

Commons of Identity: Sherpa Identity Management

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1. Introduction

The recent history of Sherpas demonstrates how identities can be scarce goods. While ‘Sherpa’ refers to an ethnic identity, ‘Sherpa’ refers to a crucial occupation in the trekking industry.ⁱ Their privileged position in Nepal’s international tourist industry is related to their common reputation. Their collective use of identity seems to help them getting access to an economic niche, and work in tourism seems to be an aspect of being Sherpa.

Thus, an individual that operates in the tourist market does not only manage material assets but also identity assets to maintain the Sherpa reputation. Consequently, one can expect it to be a collective concern to husband their image, ie to control each member’s behaviour which could affect the Sherpa image.

This article on Sherpa identity in encounters with outsiders analyses Sherpaness as a manageable resource that constitutes a collectively sanctioned commons. My point of departure is Barth’s analysis of ethnic boundary dynamics (1969, 1994) combined with Bourdieu’s concept of ‘capital’ and Hardin’s perspective on commons.ⁱⁱ

2. The Place

I made 18 weeks of field work in Khumbu between December 1994 and June 1995, living with two small-farm families in Khumjung village most of the time. Both wives were daughters of Sherpa men, while the husbands were sons of Tibetan immigrants. For four weeks I joined different trekking groups (tourists, crew, and porters) on the tracks of Khumbu.

As I was a foreigner towards which a collective image would be relevant to my informants, my access to information about eventual sanctioning of this image was probably restricted. Ever since the early 20th century, Sherpas (in Darjeeling) have been engaged in mountaineering tourism, but only since the late 1960’s tourism has replaced trade in Khumbu.ⁱⁱⁱ In the 1990’s the Khumbu Sherpa economy was based on agriculture and animal husbandry, cash labour (mainly in tourist trekking), lodge keeping, trade and business. Individual households pursued some economic strategies more than others, but most households worked in both agriculture and tourism.

Tourism has made Khumbu Sherpas relatively affluent (as did trade in previous times) compared to people in other parts of Nepal. This attracts other Nepalese men and women to Khumbu as porters, household servants, shop keepers, etc. However, Sherpa households and villages differ significantly in wealth. As the number of tourists and the number of companies has increased, Sherpas have monopolised many of the better jobs in trekking companies. Some argues that there has been a general shift away from Sherpas in portering and a growing demand for non-Sherpa porters (Adams 1992:538 and 1996:215). According to Stevens (1993b:413), “*Porters on Khumbu trails are almost entirely from outside the region.*” Many households have one or several tourist *jindak* (Sh.: sponsor) that return their adventurous experiences with Sherpa friends by supporting Khumbu households economically. More than every third household in Khumjung probably had Western or Japanese *jindaks* in 1987 (Adams 1996:221).^{iv}

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3. Commons of Identity

People might be worried (or happy) about cultural erosion where they lose their ethnic characteristics and become modern, hybrid, etc. They thereby reify/essentialise their identities, but language and social life is inherently reifying. All concepts are constructions, which provide our lives with meaning, so we have to study *how* people reify and essentialise, ie how they literally regard and use ideas as things.

The English concept 'property' describes both possession/estate and a characteristic attribute/quality. In a similar way identities are common properties that we can both be, have, and use. I suggest a model of 'commons of identity' for analysing the ways identities are regarded as authentic common properties which are collectively fostered and potentially profitable, but which can be eroded or degraded if over-exploited.

A commons of identity is both a resource and a collective: The identity in question is collectively embodied (possessed) and managed (used and formed). Thus, processes of identity can be analysed as a kind of resource management. Obviously, identity implies feelings of belonging, not only interested action, but here I focus on instrumental impression management, ie how people cultivate an image of their identity.

A social resource is an asset that actors recognise as relevant, consciously or not. In other words, the social value of a resource is a function of its use. Bourdieu regarded 'capital' as a resource which yields power and is distributed among people (cf. Calhoun 1993:69). He distinguished four convertible capital forms: 'Economic' (material and monetary wealth), 'cultural' (competence/skills, information, legitimate knowledge), 'social' (connections and group membership), and 'symbolic capital' (distinction, prestige, reputation, fame, etc.). Sherpaness can be regarded as symbolic or social capital which can give its possessors access to economic capital in trekking tourism which again can be used to foster the symbolic/social capital that constitutes their identity.

Several insights from previous research on common natural resource management are relevant for analysing identities as commons. Some researchers have focused on the problem of free-riders; *"each person is motivated not to contribute to the joint effort, but to free-ride on the effort of others"* (Ostrom 1990:6). Hardin (1968:1244) argues that *"freedom in a commons brings ruin to all"*, which he called 'the tragedy of the commons'. Other researchers have argued that commons are not 'public goods' with unrestricted access for everyone. Rather, commons are (by definition or empirically) managed and sanctioned: Its members collectively control the number of users and the harvest of each unit, to prevent degradation or destruction of their common resources. But even though there is no absolute freedom in the commons, they should not be defined as sustainable. The degrees and effects of management and sanctions should be empirically assessed.

The rules and practices in any commons regulates who can own and use the focal resource and how it can be used. It includes *"rights and duties for participants and nonparticipants in resource extraction"* (Stevenson 1991:49). The degree of access regulation in commons can vary empirically from exclusive/closed (only members have owner-/user rights) to inclusive/open (non-members can have some rights). According to Ostrom and Keohane (1995:4ff), rules of access depends on how many users the resource can tolerate, and the heterogeneity of the users – how they differ in skills, preferences, knowledge and beliefs. Whether outsiders are recruited to a commons, depends on how heterogeneous and how many the users think they are and can be.

Similarly, in a commons of identity recruitment implies members giving or denying non-members the rights to use or embody an identity.

The degree of use regulation in commons also varies empirically from conservation (ie use is prohibited) to internal freedom (ie use is unregulated). In commons of identity this is a question of whether its members restrict or enlarge the insiders' and outsiders' freedom to use their identity. In formal and informal ways the collective can sanction individuals' recruitment and identity performances to avoid damage on their common image. The concepts of access to, and use of, a commons of identity are comparable to the way Bourdieu conceptualised management of 'social capital':

“the introduction of new members [...] re-produces the group [and] reaffirms the limits of the group [...] its identity is put at stake [...]in each new entry.” Group members can *“regulate the conditions of access [and] shield the group as a whole from discredit by expelling or excommunicating the embarrassing individuals.”* (Bourdieu 1986:250f)

As always, property is a question of who benefits, loses, and decides. Even if commons are collective forms of ownership and management, authority and profit can be unevenly distributed among its members (cf. McCay & Acheson 1987:19).^v In one commons of identity, a few members might monopolise what this specific identity implies, how insiders should behave, and how outsiders can be recruited. In another, no insider is a more legitimate authority than other insiders.

Like any commons, commons of identity can provide institutional solutions that to varying degrees favour profit potential or degradation risk. Whether the collective will profit from its common resource – or the exploitation will lead to degradation or breakdown of the commons – depends on the carrying capacity: the balance between extraction and regeneration. As for natural resources, the question is how many people that exploit the relevant identity, and how (hard) they do exploit it.

Based on these brief theoretical notes, I shall analyse some aspects of Sherpa identity management: How they recruit Tibetans and Nepalese people to Sherpahood, and how Sherpas use their cultural identity towards Western tourists.

4. Access to the Sherpa Common

According to Stevens, *“within Khumbu itself there is even some confusion over who is and is not Sherpa [...] some of the central [distinctive] qualities have undoubtedly changed through time.”* (1993a:37f)

If Sherpaness is a critical resource in Khumbu, the question is whether, how and why Sherpas allow non-Sherpas to convert to Sherpahood. I argue that there is a pattern of economic struggle related to identity management among Sherpas and non-Sherpas. Two major processes of Sherpatisation has generated two hierarchies of identity that mirror the economic differences between Sherpas and their neighbours in Tibet and Nepal.

Tibetan immigrants has gradually “negotiated” to become accepted as ‘Sherpa’. Sherpa communities are relatively egalitarian compared to the feudal hierarchical structure of their Tibetan origin and the Hindu ideology of the Nepalese state. Nevertheless, Sherpas are divided into named, exogamous patrilineal clans (Sh. = *ru*) arranged in hierarchical groupings. According to Fürer-Haimendorf (1964:19ff), the 18 clans descending from the first Tibetan immigrants (in the 16th century) to Khumbu formed a “core” of relatively equals. Below or outside the “core”

were the clans of later immigrants, followed by “Sherpa-styled” clans made by intermarriages with other ethnic groups. “In the outer circle”, ie at the bottom, were *Khambas* (recent Tibetan immigrants and their descendants), and “outside the circles” were *Yembas* (Sh.: (descendants of released Tibetan slaves) and *Khamendewas* (Sh.: untouchables).

In 1957 there were almost as many *Khamba* households as households “of pure Sherpa stock” in Khumjung, Furer-Haimendorf (1964:34, 26) argues. In a Khumjung household survey from 1987, only 18 % were considered *Khamba*, while Sherpa households made up 69 %: “[T]here are more people considered Sherpa by pure Sherpas today than in the 1950’s” (Adams 1989:175ff). “*Khamba families intermarry freely with Sherpas, hold village offices, and are generally fully integrated into Khumbu society. Many now call themselves Sherpas and seem to be accepted as such within and outside Khumbu*” (Stevens 1993a:38).

For instance, one man was described by Furer-Haimendorf (1984, appendix) as a son of *Khamba* parents that came from Tibet before 1953. But in 1995 he rejected this: “I don’t understand *Khamba* language – just very little.” He said that his father and himself were *Tepa*, not *Khamba*: “*Tepa* people live just across the border in Tibet. *Khambas* live much further down.” This man stressed what kind of Tibetan origin he had. Another man aspiring to Sherpahood claimed to be a member of a “core Sherpa clan”, like his mother’s mother: “She was good.” “What do you mean?” “She was pure Sherpa – do you know *Paldorje*? [...] So I am also *Paldorje*.”

Several informants had similar ideas. We might conclude that identity borders have been blurred through the years. A discourse between Tibetans and “pure Khumbu Sherpas” on rank distinction and Sherpaness has led to ideas about degrees of Tibetanness; a hierarchy of Tibetan origin metaphorised as altitude and distance from the Nepalese border.

A similar “southern” social hierarchy of altitude has emerged through processes of intermarriage and “climbing the trekking hierarchy”. Utilising the double meaning of the term ‘*Sherpa/sherpa*’, some Gurungs, Tamangs, Rais, Chettris or Newars claim to be Sherpa in order to obtain work in tourism (cf. Stevens 1993a:37f).

Because of Sherpas’ career climbing, people from further down the valleys of Nepal has literally “filled in from below”. Thus, the socio-economic hierarchy of trekking employees in some way reflects geography and the altitude of the actors’ home places. And Sherpas regard *Rongbas* (“lowlanders”) – like *Khambas* – as of inferior rank in general.^{vi}

However, social differences and distinctions in Khumbu are alterable. There are opportunities for a porter to advance in the trekking hierarchy, and for a Gurung or a *kami* (Sh.: blacksmith) to marry a Sherpa, even if it is negatively sanctioned. A lodge owner was asked if a Sherpa can marry a *kami*: “That’s bad-bad! But it happens sometimes.” “What would you do if your child did that?” “Well, it would be possible, but I could not drink tea with them.” A *sardar* (Sh.: guide in charge at a trek/expedition) said: “We Sherpas are not so strict about caste, but if I marry a blacksmith, my caste go low.”

Both implicitly and explicitly people said that there has been a gradual inclusion of blacksmiths as a consequence of tourist influence. Intermarriage, minor statements, or other social practices can potentially prepare for a change of identity. Such topics were often mentioned in humorous and half-ironic – rather than explicitly worried – ways. Interethnic marriages seemed unpreferred, but there might be a general trend towards accepting Nepalese access to Sherpahood due to career climbing, mobility and intermarriage.

One could expect that a successful commons of identity would exclude others from use rights to their identity, but to some extent the Sherpa commons does allow access and inclusion. I have indicated some informal ways in which access is collectively regulated, and what possible patterns of economic and identity struggle that have emerged from this management.

Then why do Sherpas allow others to become Sherpa? One answer might be found in Galaty's (1982) model of identity shifters and peripheral borderlines of identity. He has argued that diversified peripheral metaphors signify people's ideology of an identity centre, and borderlines of identity are basic to the relevant contexts of identification.

Thus, people at the margins of Sherpaness are crucial for "pegging" Sherpaness. Tibetans and Nepalese are peripheral surrounding people that in certain ways define Sherpaness. To Sherpas they are not simply "others": Both are "potentially us", and Tibetans are "historically us". Such ideas can make Tibetan and Nepalese people's access to Sherpahood understandable.

5. Use of Sherpaness

Individual behaviour is collectively and formally sanctioned when the trekking companies ask tourists to evaluate the crew members. "If you are criticized, you get fired." "Does that happen often?" "Yes, the competition for jobs is hard." Such sanctioning of individual behaviour might be a way to protect the Sherpa reputation and their common position.

Some were worried that individual profit from drug smuggling on travels abroad has collective costs of harming the Sherpa image: "I did not get the visa for Canada." "Because some monks have become rich on smuggling cocaine and hashish out of Nepal, the Sherpa reputation is going down."

There are also more general patterns can now be related to problems of perceived profit potential and degradation risk in extracting identificational resources.

Adams has argued that Sherpas imitate Westerners' image of authentic Sherpaness, and that Sherpas through this mimesis construct their essentialised ethnic identity; "*surface appearances [are] the location of authenticity. [...] What is authenticity if not a version of essential, and therefore commodifiable, truth about the Other [...]?*" (Adams 1996:9,72) In this perspective, Sherpas' self-ascription is a flexible identificational adaptation to Westerners' ascription.

However, what can be seen as Sherpas' adaptation to tourists' hegemonic expectations and wishes, can also be interpreted as Sherpas' management of tourists (cf. the *jindak* relations) and tourists' Sherpa images as resources. Ortner (1999) – opposing Adams' concept of "virtual Sherpas" – has analysed the history of Himalayan mountaineering as an interplay between the power of tourists and Sherpas' strategies against this power.

Sherpas and tourists are living together on two weeks treks or two months mountaineering expeditions in Khumbu. I shall briefly analyse how Sherpas use, sanction and reflect on some aspects of their Sherpaness as a resource towards tourists, and how tourists' wants influence on the ongoing formation of Sherpaness.

6. A Restricted Buddhist Image

I observed how Sherpas were well aware of how Tibetan Buddhism fascinated Westerners: "Some [tourists] are very interested." We could reasonably expect this fascination to be capitalised on, and that Westerner's admiration would confirm Sherpas' pride in their religion and

identity. “An Australian woman sent me 100 \$ to go in the monastery. But I wrote and told her I would not. [Still,] she is my sponsor now,” a young sherpa said.

Buddhism happened to be a theme of discussions in the tent, the lodge or on the trails. Frequently, fullfledged wedding parties were arranged (in a monastery or a private house) for trekker couples that decided to marry The Sherpa Way. However, I observed only marginal focus on Buddhism and superficial explanations of Sherpa culture in trekking interaction between Sherpas and tourists. Furthermore, the trekkers and the crew often formed rather isolated interactional spheres both during the day and in the evening. Talking was generally limited to practical information about the trek and the landscape.

The reason can be that Sherpas did not expect much knowledge or interest from the average tourist. But possibly this can be explained as a pattern produced by restrictions on use of Sherpaness.

7. The Lhawa/Minung Dynamic

Khumjung people recognised some foreigners’ interest in healing and spirit possessions. Both the *lhawa* (Sh.: shaman) and the *minung* (Sh.: soothsayer) in the village said that every household in the village had asked for their services. But there was a striking contrast in how people talked about them. The *lhawa* (and animal sacrifice) tended to be under-communicated, ridiculed or even repudiated: “He is not good” or “He is not a real *lhawa*.” The *minung* was much more acknowledged, at least the way people presented it: “He has a good mind [Sh.= *rhigpa*].” “He just calls his god, and then automatically he gets an answer.”

I think one reason was that the *lhawa* was a Hindu *Rai*, not a Sherpa, Tibetan, or Buddhist: “There is a *lhawa* in Namche, too. He is Tibetan. Everybody says that he is more powerful.” It seemed that the Sherpa *minung* was positively sanctioned because he was more significant for the villagers’ self esteem and more suitable for presentation towards tourists – representing the Shamanism and Buddhism of Sherpa community.

Another striking difference was that the *minung* called him self *lhawa*, or *lhawa-minung*, but never *minung* only, while the *lhawa* explained that “*minung* and *lhawa* is the same. *Minung* is respected name. *Lhawa* is a rude word, so I should be called *minung*.” They seemed to be involved in a battle of categories where each of them tried to lay claims on the status of the other.

I think this pattern resulted from two processes. Villagers tended to prefer the Sherpa *minung*, partly because of self-identification and tourists’ ascriptive “gaze” on ‘Sherpas’. Therefore the *lhawa* claimed to be *minung*. On the other hand, because of a growing tourism of shamanism, the *minung* tried to establish him self as *lhawa*, or the hybrid term ‘*lhawa-minung*’.

8. Ecological Awareness

Several authors (e.g. Norwegian eco-philosophers) have presented a romantic and rhetorical image of Sherpas’ sustainable adaptation to their local natural environment – “*they never over-exploit it, or destroy it’s durable ability of self renewal*” (Kvaloy 1976:75f) – as a contrast to the environmental degradation in Western countries. Researchers like Stevens (1993a:415ff), on the other hand, have argued that Khumbu Sherpas’ are not simply “harmoniously adapted Buddhists”, and environmental degradation in Khumbu and the rest of Nepal has been a world-wide concern for at least two decades (in media, research, and INGO’s).

I rarely witnessed Sherpas talking about environmental problems except on trekkers' initiative,^{vii} and Sherpas usually answered such questions rather briefly. But sometimes they elaborated on the topic if they felt offended by trekkers' criticism about rubbish and lack of firewood. Furthermore, people generally seemed to regard the national park regulations and control patrols positively, rather than unnecessary and offensive to their own ecological knowledge and adaptation.^{viii} When I asked a school class about environmental awareness in their villages, the pupils were generally more critical towards their co-villagers than towards tourists.

Thus, ecological awareness does not seem to be an important aspect of Sherpaness utilised as symbolic capital in relation to tourists, even if Sherpas have a reputation of sustainable environmental adaptation. One reason can be that media have presented ecological degradation in Khumbu as an effect of tourism, not as a critique of the local inhabitants.

8.1 Sacred Mountains

Sherpas' belief in sacred mountains has frequently been used as a metaphor of their ecological awareness. How did Khumbu Sherpas reflect on and present their spiritual-ecological relation to nature and mountains that should not be climbed?

Several young men stressed their wish to reach "the summit", ie Mt. Everest. Some called this "my aim", some described it as "a fever". On the other hand, the sacredness of Khumbila mountain was an aspect of Sherpa religion that people often focused on towards tourists. This mountain above Khumjung and Khunde villages was the abode of *Khumbu-yul-lha*, the locality god for Khumbu: "All is free [for climbing] now. Only not Khumbila." A man told me that he once took two Americans halfway up the Khumbila: "People think it's not good that I took foreigners up there. [But] one can go even higher if people do not see it." By making this trip he balanced two pursuits: The sacredness of Khumbila was capital that he could utilise in his interaction with tourists. But he risked sanctions from his co-villagers for pushing the taboo.

In 1995 Arne Næss (Norway) and Chris Bonington (Great Britain) headed an expedition to the unclimbed peak Dragnag Ri between Khumbu and Rolwaling. This expedition was highly debated in Norwegian media. Critics argued that the expedition was culturally imperialistic, offensive, and harmful for the Sherpa community in Rolwaling.^{ix} My informants (independent of gender, age, and whether they were employed by this expedition) showed a quite pragmatic attitude: "Maybe it's sacred for animal farmers, but here in Namche we don't know about that. [...] When they have permission, it's OK." According to the expedition cook: "Before, Dragnag Ri was sacred, but it was opened [for climbing] 2-3 years ago." The *sardar* said: "Dragnag Ri is not sacred. Holy mountains usually are right above villages, like Khumbila. Dragnag Ri is far from villages."

In Kathmandu, a ritual Sherpa brother of Sigmund Kvaloy (one of the critics) told me: "Oh, it's only Sigmund that is concerned about holy mountains. People in Rolwaling think this is an opportunity to earn money, I think."

Thus, the impression is that both sustainable adaptation and respect for mountain goddesses were not crucial aspects of their symbolic capital of Sherpaness towards foreigners. This should be related to a more general discussion on perceived cultural erosion, alienation and image management.

9. Cultural Detachment

Both young and older people often answered about Sherpa culture using phrases like: “*Old people say that...*” or, “*It’s the old system to...*”: “I respect [my family], but I don’t know if I believe in *lu* (Sh.: house spirit) [...] I’m in between. [...] When tourists offend the *lu*, I get irritated [...] but sometimes I feel I don’t care much,” a *sardar* said laughing. A young man working in Khumbu *Bijouli* (Sh.: Electricity) Company said: “We don’t know about these things, but we believe. Maybe 50 percent don’t believe.”

When people told about spiritual powers, their gestures, ironic smiles and choice of words gave an impression of detachment – a certain emotional distance to such beliefs. Such a distancing can be both a strategy towards outsiders, and a feeling experienced as real. I think it is a convenient way for people to manage two different motives simultaneously. On the one hand, to preserve the tradition that is significant to, embodied in, and practised by themselves, and also a resource in interethnic relations. On the other hand, to cope with the fact or feeling that they themselves are in some way alienated from this tradition, and that they perhaps want to be so.

10. Reputation

A few more explicit sanctions are at work, as well: Individual behaviour is collectively and formally sanctioned when the trekking companies ask tourists to evaluate the crew members. “If you are criticised, you get fired.” “Does that happen often?” “Yes, the competition for jobs is hard.” Such sanctioning of individual behaviour might be a way to protect the Sherpa reputation.

Some people were worried that individual profit from drug smuggling on travels abroad has the collective costs of harming the Sherpa image: “Because some monks have become rich on smuggling cocaine and hashish out of Nepal, the Sherpa reputation is going down.” “I did not get the visa for Canada.”

11. Sanctions and Margins

I have shown that some processes regarding Sherpa identity can take the form of collectively sanctioned resource management. The recruitment of Tibetans and non-Sherpa Nepalese into the Sherpa community can be analysed as access regulation in a commons of identity. I have also demonstrated how identity performances can be sanctioned: The dynamics of naming between a *lhawa* and a *minung* and the villagers’ responses; the formal evaluation of trekking crew members; the concern about smuggling and international reputation.

Finally, I have argued that people use their Sherpaness towards tourists in restricted and detached ways, which might indicate that there are underlying, collective sanctions on individual use of ethnic identity. On the other hand, many Westerners admire and want to experience Sherpas’ Buddhism, shamanism and ecological adaptation. This paradox should be explained: Why do Sherpas perform their ethnic identity – ie present their symbolic capital – so rarely and simplified, if Sherpa culture is a “commodity in great demand” on the tourist market?

When Sherpas interact with tourists both in trekking, expeditions and on sponsored globe-wide visits, we expect that this lead to common experiences and close social bonds. In these encounters I think Sherpas try to balance the hegemonic power of the economically exploitable tourists and the symbolically exploitable Sherpaness.

Gupta and Ferguson (1992:18) has argued that the normal situation for post-modern subjects are “the borderlands” where “*the problem of cultural difference is ourselves-as-others, others-as-ourselves, that borderline.*” It seems a matter of deep concern to Sherpas as a collectivity “to stay

Sherpa” also when they “walk with tourists”. To grow similar to tourists might be experienced as a threat to one’s personal Sherpaness, and also to Sherpaness in general. A climbing *sardar* said: “Today many people in Nepal want the European system. It’s not good. We must save our culture. If you take the culture away, there is nothing left.” A *Tamang sardar* argued that “Western influence has spoiled Buddhism.”

This article do not consider whether the commons of Sherpaness is likely to be subject to further profit potential or degradation risk. But borderline management is a plausible and a crucial part of the ways the Sherpa commons is sanctioned. The categories ‘Tibetan’, ‘Nepalese’, and ‘tourist’ constitute the margins of what it means to be Sherpa. Thus, individual Sherpas are to some degree “similar to” Tibetans, Nepalese and tourists.

If the tourist/Sherpa borderline constitutes a third margin of Sherpaness, this margin is perhaps even more problematic for many Sherpas than the borders against Tibetans and Nepalese (cf. Galaty 1982). Such a borderline between feeling modern/global and Sherpa/unique, can explain the interactional trekking spheres, the sanctions, and the restricted and detached presentation of Sherpa culture. An opposite strategy could have been to present their Sherpaness in great detail to demonstrate their distinctiveness and meet the tourists’ admiration of Sherpa Culture. Instead, Sherpas’ concern with maintaining the distinction has made them reluctant to fully present their cultural capital to foreigners. Possibly, Sherpas regard their identity quite literally as a commodity that should be kept in short supply, to ensure a maximum benefit when “it” is offered on the tourist market. In that case, they possibly “portion out” their symbolic capital of ethnic identity as a scarce resource that should not be excessively consumed.

Bourdieu argues that “*The management of names is one of the instruments of the management of material scarcity [...] agents resort to practical or symbolic strategies aimed at maximizing the symbolic profit of naming*” (1991:240). As a group, Sherpas are economically wealthy compared to their neighbouring people in Nepal and Tibet, partly because they have managed to convert Sherpaness as symbolic capital into economic capital. While Sherpas have become dominant actors in tourism, other ethnic groups have not succeeded.

The ‘commons of identity’-model is developed to analyse such processes and to conceptualise actors’ reifying use of their identity. Through this model, perhaps Sherpas can find new profit potentials in their common identity or discover dangers of identificational or economic degradation. On the other hand, the model might help other ethnic groups to build new insights about their own image and use of their identity, and to challenge Sherpas’ privileged position in the Nepalese tourist industry.

¹ In Norwegian, ‘sherpa’ and ‘porter’ are synonymous.

¹ This article is based on Loland 1997.

¹ 20 tourists visited Khumbu in 1964, c. 12 000 in autumn 1992/spring 1993.

¹ Cf. Ortner 1999 on the power dynamics in *jindak* relations.

¹ Cf. also Brox (in R. Grønhaug et. al. 1991: *The ecology of choice and symbol. Essays in honour of Fredrik Barth*. Bergen: Alma Mater Forlag, p. 426-44), who argues that tragedies of commons are likely to be triggered by the economically strong actors that can pursue the resource extraction even if the resource rent diminishes.

¹ Cf. Hepburn’s description of a moral geography in Helambu (in M. Allen (ed.) 1994: *Anthropology of Nepal. Peoples, problems and processes*, p. 448-59).

¹ A handful of Sherpa men worked in SPCC in Namche and Lukla. Through brochures and exhibitions at the SPCC offices they informed trekkers about environmental issues in Khumbu,

but the SPCC-workers' concerns and knowledge was probably not representative of Khumbu people.

¹ Sagarmatha (Mt. Everest) National Park coincides with the Khumbu region.

¹ Among their arguments were that the Rolwaling Sherpas had a vulnerable cultural and religious tradition that was too easily disrupted, so this area should be shielded against such expeditions. On Norwegian television Arne Næss said he had asked the Norwegian prime minister Gro Harlem Brundtland to call on the Nepalese government (which she did) to provide him the climb permission to Dragnag Ri: "I told her: 'Norway gives Nepal 40 million Norwegian kroner [c. 6 million US \$] annually, but what do we get in return? Why not [ask for] a mountain!'" I had no opportunity to meet Rolwaling Sherpas myself, to have their opinions about tourism in general, and "Dragnag Ri 1995" in particular.

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