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Language as the Foundation of Identity Among Sherpa Youth in Nepal

Abstract

This paper explores how young Sherpas in Nepal use their language as a tool for identifying themselves as uniquely Sherpa in a multicultural Nepal. By analyzing the way Sherpas use their language in social settings and at a radio station, the author suggests the Sherpa language is perhaps the only truly unique quality that delineates Sherpas from other Nepalis.

Keywords

Sherpa, Nepal, Language, Dialect, Ethnic Independence, Identity

Disciplines

Anthropology | Asian Studies | Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education | Ethnic Studies | International and Area Studies | International and Comparative Education | Linguistic Anthropology | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies | Social and Cultural Anthropology | South and Southeast Asian Languages and Societies

Comments

Anthropology Honors Thesis

Language as the Foundation of Identity
Among Sherpa Youth in Nepal

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Anthropology Capstone - Honors Thesis
Professor M. Amster & Professor D. Perry

Introduction

While language is certainly a key component to identities throughout the world, in this paper I argue it is perhaps the single most important piece of a young Sherpa's identity. Situated within Nepal, surrounded by Indian, Chinese, Tibetan and Nepali cultures, languages, and religions, influenced by each one in many ways, Sherpas struggle to assert their individuality. Thus, the Sherpa language is vital to the construction of a Sherpa's identity because it acts as the stable foundation of a culture that is inherently dynamic and hybrid, ultimately serving the purpose of a social comfort while delineating ethnic independence.

This paper attempts to understand the desire young Sherpas have to (re)assert their identity in the context of a globalizing, potentially homogenizing, world. Through an examination of theoretical approaches to language, identity, and globalization, anthropological literature pertaining to language revitalization and indigenous media, and drawing on my own fieldwork from three months in Kathmandu, Nepal, I explore how Sherpa youth use their language as a medium and a tool for reasserting their identity. I will begin by describing my general methodology and briefly introduce the theoretical basis from which I begin my analysis. Then, I will discuss the Sherpas in general, providing necessary background information, followed by the three major components of my fieldwork – the Khumbu Media Center (KMC) and Khumbu FM, the Manjushree Community School, and Sherpas' interaction with tourism/mountaineering – in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of their use of language in creating solidarity among Sherpa youth.

Methodology

Over the course of four months (February-May, 2014) in Nepal I conducted one month of

continuous field research with Sherpa youth in the capital, Kathmandu. Having conducted twenty, semi-structured interviews, participated in two meditation sessions and one music lesson, and held numerous casual conversations over cups of tea and coffee, I gathered information regarding young Sherpas' perspectives on everything from mountaineering to movies. I spent time in cafés and at the Khumbu Media Center (a cultural center and radio station) learning more about Sherpa culture from Sherpas who fear it is beginning to fade from the cultural fabric of the world. In this time I also reviewed the relevant anthropological literature about Sherpas that discusses their deep involvement in mountaineering, their agricultural practices, and their cultural and religious dispositions.

In order to situate the Sherpas within the proper context of globalization and identity theory, I will critically analyze the work of Peter Geschiere (2009) on identity, flux/fix, autochthony and belonging, and the work of Michael Silverstein (1998) on contemporary local linguistic communities. The analysis of this theoretical literature, in addition to anthropological studies of revitalization efforts and indigenous radio stations, will seek to provide a greater understanding of how the Sherpas experience and exemplify each concept in shaping their identities. I include original field notes and additional information regarding language revitalization and identity throughout. Altogether this collection of work will argue that language is the primary component of a young Sherpa's identity. It is fundamental to understand that language is the foundation of their identity construction not in the way that it structures thought, but in the way individuals utilize language as a part of their social life to reaffirm their identity.

The Sherpa Context

The Sherpas are a Nepali ethnic group that are said to have migrated from Tibet some

450-600 years ago (Ortner 1999: 56). The Solu-Khumbu district is their supposed original home in Nepal. At the foot of Mount Everest and its surrounding peaks it is potentially the highest inhabited place on Earth at around 14,000 feet. Sherpas are, by tradition, agriculturalists, traders, and yak herders – the latter being the “oldest Sherpa occupation” (Brower 1991: 2). Beginning in the late nineteenth, early twentieth century the name Sherpa went from being the title of an ethnic group that was seemingly talented and “well suited for work involved in mountain exploring and climbing,” to the job title of high-altitude porters (Ortner 1999: 13). Today, the name serves to mean both high-altitude porter and a member of an ethnic group, however the latter struggles to prevail as the primary definition. It is through discourse such as this that Sherpas will be identified as an independent ethnic group devoid of any cultural connection to mountaineering.

The Sherpas of the Solu-Khumbu region are perhaps the most well researched ethnic group in Nepal. Beginning with Christoph von Furer Haimendorf’s pivotal ethnography *The Sherpas of Nepal* in 1964, to the present day studies of professional anthropologists, graduate and undergraduate students, the Sherpas have been of interest for their religion, their agricultural practices, and most of all, their involvement with the lucrative adventure tourism and mountaineering industries (Brower 1991; Fisher 1990; Ortner 1999). However, the Sherpa youth are overlooked or simply undervalued in their importance to their culture. The youth of the present are slowly becoming the businessmen, doctors, engineers, scholars, and cultural elders of the future in communities around the world, and this is especially true for the Sherpas. This generation of Sherpas is the second generation to benefit from the fruits of their parents’ labor in the mountaineering and tourism industries, and they have taken full advantage of their opportunities. Many of the Sherpas in this study are currently attending universities, some have

started businesses, and others have traveled to many countries outside of Nepal.

Jemima expressed that “Sherpas have always travelled. It was never the closed society that people idealize it as being” (Ginder 2014). In the first British surveying expeditions into the Himalayas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Sherpas were recruited to carry loads over the high mountain passes. As word spread and opportunities for employment grew, Sherpas flocked to Darjeeling, India to be a porter on these expeditions. Over the course of 60 years, Sherpas became famous as brave, happy, and skillful high-altitude porters. Their name has become synonymous with the job of porter. First, as traders, they dealt with Tibetans to the north and Newari to the south. Then, with the rise of mountaineering and adventure tourism, they began meeting Australians, Americans, English, Japanese, Korean, and many others. This is because roughly 700,000 people visit Nepal every year, 30,000 of which go to the Khumbu alone (Nepal Tourism 2012), and those 30,000 individuals go marching through Sherpa villages on their way to Mount Everest Base Camp. Many of them, whether in addition to adrenalin-inducing activities or in lieu of them, also travel to the Solu-Khumbu region to experience “authentic” Sherpa culture. Furthermore, Sherpas come into contact with many of the other 670,000 people who visit Nepal when they attend school in the Kathmandu Valley and in other parts of Nepal. Not to mention the fact that they will often have other Nepali friends whom they grew up with and attended school alongside. Thus, Sherpas have constant exposure to a multitude of cultures.

As a consequence of the booming tourism and mountaineering industries that have brought wealth to many Sherpas, parents are faced with difficult decisions regarding their children’s education. Whether it is out of generous donations, scholarships, personal connections, or out-of-pocket wealth, Sherpa children have the opportunity to go to good schools

in Kathmandu and abroad. However, according to many Sherpas I met, what might appear to be the best decision for their education might not be the best decision for the preservation of the culture. This is due to the fact that the schools Sherpas will attend are government funded and, if they attend school in Kathmandu (or abroad), will require years spent away from family and friends. Considering that the home and the village are the two places where the Sherpa language – not to mention Sherpa culture in general – is learned, Sherpas who leave home potentially sacrifice natural enculturation and instead learn Nepali and English, as well as the urban, Nepali way of life.

Rinzi was born in Taptung, a village in the Solu-Khumbu region, but moved to Kathmandu to live with his aunt when he was three. He moved to receive a proper education that was otherwise unavailable to him in his village. Opportunities in Taptung were unsubstantial, and Rinzi's parents wanted to ensure he would have a life beyond the trekking and tourism industries. He attended a school operated by the Spanish government (founded by a Spaniard who had trekked in the Himalayas) that was predominantly attended by other Nepali children. He had to wear traditional Nepali dress and his classes were taught in Nepali. The last time he visited Taptung was when he was 16, and he went only to get legal documents approved. His separation from his home village, as well as from most of his family, supplemented the fact that he was receiving no Sherpa language or cultural education at school. His Sherpa is "okay, not perfect. Not bad" (Rinzi interview); his brother's and cousin's (who lived with him in Kathmandu), even worse. If he were to go back to Taptung and try to speak, they would laugh at him. He has spent his entire life in Kathmandu, away from the Sherpa culture, and it shows.

Similarly, Jemima Diki is part Sherpa (her father) and part Kiwi (her mother). She was born in the Solu-Khumbu district and spent the early years of her life in the Thame Valley, just

east of the direct path that leads through the Khumbu to Mount Everest. Like Rinzi, she attended primary and secondary school at private institutions in Kathmandu, and received her Bachelor's degree from Victoria of Welling University in New Zealand. She spent her childhood making annual trips back to the Solu-Khumbu district to visit her grandparents, and she enjoyed the time she spent there. She cannot speak Sherpa very well either, and this is again largely due to the fact that she attended private, Nepali schools. She is well educated, as are both of her parents, and she has had opportunities to travel outside of Nepal, experiencing more than many of the other Sherpas to whom I spoke. Thus, her thoughts and feelings towards the preservation of Sherpa culture stem from a very different perspective, but are nonetheless emotionally charged.

One point Jemima emphasized was the fact that many, both Sherpa and non-Sherpa, still believe “the Solu-Khumbu is the unchanging core of Sherpa culture” (Ginder 2014). They believe it is perhaps the last remaining “hub” of Sherpa culture on the planet. However, on the contrary, it is sometimes less culturally Sherpa than other places. Jemima noted that there have been organizations of Sherpas in the diaspora community that have come back to the Solu-Khumbu region to teach traditional dance lessons. And while none of the other Sherpas I spoke to stressed that it is *only* in the Solu-Khumbu that one can truly learn Sherpa culture or the Sherpa language (as I hope is clear through their efforts at the Khumbu Media Center), people still believe it to be the site of pure Sherpa culture. A discussion of diaspora communities is much too extensive for this paper, but the importance of cultural relocation and translation to other places figures into Sherpa lives greatly, as they are, and always have been, very mobile people.

Another point Jemima stressed reiterates the difficulty of sending Sherpa children to Kathmandu for school. While the education is arguably better in Kathmandu, “at boarding

schools they learn both English and Nepali and do not speak Sherpa. The holiday breaks often do not coincide with Sherpa holidays or festivals, and if they do they are during peak tourist season when transportation back to the Khumbu is almost impossible” (Ginder 2014). Not only does sending Sherpa children to Kathmandu or abroad threaten their ability to learn about Sherpa culture or to speak the Sherpa language, it almost encourages full separation from the culture as a whole by not allowing full engagement in holidays and interaction with family for perhaps years at a time. It is at home that the Sherpas learn about their culture best.

The belief that the “home” – whether as a physical space or a social space – is the source of cultural and language education is not unique to the Sherpas. In her study of Mexican-American children in bilingual schools in Illinois, Janet Fuller (2007) explores the use of Spanish and English by young, Mexican-American children to understand how their upbringing has influenced their choice of dominant language and, subsequently, their choice of identity. The children she focuses on vary in background; some children were born and raised in Mexico, others visit Mexico many times a year, and others yet were born in Mexico but never returned and are now very much assimilated to a more American life. Nevertheless, all of the children were bilingual and utilized their abilities in varying circumstances. Miguel vehemently identifies as Mexican and speaks the most Spanish of all the children, only using English when necessary. Antonio, however, uses English and Spanish strategically to not only emphasize his ability to use both languages, but also to assert his academic achievement (Fuller 2007: 125). Two girls, in yet another way, utilize English when speaking to peers and adults in a social setting, using Spanish only sparingly when necessary. In every case, the children identify as Mexican-American, but their emphasis as either *Mexican-American* or *Mexican-American* depends on their preference to one language over the other, which in turn is supported by their upbringing at home. Those who

were raised in a family that emphasized the use of Spanish would identify as the former (i.e. Miguel), and those who were raised in a predominantly English-speaking household would identify as the latter (i.e. the girls). Likewise, Sherpas feel a stronger connection to their language and Sherpa heritage if their family does as well.

Many Sherpa families in Kathmandu do, indeed feel a strong connection to the language, and I offer a few examples of Sherpas who were raised, or who now live permanently, in Kathmandu and are still fluent in Sherpa. Sonam Futi and her sister Yangjee are both pursuing post-graduate degrees in Environmental Sciences and Dentistry, respectively, and are both fluent Sherpa speakers. They attended the Hillary School – located in the Solu-Khumbu region, funded by the (Sir Edmund) Hillary Trust – for their early education, but finished in Kathmandu before attending university. Their family, however, moved to Kathmandu together, and continued to speak the Sherpa language at home, despite the necessity to speak Nepali and English in the city. It was an active choice, made by their parents, to continue using the Sherpa language, and it is because of this decision that they are able to speak it today. Unfortunately for many Sherpas in Kathmandu and around the world, this is not the reality. Parents (or perhaps grandparents, aunts, or uncles) choose to speak Nepali (or English) in the household so that the children will become fluent, thus allowing them more opportunities within Nepal or around the world.

As Jemima claims, Sherpas have not actively sought to preserve their language or culture in recent years because they do not face literal oppression or brute force to change, for instance, as do the Tibetans. Tibetan households will be predominantly monolingual (in Tibetan), largely because they no longer have the liberty to “be Tibetan” in public, except for a few locations where asylum is granted. While this is perhaps a trivial detail, it is important to stress that for

some cultures, especially for the Sherpas, a decision to preserve the language and other traditions will only happen when their lives appear to be more and more similar to those around them.

Today, Sherpas are living all over Nepal and in many other mountainous villages beyond the Solu-Khumbu, and they do, in fact, speak different dialects of the same language. Tashi, a Sherpa from a village east of the Solu-Khumbu region, explained to me that while he might be able to understand the dialect of Sherpa that most of my informants speak, he would likely find difficulty in communicating effectively with them in their dialect. It would be more effective to speak either Nepali or English. Furthermore, there are a multitude of ethnic groups in Nepal that experience similar circumstances of cultural deprivation through the impacts of tourism and government boarding schools. While I do not intend to provide either a formula for cultural preservation or a grand theory about the globalizing world, this study sheds light on how other ethnic groups in Nepal might face challenges to sustain a cultural and, more importantly, linguistic tradition in the face of global flux.

A Brief Look at Language Revitalization

Before discussing a few ways in which Sherpas challenge global flux, it is important to provide a brief understanding of language revitalization efforts. Language revitalization is often a difficult task, mired by the disinterested communities of people who do not wish to spend time or money reviving a language that perhaps has very little social or economic value in their lives. However, efforts to revitalize (or preserve) a language are not always made in vain. Indigenous cultures around the world struggle to reassert their language's importance in daily life, and anthropologists and linguists attempt to help their efforts. Leanne Hinton (2010) provides five key steps that must be taken by a linguist in order to help a community revitalize a culture and

empower a people through their traditions: “(1) the preservation of indigenous languages, (2) the promotion of literacy, (3) the development of new speakers, (4) the actual use of the indigenous language, and (5) community control of the language” (Hinton 2010: 37).

Abley (2003) outlines two very distinct, and successful, revitalization efforts that have moved through the five steps outlined above. The first of these is Hebrew, a language altogether forgotten, except in religious settings, until the late 1800s. Eliezer Perelman was dedicated to making Hebrew a dominant language of the Jewish people again, and through his own efforts to educate his children strictly in Hebrew, he began a slow shift in the modernization of the language (Abley 2003: 230). As more people began to speak it, more too became literate in Hebrew, and these individuals would continue to educate new speakers each day. Soon, Perelman’s children began using Hebrew words in public, effectively planting the seeds for a language revitalization that would blossom into greater enthusiasm among the Jewish population to use the language in their daily lives.

Similarly, the Faroese language of the Faeroe Islands, just northwest of Scotland, has been revived entirely through community support and engagement. The Faroese language is a descendant of Old Norse, and the Faeroes Islands are governed by the Danish. But when the language began to fade from the social fabric of life on the islands, Faroese students attending universities in Denmark began to understand the importance of the Faroese language. One such student, who felt immense pride in speaking Faroese, created an alphabet for it. It was not until then that the language had been in a written form, subsequently allowing for further education and proliferation of the language to every citizen of the Faeroes (Abley 2003: 234).

As I will outline below, the young Sherpas in this study – all of whom are either in university level studies or are pursuing them in the coming year – are taking active roles in

revitalizing and preserving the Sherpa language and, in turn, the Sherpa culture. Numerous other examples show how language can be revitalized and maintained through greater use in the public sphere (McLeod 2006), in the social and educational spheres of communities (Ngulube 2012; Granadillo 2011; Monzo 2009; Dementi-Leonard 1999) and through the education of teachers (McPake 2013). I will now turn to an examination of how young Sherpas in Kathmandu use radio, a particular form of code switching, and their overall social constructions as means of revitalizing the use of Sherpa language in daily life.

Radio as a Tool for Cultural and Linguistic Revitalization

The Khumbu Media Center (KMC), currently located in Chuchepati, Kathmandu, Nepal, is the home of Khumbu FM. The Khumbu Media Center offers traditional Sherpa dance and musical instrument lessons, meditation sessions with local Buddhist teachers, and Sherpa language classes, while also broadcasting a radio program seven days a week. Originally, Khumbu FM was located only in the Solu-Khumbu. At 3780 meters (12,402 ft), it sits in the shadow of Mount Everest, the highest radio station in the world. Although most of the broadcasting comes from Kathmandu today, the station in the Solu-Khumbu is still active.

The Khumbu Media Center is a division of Khumbu Multipurpose Cooperative Limited in collaboration with Himali Sanchar Limited and Eco Himal, all organizations devoted to the preservation of the culture and environment of the Himalayas. It was through my time at the KMC that I began to understand how important language truly was to these young Sherpas and their identity. Below I explain how the Sherpas at the KMC use language as a lens through which they assert their identities by examining their social interactions and analyzing the Khumbu Media Center and Khumbu FM as social activist programs.

Prior to the Khumbu Media Center's founding, the Sherwi Yondhen Tshokpa (SYT) – a student-run network for Sherpas founded in 2007 – held Losar (New Year) celebrations and other events where they would teach traditional Sherpa dance in Kathmandu. The president of the Network, Nima Tasi Sherpa – now the supervisor of the Khumbu Media Center – decided there needed to be a better way to teach Sherpas traditional dance and music in Kathmandu. Thus, the Khumbu Media Center was established. The first thing they did was “teach 56 Sherpas how to do Shabru (a traditional Sherpa dance) for free so they could dance at the inauguration celebration of the center” (Ginder 2014c). Shortly after the inauguration the radio station was established as the primary function of the Center, but when they did not have traditional Sherpa music to use in their broadcasts, they began teaching musical instruments as well. They would then record the songs they performed and use them as music for the radio station. Currently, they offer both classes for traditional Sherpa dance and traditional musical instruments.

The classes offered are perhaps less important now than is Khumbu FM, the radio station, but their original purpose and continued impact cannot be overlooked. The first dance class was offered so that Sherpas who did not know how to perform traditional dances could do so for Losar and for the opening of the Khumbu Media Center. Thus, from the very beginning, the Khumbu Media Center provided opportunities for Sherpas to learn more about their culture. Furthermore, in order to make the radio station Sherpa-centered, they needed to play traditional Sherpa music with original instruments. This provided yet another cultural learning experience. The Sherpas have successfully created an enclave of Sherpa culture in the heart of Kathmandu, providing a socially comfortable and educational atmosphere where all Sherpas are welcome. And because of the radio station, Sherpas can also seek this comfort via the radio or the Internet worldwide.

The goal of Khumbu FM, according to their website, is to broadcast information regarding “spiritual, cultural, and traditional values of the community” of Sherpas (About Us page). In conversation, Ngima, an active member of the Khumbu Media Center, stated that they can reach all 47 districts of Nepal via Khumbu FM 93.2 MHz and Himal FM 90.2 MHz, and their radio programs are heard throughout the world through their website (khumbufm.org). This is perhaps a well-understood aspect of contemporary communication technology, but their wide broadcasting range is paramount to their mission of connecting with Sherpas around the world.

The program is conducted in the Sherpa language (the Khumbu dialect, specifically). English and Nepali are used only marginally, if necessary. Each day is devoted to a different topic or specific segment: Sunday and Monday are devoted to Buddhist teachings, conducted by a member of the KMC who is a practicing nun; Tuesday and Wednesday are cultural programs, discussing topics such as weddings, festivals, traditions, etc, while emphasizing Buddhism in each of these; Thursday and Friday are interactive days where listeners may call, email, or text questions in to the station to be discussed on air, and it is also when guest lecturers are invited to give an expert opinion on a particular topic; and Saturday is devoted to entertainment, when they will play songs (traditional and contemporary) and share world news.

The Sherpa language is what creates a certain Sherpa-ness (to use James Fisher’s terminology), and this is why they use it exclusively at the KMC. Many of my Sherpa friends expressed their concerns about losing the ability to speak to their friends and family in Sherpa. It ultimately takes something away from the communicative experience. Ngawang laments:

When I speak with my friends at the Khumbu Media Center, I usually use Sherpa. I use this because all of my friends in the Khumbu Media Centre are Sherpas and most of them are fluent in the Sherpa language. I also feel comfortable communicating with them in Sherpa language. Using traditional Sherpa words and the slang words make the communication more interesting (Ginder 2014a).

The social atmosphere that they create at the Khumbu Media Center through the use of the

Sherpa language is one that is comfortable for Sherpas. Ngawang, Ngima, and the other Sherpas in this study learned Sherpa language in their homes. They grew up speaking it with friends and family. But as more Sherpas move to Kathmandu before reaching the age of five, they often relinquish this opportunity to learn it through enculturation. Furthermore, because there is currently only one school in the world that teaches the Sherpa language formally, the possibility of Sherpas learning the language become smaller. However, it is this situation that encouraged Ngima and the other members of the Khumbu Media Center to focus on broadcasting in Sherpa language, and they do so as much as they can.

The goals of the station, as outlined above, are to educate Sherpas around the world about Sherpa culture and language, as well as contemporary issues and events. Although no one ever expressed the exclusivity of their program to me directly, it is implied in their persistent use of the Sherpa language. While they were open to me in sharing traditional music, dance, and dress, it is clear that their radio station is targeting only Sherpas, and this is their primary concern. The world should certainly have a better understanding of who Sherpas are, but that is ultimately of little importance to Ngima and his friends. I asked numerous times if they ever intended on broadcasting in English so that other people around the world could understand their program, but it was typically met with the same response each time, “We have thought about it, but we do not want to do it now” (Ginder 2014b).

However, some Sherpas to whom I spoke expressed less concern about preserving the Sherpa language for the purpose of retaining a particular identity. They collectively understood that the Sherpa language holds little – if any – economic benefit; even speaking Sherpa in the villages of the Solu-Khumbu has become less important. Therefore why should Sherpas learn the Sherpa language when they can – and will only – get jobs speaking English and/or Nepali? With

this in mind, some do not find language to be of paramount importance to one's identity.

Certainly it helps to define a Sherpa as a Sherpa, but since there is less of a necessity to learn the Sherpa language today, it is ultimately not as vital as perhaps Buddhism is.

Most, if not all, of Sherpa cultural life is Buddhist inspired. This distinction is important because Nepal is a predominantly Hindu nation. While Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity are present, Hinduism informs much of cultural life in Kathmandu historically and socially, and throughout the rest of the country more spiritually. One exception to this would be Boudha, the predominantly Buddhist populated town in the Kathmandu Valley, and sometimes referred to as the "spiritual nerve-center of Nepal's Tibetan and Sherpa community" (Coburn 2002: 19). There even exists a specific Sherpa monastery where many of my informants will go for weddings, Losar, and other festivals throughout the year. Boudha became the location where I met many of the Sherpas I interviewed, and it is where their families have chosen to relocate. But despite many families moving to Boudha, there is still a great deal of separation that results in language and cultural loss.

Ngima relates that, just as with language, fewer Sherpas are learning about Buddhism because they are separated from their families and other Sherpa relatives. Consequently, this has also become integral at the Khumbu Media Center. I attended a meditation session at the KMC conducted by a visiting Buddhist lama. When I arrived at the KMC at 8:00am there were already six Sherpas in attendance, many of whom I had met before. By 8:30am, when the session was to begin, 7 more Sherpas had arrived. Everyone was in good spirits, having casual conversations, (in Sherpa) and laughing. Those who did not know me asked what my research was about, and after I told them that I was interested in the Sherpa culture and how language was important to them, they were interested in speaking to me more after the session.

While the session was underway I took time to observe everyone present. I noticed that each person in the room was fixated on the lama conducting the session. They provided her their undivided attention, listening closely to the words of wisdom she shared on clearing the mind and releasing all desires, while following her suggestions on how to sit properly to meditate. The session lasted for an hour, and we spent the last 15 minutes in meditation, focusing our attention on breathing and clearing our mind. Although I struggled to remain in the cross-legged position in which we sat, every other person in the room was content. When the session ended, we shared tea and fruit and sat talking to each other. I asked how they enjoyed the session and Sonam summed up what most everyone had felt: “I really enjoyed this. We do not have many teachers come for meditation, so this was really great. All of us know a little bit about Buddhism, but so many Sherpas do not know these days. We want to get more people here so that they can learn about meditation and how important Buddhism is to our lives” (Ginder 2014d).

However, Sonam did not express whether Buddhism was more or less important to her identity than the Sherpa language. Those who do not feel a strong connection with Buddhism are not practicing another religion, nor do they dislike the Buddhist teachings. Instead, they are simply unfamiliar with the teachings because they have grown up in either a more Hindu or possibly secular, urban environment. The more well known teachings of the Buddha (the Four Noble Truths, practicing mindfulness, and so forth) are still important, but the depth of their knowledge in Buddhism and how it is the foundation for their festivals and events, such as marriage, is not great. This did not come as a surprise, however, as secularism is a growing aspect of globalization. Regardless, language is still the key to securing proper cultural understanding, as others remarked, “without being able to communicate with each other in our own language, we cannot preserve our traditions and our culture” (Ginder 2014b).

Radio stations and cultural centers like the Khumbu Media Center are of paramount importance to the individuals who operate them. Not only do they provide an opportunity for members of the same community to gather together and share in their cultural traditions, but they are also a symbol of cultural preservation. As Silverstein (1998) states, “new kinds of discursive interaction have been emerging in local communities (typically ones that are plurilingual) with increasingly technologically mediated communication stimulated from the outside” (Silverstein 410) in the forms of radio and other means. These new interactions are new, non-traditional ways to not only preserve a language or culture, but also a community in general. While radio might be archaic to the “West” where the Internet, television, and digital streaming dominate, it is a sophisticated communicative resource for indigenous communities around the world.

In addition to sharing and preserving their culture and language through the radio station as disk jockeys, the Sherpas at the KMC also gain skills in mixing and editing audio, writing programs, translating these programs from English or Nepali into Sherpa, teaching musical lessons, and facilitating meditation sessions. In my observations I noticed a strong sense of community between all of the Sherpas at the KMC. Ngawang and Sonam both feel a connection to the community of the KMC: “I come to the Khumbu Media Center because my friends are here” (Ginder 2014a); “I can speak Sherpa and learn more about my culture here” (Ginder 2014d). These sentiments were not uncommon. Many, if not all, of these young Sherpas attend a college or university in Nepal where other Nepali ethnic groups surround them. Their lives have been shaped by the Nepali culture and the Nepali language through their education; thus, the KMC gives them an opportunity to escape to a place where they can be around Sherpa friends that provides a comfortable, supportive environment to grow as individuals and continue to shape an identity of their own creation.

Although, in addition to utilizing the Khumbu Media Center's physical space to create a sense of community, the Sherpas also create a comfortable space for their listeners through their radio programs. Khumbu FM's ability to reach an international Sherpa audience provides opportunities for local Sherpas and Sherpas in the diaspora to communicate with one another. Though the program's interactive sessions when individuals can text, call, or email comments in, the Sherpas at Khumbu FM can broadcast voices and words of Sherpas worldwide for the audience to hear and engage with themselves. They may not provide thoughtful conversations or communication between two Sherpas directly, but they do offer a dialogue that can be shared among the Sherpas listening as a collective whole, thus giving them a voice where they may not have had one before.

Kunreuther (2006) argues that the radio (as well as other forms of media) provide a "voice" for the otherwise voiceless in Nepal. Her research focuses primarily on Kantipur FM, one of many mainstream, non-governmental radio programs, and through this program Nepalese both domestically and in the diaspora can communicate with relatives and friends, while also sharing thoughts and opinions as "free speech" in a safe arena (Kunreuther 2006: 327). She also argues that radio programs, despite the conversations had or the personal nature of each call, produce "'Nepaliness,' first by creating categories of urban Nepalis or Nepalis at home and the Nepali diaspora, and then by seeming to *unite these Nepali subjects within the broadcast of the program itself*" (Kunreuther 2006: 329, emphasis mine). The Sherpas experience this very same sense of community through Khumbu FM, except they are providing the "Sherpa-ness" by speaking Sherpa, teaching about cultural traditions, and offering thoughtful programs on Buddhism by experts.

This space, once it can be understood as a safe environment for open conversation and as

a reiteration of a community, is then solidified further by its exclusivity. In the case of Kantipur FM, radio jockeys such as Anamika ensure that only Nepalese are calling in to the station. She “never entertains phone calls between Nepalis and non-Nepali foreigners living abroad. The main premise of the show, she said, is to cultivate ties between Nepalis around the world” (Kunreuther 2006: 331). Khumbu FM, however, render’s their programs exclusive to Sherpas by using the Sherpa language only. While anyone in the world can listen in on their programs, it will ultimately only be Sherpas (and Sherpas who can speak the Sherpa language, at that) who will understand the messages, thus they will be the only ones who will call into the station. The underlying emphasis of this exclusivity is simply a reiteration of their desire to produce solidarity in the Sherpa community, both in Nepal and abroad.

Aborigines in Australia have also taken to the radio to produce cultural solidarity, or in this case, cultural distinction that allows them to have a space for individuality. Fisher (2009) focuses on how “making requests are cultural practices through which the work of radio and the work of kinship turn into one another” (281). Aborigines have the opportunity to call into radio stations such as 4AAA in order to greet family members with their words or a song. Many Aborigines are in prison, and so radio stations provide a connection between the incarcerated and their kin. In doing so, Aborigines can “recognize and refashion the character of their shared distinction from Settler Australia” (Fisher 2009: 283).

Indigenous radio in Australia was sparked by two desires of the indigenous community: “efforts...to develop community radio in urban and town locations, and second, the growth of activism and subsequently cultural policy to promote remote Indigenous broadcasting – mainly within a framework of cultural survival and language maintenance” (Fisher 2009: 286). The former provided an opportunity for Aboriginals to learn how to organize and run a radio program

that would attempt to connect kin scattered around the country. Through these opportunities, the latter desire (promoting indigenous broadcasting) is made a reality and the preservation of culture and language are finally possible via radio. Much like Khumbu FM, stations such as 4AAA broadcast a variety of shows in an attempt to connect people who share a similar culture. However, they do so through an English – or in some cases, Aboriginal English – medium. Thus, they are often criticized for lacking “Aboriginal content” (Michaels in Fisher 2009: 283).

Nevertheless, providing an outlet for young and old Aborigines to cultivate their close family ties, to be cultural activists, and to learn how to operate radio equipment allows for more than personal growth. Radio stations such as 4AAA and Khumbu FM encourage a reconsideration of indigenous social imaginaries and specifically help to develop among people a self-conscious understanding of unique Sherpa and Aboriginal culture. 4AAA is unlike Khumbu FM in that the DJs intervene very little and allow for more person-to-person communication through the station as opposed to one person talking to many. However, in this context, it allows for declarations of “solidarity, hope, longing, and loss between men and women incarcerated in Australia’s prisons and their families” (Fisher 2009: 289). The Sherpas often make similar declarations (of solidarity, hope, and longing), although in a more indirect manner, through their educational programs about Buddhism, Sherpa language, and Sherpa traditions. The declaration of solidarity on Khumbu FM programs is made through the use of the Sherpa language. While this might foster greater displacement from Sherpas who have not had the privilege to learn Sherpa, it can also be a source of encouragement to learn the language.

Moore and Tlen (2007) further emphasize indigenous language use on the radio, where, in their case, the program itself acts as an arena of social reproduction. Quoting Michael Silverstein, it is “in the wake of language shift to English” where “uses of indigenous language

become emblems of identity and also evidence of what is happening in the wider social matrix” (Silverstein in Moore 2007: 267). This is certainly true for the Sherpas at the Khumbu Media Center, as speaking Nepali has become a part of not only their lives, but of everyone’s lives in Nepal. Nepali is certainly not English when it comes to its dominating effect over smaller, indigenous languages, but because Nepal is so ethnically diverse, a common language is required in order for daily interactions to take place. Thus, in response to the pressures of speaking Nepali for official business, in the classroom, and in almost every other aspect of their lives, having the ability to speak Sherpa with their family and friends provides them a unique opportunity to be defiantly independent, consequently reasserting their identity as not Nepali, but Sherpa.

In the Kunreuther, Fisher, and Moore examples mentioned, and likely in countless others, the use of radio is paramount for cultural preservation and declaration of solidarity. As Fisher points out, however, this solidarity is far more important “in urban communities where people feel keenly how a broad range of cultural practices have been attenuated by colonial subjugation and settlement, and where people often feel doubly deracinated by discourses of authenticity that subsequently challenge their indigeneity as an inauthentic shadow of something now past” (Fisher 2009: 294). For the Aborigines in Australia, their focus in creating solidarity is on their relationships with their kin; for Nepalis it is providing a space for “free speech” between only Nepalis while also making the diaspora feel like a part of the greater local community; for Sherpas, their primary focus is the perpetuation of their language through continued use and education in an exclusively Sherpa program.

As Sherpas move farther away from their traditional homes in the mountains of Nepal, it becomes increasingly more difficult to stay in touch with other Sherpas. More than ever before Sherpas are dispersed around the world pursuing higher education and better careers that are

unavailable in Nepal. Similarly, Sherpas living in Nepal are populating cities for the same educational and occupational opportunities. Given the widespread population, the Sherpas at the Khumbu Media Center are concerned that Sherpas around the world are not learning about their culture, language, or religion. They have already seen what can happen when a Sherpa grows up in Kathmandu attending a Nepali boarding school, far away from his/her family and cultural traditions. The result is a lack of understanding of Sherpa cultural values, traditions, and even more so, language. This makes their efforts at the Khumbu Media Center and on Khumbu FM increasingly salient. Not only do they work hard every day to educate Sherpas around the world, but they also provide an outlet for Sherpas in Nepal to learn more about their culture and a space where they can reinvigorate their identity as Sherpa.

Formal Education and the Markedness Model of Communication

Attempts to teach the Sherpa language are underway in Kathmandu for the very first time. The Manjushree Community School, named after the Buddhist bodhisattva of wisdom, opened in Kathmandu just three years ago (2012) and is dedicated to teaching Sherpa, Tamang, and Hyolmo children their native language, while also providing a proper, well-rounded education. The school is privately funded by Sherpas and is the only of its kind in the world. The children will also learn English and Nepali while at the school, but their emphasis on the language and culture of each ethnic background is of vital importance. I was fortunate enough to visit the school multiple times and speak to a few teachers, many of whom are also Sherpa. They expressed their passion for teaching children their cultural heritage, in addition to the “moral education of love, compassion, and equanimity taught by the Shakyamuni Buddha” (Manjushree Community School Prospectus). Although, when I asked each teacher whether they would prefer

parents send their kids down from the villages to this school to learn the Sherpa language, or whether they suggest they remain at home and learn the language from their family, they chose the latter. It is through enculturation and relationships in the home setting, not the classroom, which truly provides the proper foundation in a cultural heritage. Yet regardless of where a Sherpa learns the language, they still need to make decisions as to when to use it.

Code switching is often times the term used for actively, and intelligently, switching between languages in a given conversation. Typically the switching is understood by both parties and accepted as a part of the conversation. However, the markedness model of communication, as explained at length by Myers-Scotton (1993), provides a different understanding of how language choice is used in a social context; it is specifically used to create and perpetuate relationships of inclusion (or exclusion).

In sum, the basis of the model is the claim that “the range of linguistic choices for any specific talk exchange can be explained by speaker motivations based on readings of markedness *and calculations of the consequences of a given choice*” (Myers-Scotton 1993: 110). This method of code switching relies heavily on the speaker’s ability to understand the social context of a given situation, and to use their best judgment to ensure social obligations and differences are upheld. Essentially, the speaker must know which language is the marked language, and which is unmarked. Typically, this translates to mean that the commonly understood language, the one that anyone in the situation could speak, would be the unmarked language, and the more specific, perhaps exclusive language to a particular ethnic group (or social group), would be the marked language. Thus, identities play a large role in a conversation where the markedness model is utilized, and these decisions are made instantaneously.

In the context of Sherpas and their interaction with others in Kathmandu, Nepali would be the language of choice, or the unmarked language. This is because virtually all Nepali citizens speak Nepali, thus it would not exclude anyone from conversation and serve as an inclusive social marker. However, if a Sherpa walked up to a man or woman they could not immediately identify as Sherpa, they would begin speaking Nepali until they could ascertain any evidence that would encourage a change in the language being spoken. For instance, when my informants spoke to me, they would speak in English, as it was likely clear I could not speak another language. If I replied in Sherpa or Nepali, they would then reply in whichever language they felt most comfortable communicating in. This ultimately implies a closer relationship between us.

The choices are speaker-motivated as well, not simply socially motivated. Furthermore, when I spent time at the Khumbu Media Center, my informants would speak Sherpa to their friends and then quickly turn to English for me. While everyone present could speak enough English to hold a conversation, their choice to use Sherpa defines a particular exclusivity to their conversation, reasserting their identity as a Sherpa and in their solidarity as a group. Rampton (1995) supports this notion by claim that using a specific language “inserts images of a particular social type into the flow of interaction, and it both instantiates and sparks off heightened displays of the participants’ orientations to one another...and to the relationship between them” (55). Therefore, when they speak to one another, they can act ‘naturally’ Sherpa. They “negotiate their group alignments” (Rampton 1995: 55), and support one another in that relationship. When they speak to me, however, they will likely act less Sherpa (not least because they are speaking English) in order to create and support a relationship that is defined by our cultural differences and social similarities.

As described at the beginning of this section, Sherpas often lose the ability to learn the Sherpa language or experience Sherpa culture if they are sent to schools away from home. This inevitably perpetuates the growing homogeneity that globalization is already inherently imposing around the world. With international languages such as English being widespread, fewer indigenous people are taking the time and effort to learn their traditional language. Many Sherpas feel similarly, stating that there is ultimately no benefit to learning the Sherpa language. “Speaking Sherpa will not get me a job. I need to speak English or Nepali to get a good job. It does not have any economic benefit” (Nima interview). It is difficult to encourage learning a language that, in reality, truly may not have an economic benefit. However, we then must ask what the ultimate purpose of a language is. For the Sherpas at the Khumbu Media Center, many of which are part of this study, language is not an economic opportunity, but instead a cultural experience and the means by which they assert their Sherpa identity to the world, and most importantly to one another.

Urban Sherpas: The Importance of Identity in a World of Flux

Geschiere and Meyer, in their introduction to *Globalization and Identity: Dialectics of Flow and Closure* emphasize a growing trend of ‘flux’ and ‘fix’ in the globalizing present. In this context, identities are an attempt for people to fix the flow of globalization by conceptualizing it as a seemingly static entity. Yet “to grasp the ‘flux’ requires us to dismiss ‘the idea that the world is a collection of nameable groups’” (Kelly in Geschiere 1998: 603). Cultures must be considered more fluid in order to maintain a presence in the world. Likewise, an identity must be fluid as well. However, there is a difference between disappearing and adapting. Essentially, when a culture is *disappearing* because its members take on characteristics of

another culture, it is not the same as when a culture is *changing* as people move because its members realize the importance of adaptability in order to survive. In the former, individuals are passive as language and traditions are slowly subsumed or replaced by other languages and traditions. In the latter, individuals are actively restructuring a language or a tradition that ensures its continued survival in the new physical, political, or social setting in which they now live.

Sherpas who attend boarding schools are typically not exploring new ways to be Sherpa in the city. Instead they are being enculturated into Nepali urban life, not least by speaking Nepali exclusively. Kroskirty emphasizes the fact that “distinctive ethnic identities of minority groups, for example, must be constructed from linguistic symbols and/or communicative practices that contrast with resources available for the construction of other ethnic identities or more generally, available national identities” (Kroskirty 2000: 112). This raises an interesting point.

Sherpas that live in Nepal are nationally Nepali. Each and every Sherpa with whom I spoke expressed this vehemently. They were clearly proud of this distinction. However, it did not typically subvert their identity as a Sherpa. For instance, if one were to ask Ngima (a Sherpa who was born and raised in the Khumbu and who feels very closely tied to Sherpa culture and the language) where he was from, he would likely say “Nepal,” yet he would also qualify that he is Sherpa. Interestingly enough, Rinzi, who speaks very little Sherpa and who has been altogether distanced from Sherpa culture for his entire life, responded in the same way. Being Sherpa, then, is equally as important as being Nepali. For Sherpas like Ngima, the Sherpa language is the key to this distinction. Ngawang Sherpa explains it well:

The Sherpa language is very important to represent the true identity. There is a linkage between tradition, culture, religion, norms and other values and the language. If we forget our language,

we lose our identity in the long run. In losing the vital part of a culture, there is a risk that we might lose our identity and be dissolved into other communities (Ginder 2014a).

His concerns are not unfounded, nor are they unique. Many ethnic groups, whether outside of their indigenous homeland or not, feel pressures from the flow of people - and the larger, more widely spoken languages that they speak – to assimilate. Such worries are made clear in attempts at understanding language loss, strategic code switching, and language revitalization efforts.

Below I outline examples of each of these to articulate how widespread this concern is.

Ruiz in Henze (1999) notes that preserving (and to a greater extent, revitalizing) a language might not be as obvious as one might think. The UN Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples states that “indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop, and transmit to future generations their languages, oral traditions, writing systems, and literature” (UN Commission on Human Rights 1993: 6). However, this does not mean they will have the ability to do so. There must be support, not least from the indigenous people themselves. Just as with the Sherpas, Fishman believes that “intergenerational transmission of the language in the home and community” is paramount, “if this stage is not satisfied, all else can amount to little more than biding time” (Fishman in Henze 1999: 8). Language is a vibrant part of a culture, and it is essential for many people. For the Sherpas in my study, it is not a question of keeping just the language alive. It is a matter of keeping the culture, thus the identity, alive through the language itself. As an essentialist would claim, there is “a natural relationship between an ethnic group and its ancestral language” (Henze 1999: 9). While the language, just as the culture, may change over time, the meaning of it and the close connection it has to the culture itself will remain steadfast.

For young Sherpas, their identity is the cultural lens through which they view their world. It is the foundation for their morals and overall disposition; it informs everyday decisions; it is

how they fundamentally define themselves with respect to others. However, as such an all-encompassing idea, it is often difficult to understand why Sherpas choose to identify as they do, and it is even more difficult to specify what aspects of their identity are the most important in shaping it. When prompted, most Sherpas answered “language.” I often heard comments such as, “Sherpa (the language) is part of our identity. It is like being French and not being able to speak French” (Ginder 2014e); “People’s identity is based on their culture and tradition, and for all of this communication is essential” (Ginder 2014b). Initially this was no surprise. As someone who is interested in the connection between language and culture, I anticipated these kinds of responses. A culture is deeply rooted in its language. I think few would refute the fact that one cannot completely identify as a member of a particular group without speaking the native language. This, I believed, was a fundamental concept. But upon further consideration I have repositioned my opinion.

Culture is not ultimately embedded in language, but instead the language is embedded in the culture. Thus, a culture can ultimately survive – if only in part – without its original language. Conversely, a language cannot survive without a culture. It may be taught or learned, but it will not continue to be spoken if the culture from which it was born no longer exists. This concept underwrites each theoretical approach I explore because ultimately, it is the language that Sherpas are concerned most about. Many of their friends have grown up never learning the Sherpa language, but still identify as Sherpa. For those that have never learned to speak the language, it is essentially of little importance. However for those that do speak Sherpa, there is nothing more important.

Michael Silverstein (1998) discusses the difficulties faced by linguistic communities in a time where changes occur more rapidly than before. He states, “language is at once an aspect of

people's focused concern as agentive subjects, as well as perhaps the very most central semiotic medium or modality through which those cultural processes are, as it were, articulable or articulated (Silverstein 1998: 402). It is not only a way that the Sherpas assert their agency as individuals in a very multiethnic Nepal, but also the medium through which they perpetuate their distinctive identity. Their language is full of meaning that can only be elicited through particular festivals, music, and dances that will ultimately articulate exactly what it means to them to be Sherpa.

Struggles in Autochthony: Interacting with the “Other”

For some, an identity is something that is continually being represented (Hall 1990); for others, it is an expression of cultural values and norms; and for others yet it may be a category given by the state or by foreigners in order to logically organize a group of individuals and create a local sense of solidarity, however fabricated it may be (Geschiere 2009). Regardless of which definition you prefer, it is a dynamic, socially – if not psychologically – constructed notion that ultimately serves to delineate both individuals and entire groups.

Geographic, physical location is also often associated with a particular language, as I have noted briefly above with respect to Sherpa villages being the “cultural core” of the Sherpa language. Below I look more closely at how this location (in defined, geographic terms) is less important to the Sherpas than the overall use of the language itself. Through a continued emphasis of the importance of language to their identity, the Sherpas in this study provide a more nuanced perspective on their attempts to both assert their identities, as well as how they may in fact utilize their language – and to an extent their religion and traditions – as an attempt to assert their autochthonous position in Nepal in the face of growing global influence.

The concept of autochthony is a complex way to understand how the Sherpas are situated in an even greater matrix of self-identification. In the introduction to *The Perils of Belonging: Autochthony, Citizenship, and Exclusion in Africa and Europe*, Peter Geschiere (2009) defines and emphasizes autochthony in our world today. Simply meaning, “to be born from the soil” (Geschiere 2009: 2), autochthony is more powerful in definition than the term “indigenous.” Comparatively, indigenous means occurring naturally in a particular place. While this appears very similar, autochthony implies an unquestionable connection to the land on which one lives, being a literal product of it. However, one need not be autochthonous to a particular place through a long history of living there, as autochthony is ultimately self-defined by many groups. The Sherpas have supposedly lived in Himalayan villages for 450-600 years, so while they have certainly claimed ownership of the land on which they live, they are not truly “from the soil.” In contrast, however, to the visitors they encounter in their villages through numerous mountaineering and trekking expeditions, they could not be more “of the soil.”

In the context of globalization, however, autochthony is ultimately a “return of the local” (Geschiere 2009: 1), an effort to close the community against the global flows. It is also an attempt to find a place where one belongs, and in what ways one can create a sense of belonging. Silverstein describes “locality” with regard to language, and how it plays a role to individuals’ lives in the wake of globalization. It is worth quoting at length:

locality is a property of self-ascriptions of having a particular culture. Such global-scale processes as (a) the formation of empires...; (b) the emergence of global economies and communicational patterns, with intensifying commodification of information; and (c) the emergence of consciousness of diasporization of mosaic-like world distributions of people bearing multiple ‘cultural’ allegiances (Silverstein 1998: 404)

These attributes ultimately render this concept of locality a problem for those who have neither moved from their traditional homes, nor those who have not experience the greater

impact of global economies or communicational patterns that often accompany colonialization and/or tourism. The Sherpas have not been colonized, at least not in the formal sense. While India was occupied by the United Kingdom, Nepal remained unknown, its borders closed until the mid-1950s. Thus their experiences of locality did not come at a colonial cost. Instead, they experienced problems of locality when mountaineering grew in popularity and when Sherpas who left the villages made the decision not to return.

Sherpas struggle to assert their identities against constant interactions with foreigners (tourists and mountaineers), as well as other Nepali citizens. Thus, with a cultural heritage rooted in Tibet and a present location in Nepal with increasing influence on the younger population, Sherpas must play an active role in order to continue being Sherpa. As Bayart states, “People feel dominated by identity’s illusions or by the processes of globalization but at the same time are deeply involved in shaping them” (Bayart in Geschiere 2009: 34). Globalization often implies movement, and to ignore this would be to ignore history itself. Sherpas have certainly never been a sedentary ethnic group, and so their identity is not inherently tied to the land on which they live. Their current association with the Himalayas and particularly Mount Everest is a result of popular media, not an attempt to claim ownership of land for nostalgic purposes. The Sherpas support notions proclaimed by many in the age of globalization that the “self-evident link between identity and place no longer exists...where people are constantly moving” (Versluys 2008: 287). Yet their constant encounter with ‘Others’ throughout their history in Nepal is essential in understanding their use of the Sherpa language to identify because it may signify a threat to their independence as an ethnic group. Geschiere claims, “Autochthony’s Other can be constantly redefined, entailing new boundary marking for the group concerned” (Geschiere 2009: 28). I would certainly agree with this, and I would like to briefly explore how cultural

boundaries are blurred through interactions with foreign tourists, and how Sherpas have sought to maintain their uniqueness regardless.

Cultural boundaries are fluid, almost indistinguishable social creations that separate one ethnic group from another; and the features of these boundaries are always changing. But because many people that the Sherpas meet today speak English (which many Sherpas now speak) and wear clothing that they themselves have also begun to wear, it becomes more difficult to separate themselves from the 'other.' As Fredrik Barth (1969) notes in his discussion of boundaries, he claims, "categorical ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of mobility, contact, and information, but do entail social processes of exclusion and incorporation whereby discrete categories are maintained *despite* changing participation and membership in the course of individual life histories" (9-10). This essentially means that Sherpas constantly need to redefine whom they are as they become more and more influenced by the visitors they encounter. This is also why identities did not necessarily become a point of concern before globalization took hold and before people, ideas, and goods moved freely around the world at unprecedented rates. This period of globalization entails a certain crisis of identity, and the Sherpas are experiencing this very close to home.

As tourists and mountaineers from numerous countries flood the alpine villages of the Solu-Khumbu on their way to Everest Base Camp, Sherpas meet, greet, feed, and often provide assistance along the way. Tourists hope to catch a glimpse of the authentic Sherpa, and they will often leave satisfied. But this interaction between 'local' and 'foreigner' begs the question, is the Sherpa that people see an authentic Sherpa? Or is it a performance of a romanticized ethnic identity? This could also be asked with respect to Kathmandu and how Sherpas act around their Nepali friends. However, in this context, Sherpas do not typically act more Sherpa, but instead

they *act* (to whatever degree they see necessary) more Nepali. But are they actually pretending here? Ethnic distinction is required to procure a worthwhile, and truly authentic experience. Yet because many Sherpas have electricity, own cell phones, wear quality trekking gear as touted by many mountaineers, and speak English, they must actively create this cultural boundary through a continued use of their language and their traditions.

Anthropologists have contemplated the degree to which Sherpas perform and flaunt their Sherpa-ness (Fisher 1990; Adams 1996), but it is not altogether clear that this is actually what happens. Jemima Sherpa explained to me that changes in Sherpa dress, level of consumerism, and overall identity are perhaps not the result of “intermingling with tourists, but simply a sign of the times and global trends” (Ginder 2014). It is only through a persistence of cultural traits by the individuals in a community that an identity, as understood by the whole, will be maintained (Barth 1969: 38). Therefore it is ultimately an active decision on the part of the Sherpas to maintain this distinctive ethnic boundary, or to abolish it. If, as Barth suggests, an ethnicity – and the cultural values that are the foundation of an ethnicity – is in fact an implication or result of an assumed identity, then it would stand true that Sherpas collectively decide to produce this in the face of constant exposure to other cultures and languages. As Hall notes, “Cultural identities reflect the common, historical experiences and share cultural codes which provide us, as ‘one people’ with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning” (Hall 1990: 233). Yet just as ideas can change over time, so too can the concept of an identity if the circumstances are favorable to the individual (i.e. if they prefer a culture or particular trait of a culture more than their own). However, language falls into a different category.

Each individual who comes through the Khumbu brings a different language, sometimes in addition to English. As time passes, Sherpas – be they members of the expedition or simply

locals in the villages – are bound to pick up words, phrases, or even sophisticated communicating abilities. Because foreign-owned companies run most expeditions, English is the lingua franca. Furthermore, many Sherpa children who live in the Khumbu region attend the Hillary School, where English is one of the two mediums of instruction (the other being Nepali). Sherpa will be spoken in the home and between Sherpas, and thus maintained as an important aspect of village life. It can only be expected, then that the language be considered an identifier; one that separates the local from the visitor, emphasizing the difference that is already clear, yet must somehow be defined regardless. This is largely because travelers either expect to communicate with the local Sherpas in English or not at all. As a consequence of these boundaries, expectations are created (such as hyper-Sherpa and hyper-America) and can be maintained by both parties creates a constraint from which it is difficult to escape. But foreign mountaineers or tourists are not the only ones who impose these constraints. Sherpas experience difficulty in becoming more individual in every aspect of their lives, except for the few that I have noted above. And it is because of this constraint that they have felt a need to found organizations such as the Khumbu Media Center, to fund schools such as the Manjushree Community School, and to stress language and tradition in front of countless mountaineers, tourists, and perhaps even academics (whether genuinely or in performance), so as to reassure themselves of a culture they feel may be slipping through their fingers.

Conclusion

Geschiere states that as consequence of globalization, “the rapidly increasing mobility of people, not only on a national but also a transnational scale – which to many is a basic factor of globalization – has generated the wider context for people’s preoccupation with belonging

(Geschiere 2009: 17). In other words, the closer we get to becoming more homogenous, the more we want to be heterogeneous. The differences that were inherent, yet unnecessary, before, have all of a sudden become inexplicably necessary while altogether less-than-inherent. Yet the concept of an identity, and how one creates or embodies it, is still as difficult to ascertain as ever. However, it is clear to me that searching for particularities within a culture offers insight into the complexities of an identity.

The Sherpas are a people who have experienced countless other cultures and ethnic groups for much of their known history. They have become the icon of mountaineering, as well as the epitome of hard work and pleasant demeanors. However, little of their cultural heritage is known, even within Nepal's borders. Nevertheless, Sherpas feel a strong sense of solidarity and a certain pride in being Sherpa. As I have attempted to show here, it is the Sherpa language itself that ultimately defines many young Sherpas' identity (though not all). Without the Sherpa language, festivals, traditions, music, and even conversations would be devoid of the cultural uniqueness that empowers a them. Through their experiences in Nepali-centric schools, away from their families and their cultural traditions, by recreating what it means to be Sherpa by speaking the language and educating others about the culture and traditions of Sherpas, and through self-expression of their cultural individuality and linguistic difference via radio, Sherpas continue to assert their unique identities to one another and around the world; and in turn, create greater solidarity.

I have stressed the importance of language in delineating individual identities among the young Sherpas in Kathmandu, Nepal. Although language is often considered a particular part of a culture, and not the very core of an identity in a multiethnic group context, I believe it is of paramount importance to the formation of an identity for young Sherpas. Their language allows

for expression in the ultimate forms of a culture in which the language is deeply embedded, because it is shaped by the culture itself and is, in fact, a cause for change itself. It is not for want of global fluency, or even relative knowledge, in the Sherpa language that they insist on speaking Sherpa in their villages, with friends in Kathmandu, or even on-air seven days a week. Instead, they simply wish to perpetuate the language to Sherpas (and to anyone who cares to listen to their radio programs) around the world (and in Nepal) in order to preserve a cultural tradition that inherently includes only Sherpas. They continue to travel around the world, taking their traditions, music, dance and religion with them, but often choose to “leave behind” their language. While they will never truly lose their Sherpa-ness, without continuing to speak the Sherpa language, they risk losing something greater; the feeling of ultimate belonging to a proud, unique ethnic group.

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