Hotels as Sites of Power: Tourism, Status and Politics in Nepal Himalaya

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This article is about the social and cultural significance of hotels in the Nepal Himalaya. Through a socio-semiotic approach, I analyse how the hotel in Himalayan tourism functions as an architectural form that mediates different social domains, and through the process embeds the ideology of ‘development’ in everyday life, producing the power relations that would in turn generate their very contestations. By treating the materiality of the hotel as an anthropological tool, we are thus able more fully to understand how a community’s pursuit of development and intensive engagement with tourism have resulted in the creation of new forms of subjectivity as well as social and political relationships.

It was the first day of the Tibetan New Year in Langtang. Tashi and his family made their offerings to the gods for their continual protection. He had started a small teashop on a piece of inherited land situated along the village’s main path in the early 1990s. Since then, the teashop had prospered, and become a proper hotel with a dining room and sleeping quarters. Now Tashi felt especially blessed, for he had just opened his third and grandest hotel. To thank the gods, he erected a new prayer pole in the grounds of his new lodge, and a lama had been invited to conduct the lhabsang (Tib. lha bsang) ceremony to pray for a long life, good health, and material prosperity.

When I arrived at Tashi’s hotel at lunchtime, he was dressed in his finest chuba (traditional Tibetan long robe), made in the style of a chieftain. He did not get up to receive any of his guests, but remained seated as they exchanged greetings. With his benign smile, Tashi would then majestically wave his hands, signalling the guests to take up their seats on the long tables to the two sides of him. More guests arrived, who greeted Tashi and were directed to their places in this way. They included Tashi’s brothers, his helpers and cooks, and other close friends. None of the guests were hotel-owners, and all were less wealthy than Tashi. The only person comparable to him in status was his eldest brother, but even he had a comparatively modest lodge next to Tashi’s. After a couple of hours of eating and drinking, guests started to sing and dance in the middle of the dining room. Tashi did not participate, but cheered his guests on.
Sitting in his hotel and watching over his guests, the Tashi whom I had thought to be unassuming and soft-spoken had now an unmistakable air of authority.

**Hotels in Nepal Himalaya**

Apart from the immediate context of the tourism industry, the significance of the hotel in other social and cultural domains has not been adequately explored. Tourism literature in general tends to treat hotels as sociologically and culturally unproblematic. The few studies that treat hotels as social organizations in their own right deal mainly with the themes of social control and micro-level interactions between the hosts and guests (Belisle 1981; Stringer 1981; Wood 1993: 66–7). Researchers working in mountain tourism areas of Nepal are no different – in the discussion of tourism’s impact on local communities they have considered hotels to be purely economic phenomena (e.g. Brower 1991; J.F. Fisher 1990; Stevens 1993). This article is about the cultural significance of hotels in the Nepal Himalaya. I will show that a hotel is more than just an economic activity; it is a materiality through which the development ideology that currently pervades Nepal gets embedded in the everyday life of people. Through a socio-semiotic approach, I show the hotels that have arisen from Nepal’s contemporary effort at national development, have acquired social and political significance, and should be understood for their salience in status and power contestations.

Because Tibetan Buddhist communities inhabit large parts of Nepal’s trekking areas, many anthropological studies conducted in these communities include discussions of Buddhism and its attendant religious institutions. In particular, these studies have noted the significance of monasteries and temples (e.g. Adams 1996; Ortner 1992; 1999; Clarke 1980; 1983; 1991). Clarke’s (1980) study of the so-called ‘temple-villages’ in the Helambu region shows that households were bound together primarily through the village temple, forming the foundation upon which the Yolmo’s political, religious, and social lives were based. Clarke further discusses the ways in which the fission of priestly Lama lineages had historically contributed to the founding of new villages in different locales, as settlements formed around the newly established temples. In recent years, however, while the temple in Helambu still remains the spiritual centre of the village, it has lost its political significance. In another study, Desjarlais comments that: ‘Yolmo villages are no longer “temple-villages” but rather villages with, or without temples ... The ostensive political authority once wielded by the lamas has been usurped by secular politicians’ (1994 [1992]: 58–9). In another example, Sherry Ortner’s *High religion* shows how the development of Sherpa Buddhism and the founding of temples were intimately related to violent, strongman politics, and especially to fraternal rivalry. A historical study of the founding of Sherpa temples reveals the relationship between the community’s cultural conception of status and issues of political legitimacy. In her most recent book on the Sherpa’s engagement with mountaineering and tourism, Ortner notes that ‘from a broader perspective, [the monasteries and temples] have done their work in injecting a higher Buddhism into Sherpa religious life, and have now moved into a somewhat more marginal position in the Sherpa community’ (1999: 268). Unfortunately Ortner does not go on to say what might have gained prominence relative to the monasteries.

Turning back to the concern of the current article, I argue that what have gained prominence in the place of these religious institutions are the institutions of tourism, of which the hotel is key. The hotel’s current role within Himalayan communities exposed to tourism is that of a main structuring agency of socio-economic relations. The hotel has become a locus of status valuation and power contestation, reflects the
new values of the people, and constitutes an important arena of local political processes.1 My analysis is both historical and synchronic, and adopts a socio-semiotic method. Socio-semiotics takes the epistemological position that both the artificially produced material object (in our case, the hotel) and our understanding of it derive ‘from codified ideologies that are aspects of social practices and their socialization processes’ (Gotttdiener 1995: 26). Socio-semiotics is a field that has developed through the work of semioticians such as Umberto Eco, scholars of the New Archaeology movement (e.g. Tilley 1994), and anthropologists who study material culture (e.g. Douglas 1992; Keane 2001; Miller 1987). Socio-semiotics sees the conception of meaning not as an infinite free play of signifiers, but as emerging from the relationship between the production of knowledge and the power relationships which delimit the operation of signification. In other words, it does not view the signifying process in a cultural vacuum, but seeks to establish the link between sign production and consumption, as well as that between the socio-historical processes of economics and politics. As Mary Douglas argues, any interpretation of the meanings of an object necessarily takes place in the context of people (1992: 7). In order to interpret the social and cultural meanings of hotels, we have first to account for the production of their specific material forms and the social interactions therein, and link these to their instrumental functions as embedded within the multitudinous social contexts of knowledge production.

The setting
The Langtang Village Development Committee (N. gāũ bikās samiti) is located in the Langtang valley just inside Nepal’s border with Tibet. At the time of my fieldwork, the Langtang village comprised four hamlets with around 540 inhabitants made up of at least sixteen named, patrilineal, exogamous clans living in 109 households. The majority of villagers trace their ancestry to Kyirong in southern Tibet, and local legend tells of the discovery of the sacred valley by a bull escaping slaughter. ‘Langtang’ (’glang phrang) in Tibetan means ‘bull’s passage’ (Ehrhard 1997; Lim 2004a) and the people of Langtang refer to themselves as ‘Langtangpa’. Despite speaking a Tibetan dialect associated with southern Tibet, they have been classified in the state census as ‘Tamang’. According to some villagers, this misclassification arose in the early 1970s out of a misunderstanding between government officials who were conducting a census and the village headman of that time. The officials could not speak the local language, but a few managed to converse with the headman in Tamang, a Tibeto-Burman language widely used in the Rasuwa district (but which is not mutually intelligible with the Tibetan spoken by Langtangpa). The officials mistakenly identified the villages as ‘Tamang’, and their identity cards bore this stamp. Thirty years on, the villagers explain that rejecting this label of Tamang would result in great difficulty in obtaining Nepalese citizenship cards. Indeed, in his earlier study of Langtang village, Tom Cox wrote that Langtangpa presented themselves as ‘Tamang’ to government officials in order to be considered well-integrated citizens, ‘and avoid being disparaged as “squatters from Tibet” ’ (1989: 16). These days, many Langtang villagers identify themselves as ‘Tamang’ or ‘Sherpa’ or ‘Tibetan’ depending on whether they are dealing with government officials or tourists. How Langtang villagers see the situation is perhaps best summarized by Tshewang, a 32-year-old Langtang man: ‘We are officially Tamang, but we are actually Tibetan’.2

Before the 1960s, Langtang’s political and spiritual affairs were dominated by the Domar (Tib. rdo dmar) lineage of religious specialists whose legitimacy to rule was largely based upon their alleged association with the early kings of Tibet and the notion

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of Langtang as a sacred sanctuary (Lim 2004a). That state of affairs began to change after the isolationist Rana regime was deposed and Nepal embarked on an overall policy of socio-economic development. Langtang’s relative isolation came to an end towards the end of 1963, when the new ‘Panchayat’ system heralded a period of intensive development. This development was underwritten almost wholly by foreign aid and resulted in a burgeoning of the government’s administrative capacity. In 1970, the Rasuwa District Headquarters was moved from Trisuli to its present location at Dhunche, a mere two days’ walk away from Langtang. As a result of this relocation, Langtang village began to receive more visits from government officials. Under the ‘Panchayat’ system, villagers could express their demands – for example, for development funds – directly to the district through their village headman, the pradhān pancha, who sat on the district council (cf. Cox 1989: 15). By 1973, the incorporation of Langtang into the Nepalese state was more or less complete – the government established a primary school and police station in the village and an army camp was set up in the outskirts after the gazetting of Langtang National Park.

Tourism for development

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Nepalese government was taking its first steps towards its eventual entanglement with the project of development (bikās). The legitimacy of the so-called ‘Panchayat’ regime at that time was based to a large degree on the promises of bringing bikās to Nepal (see, e.g., Blaike, Cameron & Seddon 1980; Pfaff-Czarnecka 1997; Pigg 1992) and the rapidly increasing number of developmental projects went hand in hand with the country’s growing dependency on foreign aid. With the assistance of foreign aid, the Nepalese government in 1968 set up the Remote Areas Development Committee, whose main aim was to counter possible Communist influence from Tibet by bringing bikās to the various Tibetan-speaking communities living along the border areas. An important corollary to Nepal’s overall project development was the forest nationalization programme of 1957 and the subsequent creation of national parks. As a result, one of Langtangpa’s most profound initial experiences of the project of development was in losing their traditional control over the surrounding forests. Previously, the Langtangpa could utilize forest produce freely. One young man from each Langtang household would be organized by the village headman into small groups to patrol the forest and prevent poaching. Under the new system of state-landlordism, forests became the property of the state. The 1968 Forest Protection Special Act gave policing and judicial powers to officials from the government’s Forest Department (Green 1993: 316; see also Campbell 2003; Harper & Tarnowski 2003). These officials were also given the responsibility of harvesting forest products to supply raw material to the forest-based industries located mainly in the lowland Tarai (Malla 2001: 292).

Meanwhile, an increasing number of foreign visitors began to arrive in the country. The Nepalese government identified tourism as one of the industries crucial to the country’s long-term developmental goals (see e.g. Satyal 1999; H. Shrestha 2000). In the early 1950s, the Western public had already become sufficiently mesmerized by Nepal, primarily as a result of the widely publicized Himalayan mountaineering expeditions. Modern tourism formally arrived in Nepal in 1955, when the travel agency Thomas Cook offered to the Americans and Europeans the first organized tour of the kingdom. The Nepalese government published a new tourism Master Plan in 1972. This document was followed in 1995 by the Policy Document for Tourism Sector, which explicitly recognizes ‘the strategic importance of tourism ... to the national economy’ (MacLennan, Dieke & Thapa
Presently, tourism earnings contribute about 3 per cent of Nepal’s gross domestic product and 15 per cent of its total foreign currency earnings. The hotel business is one of the main income-generating enterprises in the tourism industry.5

For the Langtangpa, circumstances largely beyond their control have forced them to engage with tourism and adopt the operating of hotels as their primary means of social mobility. In the middle of the twentieth century, the cessation of trans-Himalayan trade between central Nepal and southern Tibet had compelled Langtang villagers to rely on the collection and sale of forest products for cash to buy food. With the gazetting of the National Park in 1976 for the stated purpose of conservation and tourism,6 new restrictions came into place that severely affected Langtangpa’s reliance on forest products for their livelihood. One was the prohibition against the collection of herbs for sale,7 and the other was the further clearing of park land for agricultural use. The Langtang system of land inheritance stipulates an equal division of household land among the male siblings. Unless additional land is acquired from the forests or from neighbouring villages, the average land size per household tends to decrease with succeeding generations. Decreasing agricultural yields per household meant that agricultural produce alone was insufficient for subsistence. Not surprisingly, then, the Langtangpa found themselves looking to tourism as a means of survival.

In the nascent trekking tourism industry, the Langtangpa first gained employment as porters or guides for trekkers and more professional mountaineers. It was around this time, in the mid-1970s, that a villager whom I shall call Pema opened a small tea-house to cater to the increasing numbers of visitors. The tea-house evolved into the first modest, single-storey hotel in Langtang village. Ten years later, by the mid-1980s, there were three to four hotels in village. By the end of my period of fieldwork in 2002, there were sixteen hotels in the village alone, and about thirty in the entire upper Langtang valley. Thirty per cent of the 109 households in the village were directly involved in hotel operation.

Design of hotels8

Like all other business ventures, hotel operations are driven by the need to design a machine for the realization of capital. Given Nepal’s current realities, its developmental goals, and the global tourism industry, the main purpose of most hotels there is to sell hospitality to trekkers (Fig. 1). The hotels’ design functions to disguise the nature of the relationship, which is fundamentally an instrumental exchange between hotel-owners and guests (the consumers of hospitality). A hotel presents an integrated façade that aims to induce trekkers to seek out and fulfil their consumption-related desires. This overriding concern to profit from the relationship exerts decisive control over all other aspects of the hotel’s design, such that the hotel as a built environment exists as a manifestation of wider discursive practices.

As a result of their travels and visits to other trekking areas in Nepal, many Langtang hotel operators have a clear sense of what constitute popular facilities and architectural forms. They learned the art of hotel operation from acquaintances already in the business. In addition to these informal channels, hotel management courses are conducted by government officials and other experts from Nepalese and foreign non-governmental organizations: certificates of attendance are proudly framed and hung on the walls of a hotel’s dining room as proof of the professionalism of the owner. In Langtang, experts from the Department of National Parks and the American-based Mountain Institute conducted courses for local hotel-owners as part of the ‘Langtang Ecotourism Project’ (see
The training covered matters such as fuel utilization, waste disposal, sanitation, and the construction of essential hotel facilities. Even as they seek out rugged adventures and rural living, visitors to the mountains expect a certain familiar level of comfort and hygiene. Langtang hotel-owners have been advised to build facilities such as clean toilets and solar panels for hot showers – facilities that are entirely absent from the traditional houses of the area. Another issue of concern is food, and owners of these establishments understand that it can make or break their business. All along the main trekking routes, hotels offer a bewildering array of international cuisine, from pizza to chow mien and Mars bar pancakes. A hotel that introduces a ‘German’ or ‘Swiss’ bakery almost certainly sees its business improve. Successful elements are often copied elsewhere, resulting in the replication of similar hotel designs throughout Nepal’s most popular mountain-trekking areas. The design of choice, interestingly, is one with more of a ‘Hostel’ theme which incorporates comfortable communal dining areas and dormitories. The success of this specific motif is obvious from its proliferation throughout the Nepalese Himalaya. It evokes a sense of the rugged camaraderie of communal living that simultaneously offers the option of privacy and a degree of material comfort that approximates the trekkers’ experience back home.

**Articulation of internal design elements**

As dusk falls, trekkers drop their adventures and seek refuge indoors. The hotel’s dormitory rooms are usually basic and sparse. Electricity is not always available and the rooms are not well insulated from the cold and wind. The dining room, in contrast, is an oasis of warmth and comfort – it is the most important space in the hotel. A well-designed dining space generates cash as the longer guests linger in the dining room, the more food and drink they consume. This principal space usually consists of a large room with connecting benches that run along three sides of the wall. A stove sits in the middle, burning firewood to heat the room, and cushions or carpets are placed...
on the benches to provide added comfort. Posters of various mountaineering expeditions and popular tourist destinations in Nepal are hung on the wall, and the ‘ethnic’ feel so sought after by tourists is manufactured through the display of Tibetan thangka paintings, handicrafts, and photographs of the owner with his family and friends. The cosiness of the dining room functions as a positive contrast to the hostile external environment, and to the sparse dormitories that have little attraction beyond sleep. Guests do not stay in their rooms for long and the overall design of the hotel facilitates the gravitation of guests away from the rooms and towards the comfortable, communal space of the dining room, where their consumption is maximized.

**Hotel, status, and personal identity**

Not surprisingly, starting a hotel is a major undertaking for a local in Langtang, with the project taking anywhere between two to four years to move from planning to completion. Assuming that it is to be built on land one already owns, there are two primary ways a person can secure the money needed to build a hotel. One of the most common means to raise the needed cash is through the sale of valuables; but the money obtained from the sale of possessions such as land or gold is often insufficient for the Rs 4-8 lakhs (approx. US$ 530-1,100) needed to build a hotel. The rest has to be borrowed. Banks are ruled out as a potential source of funds since the agricultural value of Langtang land is considered so inferior that they refuse to accept it as collateral. For wealthy families, gold can be used as bank collateral – but with interest rates ranging between 13 to 17 per cent, this is not a popular option. The more common approach is to go to one or more of the local ‘big men’ for financial help.

Whatever the source of funds, the construction of hotel facilities requires considerable resources, and such projects invariably create some degree of employment for Langtang villagers. Construction work is thus one of the primary means through which non-hotel-owning villagers first become tied to the tourism industry and dependent on it for income. The skilled workers fundamental to the hotel’s construction, such as the master builder and the carpenters, are often hired on the basis of recommendations from other hotel-owners. Unskilled workers, in contrast, are drawn from within the village and its surrounding regions. The main builders and carpenters work on-site for most of the project, and the rest essentially become human mules, tasked with job of ferrying building material such as stones, logs, and supplies to and from the new hotel. With the demands of socializing with guests, cooking for them, cleaning the place, walking along the trails to solicit custom, procuring supplies, and so on, the work of operating a hotel leaves its proprietor with little time for menial or agricultural work. Periodically, the hotel-owners would engage villagers to collect firewood and animal dung for cooking and heating. Offering up to Rs 100 and two meals per day, hotel-owners also hire villagers to work in their fields, which might not otherwise be attended.

As a result of tourism, therefore, two new economic classes have emerged in the village: the hotel-owners as primary employers, and the rest of the village depending on them for waged work. As the main source of employment for other villagers and because of their greater economic power, hotel-owners now constitute the dominant class. Presently, this hotel-centred power relationship is made more stable by the fact that no viable alternative source of employment is available to the villagers. Unlike the Gurung, Rai, or Magar of the central hills, Langtangpa do not have the option of joining the various Gurkha regiments. Furthermore, as documented by Joanne Watkins (1996), the Langtangpa have no widespread national or trans-national business
networks to speak of that can shadow that of the Nyeshangte. Under Nepal’s present economic circumstances, many Langtangpa see operating a hotel as a means for social mobility and the attainment of greater material comfort. As a result, the hotels have become status symbols, with their owners being regarded as a step closer to bikās than the rest of the village. The hotel-owner’s economic power rests largely upon his ability to command a labour force and to be a source of loans. This power is translated into status in two main ways: the hotel’s physicality as an icon for bikās, and the social interactions within it.

Turning to the physical structure of the hotel, it can be said that hotels stands out as status symbols, in part because of the stark contrast between them and the traditional buildings of the villages (Fig. 2). Traditional buildings in Langtang are modest, double-storey structures consisting of stone walls and roofs made from wooden tiles. A wooden staircase leads from the courtyard in front of the house into the upper living quarter, which is a large square room. The four corners are assigned a variety of purposes, such as storage, cooking, sleeping, and religious worship. The ground floor is used mainly for storing grain and for keeping household animals at night. For the sake of their function, hotels are generally of considerable size and tend to include a large dining area and dormitory rooms. The main structure is usually built with huge stones quarried from the riverbed, while the roof is made of shiny corrugated zinc sheets bought in Kathmandu. The hotels stand out also because of the facilities they provide. Owing to the wide standardization of hotel design and the curriculum of Lodge Management courses, hotel-owners understand that certain facilities are essential if they are to have a chance of business success. They are advised, for example, to construct separate enclosures for toilets and bathrooms with hot showers powered by solar energy. Other uncommon features are a relatively well-equipped, separate kitchen, and a courtyard where trekkers can lounge in good weather. Together, these factors fuel the hotel’s image as the physical embodiment of bikās.

The role of the hotel in Langtang’s everyday life is augmented through its dual function as a site of both business and domestic affairs. Extending Lévi-Strauss’s notion of a ‘house-society’, Carsten and Hugh-Jones (1995) urge us to pay serious attention to the house’s material as well as its social dimensions, such as its domestic, economic, political, and religious functions. They demonstrate ‘the value of seeing houses

Figure 2. New status symbol – contrast between a hotel and a traditional house.
together with the people who inhabit them as mutually implicated in the process of living’ (1995: 45). In Langtang, the social significance of the house can be observed from local ideas about the household. Historically, the status of households in Langtang had in part been dependent upon whether they were associated with the founding clans of the village. The focus on lineage (Tib. rigs) resulted in the formation of a type of household called the kuriya. These were corporate entities whose adult members were accorded full citizenship in the village.

One of the key defining features of the kuriya is their hereditary ownership of parcels of temple land known as kushing. As a result, the kuriya households were, and still are, expected to fulfil certain social and religious obligations to the village, such as making donations of grain and money to the organization of village-wide rituals. The non-kuriya households were collectively known as yangpa, literally ‘the outsider’. In Langtang, the indigenous socio-political and ritual hierarchy (Lim 2004a) were made up of the priestly Domari clan, the kuriya, and the yangpa. The form of organization practised in the village is structurally similar to the peasant household systems that can be found in a number of Tibetan enclaves in the Himalayan regions (e.g. Levine 1988; Vinding 1998). However, in present-day Nepal, as national citizens, every villager in theory has equal rights to political participation. With the local political economy revolving primarily around tourism, earlier means of status valuation that incorporated kinship, ideas of household, as well as socio-political rights and privileges, have all undergone significant changes.

The typical household today – be it Domari, kuriya, or yangpa – consists of a married couple and their children, and sometimes the elderly parents of the male householder. In Langtang, it is usually the youngest son who inherits his parents’ house, together with the responsibility of looking after them in old age. The elder brother, upon getting married, will usually move out into a new house built on divided family land. Hotels in Langtang are not just commercial enterprises; owner families usually live in them as well. This practice ties the hotel keenly to a family’s identity. When a family’s house is a hotel, the family’s personal and household identity becomes closely associated with the hotel as well.

The intimate link between one’s identity and one’s hotel is clearly illustrated by one of the ways Langtangpa identify a person. Since certain names are widely used, Langtangpa often use epithets to differentiate those who share common names. For example, this particular man who is the son of a shaman is called jhankri Gyalpo (jhankri is the Nepali term for shaman), to differentiate him from the many other Gyalpos in the village. Or someone might be referred to as baru (Tib. dba’ rus) Phuntso, the epithet often being used to refer to people from the wealthier kuriya lineages. Continuing with this cultural practice of identification, hotel-owners are often identified by the names of their establishments. Thus when I first arrived in Langtang, I was told to look for ‘Village View Pema’, the richest man in the village who might be able to help. Similarly, since there are a number of villagers who are called Tenzin, one is commonly referred to as ‘Mountain View Tenzin’, while the other is identified as ‘Langtang Lirung Tenzin’. The implication of such referencing norms is that hotels have become tied to personal identity.

I have previously highlighted how as part of the overall hotel design, the hotel’s interior functions to stimulate and fulfil trekkers’ consumption desires and maximize profit for the proprietor. The instrumental concern over internal spatial organization has implications for status generation and local political activity as well. A comparison of the social organization of the space within a temple with that of a hotel will help to
illustrate my point (see Figs 3 and 4). In temple seating arrangements, a person’s status is indicated by his or her proximity to the deities on the altar during communal worship (Fig. 3). The most esteemed position is occupied by the chief officiating priest, who sits just in front of the altar in an elevated seat for senior member of the local Domar lineage lama. Other priests follow down the line, in descending order of rank. The

Figure 3. Sitting arrangement of priests and worshippers in the temple.

Figure 4. Sitting arrangement of host and guests in the hotel.
communal space directly in front of the altar and between the two rows of priests is
usually reserved for members from prominent, wealthy baru lineages. Villagers of lower
status usually congregate near the door.

Now consider the social gatherings of Langtang villagers in hotels, such as during the
Losar feast that is held yearly in almost every establishment. During my fieldwork, the
Losar feast, as shown in Figure 5, was replicated in most hotels in the village and their
wealthy owners hosted banquets where they received well-wishers.

The seating arrangement on this occasion and other large gatherings of villagers bears
a striking resemblance to the pattern observed in the temple. The interior design of the
hotel dining room can be seen to serve as a bridge between the two domains of experience
(spiritual and economic), transposing the status symbolism of one to the other. This
replication of the temple seating arrangement in the hotel is made possible by the peculiar
design of the dining room. The prime position of the host reflects his overall social
position, and the guests are arranged according to their own relative status (see Figs 4 and
5). By choosing his position and that of the guests in the dining room, the hotel-owner
becomes the agency for the spatial organization of social status, revelling in his own
symbolic power. But status is a hierarchy of social ranking within which one’s position
is determined by a constant dialectic between self-valuation and social validation. The
symbolic power of a particular hotel-owner can be contested by his peers through their
absence from the gathering. A person who considers himself higher in status than the host
can choose not to attend the function, for his presence would affirm the host’s status at
the expense of his own. The number and composition of the hotel-owner’s guests provide
indication of his overall status and ranking in the village.

The status-generating event of the Losar feast thus facilitates both an inwards and
outwards form of orientation: an inwards focus through which the relative social
positions of the host and the guests engender for the host an immediate validation of

Figure 5. Hotel’s dining room as site of status generation. The host is the only person wearing the
chuba reminiscent of a chieftain. With the exception of the toddler, notice that a young boy (ranked
according to age) and a woman (ranked according to gender) are sitting furthest away from the
host.
his own perceived status, and an outwards orientation in which this status has to be reappraised via comparison with the situation in other hotels. Such determinants of status go beyond the confines of the Losar feasts and the hotels that host them, and reverberate into the political sphere.

**Hotels as political sites**

With the increasing tourism focus of Langtang’s economy, the role of the hotel as an important status and identity marker has profound implications for local political process. Before the 1970s, the priestly Domari lineage was both politically and religiously dominant in Langtang village. In recent decades, however, the Domari’s hold on temporal power has been challenged. Following the overthrow of the autocratic Rana regime in 1950 and the creation of a new political system based on democratic principles, all citizens were empowered by state law to select their local leaders in periodic elections. In 1960, King Mahendra dissolved the multi-party system and instituted the party-less ‘Panchayat Democracy’, but Nepalese still enjoyed voting rights to elect their local leaders. The only difference was that the candidates could not belong to any formal political parties. Following the first two decades of the Panchayat regime, the members of the Domari lineage managed to dominate the post of village headman.

However, after the creation of Langtang National Park and the introduction of tourism to the area in the late 1970s, a group of rich and powerful entrepreneurs emerged. Relying on their newly acquired tourism-driven wealth and status, they began to challenge Domari dominance in local elections. In the early 1980s, one of the early beneficiaries of tourism, Pema, managed to get elected as the village headman after defeating a relatively young and inexperienced Domari candidate who was unable to match his opponent’s ability to mobilize personal wealth to secure the support of voters. Elections in the next ten years saw the Domari continually challenging Pema in local elections, but to no avail. Through this period, Pema had become the richest man in the village, with his family members owning at least four hotels throughout the Langtang valley. According to Langtang villagers, because of Pema’s tremendous wealth, he was able to out-spend his political opponents to win votes by organizing banquets in his hotels for villagers, and distributing sacks of rice and gifts of beer during election periods to increase his popularity.

Following the restoration of multi-party democracy in Nepal in 1990, two parties became dominant in Langtang: the Nepali Congress, led by Pema, and the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist), whose leader was another wealthy hotel-owner. During local elections, candidates from these two parties campaigned to lead the nine wards that make up the Langtang Village Development Committee (VDC). At the same time, villagers also got to choose the VDC Chairman and Vice-Chairman, a two-man team consisting of the party leader and his deputy. Because of Nepal’s decentralization policy, the VDC Chairman has considerable power over local affairs. Most importantly, he controls the funds allocated to the VDC by the central government for local development projects, as well as the stipends for all members of the Committee.

**Langtang land-grab**

Pema managed to get elected again in the first multi-party election in 1992, becoming Langtang’s first VDC Chairman. As the village leader who straddled both the old Panchayat and the new multi-party political regimes, Pema was involved for four years in one of the most bitter disputes in Langtang’s history. The case concerned Pema’s...
construction of hotels on what was supposed to be communal land. In the late 1980s, Pema decided to build a new hotel with better facilities on a patch of communal pasture. In addition, he set his sights on another piece of land which had traditionally been used by villagers to celebrate important religious festivals. On these two pieces of communal property, Pema began to build the grandest of his hotels, ignoring the protest and indignation of many villagers.

The villagers were not only vehemently opposed to Pema’s appropriation of communal land as his own, they were also concerned that he might levy an animal-grazing tax, and charge trekkers a fee for visiting a popular viewpoint on top of a hill located on the disputed land. During the arbitration at the district headquarters, the authorities asked the then Vice-Chairman of the VDC, an ally of Pema, about the truth of the villagers’ accusation. As can be expected, the Vice-Chairman came down in favour of Pema, who eventually won the case. Undaunted, some villagers, led by members of the opposition party UML, appealed against the ruling by taking the matter to the Supreme Court in Kathmandu. The persistence and effort paid off, but theirs was not a complete victory. Of the approximately 3300 ropani of land Pema had laid claim to, he was allowed to keep around three and a half ropani—the land on which the two hotels had already been built. In effect, Pema’s new hotels helped stamp his authority over two pieces of valuable communal land and allowed him to claim them as his own. Because of their sheer physicality and immobility in the Langtang landscape, the new hotels bear lasting testimony to how wealth in the new economic and political circumstances can be translated into power over the control of valuable resources. Since Pema was the leader of the local Congress party, many villagers who had opposed his effort at the land-grab became supporters of the UML party. The UML party’s members currently include all the village priests, including those from both the Domari and non-Domari sub-groups.

Power contestation

Following the restoration of multi-party democracy in Nepal after 1990, all subsequent local and national elections in Langtang have been plagued by physical violence involving the two rival political parties. With the polarization of the village into two political camps, and with all prominent leaders being engaged in the hotel business, the hotels in Langtang have taken centre-stage and become the main site of horizontal contestation of political power. Like political parties in many other places, in Langtang the modus operandi of political parties consists of the creation of party loyalists and the effective utilization of their support for electoral gains. In time, the hotels of the two political leaders became the de facto party headquarters. Supporters would gather at their respective bases for mutual support, to affirm their political affiliation, and to discuss election strategies. As a result, the physical space of the hotel dining room has taken on a secondary function above that of providing a comfortable communal space for trekkers. It is now a political site where the status and power of political leaders are affirmed and where solidarity is generated between their supporters.

The political contestation centred on the hotels that serve as political headquarters is dramatically enacted each year during the Drukpa Che Zhi festival. Held in the middle of the monsoon season in July, this event is celebrated in all areas where Tibetan culture is practised. The celebrations commemorate the day Shakyamuni gave his first sermon at Bodhgaya following his enlightenment. For the Langtangpa, it is a four-day festival that includes communal prayers, picnics, and entertainment. Because of the intense competition in party politics, the Drukpa Che Zhi festival has for many years been marred
by physical violence. The situation is especially tense during an election year. The most serious violence erupted when there was to be a national election for a member of parliament representing the Rasuwa district. On this occasion, after the drinking and merrymaking at Pema’s hotel, a large group of Congress party members descended upon the UML leader’s hotel where the UML supporters had gathered. The ensuing brawl between the two groups of supporters got so violent that a group of English trekkers had to be evacuated by helicopter. In the aftermath of the mayhem, the police and army moved in and arrested more than a hundred Langtang men, including all political leaders.

When I attended the Drukpa Che Zhi festival in 2002, it became obvious to me why outbreaks of violence between supporters of the two opposing political parties were prone to occurring during this particular festival. On the last evening, depending on their political affiliation, villagers would bring gifts of beer and ceremonial scarves to either of the political leaders. On that particular night in 2002, the large communal space of each hotel’s dining room that formed the party base was swollen with two separate groups of villagers. Supporters of both sexes entertained themselves with songs, dance, and drinks throughout the night, presided over by their leader sitting in his appropriate place. The two hotels were thus transformed from businesses catering to the consumption of tourists into two axes of power and contestation. On the vertical axis was hierarchy between leaders and followers based on wealth and status, and on the horizontal axis was the intense opposition between the two rival political factions.

Conclusion

One of the main aims of this article has been to explore the process through which the development ideology that pervades Nepalese society becomes embedded in everyday life. Historically, in the Himalayan communities of Nepal, religious institutions such as the temple have been socially and politically dominant. Much has changed, and as a result of tourism, a large share of the clout has shifted away from the temples. To date, however, scholars involved in studies of the Himalayan communities most affected by tourism have persistently ignored the phenomenon of the hotel. From this Langtang case study, I have highlighted the importance of treating the hotel as an important new materiality that has emerged in tourism-affected Himalayan communities. Appadurai cogently points out that it is not possible to understand the meanings of things without situating them in contexts of human activity, attribution, and motivation:

The anthropological problem is that this formal truth does not illuminate the concrete, historical circulation of things. For that we have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things. Thus, even though from a theoretical point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a methodological point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context (1986: 5, italics mine).

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

NOTES

Fieldwork was conducted in the Langtang valley from July 2001 to August 2002, and in December 2006. All the names of informants are pseudonyms. I wish to thank Khunchok Thile for his assistance and good company. I acknowledge with gratitude the financial support from the following: Royal Anthropological Institute’s Emslie Horniman Scholarship; University of London Central Research Grant; and an SOAS Additional Fieldwork Award. A postdoctoral fellowship at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, provided an excellent environment to revise the article. I am grateful to J.D.Y. Peel, Assa Doron, and the three anonymous reviewers for their critical comments and helpful suggestions.

1 As far as I am able to ascertain, temples in the Langtang valley were not founded on religious land title (N. guthi), unlike the case in Helambu in the neighbouring region. However, Clarke’s analysis of the economic functioning of the temples and their operation as ‘religious capitalism’ might be applicable to Langtang temples in the pre-tourism times. One of the significant points I am arguing in this article is that the ‘religious capitalism’ argument no longer holds – or at least should be extensively qualified – and that the centrality of the temple in economic organization has been largely taken over by the hotels. Hotels in the Nepal Himalaya are therefore the new model for realizing profit, power, and social authority, a fact that has not been appreciated by scholars working in the region, who still focus most of their attention on the temples.

2 While Levine (1987) and Macdonald (1980) argue that ‘Tamang’ is an invented label of state administration and of researchers for heuristic purposes, other scholars such as Holmberg (1996 [1989]) see the Tamang as taking on a ‘tribal character’ in the form of restricted exchange between exogamous clans in the context of state expansion. Ben Campbell (1997) gives an account of the emergence of Tamang identity in terms of their historical role as semi-captive labourers who carried loads for the Nepalese rulers in their trade with Tibet. He also notes that in his fieldwork site the salient local categories are Ghale and Tamang, even though to an outsider, institutional frame they are both considered ‘Tamang’ on linguistic grounds.

3 For a personal account of the ‘enchantment’ of bikás in Nepalese society, see N.R. Shrestha (1993).

4 The forest nationalization policy was reversed in the 1970s with the policy of community forestry. However, the Langtang people were unable to benefit from the new measure due to the establishment of the National Park.

5 For analyses on the other ways by which development is acted out, see, e.g., Ahearn (2001), Fujikura (2001), and Pigg (1992).

6 For a discussion on the management issues of the national park, see Bourradaile, Green, Moon, Robinson & Tait (1977).

7 The punishment for illegal smuggling and sale of herbs was harsh: for a first-time offender it was a week’s jail in Dhunche, the district headquarters.

8 In Nepal, the English word ‘hotel’ often refers also to small tea-shops, in addition to the tourist lodges in the hills and hotels in the cities. In this article, ‘hotel’ in the Langtang context mainly refers to the family-owned establishment that provides accommodation, food, and guide services for the tourists. For an account of this kind of hotels among the Thakali, see W. Fisher (2001).

9 During my fieldwork, one foreign female development expert who had helped convene the Langtang Ecotourism Project in 1996 came back to Langtang for an inspection tour. News of her imminent arrival in the village preceded her, and some hotel-owners were apprehensive about how she would evaluate the various programmes she had put in place previously, such as bottle recycling, the Women’s Association, and the...
kerosene depot. As none of these programmes had been functioning properly, one hotel-owner said he was afraid she would be angry, since ‘she had spent lots of time and money in Langtang’. When this expert arrived, she went into most of the hotels to inspect the facilities.

10 Langtang villagers need not apply for special licences if they build hotels on their own land. In an interview with the chairman of the National Park Border Zones Committee, I was told that there was no restriction on the number of hotels the villagers were allowed to build on private land, as long as they could afford to pay the Rs 200 for each piece of timber cut from the trees in the Park. On the other hand, there were a few parcels of state land along the trails on which the Park authorities had allowed for the construction of hotels or tea-houses. To do so, one has to bid for special licences issued by the Border Zone Committee. At the time of fieldwork in 2001, the Committee chairman told me that no new licence was being issued as there was an over-supply of hotels in the National Park.

11 In the Baragaun region west of Langtang, Rebecca Saul has similarly noted that many hotel-owners did not perform manual tasks, but hired hands for purposes such as looking after household animals and fields (1998: 187).

12 Similarly, a new class of ‘big people’ have emerged among the Sherpa who are not old traders and landowners but successful leaders of expeditions, a result of the history of Sherpa engagement with mountaineering expeditions and tourism. These people, after earning enough money to retire early from mountaineering, usually go into hotel and restaurant businesses (Ortner 1999: 254).

13 See Campbell (1996) for a critical review of scholarly works on the Himalayan households.

14 In temple rituals, this lineage lama is the representation of his ‘spiritual lineage’ (Tib. bla rgyud) and is considered the personification of the Buddha.

15 For detailed discussions of Nepalese politics during the Panchayat days, see Borgström (1980), Joshi and Rose (1966), and Ramirez (2000).

16 Bribery during elections is rife throughout Nepal. In her work on Kag village in Baragaun, Mustang, Saul has noted that there has been an increase in tensions at the households and villages after the institutionalization of multi-party politics (1998: 85). During an election, the Congress candidate gave several hundred rupees to villagers to entice them to vote for the party. For other in-depth accounts of village politics during the Panchayat times, see Borgström (1980) and Caplan (2000 [1970]).

17 One ropani is approximately 0.13 acre.

18 At the time of fieldwork, although the Maoist rebels were not active in the Langtang valley, the insurgency did contribute to a drastic drop in the level of tourism arrivals to Nepal. Langtang hotel-owners told me that the number of tourists visiting the area had decreased by around 50 per cent, resulting in heightened competition among the hotels. Together with the political split among villagers along party lines, intense business competition further deepened the division in the community. For a more detailed account, see Lim (2004b).

19 For a recent work that provides a good summary of the debate on house society and social materiality of houses using Margaret Archer’s concept of ‘morphogenesis’, see Brereton (2005).

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Les hôtels comme lieux de pouvoir : tourisme, statut et politique dans l’Himalaya népalais

Résumé

Le présent article est consacré à la signification sociale et culturelle des hôtels dans l’Himalaya népalais. Grâce à une approche socio-sémiotique, l’auteur analyse la manière dont l’hôtel fonctionne, dans le tourisme himalayen, comme une forme architecturale médiatrice de différents domaines sociaux. Il intègre ainsi l’idéologie du « développement » dans la vie de tous les jours, et crée des relations de pouvoir qui génèrent à leur tour leurs propres contestations. En traitant la matérialité de l’hôtel comme un outil anthropologique, on peut mieux comprendre comment la quête du développement et l’engagement intensif d’une communauté dans le tourisme ont abouti à la création de nouvelles formes de subjectivité et de relations sociales et politiques.

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