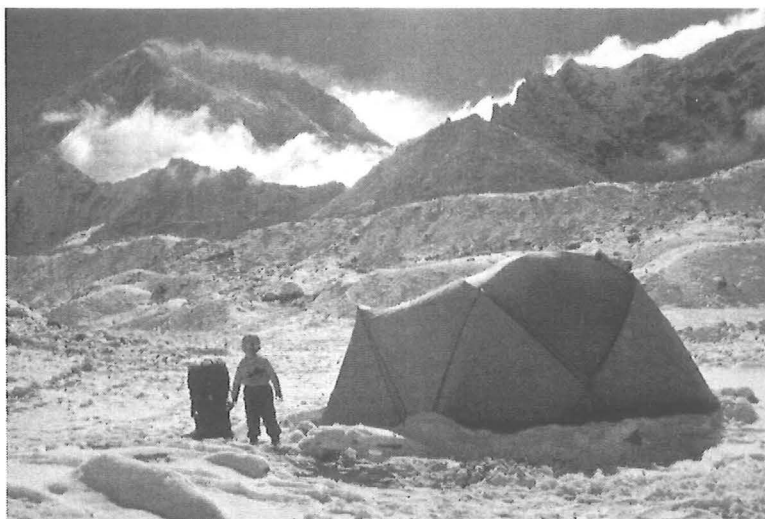
It was at Tibetan Blue in 1968 that Richard Alpert, fired from Harvard and fresh from the RTK, took a giant step on his celebrated path to enlightenment. In his book *Be Here Now*, Alpert writes “I was in the Blue Tibetan with my friend . . . and in walked this very extraordinary guy. . . . He was

6’7” and he had long blonde hair and a long blonde beard. He was a Westerner, an American [an ex-surfer from Malibu], and he was wearing holy clothes. . . . When he entered, he came directly over to our table and sat down.” His name was Bhagwan Dass and Alpert wrote that immediately “I had the feeling I had met somebody who ‘Knew’” (Alpert 1971:17). Alpert became a disciple of Bhagwan Dass and after changing his own name to “Baba Ram Dass,” went on to become

probably the most famous and influential Hindu convert the US has ever produced. It was also at the “Tibetan Blue” that Cat Stevens penned his famous song “Katmandu.”

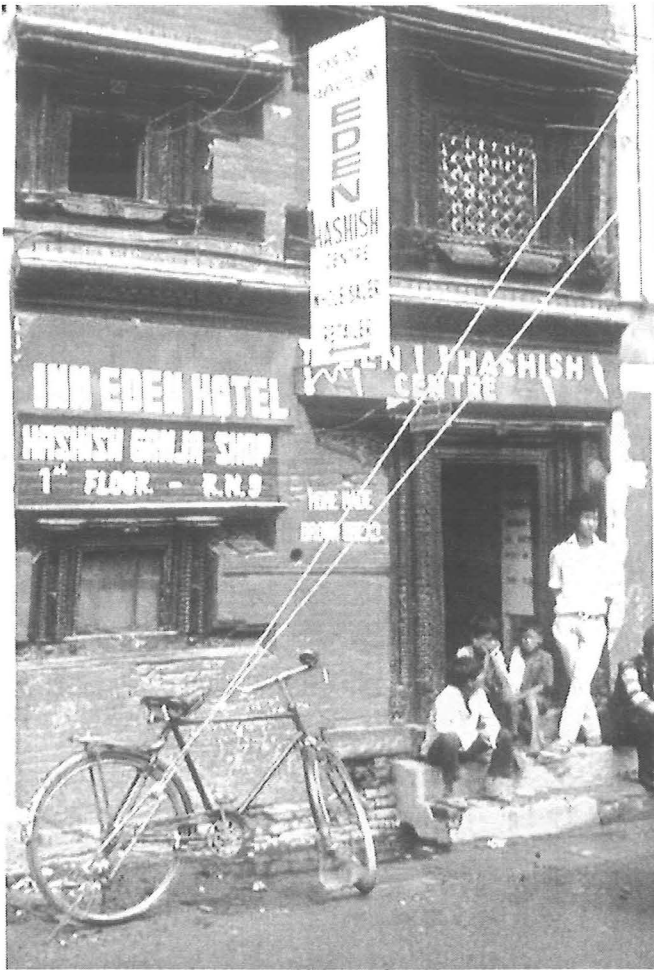
Another frequently mentioned location of the Kathmandu scene was the “Cabin Restaurant” which opened in early 1969. The Cabin had a more psychedelic atmosphere with a stereo system belting out the latest avant-garde hits. A contemporary described it as a “groovy place, bizarre, loony. Its walls are plastered with wacky pictures and witty slogans cut out from old magazines. One sign reads ‘Make Love, Not War.’ One placard reads, ‘Keep the World Beautiful—Stay Stoned.’ ‘There is so much *charas* being smoked here that you could get stoned just sitting here’ said a Nepali.” The atmosphere is more like a tribal gathering” (Colaabavala 1974:8).

This last observation brings me to an important point so far unmentioned. One thing that all of these cafés had in common—and one of the main attractions of Kathmandu—was pot smoking. At some cafés, like that at the Camp Hotel, the management kept a chillum with hashish going at all times that was simply circulated from patron to patron, gratis. At other places, like The Cabin, hashish products were literally on the menu but patrons passed the pipe just the same. When Michael Hollingshead arrived in Kathmandu in July



Tiny Trekker, Lobuche, 1990

BARBARA BROWER



Hashish shop, Kathmandu, 1973

1969, one of the first things he did was head for The Cabin Restaurant to “score” some hash.

It was up a tiny alley, dustbin dirty and smelling of cow shit and urine. . . . [It] was an extraordinary place. There was pop music on twin speakers, very loud, and a few stone-topped tables at which were gathered a group of perhaps fifteen young Westerners, silent, smoking chillums, and oblivious. They were dressed in a gay medley of Indian, Tibetan and Nepalese costumes, bedecked with beads and beards. One of them looked up, smiled, and handed me a chillum, which I smoked. The effect was instantaneous—I almost passed out, and had to sit down. . . . Rana, the dapper young Nepalese owner of the place, would come over every now and then and ask if there was anything more I wanted. . . . I merely shook my head and continued just sitting in my utter stupor. (Hollingshead 1973:222-23)

Before 1973 not only was cannabis consumption legal in Nepal, it was actually sold in Government shops. By 1970 there were about 30 shops and cafés specializing in cannabis sales. Probably the most famous was D.D. Sharma’s “Eden Hashish Centre” which was located right at the head of Freak Street. One visitor described the Eden Hashish Centre as

having “an office-type showroom with jars containing different varieties of hash lining the walls. . . . The sign on the wall read “We ship ANYTHING, ANYWHERE, ANYTIME” (Pietri 2001:13). In 1970 top grade Nepali hashish, still considered the finest in the world, was selling for ten dollars a kilo in Kathmandu while in North America, inferior grades were retailing for between 4 and 5 thousand dollars a kilo. Needless to say there was enormous incentive to try to smuggle hash back home and many people did. Even as recently as 1996 an international “Drug Watch” organization described Nepal as the source of “an ocean of cannabis” flowing to the West (GDW 1996:132).

But Kathmandu was (and still is) also a center for much more “hard” drug use, especially heroine. There are all kinds of stories of crusty-armed Western heroine addicts who, having sold everything, even their passports, were reduced to begging in the streets and dying in the gutters. There was at least one charitable organization that I know of that was paid by various embassies to try to figure out who the half-dead junkies were, and escort them home.

How did Nepalis respond to this influx of foreign youth and what did they make of them? The most obvious response was in terms of business. For centuries Kathmandu’s economy had shifted depending on developments in India and Tibet and in many respects the response to tourism is a continuation of long-established business practices that were quick to exploit competitive advantage in regards to resources and location. As youthful tourists hit the streets in search of “authentic experience,” Nepalis were quick to figure out what tourists wanted, and sell it to them. Restaurants, lodges, hash shops, and so on are the obvious responses of local Nepalis to the arrival of a new extractive resource. I don’t have time to develop the comparison, but in fact it’s this extreme adaptability on the part of Nepali business people that made Kathmandu different from almost every other city on the subcontinent. A constant refrain from visitors, especially those coming via India, is how in Kathmandu Nepalis were eager to cater to Western tastes in ways that didn’t exist anywhere else in Asia. What I stress here is Nepali agency in the face of changing historical circumstances.

I see this same kind of strategic agency in many other businesses, especially those that quickly took the approach of what we might now call “vertical integration.” For example, many people who opened restaurants also opened lodges (and vice versa) so as to capture more of the market. Cannabis dealers opened smoking shops or cafés where they often lured customers with free pot samples, free milkshakes, “happy hours,” popular music, and so on. My favorite example is D. D. Sharma, the owner of the *Eden Hashish Centre*, who also ran a restaurant, a hotel, and an export business. In effect each of his subsidiary businesses were promotional enterprises for his main cannabis business, which was, of course, perfectly legal up till 1973.

Outside of business circles, what did Nepalis make of the youth tourist invasion? Most people recalled their first

impressions to be of amazement. After a decade of seeing wealthy, elderly tourists, and know-it-all foreign development advisors, what impressed Nepalis most about these “children of the white people” was not so much that they were strange and weird, as that they were dirty, poor, and apparently not very bright! In fact by the time these visitors had driven months in a bus or VW van they were, as one Nepali man told me, sick, worm-ridden, malnourished, stoned, and out of money. In an interview, a Nepali businessman explained people’s first reactions to “hippies.”

First they were shocked, I mean, what kind of people are they? It must be a joke. They must be joking us. But slowly we talked with them [and] day to day, in conversation [we] found that yes; these white people also make mistakes. It’s not necessarily that the white people are 100% right. They sometimes argue some stupid nonsense things. And Nepalese people realized this nonsense. They realized that white people are not like supermen: they are like we are. . . . They do stupid things, sometimes they cheat us, they are not always rich, sometimes these people come and beg from you. . . . Before, we saw [only] some beautiful people, but these were just ordinary people. [Learning this], in my mind, was very good.

By the late 1960s young foreign tourists had become a topic of debate in Kathmandu newspapers. On the one side were those who blamed tourists for rising food prices and viewed them as, at best good-for-nothing layabouts, and at worst, corruptors of local youth (especially in terms of drugs and sexuality). On the other side were those willing to see these young foreigners as seekers—perhaps naïve, but seekers all the same. One article written by a Nepali in the local English daily paper in 1969 pointed out:

The readiness with which Western youth is willing to accept and undergo, even though temporarily, extreme physical hardship is simply amazing if one considers the conditions in which they have grown up. Living in a world without plumbing and central heating can indeed be for the group under discussion a ‘spiritual experience’ in itself. It is hard to believe that the sacrifice this entails could be motivated simply by the desire for cheap travel around the world. . . . [I]t is evident to those who look and listen that there are a certain number of genuine *Sadhakas*, seekers, among these people. . . . (Hollingshead 1973:229)

Between these two extremes, many people recalled the visitors of the late 1960s as simply amusing. Hippies roaming the streets were “*ramailo*”—fun, entertaining.

A number of people I spoke with who were children or teenagers in the late 1960s talked of how at first their parents tried to keep them from interacting with foreigners, but soon gave up. It was almost inevitable that children around Freak Street would meet tourists and, not surprisingly, these Nepali kids were among the first to pick up English skills. Some of them, by the early to mid-1970s had convinced their families to let them turn their homes into tourist businesses while the families moved out into the new more comfortable middle-class suburbs then developing. Time and again I found that

owners of “second generation” tourist businesses were people who had grown up in the tourist neighborhoods.

Probably the most important meeting grounds for Nepali and Western youth were the new restaurants. For adventurous Nepali kids going to restaurants and talking with foreigners was not only a good way to improve your English: it was a cool thing to do. One man told me how he would beg 10 paisa from his mother, or steal half a rupee from his father’s pocket, and then go sit in a Freak Street café for hours slowly sipping tea. “It was actually a fashion,” he explained, “a fashion to go into a restaurant, sit down and have a cup of tea, look at your friends standing outside, show off to them. . . . Talking to the foreigners was a great thing!”

Still other Nepali young people were drawn to the restaurants by the music. Kathmandu restaurants were famous for having the best sound systems in Asia at that time with new records constantly being supplied by departing tourists. Some people recall being drawn irresistibly by the music, doing anything they could to loiter in or around the places with music, hanging out with guitar strumming hippies on the temple steps, buying tapes, records, guitars, and even drums off of tourists on their way back home. It is no coincidence that, almost to a man, the people that now lead the Kathmandu pop music scene—the session musicians and people who own the local recording studios and produce music for Nepali TV and film—all spent important parts of their youths in and around Freak Street. Once they got instruments of their own, Nepali kids would jam with foreign musicians and even stage impromptu rock concerts. What’s fascinating is how this first generation of modern Nepali musicians came of age in the heart of the Western avant-garde music scene there in the “capital of the Aquarian Age.” (I am convinced that music by people like Frank Zappa made it to Kathmandu considerably before it hit my own small hometown in Indiana.)

THE END OF THE ERA

Before concluding, let me say a little about the demise of “hippie era” in Kathmandu. The official end came on July 16, 1973 when the government of Nepal outlawed buying and selling cannabis. Overnight the hash shops and smoking cafés were shut down. Police swept the streets looking for expired visas. Thousands of people were trucked to the border and deported (Pietri 2001:26-29). Though the change seemed sudden, *in fact* it had been a long-time coming. Since the late 1960s the United Nations, and especially the US and the Nixon administration, had been pressuring Nepal to legalize “drugs.” The US had begun linking foreign aid to drug suppression programs and when king Mahendra died in January 1972, his son Birendra decided to take action. (It is also widely rumored that Birendra took a massive payment from Nixon in return for criminalizing drugs.) In 1973 the US also established the new “Drug Enforcement Administration” with unprecedented powers to enforce US

drug policy overseas. In fact, it was a DEA agent that finally arrested the fugitive Timothy Leary in Kabul while he was literally on the Road to Kathmandu.

But Birendra's drug move was only one part of a larger project to transform the image of Nepal. As Crown Prince, Birendra had spent several years in Britain and the US in the late 1960s and early 1970s and although I can't prove it, I suspect that while abroad he became uncomfortably aware of his country's international reputation as a hippie, low-life destination. Once King, one of Birendra's main goals was to purge Nepal of its "freak" image and create instead a great "adventure tourism" destination. In quick succession Nepal under Birendra established its first Ministry of Tourism, its first National Parks and Wildlife Preserves, its first Cultural Monument Zones, and so on. Above all, they began to promote "trekking" and other "adventure" opportunities in Nepal. Up to this point, tourism in Nepal had been more or less an accident as far as Nepalis were concerned. After 1973, that changed forever.

We also have to see changes in Nepal in the context of broader world developments in 1973. In particular, the "Oil Crisis" of that year—when oil jumped from 3 to 11 dollars a barrel—marked the end of an economic era, and finally brought an end to the Vietnam War. In fact the Vietnam War, whose dates almost exactly coincide with the tourism era that I've been discussing (c. 1965-73), has been called "the dark twin" of the counterculture mass youth tourism boom of the late 60s and early 70s. Cheap energy had fueled the Western economies, the war, and tourism. But, as arrival statistics in Nepal show, the Oil Crisis dealt a real blow to Nepal's tourist industry.

1973 also marks a cultural turning point. In the 1970s Western popular youth culture underwent massive changes—from Rimbaud to Rambo, from Jimi Hendrix to John Travolta, from Janis Joplin to Olivia Newton John. You can see this same shift in all kinds of fascinating ways in travel memoirs from Kathmandu. For example, I have an account from 1971 of the famous "Inn Eden," the hotel run by D.D. Sharma on Freak Street. With tender affection the writer describes the hotel's dirt, rats, "disgusting" rooms, and "disgraceful bedding" before concluding that it was a "marvelous place" in the heart of the "ancient district." For this person, living in the ancient "antediluvian warren" was exactly the experience he had come to Nepal to find (Tomory 1996:189-90). Yet only a few years later another visitor described the Freak Street hotels as "lousy," "dismal" "shithouses" where the food made you sick (Tomory 1996:191-2). In other words, the gritty, visceral, supposedly "authentic" experience that the "freak" era tourists coveted was, after about 1973, a disgusting and unbearable hardship. Not coincidentally it was in 1973 that the first hotel opened in Thamel, an area on the outskirts of town that quickly became—and remains—a budget class tourist ghetto where few Nepalis venture. The first Thamel hotel, the Kathmandu Guest House, was founded with an explicit no-hippie policy, including a dress code.

By the late 1970s Freak Street was a shadow of its old self, while Thamel had exploded.

My point is that a new global economy had spawned a new form of tourism, and a new breed of tourist. After 1973 there was a clear shift in the general ethos of western youth culture away from the anti-establishment sentiments of the 1960s and toward a more conservative, consumerist mode in which "experience" was *not* something to be sought existentially, but to be bought in packaged form. This shift is evident in a number of ways. By 1973 the old overland route was beginning to fall out of favor as more and more people flew directly to South Asia. "Time is money" seemed to be the new motto. One overland bus driver recalled that in the early years of the overland trade the first question people had asked was "How much?" But by the mid 1970s the question had become, "How long?" Being "on the road" had gone from being an end in itself, to being a burden to endure. Now Kathmandu was a destination to be consumed, and consumed efficiently.

Interestingly, the new trekking culture had the same consumerist ethos. For example, one of the first "Trekking Guides" published in 1975 has undisguised contempt for the old freak lifestyle with its "attempt to live as cheaply as possible" (Armington 1975:11). Instead the book proposes a new "trekking ethic" that combines a low-impact ecotourism model with the moral obligation to spend money so as to "contribute to the economy" (ibid.:29). From Freak Street to Thamel, hippie to yuppie, experience to adventure: Nepal tourism had entered a new age.

CONCLUSION

I will conclude with a few words on *spatial imaginaries* and the *relationship between history and place*, two topics that I have kept coming back to as I've worked through this material on tourism in Nepal. I find it fascinating to see how people imagine Nepal, how those images have changed over time, and how different imaginings have created different kinds of tourist, tourism, and even different Nepals. Over the years tourists have arrived with different Nepals already in their heads and, with the help of enterprising Nepalis, have usually found, and literally purchased, the Nepals they came looking for. How are these spatial imaginaries formed? How do they promote and shape touristic desire? And how do these imaginaries actually shape their destinations?

In the first part of this paper I addressed a range of ways that I think people's touristic imaginations of Nepal were shaped prior to even leaving home, but to make clearer what I am talking about, I will quote a few passages written by Michael Hollingshead—the LSD guru—describing his initial impressions of the Kathmandu valley in 1969. Flying into Kathmandu in a vintage DC-3, he wrote:

The view through my window was brilliant with the afternoon sun. Amazement was the first element of my muted delight at these bright green paddy fields between myself and the snow-capped ranges ...; and mystery, of what lay beyond them,

unseen—the distant half-chartered ranges of Tibet, home of the fable-seeking imagination. The spell of the Himalayas was upon me. . . . These mountains had begun to exercise a magic thrall over all their own. And now I was part of it. In some way which I could not rationally explain, I just knew that I was gazing at the mysterious container of the history of the world, the magical amphitheater in which Siva dances with Nataraja. I was a visitor in the ancient land of gods. . . . I realized with an immediacy akin if not identical with revelation that I had traveled halfway across the world to find in Kathmandu what I sought in vain throughout my wanderings in the West. (Hollingshead 1973:221)

Later, roaming the streets, and walking among the temples, religious statuary, and worshipers in the old city, he wrote,

Kathmandu was “somewhat reminiscent of the imaginary Baghdad of *The Arabian Nights*. . . It was a glimpse of [an] Other World, of something that I had seen and read about but had never had direct experience of before. Here I could actually *feel* this something. . . . [I]n the space of twenty-four hours I could not only see but actually *feel* that indigenous and elusive quality in Nepalese life. It was that quality, which hitherto I had only been told about but could never really experience” (Hollingshead 1973:221-23).

What amazes me about these lines is the massive amount of what I think of as *pre-figuration* that informs them. Like so many others, Hollingshead arrived with his mind almost bursting with images and ideas accumulated over a lifetime of exposure to exoticizing images and texts on Tibet, Nepal, and South Asia generally. It was an “Other World” that he had seen, read, and been told about countless times before he arrived. I especially like his idea that Kathmandu was “reminiscent of the imaginary.” As for so many other tourists, Kathmandu was an “Other” place already largely prefabricated: one had only to reminisce in order to find what they had come “halfway across the world” looking for. It’s this prefiguring, or prefabrication of worlds, and the global spatial imaginaries that people carry with them that intrigue me and, I think, have to be part of our theoretical understandings of the cultural history of tourism.

Finally, what does this material have to say about our understandings of the relationship between history and space? To the extent that history “in fact happens” in the lived experience of people who exist in actual locations, history itself must have some spatial character. For decades anthropologists have struggled with how to understand the relationship between *culture* and *space*. With the unprecedented movement of people, images, ideas, and goods in the last century, culture has become less and less tied to any locale, and more and more mobile, diasporic, and spatially discontinuous. But what about history?

If you compare tourist guidebooks of Nepal written *before* about 1975 with those *after* 1975 you find one important difference in the shortlist of “must see” spots in Kathmandu. Along with Durbar Square, Swayambhu, and Boudhanath, after 1975 Freak Street becomes one of the prime tourist

attractions of Kathmandu. But unlike all the other sites in Kathmandu that the guidebooks embed in Nepali history, *these books invariably describe Freak Street as a location within Western history*. It was the terminus of the “hippie trail,” a hotbed of 60s radical counterculture, and so on. Like Haight-Ashbury, Greenwich Village, or Soho, Freak Street is now a geographic icon for a particular Western historical experience. Freak Street represents a moment in a history that is spatially discontinuous with what surrounds it. Of course, what’s fascinating is how different histories, Western and Nepali, are superimposed in places like Freak Street, and how, ultimately, these histories interact and transform one another.

If we are going to write truly global cultural histories of tourism we need to be able to understand how cultural production in different parts of the world create histories in which the historical actors and images themselves are “diasporic,” spreading out into specific discontinuous locales around the world. Most fascinating is what happens when different histories inhabit the same bringing people into the at least partially shared cultural project that we call tourism. Drawing inspiration from Peter van der Veer’s call for a new “interactional history” that is distinct from global history (2001:8-9), what I am attempting in this project is to describe and theorize global tourism as an interactive process of cultural production (of tourists and imagined destinations), consumption (of and by tourists), and reception (of tourists and tourist culture by, in this case, Nepalis). I want to view the distinct phases of tourism in Nepal between 1950 and 1980 simultaneously as shifts in the cultural production of desire (and desired places) in the West, and as part of the changing socioeconomic and cultural responses of Nepalis.

I’ll end with a quote taken from a personal website where someone has posted an account of their visit to Nepal in the late 1990s. The quote is actually a caption under a photo of one of the main temples in Durbar Square, near Freak Street. It reads,

A view of the street from the Hippie Temple—so named because the likes of John Lennon and Jimi Hendrix would hang out on the steps to escape the crowds of the Western world. The Nepalese just thought they were strange.

Of course in fact neither John Lennon nor Jimi Hendrix ever set foot in the city. But the quote does suggest that the fantasies tied to spatial and historical imaginaries continue to propel tourists to places like Kathmandu.

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