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Labor stories from Solukhumbu: Case studies of Khaling indigenous discourse and situational Sherpa identity

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LABOR STORIES FROM SOLUKHUMBU:

CASE STUDIES OF KHALING INDIGENOUS DISCOURSE AND

SITUATIONAL SHERPA IDENTITY

By

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B.A., Colgate University, 2010

A thesis submitted to the
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This thesis entitled:

Labor stories from Solukhumbu: Case studies of Khaling indigenous discourse and situational Sherpa identity

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
ABSTRACT

Frydenlund, Shae A. (M.A., Geography)

Labor stories from Solukhumbu: case studies of Khaling indigenous discourse and situational Sherpa identity

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Emily T. Yeh and Professor Timothy Oakes

This thesis examines Nepalese formations of identity, indigeneity and territory through an analysis of mountain worker discourses. Racialized ethnic identities and low positioning in the mountain labor hierarchy intersect to produce and reproduce experiences of marginalization for non-Hindu mountain workers. This marginalization cannot be separated from broader political and economic processes, which have shaped laborer positioning through land policy, Hinduization and systematic forms of ethno-racial discrimination. While Khaling Rai indigenous activists have articulated indigenous identities and land claims to challenge their marginalized position in the mountain labor hierarchy, non-Sherpa mountain workers pass as “situational Sherpas” to gain mobility and avoid discrimination in the labor market. Both cases demonstrate the importance of labor dynamics in understanding the contextual formation of identities, indigeneities and indigenous territories.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION, METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

I was 19 when I first traveled to Nepal in 2008 for a study abroad program, and I had grand visions of embarking on a solo adventure to Everest after I finished the semester. I did end up walking from Lukla to Everest base camp, alongside what seemed to be a thousand sneaker-sporting Germans, but was surprised to find that nothing was as I had imagined. The Everest route wasn’t a trekking route, but a commercial highway where thousands of people transported everything from refrigerators to candy and beer on their backs while wearing flip-flops, if any shoes at all. My gigantic backpack and its contents were superfluous, as guesthouses and shops lined the trail from beginning to end. Everything was so expensive, and the sheer amount of human energy required to move goods to the upper Solukhumbu was staggering. On the second or third day, I began to notice that none of the porters I met were Sherpa, even though I knew that the Solukhumbu is the Sherpa homeland. I had some basic understandings of ethnic diversity in Nepal thanks to my study abroad coursework, but wanted to understand why everything I had ever seen or read about Everest focused on Sherpas, but made no mention of the people from other ethnic groups living and working there.

The paradoxical inclusion and exclusion of lowland workers in the Solukhumbu has driven my research ever since. When Everest was thrust into the international spotlight in 2013 and 2014 following a brawl and tragic avalanche, I was frustrated by journalistic stories and everyday conversations that conflated being Sherpa with being a mountain laborer. Furthermore,
very few people who work low-income jobs in the Everest industry are Sherpa. When I returned to Nepal in 2014 to do Master’s research, I started out with questions about how people from various ethnic groups experienced the “sherpa” labor category, and how their work as “sherpas” influenced their positioning in broader Nepalese society. What I found; however, was that Everest labor dynamics are imbricated with broader and more complex political-economic processes and deep-seated histories of racialization.

My research was upended entirely after my informants helped me realize I was asking the wrong questions. First, interviews with workers showed me that passing as Sherpa to access greater social and economic mobility was the key process that I had been missing all along. Second, I learned that non-Sherpa laborers were mostly Khaling and Kulung Rai people from the lower Solukhumbu, but that they weren’t low-income laborers by their own choosing. In fact, going up to the Solukhubu is inextricably linked to land scarcity and landlessness among the rural poor. Furthermore, I was surprised to learn that Khaling people view the Everest region as their homeland, and labor disputes are deeply intertwined with Khaling indigenous identity and conceptions of territory.

The key turning point in my project came when I interviewed the owner of Nepal’s largest Nepali-owned trekking and mountaineering agency. The owner is ethnically Sherpa, and when I asked about non-Sherpas working in the Solukhumbu, he told me that every household has a Rai domestic servant or two, and that every lodge employs Rai laborers to cook or transport supplies at a low cost. Inflation in the Solukhumbu is crazy, he said, and money is tight. His own company hires mostly Rai porters from Bung and Cheskam who either just show up at the airport or are contracted through porter middlemen. He proceeded to tell me that I really should go to Bung to talk to people. This was in about the fourth week of my 7-week period of research. In
sum, most of my carefully crafted research design was useless. But I did manage to realize this in time to ask a handful of people questions that produced interesting data. My experience in the field led me to ask a new set of questions about labor in the Everest industry. First, how do state and everyday processes of racialization interact with labor dynamics and political ecologies to shape Khaling indigeneity? Second, what do Khaling land claims reveal about conceptions of indigenous identity territory? And third, how is Sherpa-ness constructed and deployed in the mountain labor hierarchy, and with what effects? My Master’s thesis addresses these questions through two papers that together broadly highlight how place, labor dynamics and racialization interact to shape the social identities of marginalized non-Hindu mountain workers in Nepal. In both case studies, labor is the key site where political identities are formed, though with varying effects.

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

I chose ethnographic methods of interview and participant observation in order to gather views and narratives from mountain workers, which revealed how they viewed themselves as well as their opinions of the Everest industry and Nepalese government. By interviewing multiple people and asking a set of open-ended questions about their livelihoods and personal experiences, I was able to gather responses that revealed not only individuals’ positioning in the labor market and wider society, but also understand patterns that emerged between respondents. While I formally interviewed 26 people, I also gained valuable data from interactions between myself and my translator, as well as unplanned conversations with people walking mountain trails. Even brief encounters with day laborers and porters provided me with valuable insight into workers’ shared experience of marginalization. By sitting or walking with participants after I
finished asking the set of questions, I found that many people’s views were different or more complex than their original responses suggested.

I engaged in various iterations of participant observation, ranging from very participant-oriented (rock climbing with guides) to more observation-oriented (sitting around drinking tea with trekking office workers). This method provided me with access to everyday conversations about workers’ lives, which may not have been revealed through traditional interviews. While hanging out in the rock gym, which was frequented by higher-paid professional guides, I heard stories that contradicted interview responses that suggested everything was fine in their jobs and lives. Ethnographic interviews and participation allowed me to understand not only what mountain workers actually do, but also the unexpected desires and constraints shaping their identities as workers.

The first paper engages with Khaling Rai land claims in the Solukhumbu, and draws on ten semi-structured interviews with people who identified as Khaling or Khulung Rai, including porters, cooks, student activists, an NGO worker and a Village Development Committee official in Bung, Solukhumbu. Interviews took place mostly in Bung during July rainy season when many people were home to plant crops. I conducted interviews with the help of a local translator in a restaurant at the center of town and in the home where I was staying. I was introduced to several Khaling Rai mountain workers and activists through friends and Nepali academics who knew about my research, and I was able to meet for coffee and interview them in Kathmandu. During this part of my project, I engaged in very little participant observation outside of cooking meals, but nonetheless several patterns emerged in my conversations and interactions with laborers. First, people from Bung only worked in the upper Khumbu if they didn’t have enough land to farm. Second, they viewed the upper Khumbu as their ancestral homeland, and many
fervently supported Khaling indigenous activism. In analyzing my data, I argue that labor is the key site of Khaling indigenous identity and conceptions of territory, which shows us that indigeneity cannot be solely understood in the context of “tribal” but not “peasant” categories.

The second paper focuses on labor identities, and is mainly concerned with how the international “Sherpa brand” is constructed and how expressions of Sherpa-ness are taken up by mountain workers, yet shape workers’ experiences of marginalization in the Everest industry in unexpected ways. I was introduced to participants through friends in Kathmandu, mostly Western-educated guides and NGO-workers. Because most participants spoke very good English or standard Nepali, I did not often use a translator. Being a fellow outdoor enthusiast and a friend-of-a-friend allowed me to participate in leisure activities like climbing or group outings to a swimming hole, where people joked about their jobs and shared funny stories about being mistaken for Sherpa. While interviews revealed a pattern of “passing” as Sherpa, participant observation offered nuance to interview data by showing the complexity and flexibility of trekking workers’ identities. Using data from 16 semi-structured interviews and many hours of participant observation in workers’ leisure spaces, I show that passing as Sherpa is an individual strategy of mobility, but that this process works to reproduce group stereotypes and entrench marginalization for both non-Sherpas and Sherpas.
FIGURE 1: Bung VDC, Solukhumbu District, Nepal

Source: nepalhdc.org
FIGURE 2: Villages of Pangboche and Bung relative to the standard Everest trekking route
INTRODUCTION

Seated on the floor of a one-room apartment in Kathmandu, Endra, a graduate student and Khaling indigenous rights activist, sifts through a stack of crinkled photocopies. Somewhere, he says, there is a document that legally affirms Khaling ownership of land near Pangboche in the upper Solukhumbu. This land is special because it contains a sacred cave, which is an ancestral place of worship for Khaling people. Endra tells me that he grew up surrounded by stories about the cave, but when I ask if it is named, he says no. But the cave is very important, he says. When someone dies in his community, a Khaling priest will sing prayers in the home of the deceased to guide their soul to the cave and into heaven. Rituals aren’t performed at the cave because the Khaling people gave their land to the Sherpas. Endra laments that if only the Khaling people had remained on this land, which they occupied long before the Sherpas, the Everest region would be like a precious jewel to them. They would be able to earn money from tourism, and people would know that this land was Khaling territory. Endra becomes agitated as he recalls how his Sherpa employers called him “Kulunge” when he worked in the Khumbu. The word refers to the Kulung Rai ethnic group, but is also an ethno-racial slur to refer to non-Sherpa laborers from the lowlands. If the Solukhumbu were still Khaling territory, Endra says, Khaling people would not be degraded to the point of carrying heavy loads and sleeping in segregated porter’s shelters. Although I never found out whether a land title document exists, or whether there is any formal government recognition of Khaling land ownership in Pangboche, stories
about Khaling labor and ancestral territory are deeply intertwined, and shape Khaling indigenous discourse in powerful ways.

I visited Pangboche in 2009, and remember seeing what looked like a shallow cave decorated with a few streams of colorful fabric. There may have been a shrine nearby, then again it may have been a pile of abandoned objects. I can’t recall. When I asked a Sherpa lodgeowner about it, she said the cave was some kind of Rai thing, but she wasn’t really sure. Most tourists visit the Buddhist monastery at Pangboche, and have never heard of a sacred Khaling Rai cave. Not many Khaling people, or anybody at all, it seems, visit the cave. I’m not even sure if the cave I saw was the cave. Endra said that some Khaling people visit the sacred cave when they are working in the upper Khumbu, but he and his colleagues are actively working to raise awareness about its significance as part of their bid to gain government recognition for Khaling indigeneity. He hopes the cave will eventually be a pilgrimage site for Khaling people, and that the area will be widely recognized as sacred Khaling land.

On the surface, it would appear that Khaling land claims in the upper Solukhumbu are only about territory, and are deployed with the specific goal of gaining the political rights that come with government recognition of Khaling indigeneity. However, upon closer examination, Khaling indigenous discourse and territorial claims are about a long history of racialized labor marginalization. This paper examines the emergence of a distinct Khaling indigeneity and territory in the context of broader historical, political and economic processes. The first section situates Khaling indigenous discourse in the context of Everest industry labor dynamics, and explains how Khaling laborers have been constructed as lazy and morally suspect. The second section frames Khaling land claims in the context of literature on indigeneity, and makes the argument that this case disrupts commonly held understandings of rural people as either “tribal”
or “peasant.” The third and fourth sections support this argument by engaging with the dual articulation of Khaling indigeneity and territory by historicizing the production racialized ethnic hierarchies alongside discriminatory land tenure policies that led to widespread landlessness and labor migration among non-Hindu groups in Nepal’s eastern uplands. The fourth section builds on the previous three sections to show that Khaling positioning in the mountain labor market is actually the result of a long history of discrimination and marginalization in multiple aspects of Nepalese society. The paper concludes with a discussion of indigenous land claims as unfinished and imperfect processes that must be understood in the context of specific historical conjunctures.

This paper draws on seven weeks of ethnographic research in Kathmandu and Solukhumbu, Nepal, where I engaged methods of interviews and participant observation to understand how Khaling activists, laborers and villagers construct Khaling indigeneity and conceptions of territory alongside experiences of marginalization in the Solukhumbu landscape and mountain labor market. My analysis is grounded in racial formation theory, and engages a political ecology framework to link issues of racial categorization and territory with the political economy of the Everest industry.

LABOR STORIES FROM SOLUKHUMBU: CONSTRUCTING KHALING INDIGENEITY AND TERRITORY

Like many young men and women from the lower Solukhumbu and Makalu-Barun, Endra joined several friends from his village near Salleri and worked a year contract in the upper Khumbu for a Sherpa family who ran a furniture business. During the summer, he would carry loads of furniture pieces from the airport at Lukla to Pheriche, where they would be assembled and sold at a high premium throughout the upper Khumbu. In the winter, he and other contracted
staff would collect yak dung for fuel and do other domestic chores. Endra feels a deep connection to the Khumbu, but has also been systematically excluded from sharing in most of the benefits that the Everest industry has generated over the past 60 years. Rather than receiving funding from park fees or owning land and building their own lodges, Rais from the lower Solukhumbu staff low-paid positions in territory that they assert they historically occupied first.

To further his point about Khaling and Kulung Rai occupation of the upper Khumbu, Endra referenced pollen analysis records (see Fisher, 1990), archaeological evidence of farming in the region (which predates Sherpa migration from Tibet), and emphasizes oral histories that explain why Khaling and Kulung people no longer live “up.” He tells two stories: the first is about why Khaling left the Khumbu, and the second explains how it became custom that Khaling do not intermarry with Sherpa women.

Long ago, the Khaling were the only people living in the Solukhumbu, but the Bhote came down from Tibet to Khaling lands to hunt. One day a Khaling man noticed that his food had begun to go missing while he was out working in the fields during the day. One day some rice, the next day potatoes, so he decided to hide in a tree in the courtyard so he could see who was stealing his food. Eventually a Bhote man came, and was about to make off with some grain, when the Khaling man in the tree drew an arrow. At the very last minute, a Bhote woman then appeared, carrying a gift of salt, and the Bhote man’s life was spared. So after that day, there was a truce – an agreement that Kaling would farm lower in the region and bring potatoes and grain, and that the Bhote would bring salt from above.

Although the story doesn’t fully explain how Bhote (Tibetan) ancestors of Sherpas actually ended up controlling of upper Solukhumbu lands, it nonetheless does important discursive work. Most obviously, it establishes that Khaling people first had control over the upper Solukhumbu, and adds legitimacy to political claims over the land in Pangboche. The story also frames Bhotes as dishonest thieves who trick the honest and hardworking Khaling. I also heard this narrative in another form from a young Kulung Rai man who worked as a porter for 6
years, but now works as an electrician in Salleri. When I asked him if he thought he was ever discriminated against, at first he said no. But then thought about it some and replied: “actually, there was one time when I was carrying loads for a tourist group. It’s more fun than carrying loads for hotels because you get to talk to the foreigners. The foreigners on this trip were very nice, and put together tips for the porters. But the Sherpa guide, he took it all. Yes, we were discriminated against [for being Rai porters].” Mahendra felt he was discriminated against for being both lowland Rai and a porter – here we see the co-construction of ethnicity and labor categories, which is reproduced in stories of Sherpa treachery and Khaling honesty.

Ram recounted a second, shorter, parable about the salt trade: “there once was a Kaling man who married a Sherpa woman. One day they were walking to trade salt in the upper Khumbu, and the woman was herding the yaks and had a terrible fall. She died, and the baby was lost. Then it became known that Kaling do not marry Sherpas.” This anecdote also does “boundary work” (Barth, 1998; Wimmer, 2013) by delineating an “us” and “them.” As an expression of cultural politics, this story crafts a specific Khaling identity and outlines the rules of group membership, specifically with regards to marriage customs. The story outlines a behavior (marrying a Sherpa) that transgresses the group’s boundaries and the consequences of this transgression. In this case, the consequence is ill fortune. However, looking beyond cultural politics, the story also serves as a marker of a distinct Khalingness. Following the Shah conquests and autocratic Panchayat system, where a discourse of “one Nepali culture” was meticulously crafted, Khalingness and Khaling cultural practices can now be a source of pride and a tool for community building.

Both stories mark the spatial division between “Bhote” upper Solukhumbu and “Khaling” lower Solukhumbu vis-à-vis the historical emergence of the salt trade. In this context, Khaling
exclusion from the Solukhumbu and the Everest industry is politicized as a moral issue, where low-income seasonal laborers can then be framed as victims of greedy Sherpas. Furthermore, these stories produce a political vision of the Solukhumbu landscape where Khaling Rai are recast as people who belong, rather than as people who are excluded from lodges and other socially prestigious spaces reserved for Westerners and higher-status trekking guides.

Endra, and other Khaling and Kulung Rais, felt humiliated when Sherpas call them “Kulunge”, a term that refers to Kulung ethnicity, but that is broadly used as a racialized slur to draw attention to laborers’ low-altitude geographical origin, low status in the Everest labor industry as well as low status in broader Solukhumbu society. Endra describes his and other lower-Solu laborers’ relationships with Sherpas and other non-Rais as tense: “we [Khaling] are called ‘Kulunge’, even though we aren’t Kulung. They generalize and call all of us ‘Kulunge’– it’s another way that we are dominated there.” Similarly, the term “rongba” is often used to refer to lower hill people, but specifically refers to parbatiya, or Hindu people. Purna, a middle-aged, middle-income guide, expresses his frustration at being conflated with Hindus: “[Sherpas] call us rongba. But we are not the same as Hindus!” These labels do important work among non-Sherpa trekking guides, as they converge with broader institutions and practices (the spatial segregation of porters apart from lodges) as part of a wider ethno-racial discourse in Nepal. In the trekking industry’s ethno-racial discourse, class and ethno-racial categories are mutually constituted. Although certainly not all Rais from the lower Solu feel sharp resentment toward ethnic Sherpas, most of my conversations with people working as low-income seasonal labor shared this view. Those who were guides or head cooks felt that their relationships with Sherpas were, on the whole, quite good. However, positioning in the lowest rungs of the mountain labor hierarchy was largely tinged with bitterness toward Sherpas.
Ram’s comments touch on the discursive processes that link lowland Rai ethnicity to low-level labor and low class status. Khaling and Kulung porters are also excluded from lodges, where foreign clients and English-speaking guides from Kathmandu enjoy access and privileged status. Instead, porters sleep in separate shelters apart from lodges. One interview participant became very angry talking about these shelters: “we aren’t even allowed in the lodge. We sleep in the porter shacks like animals. We [Kulung and Khaling] are dominated people.” In all of the young men’s comments, labor emerges clearly as a discursive site in which environmental relationships are navigated, and where political visions of the Solukhumbu landscape are formed in opposition to processes of discrimination and exclusion. Endra emphasizes cultural differences between Khalings and Sherpas, while also highlighting the means of production in the Everest industry as a nexus of Khaling marginality. Claiming sacred land in the Solukhumbu becomes a tool for resisting low positioning in the labor hierarchy in addition to gaining fuller political rights. These stories also reveal a dual articulation of Khaling indigeneity vis-à-vis culture (the “tribal slot”) and means of production (“peasantry”).

Participation in wage labor is nothing new in lower Solukhumbu and Makalu-Barun, as land privatization and expropriation fueled landlessness and drove widespread labor migration in the 19th century (Gellner, Pfaff-Czarnecka, & Whelpton, 1997; Shrestha, 1990; Whelpton, 2005). Many indigenous Kirant uplanders traded salt with Tibet during the farming “off season”, but when China invaded Tibet this trade ceased, and many uplanders traveled southeast to trade with India. During these travels, many Rais from the lower Solukhumbu were also recruited in large numbers to join the British army (Coburn, 2013). Thousands of Nepalis fought in WWI and WWII, and although Gurkha soldiers from Western Nepal are the most famous example, there is a long history of Rais serving in the military. During my homestay with a family in Bung, I
noticed a black and white photograph of a man in a military uniform holding a musket. I asked Mahendra, the homeowner, who this person was, and what army he was in. It was his grandfather, he said, who served with the British army in India.

In fact, every family I spoke with had at least one relative who had served in the British army or who had gone to India to work. One elderly man, who was confined to bed, told me about his adventures fighting the Japanese and seeing the world with the British army after having been recruited while he was trading salt in India. Alongside Gurungs and Magars, the Rai were considered a “martial race” naturally inclined to loyalty and strength in battle (Hangen, 2009; Streets, 2004). Shrestha (1970) links military recruitment during the Rana regime to decreased agricultural productivity in the uplands and widespread labor migration, which positioned upland janajati at a disadvantage compared to Hindu settlers. Losing so many young men to the British army certainly had effects on the communities where I stayed. The elderly veteran’s daughter described her memories of growing up without her father around: “he was gone for so long. My sisters and I did all the work, it was so difficult.” Now her children and extended family farm their land an hour’s walk toward the river, and they rent a house along the road that is more comfortable for their elderly father. Although many Rai people from the Solukhumbu work abroad (few are recruited into the army), the overwhelming majority of poor or near-landless people work seasonally in the upper Khumbu.

Around the same time that the salt trade with Tibet collapsed, British climbing expeditions were recruiting large numbers of porters from Solukhumbu, as well as Langtang and other mid hill regions near Kathmandu. Sherpas quickly rose to a higher position in the labor hierarchy through a mixture of strategic positioning vis-à-vis foreign climbers, who readily romanticized them as noble savages, and acclimatization to higher altitudes (Ortner, Adams,
The first American expedition to Everest employed some 900 porters, mostly Rai, Tamang and Limbu, to carry equipment and supplies on the 30-day route from Kathmandu to Everest Base camp (Coburn, 2013). The Sherpa workers, however, made it clear they were not “load carrying” people, and engaged in a strike that emphasized their role as higher-skilled, high altitude workers (Coburn, 2013). Following the 1953 ascent of Mt. Chomolungma (Everest), the Everest industry was born. Though in its nascent stages until the 1970s, the Everest industry required (and still requires) a steady supply of cheap labor to construct lodges and keep prices low enough to draw a wide array of foreign tourists. By virtue of their more vulnerable social, political and economic positioning, Rais from the lower Solu have supplied a large portion of the cheap labor that keeps the Everest industry afloat.

Working in the Khumbu is mostly a last resort for villagers from lower Solu or Makalu-Barun. Chandrika runs a lodge in Bung’s central chowk, and when I asked her if she ever “went up” to the Khumbu to work, she said that only women with problems work in the Khumbu, and that she never had to go. During my time in Bung, the only people around were the town’s elite: business owners and families working in their fields. Everyone else was “up.” This generalization follows seasonal workers into the Khumbu, where the ethno-racial term “Kulunge” marks them as low-class outsiders. Kulung and Khaling laborers’ experience of the Khumbu landscape is often marked by suffering and exclusion. Talking with Ram, a Khaling man from a village near Salleri in the lower Solukhumbu, he described his time working as a porter in reference to his experience sleeping outside: “we were not allowed to sleep in the lodge, so every night after carrying loads all day, I walked for a long time up to a cave where I would sleep. It was very cold, and I didn’t have blankets or a sleeping bag.” Exclusion from lodges and restaurants in the Khumbu is a point of contention among nearly every porter I have ever met.
Throughout Nepal, Rai porters are stereotyped as gamblers and drinkers who waste their earnings and cause trouble with foreigners and other porters. Prior to 2006, when a porter advocacy group lobbied for the construction of porter’s shelters in the Khumbu, porters often slept outside or in caves. However, porter’s shelters are also controversial, and most people that I spoke with viewed the shelters as segregation, which cemented their collective domination by Sherpas and Hindus. Porters are the lowest position in the mountain labor hierarchy, and while cooks and domestic servants are generally better paid and allowed to move more freely in lodges, most of the cooks and servants I spoke with described their experience in the Khumbu in terms of domination and marginalization. Domestic workers are tightly restricted by a year-long contract and are more closely bound to their overseers in the home. Many young men voiced to me that they prefer to work as porters because they have more freedom after the day’s work is done. Nonetheless, my point is not to generalize about the Khaling and Kulung labor experience, but rather to draw on important narratives and memories that shed light on how historical patterns of ethno-racial categorization are linked to the formation of Khaling indigenous identity and territory. The social production of porters as “impure” and morally suspect reflects the entrenched nature of ethno-racial hierarchies in Nepal, and the ways in which place-based processes of racialization and labor dynamics interact to shape the adivasi political identity.

MOVING BEYOND “PEASANT” AND “INDIGENOUS” CATEGORIES

In Nepal, indigeneity is deeply interconnected with political rights, polity formation and processes of democratization (Bhattachan & Webster, 2005; Gellner, 2007; Hangen, 2009; Jones & Langford, 2011; Rai, 2013). However, labor is often overlooked as a key process shaping Nepalese indigeneity and indigenous claims to territory. Literature in geography and
anthropology has recognized that rural people are most often grouped into categories of “peasant,” “tribal,” or “indigenous,” where indigenous people are understood as “tribal” people who are special because of their closeness to nature, and “peasants” are understood as agrarian workers (Li, 2000; Tsing, 2003). In this sense, disputes over labor must be articulated separately from disputes over territory (Li, 2000; Tsing, 2003; Yeh and Bryan, 2015). Indigenous people are able to make claims to uniqueness and unique territory, but those grouped as peasants are often disqualified from making these claims (Tsing, 2003; Li, 2000). While the Khaling case demonstrates the fact that indigenous identities are often intertwined with labor dynamics (de la Cadena, 2000; Mallon, 1995), I also use this case to show the fundamental flaw in imagining two types of activist groups with two separate agendas. For the Khaling Rai, indigenous and peasant identities come together to rearticulate Khaling positioning vis-à-vis the mountain labor market and the Nepali state. Here, separate “peasant” and “indigenous” identities and agendas do not exist. In fact, Khaling activists make claims to being special indigenous people with their own territory specifically because of their position in the mountain labor hierarchy.

Khaling indigenous activists, like many other non-Hindu indigenous people (adivasi janajatis\(^1\)), seek government recognition for the Khaling ethnic group as a distinct indigenous nationality. Yet other organizations advocate for uniting diverse ethnic groups with the hope of increasing collective political power. In the case of the Khaling Rai, one of the 26 Rai “subgroups” with a distinct language and religion, there is widespread disagreement among people advocating for individual Khaling recognition versus joining an umbrella organization like the Kirant Khaling Rai Development Organization. In efforts to show the salience of a distinct Khaling indigeneity, activist-scholars have published a Khaling language dictionary,

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1 I use the term *adivasi janajati* interchangeably with “indigenous,” as both terms refer to original inhabitants of Nepal prior to the 18th century formation of the Nepalese state. In the Nepalese context, “ethnic” is used to delineate a self-identifying group of people that share a common ancestry, language and religion.

2 I wish to highlight the similar positioning of Khaling and Kulung people in the Everest industry, their common region of origin, and similar collective historical and political experiences of ethno-racialization and Hinduization.
Khaling religious texts, as well as a book of Khaling oral histories. Most importantly, Khaling activists link a discrete indigenous identity to their sacred homeland in Nepal’s upper Solukhumbu district, made famous by the Everest industry. Specifically, activists emphasize the sanctity of a cave site in Pangboche to denote their collective land rights in the area and draw the boundaries of a Khaling autonomous region within a larger Kirant Rai state. By rearticulating their relationship to the Khumbu environment through claims to ancestral ritual lands, Khaling activists reclaim the Khumbu as a place of collective belonging and mark the region as a key site for indigenous statecraft. In doing so, activists also work to improve collective Khaling laborer positioning in the Everest industry and in wider Nepalese society.

Khaling Rai people have originally occupied the temperate hills of Makalu-Barun and lower Solukhumbu, although land scarcity and landlessness have led many to seek wages elsewhere as salt traders or laborers for generations following the Shah occupation of Eastern Nepal (Whelpton, 2005). Today, most “go up” to the upper Solukhumbu because of the region’s proximity and the abundance of wage labor positions. Although landlessness and land scarcity have contributed to labor migration, rising prices and inflation in the upper Khumbu has also incentivized many Sherpa lodge owners and landowners to hire seasonal workers from the lower Solukhumbu to keep prices low. The Solukhumbu has seen an influx of wealth following the explosion of trekking and mountaineering tourism in the 1990s (Fisher, 1990; Ortner, 2001; Robinson, 1992; Spoon, 2011; S. F. Stevens, 1993); however, this wealth is not spread evenly throughout the region. Most tourism revenue is concentrated among elite families, and remains in places where trekkers stop en route to Everest base camp. In the lower Solukhumbu, people are restricted by Makalu-Barun national park regulations, yet receive no financial benefit from
trekking permits or tourist spending. Instead, they work in overwhelmingly low-income jobs as porters, domestic servants or cooks in the Everest industry.

It is common to hear the phrase “we are slaves in our own homeland” in conversations with Khaling and Kulung² Rai mountain workers. People from Rai ethnic subgroups living in the lower Solukhumbu often work low-paid seasonal porter, kitchen or domestic servant jobs under strict contracts with Sherpa households and lodges, yet consider Pangboche their sacred ancestral place of origin. While traveling between towns in the lower Solukhumbu, I met several young men who echoed Endra’s story. Stopping for a rest on my way from Sotang to Salleri, a grueling 8-hour walk up steep stone steps and muddy ruts caked with horse manure, I chatted with a young man carrying what appeared to be about 50 kilos of crackers and beer. He was perspiring heavily in the jungle heat, but had an umbrella to shield himself from the leeches that fell in droves from the trees. I eyed his umbrella with envy (mine had disintegrated the day before), and asked him where he was from. He responded that he was from Cheskam, but that he works all around the Solukhumbu carrying loads. In the high trekking season he “goes up” to the upper Solukhumbu, but hates it because he feels he is treated like an animal by the lodgeowners and trekking companies. The money is good, but after paying for his own food and lodging in the expensive upper Khumbu, there isn’t much left to give to his mother. He also feels humiliated because he isn’t allowed in lodges and must sleep in porter’s shelters. By describing their experiences of social and spatial segregation vis-à-vis Sherpas, workers denote their marginal position in the mountain labor hierarchy. I take these narratives seriously, and situate Khaling land claims within broader historical contexts to show that Khaling land claims are actually

² I wish to highlight the similar positioning of Khaling and Kulung people in the Everest industry, their common region of origin, and similar collective historical and political experiences of ethno-racialization and Hinduization. I do not wish to obscure Kulung experiences, as they are central to understanding how collective environmental experiences shape political visions of nature and Nepal’s indigenous movements.
interconnected with claims about labor, and that indigeneity cannot be neatly separated from peasant identity.

There has been extensive debate over the definition of indigeneity, who gets to be indigenous, and the salience of indigenous territorial claims (de la Cadena & Starn, 2007; Shah, 2010). While international indigenous rights legislation takes great pains to ensure the right to indigenous self-determination, defining indigenous people as people who identify as indigenous has proved problematic in a variety of contexts. Dominant groups such as high-caste Hindus in Nepal and India have claimed to be indigenous, and have constructed land claims based on ancestral use and religious significance in order to consolidate their groups’ political power and expand regional influence (Cederlof & Sivaramakrishnan, 2006). While many countries have deployed the language of indigeneity as part of nation-building projects, as has been the case in China, Russia, India and Nepal (“we are all indigenous Nepalis”), claims that all original residents of a country are indigenous obscure histories of marginalization and differential treatment by the state. Although not all marginalized indigenous groups take up an indigenous political identity (see Yeh, 2007), shared histories of marginalization are a key part of indigeneity and indigenous activism. In Nepal, indigenous activists distinguish themselves from other Nepalis based on religious difference. Being adivasi janajati is synonymous with being non-Hindu, and indigenous activists fight for fuller political rights by drawing on shared experiences of Hindu domination.

While indigenous activists around the world have fought marginalization by fighting for territorial rights, indigenous conceptions of territory are highly diverse across spatial and historical contexts (Bryan, 2012). By interrogating territory itself as a concept, we can also see how indigenous claims to property are linked to new forms of governance, nation-building and
statecraft (Bryan, 2012; Peluso & Vandergeest, 1995; Peluso & Watts, 2001; Scott, 2009; Yeh, 2013; Zimmerer, 2013). Geographers have reimagined relationships between indigenous identity and territory, noting that territory is “not something that simply exists” (Bryan, 2012) outside of historical processes that continually construct its meaning. Considering this reconceptualization of territory, we can see Khaling territorial claims as produced and arranged within specific landscapes and historical conjunctures, specifically vis-à-vis the Everest region and lucrative Everest industry.

Recent scholarship has also reframed the debate by taking indigeneity seriously as a social fact, and exploring how indigenous identities have emerged in diverse contexts and with what effects (Pratt, 2007; Shah, 2010). By challenging conceptions of indigeneity predicated upon “tribal” identities and neatly bounded tribal territories, scholars have argued for understanding indigeneity as a political identity shaped by variegated historical processes (Cadena & Starn, 2007; Li, 2000; Li, 2005; Wainwright & Bryan, 2009; Yeh 2007). In this sense, Nepalese articulations of indigeneity are “without guarantees” (de la Cadena and Starn, 2007), meaning that indigenous identity is an unfinished, open-ended process that does not play out the same way everywhere despite attempts to standardize its meaning. Borrowing from Stuart Hall’s phrase “Marxism without guarantees” (1983), de la Cadena and Starn (2007) signal the unpredictability of indigeneity across spatio-temporal contexts.

Indigeneity, like Marxism, is transformed “on the ground,” and the concept’s variegated forms cannot be attributed solely to political-economic processes. Following Gramsci, Hall rejects understanding ideologies as emergent from fixed combinations of class positioning and material conditions (1986: 44). Building on Gramsci and postcolonial scholarship, geographical studies of indigeneity have also argued that while indigenous identities are shaped by political
economy, analyses must also account for the discourses that allow people to navigate society and experience positioning in social and physical landscapes (de la Cadena & Starn, 2007; Pratt, 2007; Gluck & Tsing, 2009). In the Khaling case, racialized discourse is inseparable from the political economic processes that have shaped Khaling indigenous identity and claims to territory.

In many South East Asian countries, colonial governments constructed “tribal” and “peasant” categories in order to mark groups’ differential relationships to the state (Forsyth & Walker, 2012; Li, 2005). Under colonial rule, tribal groups were more likely to have a degree of regional autonomy and were held to a different set of legal restrictions than peasant groups. Tania Li’s (2000) work interrogates the underlying historical, political and economic processes that construct bounded tribal and peasant categories in Indonesia, and the material effects of membership in either group. She found that by asserting a “tribal” indigenous identity, a relatively well-positioned group was able to claim extensive benefits by becoming legible to international indigenous rights organizations, while another, more marginalized indigenous group did not receive any benefits whatsoever because their “peasant” status as rural farmers occluded their indigenous identity for international activists and the Indonesian state. As Yeh and Bryan note: “although [peasant and tribal] categories may actually refer to the same people, their political and analytical separation creates difficulties for indigenous peoples to press both for recognition of cultural differences and also for full, fair incorporation into development processes as national citizens” (Bebbington, 2004; Yeh and Bryan, 2015). In other words, indigenous people can, ironically, gain territorial and cultural rights but then be denied equal political rights by virtue of their exception as “tribals.” By virtue of the productivity of their labor, peasants are recognized as citizens of the state, but can be denied territorial or cultural rights because they are disqualified from being special.
Khaling indigenous activism shows us that indigeneity and indigenous movements cannot be understood solely in the context of “tribal” (but not “peasant”) categories. Although territorial claims are a key part of Khaling indigenous rights discourse, these claims are deeply intertwined with experiences of labor exploitation in the Everest industry and a lack of control over the means of production, specifically land and lodge ownership. Although Khaling activists certainly made it clear to me that they were marginalized in every aspect of Hindu-dominated Nepali society, narratives from mountain workers are especially important because their conceptions of indigeneity and territory are uniquely rooted in experiences of being marginalized laborers. Khaling activists resist low positioning in the mountain labor market while also advocating for territorial and political rights as citizens of a democratic “new Nepal.” More broadly, Khaling indigenous discourse reveals how indigeneity is shaped by conflicts over labor, means of production and territory (Li, 2000; Yeh and Bryan, 2015).

In Nepal and India, labor roles and positioning in the ethno-racial hierarchy are deeply intertwined in the Hindu caste system, where occupation is traditionally tied to caste (Chari, 2000; Kukuczka, 2011). Although land claims are one of many tools used by Khaling indigenous activists to resist processes of racialization and marginalization in the labor market, they work to mobilize Khaling claims to the means of production (building lodges and controlling tourist flows) in the trekking industry, as well as conceptions of and claims to territory.

Scholars analyzing Nepalese indigenous rights movements have skillfully situated variegated Nepalese indigeneities within the nation’s complex history of ethnic politics (Bhattachan & Webster, 2005; Gellner, 2007; Hangen, 2009; Jones & Langford, 2011; Rai, 2013). However, race is an important but generally overlooked aspect of Nepalese articulations of indigeneity (for an exception see Hangen 2009). I understand race as a social identity
positioned in a structured racial hierarchy, where the content and value of racial identities are determined by social, historical and political factors (Omi and Winant, 2009). I draw on Omi and Winant’s racial formation theory to show how processes of racialization, or the creation of self-asserted or externally assigned racial categories have shaped Khaling articulations of indigenous identity through differential positioning in the mountain trekking labor market. I also use the phrase “ethnic politics” to refer to Nepal’s political milieu, but do not intend to occlude the racialized nature of ethnic categories in Nepal. Although ethnicity is the dominant form of social categorization in Nepal, ethnic categories are racialized because they are *naturalized* as social order (Moore et al., 2003).

**BECOMING INDIGENOUS (ADIVASI JANAJATI) IN THE NEPAL POLITICAL MILIEU: 1990-2006**

The term *janajati* originates from the term for “backward” ethnic groups (*pichadieko jati*), however, *janajati* became more commonly associated with indigeneity after the Nepalese Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) used the term to refer to Nepal’s politically and economically dominated ethnic groups (Gellner, 2007; Hangen, 2009). The term *adivasi*, literally “first peoples,” was added to *janajati* in the 1990s as the autocratic one-party system (*Panchayat* era) ended, and ethnic politics emerged front and center in Nepal. NEFIN defines *adivasi janajati*, or “indigenous nationalities” as marginalized, non-Hindu first-settlers, who speak a language other than Nepalese (NEFIN 2002). The preferred translation of *adiviasi janajati* is “indigenous nationalities,” which has roots in the Marxist-Leninist tradition taken up by Nepalese Maoists in the 1990s. Prior to 1990, *adivasi* was used mostly in reference to “small, semi-nomadic foraging groups” (Hangen, 2009: 51), and was widely mobilized in India to refer to tribal or indigenous groups. As indigeneity emerged as a political identity in the 1990s, the
meaning of *adivasi* shifted to refer more broadly to marginalized ethnic groups that seek fuller rights in a democratizing Nepal.

The first *jan andolan*, or people’s movement, brought an end to *Panchayat* in 1990, and lobbied for the inclusion of *janajati adivasi* in the new constitution. In 1991 the Nepali Federation of Nationalities (NEFEN), later renamed NEFIN (Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities) formed with the purpose of advocating for an ethnic federalist republic, in which states are formed vis-à-vis ethnic majority population. NEFIN was formed to advocate for the political recognition of *janajati* identity, and to represent the interests of indigenous nationalities within the Nepalese state (Tamang 2005 in Hangen 2010). NEFIN recognizes indigenous groups on the basis of the criteria:

- Are first settlers prior to the formation of Gorka and Nepal state
- Are a dominated group and have no representation in state organs
- Are not included in the Hindu caste system
- Have their own language, culture and religion different from the rulers
- Are listed by the Nepalese Government Indigenous Act of 2002 (nefin.org)

NEFIN achieved a considerable victory in 2002, when the Nepalese state established the National Foundation for the Development of Indigenous Nationalities, which recognized indigenous political demands and established an official definition of *adivasi janajati*. However, the central state’s increasing engagement with NEFIN and recognition of indigenous groups has also presented several problems. Conflict over the number of official indigenous nationalities, or groups, has emerged as the fluidity and complexity of ethnic labels becomes salient. Determining which groups qualify for government recognition as an indigenous nationality, and therefore qualify for representation in NEFIN, is extremely difficult given heterogeneity within groups. A number of indigenous nationalities have united under one indigenous ethnic label despite
different languages, places of origin and customs, such as the Tharu and Tamang. The ethnic label Rai, however, has not been universally accepted by many “sub-groups” who seek recognition. The label itself is traced to the term “chief,” which was given to Kirant headmen following the Shah conquests (Gellner, 2007; Regmi, 1999; Regmi, 1976; Whelpton, 2005). However, activists seeking recognition of the Khaling group as a discrete indigenous nationality reject this broad label. They nonetheless seek fuller citizenship and greater inclusion in the “new Nepal” that emerged in 2006 after the second jan andolan overthrew King Birendra’s emergency takeover and elected a constitutional assembly (CA) to write a new constitution. The CA has been dissolved and re-formed after failing to agree on a new constitution, a process that has left many disillusioned with the body. Although the 1990 constitution addressed indigenous rights, it did so in a limited and contradictory fashion (Gellner et al., 1997; Whelpton, 2005). Nepal was recognized to be a multi-lingual state, and ethnic political parties were allowed to form, but normative Hindu culture still permeated Nepalese state policy. Millions of Nepal’s non-Hindus nonetheless remain in “racialized locations not of their choosing” (Omi & Winant, 1994) such as low-paid seasonal labor positions and out-of-the way upland villages with few public services (Moore et al., 2003). Because the Nepalese state continues to privilege Hindu peoples in every aspect of society, indigenous ethnic groups and development associations continue to lobby for representation in the new constitution through ethnic political parties and through representation by NEFIN.

Categories of race and ethnicity blur in Nepal as historical and political processes have devalued non-Hindu peoples within a social hierarchy that essentializes physical and cultural characteristics (Gellner et al., 1997; Gellner, 2007; Hangen, 2009). Nepal’s political system of rule is linked to the entrenched Hindu caste system, where social mobility and access to
resources is constrained relative to positioning within an ethno-racial hierarchy. The Nepalese state first named and classified non-Hindu ethnic groups on the basis of essentialized cultural and bodily differences, positioned these groups below dominant Hindus, and finally marginalized them through a series of land tenure policies and conservation-development initiatives linked to structures and discourses that devalue “backward” and “impure” non-Hindu lives. The Mulukhi Ain (hereafter MA), implemented in 1854, was a legal code that explicitly tied ethnicity to state legislation by classifying and valuing groups vis-à-vis Hindu cultural norms of bodily purity and pollution (Gellner, 2007; Hangen, 2009; Whelpton, 2005) which recast Nepal as a racial state. Put another way, the Muluki Ain classified and ordered ethnic groups according to essentialized cultural and bodily differences. As a system of ethno-racial categorization, the MA remains entrenched in the Nepalese political system today, and continues to shape life outcomes for non-Hindu janajatis.

When the Rana family seized power from the Shah monarchy in 1846, Nepal was declared a Hindu Kingdom and applied Hindu caste law to all people, regardless of religion. Under the dynastic Rana prime ministership, where the monarchy was reduced to a figurehead, state-building processes incorporated different ethnic groups into the state unequally, distributing land and positions of power to Hindus and marginalizing non-Hindus. The MA separated ethnic groups into two racialized categories, Indo-Aryan tagadhari (wearers of the sacred cord) and Tibeto-Burman speaking matwali (alcohol-drinking people). The matwali category was further divided into enslaveable and non-enslaveable alcohol drinkers and “clean” and “unclean” castes. Non-Hindu “tribal” people were matwali, but in the “clean” category. Some groups, like the Tamang and Bhote (Tibetan) could be enslaved if they fell into debt to high-caste Hindus, while

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3 Here I understand the state as a disaggregated set of practices and institutions that shape governable spaces and subjects (R. Peet & Watts, 2004; Peluso & Vandergeest, 1995; Scott, 2009; Watts, 2003; Yeh, 2013)
others, such as Gurung, Rai and Magar, were not categorized as enslaveable (Gellner, 2007; Hangen, 2009; Kukuczka, 2011). However, it is important to note that forced labor was extracted from non-enslaveable groups under the Rakam system. The Shah rulers used Rakam labor to construct infrastructure and recruit military personnel, and the Rana regime relied almost exclusively on unpaid labor to run the state (i.e. carrying the mail and goods for international trade) and fight the Tibet war in 1866 (Regmi, 1976). Rakam enabled the state to extract unpaid labor from cultivators working on all non-Limbu Raikar, Raj Guthi and Kipat lands. The strategic position of Limbus at the time of Shah unification influenced their classification in the MA and prevented the expropriation of their labor and lands by the state. As I will discuss in the following section, the experience of other Kirant groups, including the Khaling, was vastly different, as they lost considerable amounts of land and were forced into state labor and military service.

The MA also entrenched a Brahmin-dominated political and economic system, where high-caste Hindus constituted the majority of bureaucrats, civil servants and politicians. Prior to the late 1950s and throughout Panchayat, few janajatis had the opportunity to become literate in Nepali, which prevented them from passing civil service exams or gaining salaried employment in government offices (Caplan, 1970; Gellner, 2007; Guneratne, 1998; Jones & Langford, 2011; Rai, 2013; Shrestha, 1990). Hence, regional government offices at the county or Village Development Council (VDC) level were almost always (and still are, for the most part), staffed by high-caste Hindus who have had better access to education and more social connections with other high-caste Hindus.

Broadly, Nepalese indigenous movements have united in opposition to Hindu culture (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 1999; Pradhan, 2011). The Kirant Khaling Rai Development Association,
alongside ethnic political parties like the Mongol National Organization, actively encourage the boycott of Hindu festivals and customs (Hangen, 2009). However, crafting indigenous identity in terms of Hindu/non-Hindu dualism has proved problematic, as indigenous groups are recognized and classified by NEFIN based on whether they have “their own” customs and language (ibid). Following the emergence of a grassroots indigenous movement in Nepal in the 1990s, opposition to Hinduism no longer constituted adivasi janajati identity. Alongside the need for separate indigenous identity, Khaling activists have emphasized their unique religion and language (see I. Toba, 1977; S. Toba, 1975, 1978). Although I saw little evidence of a sacred site in Pangboche during my multiple visits to the region, for the Khaling activists that I spoke with, the cave site remains a central point of legitimacy for the Khaling indigenous rights movement. Endra and other student activists draw heavily on stories about ancestral ritual to highlight their territorial rights in the Solukhumbu, yet they also draw on their own unique position of marginalization in the mountain labor hierarchy to make claims. This is not to say that recently articulated expressions of indigenous identity are ‘invented.’ Rather, I approach Khaling indigenous territory-making and identity formation as political projects that emerged out of a long history of marginalization. The following section situates the ethno-racialized political and economic processes that have transformed Nepal’s eastern uplands, and influenced Khaling Rai positioning in the Everest labor hierarchy.

CONSTRUCTING LOW-INCOME MOUNTAIN LABOR: RACIALIZATION AND LAND TENURE IN NEPAL

Ethnic federalism is the primary political goal for Nepal’s indigenous rights organizations. In the wake of the Maoist insurgency, ethnic federalism has survived as a poignant political
imaginary that has been widely taken up by Nepal’s diverse adivasi political parties. In this section I historicize the relationship between land tenure policy, race and labor in Nepal’s eastern uplands from the time of Shah unification to the present to show that land scarcity and landlessness among upland Rai people has partially emerged from processes of racialization and dispossession perpetuated by the Nepali state.

At the time of Prithvi Narayan Shah’s 18th century military conquest, northeastern Nepal was occupied by the heterogeneous Kiranti people, and ruled by regional kings. The Kirant rulers forcefully resisted the Shah conquest, but were defeated in 1773. Nepal’s eastern uplands became racialized as a result of land privatization and land tenure policies that laid the foundation for imbalanced power relations between non-Hindus and the Nepalese state. Shah unification ushered a system of land tenure that distinguished between types of land ownership that distributed land according to group or individual relationships with the monarchy. This system created a marginalized class of upland peasants and laboring proletariat, and expanded and reinforced centralized government control over upland territories and peoples. At first, Shah rulers allowed regional ethnic groups to maintain collective ownership and control their lands through kipat tenure from 1774 to 1886, yet their land rights were systematically eroded over time as the Hindu regime expropriated and redistributed lands to Hindu settlers and implemented policy that replaced customary land tenure with a privatized system (Forbes, 1999).

Between 1773 and 1951, the ruling regimes expropriated large tracts land, including most fertile parts of the uplands, and redistributed them to Hindu elites (Gautam et al., 2003; Regmi, 1976; Shrestha, 1990; Whelpton, 2005). Non-taxable land gifts, or birta, were widely distributed to a privileged class of Hindus by Shah rulers, and later the Rana regime. Birta was used extensively to advance the Rana family’s personal wealth, secure the loyalty of nobles and
ensure their base of political support. The *birta* land tenure regime also had the effect of marginalizing and racializing native uplands and peoples. Regmi writes: “with regard to both religion and politics, *birta* grants tended to be concentrated for the most part among Brahmans, Chhetris, and other classes of Indo-Aryan origin to the exclusion of aboriginal groups of Mongoloid origin such as [Rai], Gurungs, Magars, Limbus and Tamangs” (1990: 27). The racial term “Mongol” is used extensively in Nepalese literature and politics to distinguish between Hindu Indo-Aryan ethnic groups and non-Hindu, Tibeto-Burman speaking “tribal” groups (Hangen, 2009; 2010). Birta land tenure cemented essentialized cultural and physical differences between “mongols” and Hindus on the basis of differential access to fertile lands, and solidified Hindu control over upland territory and agricultural production.

Contrary to the experiences of Kirant Rais and Magars, Limbus were allowed to keep their *kipat* land longer than any other group, and were not required to perform unpaid *Rakam* labor, which has been largely attributed to more effective group unity (there were several major Limbu uprisings in the early 20th century) and strategic geographical location alongside important trade routes (Whelpton, 2005). Under the *kipat* land tenure system, use and ownership of communal lands was determined by membership in an ethnic kinship group; these lands were not taxed by the central government, and could not be sold, mortgaged or rented to members of other ethnic groups. During this period, Khaling and other Rai groups had abundant communal lands and a general shortage of labor, and it was commonplace to employ Hindu settlers to cultivate their fields. However, with the fall of the Shahs in 1846 and rise of the Rana family, all cultivated *kipat* lands were converted to *raikar* tenure as a part of land reform policy implemented in 1886 (Regmi, 1976). *Raikar* land was owned by the central government, and while the policy allowed individual use, land became taxable and could be reclaimed by the state
at any time. This was a crucial part of centralized efforts to territorialize the eastern uplands, as the conversion of communal lands to a system of private ownership fundamentally transformed upland Kirant relationships with the environment, and played a fundamental role in the social construction of land scarcity in the later parts of the 20th century.

In addition to privatizing communal lands, the 1886 reforms also entrenched Hindu political and economic power in the eastern uplands. The policy effectively transferred land ownership to whoever was cultivating the land at the time of reform, and these tenants were mostly Hindu settlers. Brahmin tenants became majority landowners overnight, displacing their Kirant landlords and inversing political and social power dynamics in the uplands by concentrating land ownership and associated wealth among Hindu elites (Regmi, 1970). Hence, raikar tenure cemented the connection between sovereignty and land, which underpinned Rana structures of governance and entrenched racialized ethnic inequality in the Nepalese state. Furthermore, when regional upland collectives were converted to raikar and indigenous territories were dismantled, upland Kirantis became tax-paying subjects of the centralized Rana regime. While it effectively created new government subjects and spaces, the 1886 reform effectively transformed indigenous Kirant people into a marginalized ethno-racial group and class of land-poor peasants and landless proletariat.

Although the “land ceiling” implemented in King Mahendra’s 1954 Land Reform Act paid lip service to foreign demands to reduce inequality by limiting the number of hectares one person could own, the policy was largely ineffective, as Hindu elite simply redistributed their lands to friends and extended family. Subsequent land reforms, including 1962 attempts at land privatization and reorganization, were also largely ineffective. Similar to the case of upland landlessness outlined in Tania Li’s Land’s End (2014), as highland farmers gained the ability to
sell land to pay off debts, the number of landless poor increased dramatically. Literate, high-
caste Hindus often gave loans to smallholders who mortgaged their lands and claimed them
when the debt was unpaid. Poor rural farmers often explained their poverty to me by juxtaposing
themselves to wealthy, high-caste Hindus. I was often told that “Brahmin are wealthy because
they are clever,” and that janajatis were poor because they were tricked by Brahmin.

The collective memory of being taken advantage of by high-caste Hindus (who
purportedly added extra zeros to loan documents or did not clarify the importance of papers to
landowners, who lost or damaged them) is clear and present in many of the communities I have
visited. Although self-deprecating “tropes of indolence” (Yeh, 2013) circulate among poor
janajatis who explain their poverty as a result of their own backwardness or ignorance, most
narratives highlight Brahmin cleverness. These narratives, alongside nationalist narratives of
Hindu unification that proliferated in the Panchayat era, do important discursive work by
naturalizing Nepal’s ethno-racial hierarchy. In this hierarchy Hindus are positioned as intelligent
and aware in contrast to naïve and ignorant villagers. These narratives also reveal the enduring
effect of the Muluki Ain’s racialized caste system, which devalued non-Hindu life and continue
to shape unequal land rights and access to political resources today.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the Panchayat parliamentary system was not strong
enough to confront powerful landed interests, as many government officials were also large
landholders. The 1967 Forest Preservation Act intended to protect forests from exploitation and
strengthen the nationalist development agenda, but served to further restrict villagers’ access to
forests. Land reform was expected to take place during the democratic transition in 1991, but the
new constitution largely ignored land reform as a result of party factionalism and the influence of
panchayat landed elite, which led to widespread unrest among smallholders, tenants and landless
peasants. Although peasants had the ability to vote for land reform, they were pressured by landlords to vote against these measures (Joshi & Mason, 2007). Hence, despite democratic reform, the Maoist insurgency occurred largely as a response to the Nepali government’s inability to provide land reform for the rural poor and limit the power of the landed elite. The Maoists gained support from rural farmers, many low caste and ethnic minorities, because they forcefully took land from landlords, redistributed it to tenants and forgave debts, declaring ethnic “autonomous regions” throughout rural Western Nepal (Nightingale, 2011). Although the Communist Party of Nepal officially integrated into the Nepali government and the People’s War ended, land reform has still lagged behind. In 2001, 5% of the population owned over 37% of arable land, and most landed elite are still high-caste Hindus (Joshi & Mason, 2007).

The political ecology of Nepal’s eastern uplands disrupts commonly circulated narratives explaining that adivasi landlessness and near-landlessness results from overpopulation, backward agricultural practices and remoteness. Rather, an analysis of agricultural transformation, land tenure policy, and foreign conservation intervention reveals how uneven historical-political and racializing processes shape unequal land access for Khaling people. Importantly, the Khaling have a long history of being peasant farmers, which is deeply intertwined with their positioning as seasonal laborers. Hence, Khaling indigenous identity and conceptions of territory cannot be separated from histories of peasant marginalization.

NATURALIZING MARGINALITY IN THE EVEREST LABOR HIERARCHY: RACIALIZATION AND “KULUNGE” LABOR

Sitting inside a hotel in Bung’s town center, I spoke to Om, an old man who worked for 20 years in the Khumbu as a porter. He had inherited a very small piece of land to farm and live
on, and had no option but to “go up” to carry loads to supplement his family’s income, as his wife is afflicted with a neurological disorder and cannot work. When I asked why he received such a tiny parcel of land, he explained that “we have many children, and pieces of land become too small to earn a living off.” Later in the day, I asked my translator how the experiences of people living in Makalu-Barun compared to his experience growing up and living in a Gurung village in Nepal’s middle hills. He said that “here people have so many children. They can’t feed themselves! The land can’t be divided up among so many children.” Ironically enough, Nendra himself is one of six children. However, his family owns a large amount of land in his village, which they rent to other villagers in addition to cultivating their own maize and millet with the help of paid labor. Nendra’s family is in a good position not only because they started with more land, but because his father’s siblings had better opportunities to move to Kathmandu to work and study, which had the effect of expanding family wealth and concentrating village lands among fewer siblings. Yet this does not explain how Nendra’s family had more land to begin with, nor how private property became an entrenched form of land tenure in Nepal.

Nepalese development workers (many of whom were born and raised in villages) talk about “backward” or “unaware” rural villagers in contrast to those who are “bikas,” developed and aware (Pigg, 1996). Land scarcity and landlessness in Nepal’s “remote” villages is often explained as a function of having too many children and using outdated, “unmodern” farming methods. While I was conducting field research in Makalu-Barun, a Village Development Committee representative, who is from nearby Cheskam, explained to me that “people here use old and inefficient farming methods, they don’t save money, and they have too many children. Their minds need to be changed to become aware [he uses the English word for emphasis].” Even villagers themselves, including people that I spoke with in Solukhumbu, lamented that their
land had to be divided among siblings every time a generational transition took place, eventually reducing the amount of inherited land to nothing. People who do not inherit enough land from their families have to carry loads as porters or work in a Sherpa tourist lodge. People work in the Khumbu because they are poor, they are poor because they don’t have enough land, and according to “developed” urban elite, poor people don’t have enough land because they are ignorant and backwards.

Nendra’s village has received funding from several foreign aid agencies, which have built a hospital and school, where Bung has neither. Although both Rai and Gurung groups are marginalized in Nepal, what factors contribute to the unequal experiences of these two men? Specifically, what explains the fact that Nendra is a guide and Om, alongside thousands of other Khaling and Khulung people, is land-poor and works as a porter? Tropes of indolence and backwardness permeate state and foreign development discourse in Nepal, as government institutions and foreign programs target individuals for “improvement” and “capacity-building” through educational workshops and micro-loans for agricultural development. This discourse naturalizes Khaling and Khulung positioning in the mountain labor hierarchy as a function of their own shortcomings, and masks the economic and political marginalization linked to nation-building, land policy, agricultural transformation and foreign-led ecological management.

The Khaling and Khulung Rai have not always been peripheral; they were constructed as such following the Shah conquests, and their marginality was cemented in a number of ways over the course of 270 years as the eastern uplands were territorialized through Hinduization, agricultural transformation, land tenure policy and the establishment of national parks. Where the central hills became more closely connected to the political and economic center of Nepal (Kathmandu) by virtue of roads and bridges in the early 20th century, the lower Solukhumbu
region was overlooked by state and foreign-funded infrastructure projects that expanded tourist access to the Everest region. The lower Solukhumbu did in fact experience development, but not in the form of roads, hospitals or schools. Rather, they became racialized environmental subjects following the proliferation of an “ecological crisis” discourse (Watts, Peet, & Robbins, 2010) in the 1990s that spurred international efforts to protect “biodiversity hotspots” through the construction of national parks systems in developing countries that were considered unfit to safeguard their own resources.

In the 20th century, agricultural transformation fundamentally altered the landscape of Nepal’s eastern uplands. Prior to the Nepalese state’s 20th century foreign-led agrarian transformation, uplanders practiced shifting agriculture supplemented by hunting and foraging. In his observations of a 19th century Kiranti village, Anglican Bishop H.B. Hodgson wrote:

The general style of cultivation is that appropriate to the uplands, not the more skillful and profitable sort practiced in the level tracts; and though the villages of the Kirantis be fixed, yet their cultivation is not so, each proprietor within his own ample limits shifting his cultivation perpetually, according as any one spot gets exhausted. (Hodgson, 1858: 400 in Gellner et al. 1997)

As Hodgson observes, upland shifting agricultural practices matched the region’s steep, acidic and nutrient-poor soils. Communal land management also provided a consistent supply of land for shifting cultivation. However, as land was lost to government birta grants and privatized under raikar tenure, shifting cultivation became untenable. In an effort to modernize the country and increase agricultural outputs, large-scale agricultural development programs proliferated as international aid began pouring into Nepal in the 1950s (Gellner, 2007; Paudyal & Shrestha, 2011; Shrestha, 1990). Agricultural development programs provided fertilizer and irrigation infrastructure to support market-oriented shifts toward wheat and rice production; however, these
projects did not fare well in the uplands. In fact, overall agricultural production fell in Nepal throughout the 1960s and 1990s, as production decreases in the uplands outweighed gains in the lowlands (Whelpton, 2005). Part of this failure in agricultural reform can be traced to unequal access to irrigation infrastructure and fertilizer, which stunted “modern” forms of upland productivity and entrenched upland poverty (Shrestha, 1990). Throughout my field research in lower Solukhumbu and Makalu-Barun conservation area, agricultural modernization was a mainstay of conversations with local development officials. Outdated technology and backward agricultural practices were most often cited as the reason that villagers were poor and had to “go up” to find work in the Khumbu. It is also important to note that participation in wage labor, particularly in India and later in the upper Khumbu, is nothing new. Although Nepal’s unfinished agrarian transition began in the 20th century, a long history of political and economic processes worked to transform the uplands and marginalize non-Hindu uplanders, which led to widespread labor migration. Today, these processes manifest through vulnerable positioning as seasonal laborers in the Everest industry.

CONCLUSION

For many seasonal Khaling laborers, their positioning in the Everest labor hierarchy is linked to visions of the Solukhumbu as a landscape of exclusion and suffering. This of course, is not to group all Khaling and Kulung people as marginalized, low-income seasonal workers. Rather, my analysis accounts for entangled processes of racialization and labor dynamics in the formation of Khaling indigenous identity and territory. In producing and circulating narratives about ancient claims to the Solukhumbu, Khaling activists construct a political identity that repositions them vis-à-vis labor, means of production and territory in the Everest region and in
broader Nepalese society. This paper demonstrates that, in the case of the Khaling indigenous movement, racialized labor dynamics are the key site where indigenous identities and claims to territory are constructed and played out.

By “putting themselves on the map” (Tsing in Li, 2005) through legal land claims; however, the Khaling activists are also recognizing the Nepalese state’s power to validate land ownership and regulate the terms of land use, even in the case of regional autonomy within an indigenous state. As Bryan (2012) notes of the Bolivian “territorial turn,” indigenous property rights do more than demark boundaries. Khaling land claims are linked to political aspirations for fuller citizenship in the Nepalese state. As Bryan convincingly argues, gaining community property rights also makes new governable spaces and subjects (2011: 217). Legal land claims are a contested practice, and are not an absolute solution to the marginalization of indigenous people. Furthermore, by seeking separate recognition within NEFIN, which lobbies for an ethnic federalism, janajatis are still subject to centralized state power that upholds a dominant socio-spatial order. As Bryan (2012) also notes, land rights are not the same as territorial rights. Land rights can be granted without fundamentally altering the broader political and economic structures that marginalize indigenous people. With this in mind, Khaling people may become more vulnerable to state and economic processes of governance even as they gain more rights.

By no means do I suggest that indigenous land claims are invalid forms of activism; however, I follow critical scholars of territory by interrogating indigeneity and indigenous land claims as processes without guarantees.

In Nepal, Khaling indigenous discourse is produced in and through the Solukhumbu landscape and the mountain labor market. This transformation blurs distinctions between “tribal” and “peasant” categories to produce an indigenous identity that not only mobilizes territory
claims, but also advocates for control over land as a means of production in the Everest industry and for fuller citizenship in the New Nepal. In understanding the contextual formation of Khaling land claims and indigenous identity, this research challenges a bifurcated understanding that imagines rural people as either “peasant” or “indigenous” and sheds new light on the role of labor hierarchies in shaping regional articulations of indigeneity.
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CHAPTER 3
SITUATIONALLY SHERPA: THE SHERPA “BRAND” AND CONJUGATED OPPRESSION IN NEPAL’S MOUNTAIN LABOR MARKET

INTRODUCTION

I was once passing a hot monsoon afternoon in the air-conditioned sanctuary of a Kathmandu trekking office when two German girls came in looking to book a guided Everest trek. Like many of the chic backpackers that come and go through Kathmandu’s tourist district, they wanted an authentic Everest adventure that fit their shoestring budget. After spending a half an hour or so discussing their desire for experiencing Buddhism and Sherpa culture, they asked about their guide. My tour-operator friend said that Sabin would be trekking with them. They asked if he was Sherpa, and my friend said no, but explained that Sabin (who is Gurung) was very experienced. The two girls were not pleased, and ended up walking out of the office after they decided that the travel agency was cheating them. My friend gave me an exasperated look, laughed, and ordered us some milk tea.

Since Tenzing Norgay became the second person to stand atop Mt. Everest, Sherpas have come to be imagined as the embodiment of the world’s tallest mountain (Adams, 1992, 1996; Brower, 1991; Fisher, 1990; Ortner, 2001; Stevens, 1990). In the Western imaginary, Sherpas are peaceful residents of Shangri-La, an untouched mythical Himalayan kingdom (Adams, 1996). In association with their Buddhist religion, Sherpas are also praised by Westerners as morally pure and close to nature (Adams, 1992, 1996; Ortner, 1978, 2001). Images of Sherpas as strong, noble mountain people fill books and magazines documenting Everest expeditions, while films bring their exoticized mountain homeland to living rooms around the world. Today, Everest is never far from headlines, as tragic avalanches and slopeside brawls catapult Sherpa laborers into
the international spotlight over and over again. The image of Sherpas as noble savages is still pervasive in Western films about climbing. In the recent film, *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (2013), the main character discovers his inner adventurer and travels to a remote corner of the Himalayas where he *buys* two “strong little men” to guide him up a mountain (while playing songs on a flute). Blatant offensiveness aside, the film reinforces stereotypes that Sherpas are strong, loyal climbing guides who exist to serve Western adventures. Even the documentary *High Tension* (2013), which documents the now infamous “Everest brawl” between Sherpa workers and elite Western alpinists, shows a bewildered American climber remarking that Sherpas are normally “peaceful people.”

As a result of Western mythbuilding, Sherpa-ness has been removed from its ethnic context and reproduced as a brand that signifies a specific set of behaviors and inherent characteristics such as bravery, loyalty, mountaineering skill, and strength. The iPhone app “Sherpa,” designed by Copper Mountain Ski Resort to provide “expert tips” for navigating mountain terrain, clearly illustrates this point. The app not only “guides” skiers, but also keeps track of the merits that a skier accumulates by riding certain chairlifts or skiing specific trails. When I wrote an internet post arguing for its discontinuation, a representative from the resort replied that the app “honors Sherpas” as skilled mountain guides, while another commentator chimed in that protesting the appropriation of Sherpa is ridiculous and “overly-politically correct.” While commercialized imaginations of Sherpa-ness are largely viewed as harmless in Western discourse, the Sherpa brand has deep historical roots and far-reaching implications for mountain workers in Nepal.

The racialized image of Sherpas as noble savages originated in British mountaineering expeditions that employed Sherpa residents of the Solukhumbu as porters, and wrote travel
journals lauding the hard-working nature of the Sherpas who loyally served *sahibs* (white employers) (Ortner, 2001). Today, many tour companies offer foreign trekkers the opportunity to meet “real” Sherpas and experience authentic Sherpa culture as part of their hike to Everest Base Camp. In fact many tourists, like the two German girls looking to book an Everest trek, imagine interactions with Sherpas as integral to their adventure experience. Although most Nepalese trekking guides identify as belonging to ethnic groups other than Sherpa, many of them identify themselves as Sherpa to their foreign clients, who expect their guides to be “real” Sherpas. Of course, not all trekking guides claim to be Sherpa. However, those who do claim to be Sherpa are in a more secure social and economic position within the trekking industry.

Sonam Gurung, about 50, is a tall wiry man with a nonchalant air about him. His office assistant brings a tray of *chhia*, and although I drink the sweet milk tea quickly and with fervor, Sonam’s grows cold on the desk. Coming from a military family in Western Nepal, Sonam was expected to join the British Gorkhas, but in a shock to his wealthy family, he turned down the acceptance letter and joined several childhood friends in pursuing a trekking career in the late 1970s. After years of working his way up in the trekking industry, today he is the owner of a prominent trekking company, and is also the director of a professional mountain guide association. Laughing, he tells me that among foreigner clients, he goes by Sonam Sherpa: “if I am not Sherpa,” he says “Then I don’t eat!” Sonam is joking, but in a way he isn’t. The tone of his voice betrayed the flippant smile that he gave me, and his words were tinged with sadness.

Passing as Sherpa, intentionally or unintentionally, is a common occurrence in the trekking industry as individuals seek to advance their careers or avoid discrimination that comes with being non-Sherpa. “Situational Sherpas” do not identify as ethnically Sherpa, but draw on an international “Sherpa brand” to become Sherpa among Western trekking clients. This article
expands Bourieu’s analytic of symbolic capital alongside the concept of conjugated oppression to interrogate how Sherpa-ness constructed and deployed, and with what effects. Drawing on 7 weeks of ethnographic research in Kathmandu and Solukhumbu regions of Nepal, where I interviewed 16 Sherpa and non-Sherpa mountain workers, I argue that becoming “situationally Sherpa” unintentionally reinforces a construction of ethnicity and class that subjugates both Sherpas and members of other ethnic groups.

First, passing as or claiming to be Sherpa inflates the number of perceived (and statistically recorded) Sherpas working in the trekking industry, which devalues non-Sherpa labor and reproduces discourses that naturalize non-Sherpa porters (Rais, Magars, etc.) as low-level laborers who are untrustworthy, lazy, and dirty. Second, it reinforces the assumption (held mostly by foreigners, but also common in Nepali trekking discourse) that all Sherpas are strong, skilled and trustworthy mountain workers, which has the effect of naturalizing Sherpas as servants to white clients. The naturalization of Sherpas as loyal laborers also results in their positioning as “disposable” workers who receive shockingly little compensation (and virtually no life insurance) given their dangerous jobs. Many Sherpas become high-altitude mountain workers because they have few other choices; poverty and high inflation in the Everest region makes portering work attractive to young men with few options. A combination of lax regulations and little professional training makes Sherpa workers highly susceptible to disasters like the 2014 avalanche that claimed 16 workers’ lives. While Sherpa deaths are largely seen as an inevitable part of a dangerous industry, considerably fewer foreigners lose their lives when compared to the laborers that fix lines and carry equipment. Sherpas, therefore, can be killed with greater impunity due to their naturalized position as loyal laborers.
It is important to clarify that Sherpa has two meanings in the context of Himalayan mountaineering. First and foremost, Sherpa is an ethnic group, but un-capitalized, sherpa also refers to a job category within the mountaineering industry (Fisher, 1990: p. 111). Although ethnographic studies of Sherpas have explored shifts in livelihoods and their relationship to mountaineering over time, both the Everest industry and country of Nepal have experienced vast changes since the 1990s, when most of these studies were published (Adams, 1992, 1996; Ortner, 2001; Stevens, 1990). Growth in the trekking and mountaineering industry, combined with extensive development intervention has transformed the Solukhumbu into a highly commercialized region relative to the rest of Nepal (Johnston & Edwards, 1994; Ortner, 2001; S. Stevens, 1990). Most importantly, however, in contrast to the 1990s, many of today’s expedition workers do not identify as ethnically Sherpa, as rising prices and inflation in the Solukhumbu have led Solukhumbu Sherpas to hire people from different ethnic groups at a lower cost (Spoon, 2011). These changes have important implications for understanding how “Sherpa-ness” is produced as an international brand that can be used by mountain laborers as an individual strategy of mobility to generate credit among foreign clients. Deployed by passing as well as through active claims, situational Sherpa-ness influences Sherpa and non-Sherpa positioning in the commercial mountaineering labor hierarchy and wider Nepalese society.

In 2012, fewer than a third of mountaineering sardars, or sherpa supervisors, registered with the Nepal Mountaineering Association (NMA) are non-Sherpa janajatis, or non-Hindu indigenous nationalities of Nepal. Over 93% of lead support climbers identify as Sherpa (nma.org.np), while over half of NMA kitchen boys identify as Tamang or Gurung. Those who identify as Sherpa also hold the majority of prestigious positions in other organizations, such as the Mountaineering Academy of Nepal and Mountaineering Instructor’s Association, where only...
two board members in 2014 were Gurung, and whose administrators were either Sherpa or high-caste Hindus. There are a large number of Rai, Tamang, Gurung and other janajatis in the mountaineering industry, and non-Sherpas generally occupy a relatively low position in the labor hierarchy.

These labor statistics are important because they draw attention to the mutability of ethnicity as a social construct, and reveal slippages between labor roles and fixed ethnic categories in Nepal. The numbers show us that regardless of “real” ethnicity, Sherpa-ness goes along with higher positioning in the mountain labor hierarchy. Furthermore, when we consider the mutability of ethnicity as a social construct rather than a fixed identity, we can see that whether mountain workers are “really” Sherpa is beside the point. The fact that most higher skilled mountain workers are counted as Sherpa, pass as Sherpa, or claim to be Sherpa has real social and material effects. When non-Sherpas pass as Sherpa by going along with clients’ assumptions, the number of Sherpas working in the trekking and mountaineering industry is inflated. This process obscures the fact that many skilled guides are not ethnically Sherpa, devalues non-Sherpa labor, and entrenches “Sherpa-ness” as a brand synonomous with mountain skill. It is easy to see how passing as Sherpa holds the potential for enhancing a trekking guide’s reputation among foreign clients – not only do Westerners romanticize Sherpas as naturally skilled mountain guides, but the fact that most higher-skilled guides are Sherpa also draws attention to those who identify as belonging to other ethnic groups.

Drawing on Omi and Winant (2006), I view Nepal as an “racial state” that “links a political system of rule to the racial classification of individuals and groups” (Omi and Winant: 102). Here I understand the state as a disaggregated set of practices and institutions that shape governable spaces and subjects (Peet & Watts, 2004; Peluso & Vandergeest, 1995; Scott, 2009;
Watts, 2003; Yeh, 2013). In Nepal, as a racial state, or rather “ethno-racial” state, social mobility and access to resources is constrained relative to positioning within an ethno-racial hierarchy, which is the legacy of a legal code implemented in the 19th century. Categories of race and ethnicity blur in a historical and political context that has essentialized and devalued non-Hindu peoples and placed them in “racialized locations not of their choosing” (Omi and Winant, 1994), such as “remote” upland villages or low-paid seasonal labor (Moore et al., 2003).

For the purpose of clarity of writing only, I refer to trekking workers based on the ethnic group they identify with, primarily ethnic Sherpa and all other ethnic groups, which I refer to as non-Sherpa. These non-Sherpa trekking workers pass as ethnically Sherpa or claim to be Sherpa while performing mountain labor, but do not personally identify with the Sherpa ethnic group. I do not mean to imply that there is an essentialized binary between Sherpa and non-Sherpa identities, which would assume that there is a “real” or authentic Sherpa identity. Instead, I consider Sherpa-ness as a flexible and context-dependent identity that also serves as an individual strategy of mobility. I draw attention to the way that trekking workers self-identify based on primordial notions of ethnic group membership, yet also move between ethnic labels with an ease that ironically demonstrates the very mutability of ethnicity as a social construct. By questioning the production and deployment of the “Sherpa-ness” through passing in concert with its real effects, this research enhances scholarly understandings of the co-construction of ethnicity and class by showing how individual strategies of mobility in the labor market can reify ethnic stereotypes and reproduce inequality.
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE CO-CONSTRUCTION OF ETHNICITY AND CLASS

By considering the intersection of race, ethnicity and class in Nepal alongside historical and political-economic processes, we can more closely examine how entrenched Hinduization processes have shaped the trekking labor hierarchy. Those at the top of the hierarchy, including wealthy high caste Hindu businessmen and Solukhumbu Sherpa lodge owners, earn the most money and have a large degree of political power and control over flows of capital in the Everest industry. Certainly not all Sherpas occupy prestigious positions in the Everest industry, but many who own lodges frequented by Westerners on the main trekking route have become fabulously wealthy. Trekking guides occupy anywhere from the middle-upper layers of the hierarchy to the lower levels, as positioning is largely contingent on connections within the Sherpa lodges and Hindu-dominated business world, and other forms of social capital such as connections to foreigners. Paradoxically, Sherpas working in the Everest trekking industry have come to occupy a relatively high position in the labor hierarchy; however, this higher position (which is sought after among non-Sherpa guides) reproduces and reinforces their racialized categorization as natural laborers.

Porters and domestic staff earn the least amount of money and have the least political power in the Everest labor hierarchy. Many porters are Rais from the lower Solukhumbu and Makalu-Barun region, while many others are Magar and Limbu from East Nepal. Tulsi, a trekking guide, and Ram, a university student, each described a derogatory ethno-racial label that is used by Sherpas to describe lowlanders. According to Tusli, “[Sherpas] call us rongba, which is a term for lowland hill people, but specifically refers to parbatiyas (caste Hindus). I don’t like this. We are from the lower hills, but we are not the same as Hindus!” Ram describes working a contract as a domestic laborer for a Sherpa family in the upper Solukhumbu: “they called us
“kulunge”, which refers to Kulung people from the lower Solukhumbu and Makalu-Barun region. But it is a way of dominating us [workers], because I am Khaling, not Kulung.” Here Tulsi and Ram are offended by being called ethnic labels that essentialize them as laborers and outsiders. However, Tulsi also admitted that he doesn’t correct foreigners when they assume he is Sherpa. The two young men’s contradictory feelings toward essentialized, or racialized ethnic labels used in the trekking industry reveals the entrenchment of ethno-racial hierarchies in Nepal (where one ethnic group is valued over another) while simultaneously demonstrating the context-dependent nature of “situational Sherpa” identity.

Scholars have theorized passing as an important identity practice that problematizes ethnicity and race as a fixed sets of performances and physical characteristics: “the process and the discourse of passing challenge the essentialism that is often the foundation of identity politics…[and] discloses the truth that identities are not singularly true or false but multiple and contingent” (Ginsberg, 1996 p. 4). While the process of passing is inextricably linked to the concept of mobility, passing has been largely understood in the context of marginalized groups transgressing racial or gender-based boundaries in order to shed their low status. However, in many cases people also pass “down,” as illustrated by Ann Powers in her Village Voice piece entitled “Queer in the Streets, Straight in the Sheets,” which chronicles straight performances of queerness linked to desires for community and belonging. While many workers pass as Sherpa to avoid conflicts with foreigners, they also recognize that, ironically, many Sherpas are also acutely marginalized by Hindus.

Although this study is primarily concerned with passing as an identity process, a discussion of operational ethnicity thickens understandings of how passing is contingent upon broader ethnic and racial contexts. The concept of operational identity examines processes of
ethnic identification by interrogating the historical, social and political processes that shape decisions around asserting ethnic identity. Operational identity does not view ethnicity as an ontological reality, but rather a category believed to exist by people. In this sense, passing as Sherpa is less about transgressing ethnic boundaries than about transgressing labor boundaries. Defined as “mental constructs enacted and communicated via symbolic interactions” (Goffman, 1999) operational identities are situational – they can be left behind when another identity is asserted. While mountain workers may pass or claim to be Sherpa among Western clients, they certainly would not pass as Sherpa among family members in their home village. In his groundbreaking study on Black Mexicans in New York City, Robert Courtney Smith (2014) analyzes teen Mexicans’ choice to become Black, and explores the broader question of why members of one ethnic group claim a different ethnic identity. His conclusions point to young Mexicans’ perceptions of the advantages of being Black, specifically perceived social mobility and avoidance of gang violence, that shape their decisions to identify as Black. The participants’ Black identities were grounded in desires to do well in school, be cool, and avoid being mistaken for illegal immigrants. When I spoke with mountain workers about being mistaken for Sherpa, they emphasized that they still identified as Rai, Gurung, Magar, etc, but often went along with being Sherpa because most Westerners prefer Sherpa guides. They gain clients’ trust, fulfill desires for encounters with “authentic” Sherpas, and may even earn bigger tips. Hence, situational Sherpa-ness is a key process that constitutes the symbolic cultural capital in Nepal’s trekking and mountaineering industry.

I use Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic capital alongside the concept of conjugated oppression to interrogate the construction of Sherpa-ness alongside class status and explore the
effects of passing as Sherpa. Although I discuss symbolic capital as well, I do not use it in the Bourdieusian context of the social relations of gift exchange. For Bourdieu, symbolic capital is:

denied capital, recognized as legitimate, that is, misrecognized as capital (recognition, acknowledgement, in the sense of gratitude aroused by benefits can be one of the foundations of this recognition) which, along with religious capital, is perhaps the only possible form of accumulation when economic capital is not recognized.

Symbolic capital is produced and held in social relations of debt and gratitude, and works only when its true purpose is concealed (ibid). I put forth an expanded understanding of symbolic capital, but one that has the same effects as Bourdieu’s concept. For Bourdieu, symbolic capital is leverage that is accumulated through social relations, and is used to navigate times of need such as large harvests, or to arrange marriages and negotiate favors. However, Sherpa-ness has the same effect of generating credit for both ethnic Sherpas and people who are situationally Sherpa – this credit takes the form of trust among clients who associate Sherpa-ness with closeness to Khumbu nature and mountain skill. In this sense, Sherpa-ness is more than a social identity; it is also symbolically accumulated labor. In being Sherpa, an individual gains credit for (purportedly) performing the mountain labor, such as fixing lines or carrying heavy loads, that has come to be stereotypically associated with Sherpas. Situational Sherpas also access Western stereotypes of Sherpas as loyal, trustworthy and morally pure. When we see Sherpa-ness as symbolic capital, we can see how workers use Sherpa identity to gain mobility in the mountain labor hierarchy, which has been constructed through the historical interaction of race and class in Nepal.

Phillipe Bourgois has theorized the simultaneous co-construction of class, ethnicity and occupational hierarchy, which has important implications for understanding labor relations in the Nepal trekking industry (Bourgois, 1988, 1998a, 1998b). This literature emphasizes the
inseparability of class and ethnicity, as they continually produce each other through social processes and power relations. Conjugated oppression occurs when an economic structure intersects with ethnicity to form normative labor hierarchies that legitimize the subordination and exploitation of a group. Bourgois argues that it is impossible to distinguish between occupational and ethnic hierarchy, as both define and create each other. Hence, the deployment of situational ethnicity through passing and intentional claims must be understood in the specific historical context of Nepalese ethnic politics. In order to show how situational Sherpa-ness leads to conjugated oppression, I apply Bourgois’ method of historicizing the construction of racialized ethnic categories alongside racialized labor categories in Nepal.

Labor discipline and control are directly linked to the production of labor hierarchies in a given industry (Bourgois, 1988; Chari, 2000; Gidwani, 2008). A number of social, cultural and historical factors influence the perceived degree of labor control, and with it labor exploitation, that can be exercised on a particular group, including cultural supervision and different mobilizations of ethnicity (Bourgois, 1988). In the case of Nepal’s mountain industry workers, racialized discourses and class hierarchies interact to cement the marginalization of both Sherpa and non-Sherpa laborers. Specific historical and political-economic factors, such as British mountaineers’ patronizing narratives that frame Sherpas as noble savages and non-Sherpas as disobedient alcoholics, have influenced the co-construction of mountain labor categories and ethno-racial stereotypes. When I was first traveling in the Solukhumbu in 2008, I was made aware by both Nepali trekking guides and Sherpa lodgeowners that porters (who are overwhelmingly non-Sherpa lowlanders) were not allowed in the lodges because they had bad hygiene and caused trouble. Guides and other higher-paid staff, I was told, are trustworthy and clean because they don’t live in rural backwaters. In my most recent trip to the Solukhumbu
region in 2014, where a vast number of people from the villages of Bung and Cheskam work as porters, my translator explained that it was better for them (Rai porters) to stay in their own bunkhouses because they would disturb trekking guests with their drinking habits and bad smell. Hence, being a non-Sherpa and working a low-paid job as a porter or domestic servant in the mountain industry leads to intensified experiences of subjugation.

While Sherpa-ness enhances the value of Sherpa labor through symbolic cultural “credit,” it also devalues the labor of non-Sherpas, and reproduces stereotypes that (mostly Rai) porters are lazy, alcoholics, uncivilized and disloyal – all characteristics that are decidedly un-Sherpa. While Sonam laughed about needing to be Sherpa in order to get work, his point is a serious one because it reflects the struggle that many Rais, Gurungs and other non-Sherpa janajatis share when they enter the mountain labor market as porters, kitchen boys or in other low-paid positions.

HISTORICIZING THE EVEREST LABOR HIERARCHY

Nepal’s ethnic groups are highly heterogeneous, and ethnic labels in Nepal are porous and context dependent (Guneratne, 1998; Kukuczka, 2011; Pfaff-Czarnecka, 1999; Skinner, Pach, & Holland, 1998; Holmberg, D., March, K. & Tamang, S., 1999). For example, Tamang from western Nepal distinguish themselves from eastern Tamang, who eat beef and have different linguistic expressions, yet both groups are categorized by the Nepali state as Tamang. Tamang, and other ethnic labels such as Rai and Tharu, emerged as government-assigned categories during the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries following Nepal’s unification under the Hindu Shah monarchy, and became internally-asserted identities and ethnic movements during the 2000s. This is not to deny the shared history and real cultural meaning of ethnic identities in Nepal, as ethnic and racial categories are social constructions with real effects (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Omi &
Winant, 1994). However, the creation of racialized ethnic labels is closely tied to the central government’s political agenda during the 18th and 20th centuries (Campbell, 1995). In the 2000s, ethnic labels became an essential way for marginalized groups to exercise their rights and reject discriminatory practices by high caste Hindus (Gellner et al., 1997; Hangen, 2009; Skinner et al., 1998).

The legal classification of Nepal’s non-Hindu indigenous peoples, or janajatis, within the state had a racializing effect that has continued to shape their collective experiences of political and economic marginalization. As Cornell and Hartmann emphasize, race and ethnicity are two different categories. They have mostly different effects that should not be conflated, but are related and often overlap (2004: 26). The Nepalese government classification system, which has since been formally abolished but continues to affect life chances of non-Hindu janajatis, is a clear example of the overlap between race and ethnicity.

In this sense, ethnic labels in Nepal are highly racialized, as bodily purity is a key concept in Hinduism that has been used for thousands of years to delineate between “pure” high castes, untouchable castes, and “tribal” peoples who are somewhere in between. Labor is also explicitly tied to the Hindu caste system, and class and caste are traditionally co-constituted according to strict occupational categories in Nepal – butchers and tailors, for example, are untouchable castes, while priests (Brahmin) and warriors (Chhetri) are “pure” castes. In this sense, ‘Sherpa’ is a highly racialized ethnic label in Nepal and on a global scale, as Sherpa bodies are naturalized as physically superhuman and to immune to altitude illness. In claiming to be Sherpa, non-Sherpas are also claiming to be an embodiment of Everest, and access the Sherpa “brand” of superhuman strength and legitimacy.
The Nepalese state first named and classified non-Hindu ethnic groups when the Rana family seized power from the Shah monarchy in 1846. Nepal was declared a Hindu Kingdom and applied Hindu caste law to all people, regardless of religion. The Mulukhi Ain (MA) legal code, implemented in 1854, explicitly tied ethnicity to state legislation by classifying and valuing groups vis-a-vis Hindu cultural norms (Gellner, 2007; Hangen, 2009; Whelpton, 2005) thus recasting Nepal as a racial state. Under the dynastic Rana prime ministership, where the monarchy was reduced to a figurehead, state-building processes incorporated different ethnic groups into the state unequally, distributing land and positions of power to Hindus and marginalizing non-Hindus. The MA separated ethnic groups into two racialized categories, Indo-Aryan tagadhari (wearers of the sacred cord) and Tibeto-Burman speaking matwali (alcohol-drinking people). The matwali category was further divided into enslaveable and non-enslaveable alcohol drinkers and “clean” and “unclean” castes. Non-Hindu “tribal” people were matwali, but in the “clean” category. Some could be enslaved, like the Tamang and Bhoté, while others were not enslaveable, such as Gurung, Rai and Magar (Kukuczka, 2011). In other words, the MA produced a strict, racialized social structure that classified and ordered ethnic groups defined by essentialized religious, phenotypic and cultural differences. This classification system has had far-reaching effects, which continue to shape Nepal’s social and economic landscape.

Most importantly, the MA entrenched a Brahmin-dominated political and economic system, in which high-caste Hindus constituted the majority of bureaucrats, civil servants and politicians. Brahmin domination in the trekking industry is particularly visible, as most Nepalese-owned budget and mid-level trekking companies are owned by high-caste Hindus, but the labor is performed by non-Hindu janajatis. Non-Hindu marginalization was constructed and entrenched in every aspect of Nepalese bureaucracy and government through the autocratic
policies of the single-party government implemented by King Mahendra. This period from 1960-1990, known as *Panchayat*, suppressed cultural and religious difference and normalized Hinduism in Nepal through the process of *Hinduization*. During *Panchayat*, the slogan “ek bhasha, ek besh, ek desh” or “one language, one dress, one country” (Whelpton, 2005: 183) was deployed to build a homogenous Nepali nation. This national project built upon racialized ethnic hierarchies constructed by the MA to disenfranchise non-Hindus and deliberately privilege high-caste Hindus in business and politics.

As a result of restricted access to education during *Panchayat*, few non-Hindu *janajatis* had the opportunity to become literate in Nepali, which prevented them from passing civil service exams or gaining salaried employment in government offices (Caplan, 1970; Gellner, 2007; Guneratne, 1998; Jones & Langford, 2011; Rai, 2013; Shrestha, 1990). Hence, regional government offices at the county or Village Development Council (VDC) level were almost always (and still are, for the most part), staffed by high-caste Hindus who have had access to better education and social connections. Even after the people’s movement, or *jan andolan*, which overthrew the monarchy on two different occasions (1990 and 2006), *janajatis* still lack political representation at the local and national levels, and are forced to comply with Hindu religious customs. In the eastern uplands, police have been known for beating or jailing persons caught slaughtering cows as a part of religious ritual or in fulfillment of traditional non-Hindu dietary habits. Slaughtering cows in Nepal is illegal even though Nepal became a secular state after 2006. These ongoing forms of discrimination actively reproduce non-Hindu marginality in all aspects of Nepalese society. In Nepal’s trekking industry, the legacy of Hindu domination entrenches the exploitation of non-Hindu mountain labor.
In my conversations with Sonam, the successful non-Sherpa guide, he linked being “Sherpa” to class mobility — if he isn’t perceived as Sherpa by foreigners and trekking clients, he doesn’t earn money. Here the consequences of not claiming to be Sherpa can be better understood in the context of ethno-racial classification and Hindu domination in the Nepalese business sector. All non-Hindu janajatis, including Sherpas, are marginalized by an entrenched ethno-racial state through processes of Hinduization that have remained intact, and are upheld through policing and differential access to resources, even after the jan andolan movement brought sweeping changes to the Nepalese government in the 1990s. However, in the trekking industry, most non-Sherpa guides that I spoke with see a clear advantage to being labeled Sherpa as opposed to being another non-Hindu ethnicity. Similar to Mexican teens who become black to avoid being perceived as illegal in New York city, non-Sherpas adopt the ethnic label Sherpa to defend themselves against “rongba” prejudice and penetrate the Hindu-dominated business world. Here we see a subtle differentiation between ethnicities that are in relatively similar positioning as non-Hindu janajatis positioned in an ethno-racial state. In the specific social conjuncture of the trekking field of Nepal, an essentialized and romanticized Sherpa ethnic label becomes privileged over other non-Hindu ethnic groups. It is important to note, however, that it is only the Sherpa “brand,” or imagined racialized vision of Sherpas as natural and superhuman mountain guides, that is elevated in the ethno-racial hierarchy. In reality, Sherpas living in the Solukhumbu struggle to benefit evenly from Everest trekking and tourism, and many lose their lives every year as a direct result of being objectified as superhuman.

Nepal’s government classification system, and ongoing processes of Hinduization shed light on how ethnicity and class are co-constituted in Nepal in important ways. Most visibly, access to resources and social capital in the trekking business world is influenced by one’s
racialized ethnic label. Government classification systems and labor are key contexts shaping the construction of identity for non-Hindus in Nepal. These contexts both explain and problematize the identity work that passing as Sherpa does. The interaction between ethnicity and class in Nepal have racialized effects, as Sherpas are reproduced as naturally strong mountain laborers who embody Everest, and non-Sherpas become unremarkable devalued labor. Passing as Sherpa is a double-edged sword for Sherpas and non-Sherpas alike, and serves, alongside the political economy of labor in the Everest region, to reproduce conjugated oppression for all.

SHERPAS AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF EVEREST LABOR

The co-constitution of Sherpa-ness alongside higher positioning in the mountain labor hierarchy is intertwined with the political economy of the Everest industry. I show how historic, cultural and political-economic factors such as the governmental classification of ethnic groups within a racialized ethnic hierarchy and the spatial construction of a rural periphery in Nepal’s middle hills have combined with the international formation of a Sherpa “brand” shape the formation of trekking industry labor hierarchies.

Ethnic Sherpas first entered expedition work in the same context as Tamang, Limbu and Bhote people, yet asserted themselves as separate from other ethnicities as non load-carrying workers through active resistance. Several cultural and historical factors contributed to Sherpa’s ability to achieve a favorable position as more elite mountaineering laborers (though they were certainly racialized as noble savages), including the concept of zhindak, which influenced the way that ethnic Sherpas viewed Western mountaineers. The zhindak is a benevolent protector who benefits, and is benefited by, a protégé (Ortner, 2001). This concept of a mutually beneficial relationship can, to some degree, explain many Sherpas’ positive and enthusiastic attitude
towards foreign climbers when combined with their social positioning in wider Sherpa society and their historical relationship to the Nepali state. Other janajatis have had markedly different relationships with respect to ethno-racial and economic hierarchy, as well as far less favorable relationships with the Nepali state, which have placed them in a position to benefit considerably less from the trekking industry.

Tamang people, for example, have been historically marginalized by the Nepali state, and by virtue of their proximity to Kathmandu, large numbers were forced into manual labor as part of the Nepali statebuilding project in the early 20th century. While many poor Sherpas entered the labor pool on their own accord and envisioned their relationship with foreign mountaineers as relatively egalitarian, at least after several major uprisings against the British, Tamang and other ethnic minorities had an entirely different experience as laborers on early mountaineering expeditions. Their preconceived status as “load carriers,” combined with their generally less enthusiastic attitude led foreign mountaineers to deem them more suited to heavy labor as porters or kitchen staff, while ethnic Sherpas were favored for more privileged positions because they were more “obedient” and easy to control (Ortner, 2001).

Sanam remembers people in the Department of Tourism and Civil Aviation recruiting people to take the guide exam: “literally, they would pull people off the streets! There were not enough guides to fill the positions in the growing trekking industry. This, of course, was in the early 1970s. Today it is much different – you have to know better English to be a trekking guide nowadays.” Sanam’s recollection draws our attention to an important facet of the trekking industry: access to English language skills. Hindu privilege and the marginalization of non-Hindu groups, historical processes of discrimination and the political-ecological construction and naturalization of Nepal’s hill “backwaters” (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987; Blaikie, 1980), which
lack reliable access to education or services, continues to stunt the ability of *janajatis*, both Sherpa and non-Sherpa, to learn English and secure better paid, higher-status trekking jobs. Although one must have a working understanding of English to claim Sherpa ethnicity among Westerners, those with weaker language skills (most low-level trekking guides I spoke with had rough English) also seemed to rely more heavily on being “Sherpa” to facilitate interactions with Westerners.

Over a cup of black tea in a Kathmandu cafe, Purnam tells me story after story about difficulties he understood as inherent to being non-Sherpa in the trekking industry.

Once the Discovery Channel emailed my company, asking about trekking and mountaineering in Nepal. They asked if I was a Sherpa, and when I cordially replied that I was actually Magar, but that I was from the Himalayas and had many years of experience working as a guide, they did not respond.

He laughed and shook his head sadly. “This was unfortunate,” he said. Like Sanam, Purnam recognizes that “being Sherpa” is a necessity in the trekking industry, and that being non-Sherpa limited his options for mobility. The Discovery Channel was not interested in his skills or knowledge, and the network exemplifies the myopic view of Sherpas as an internationally recognized embodiment of Everest. Although the mountain labor hierarchy is complex – both Sherpas and non-Sherpas suffer discrimination and exploitation, the “Sherpa brand” is deeply entrenched in the trekking industry and in the global imaginary. In the West, and even in Nepal, thousands of trekking companies showcase the strength, loyalty and natural purity of Sherpas, while clothing companies and phone apps appropriate Sherpa-ness to sell products and services.
“SHERPA-NESS” AS SYMBOLIC CAPITAL

Rais, Limbus, Magars and members of other ethnic groups gain access to symbolic capital when they identify themselves as Sherpa: they claim a history of performing mountain labor and what Bourdieu refers to as “credit” that can be exchanged for economic capital in the form of class status in the mountain labor hierarchy and tips from clients. For non-Sherpas working as trekking guides, being situationally Sherpa has direct material (and discursive) results as they improve their status in the labor hierarchy and achieve higher class status in broader Nepali society. Non-Sherpas draw on Sherpa-ness as a symbolic category that represents embodied mountain knowledge, skills and strength. Hence, non-Sherpas use the surname “Sherpa” as symbolic cultural capital to gain prestige, or “credit” among foreign clients, for whom being Sherpa means being a trustworthy and strong mountain guide. Over the course of many trips to the Everest region between 2008 and 2014, I have witnessed a handful of interactions where Western imaginations of Sherpa-ness are disrupted when non-Sherpa guides clarify that they aren’t Sherpa. However, I have witnessed far more interactions where tourists express interest in the Sherpa-ness of their guide, and nothing happens at all. There is no disappointment or awkward conversation in the latter case because Westerners either simply assume their guide is Sherpa, or guides just go along with what Westerners want to hear. In either case, Sherpa-ness stays intact as a stereotype and social identity with real effects.

Being credible as Sherpa not only may lead to employment where there is none, but also makes non-Sherpas’ lives easier. Purnam, a young but seasoned guide, states “most of the time when my clients call me Sherpa, I just shake my head. If they are really interested in my actual ethnicity, I explain, but mostly it’s not worth the effort.” For Purnam, the consequences of not being “Sherpa” is less a direct loss of credibility, but rather the inconvenience of an awkward
conversation. Regardless, passing as Sherpa, even if just to avoid awkwardness with foreign clients, reproduces a reified vision of Sherpas as natural laborers and exacerbates the drastically unequal power dynamic between trekking guides and foreign clients.

Sitting in a verdant monastery garden in the Buddhist quarter of Kathmandu, Tulsi laughs that he “is always mistaken for Sherpa, even among Sherpas! They see my face, eyes, nose, and think that I am Sherpa.” Here, Tusli, like many of the others that I spoke with, understands passing as Sherpa not in relation to habitus, or embodied ways of being, but rather as related to phenotypical characteristics: eye shape, nose shape, absence of facial hair, and the racialized ethnic ambiguity of non-Hindu hill people. He goes on to say “nobody can really tell if you are Sherpa or not, I get along well with Sherpas – they have also been dominated by Hindus and are noble, hardworking people.” We see here that non-Hindu-ness is a stronger binding factor among janajatis than ethnicity is a differentiating factor. Tulsi draws our attention to the shared experience of domination by Hindus, which works to downplay differences between Sherpas and non-Sherpas while uniting them as marginalized laborers in a racialized social and political-economic system. To him, being “Sherpa” for Westerners isn’t a big deal, as shared experiences of the racialized Nepali state blur ethnic boundaries and contextualize passing as a process that connects people who share experiences of discrimination.

Non-Sherpas draw on, and are influenced by, the broadly racialized structure and character of ethnicity in Nepal (as well as ethno-racialized assumptions that all mountain guides are Sherpas) to intentionally or unintentionally reproduce “Sherpa-ness” as a symbolic form of cultural capital that improves their status in the field of trekking. In this expanded understanding of cultural capital, there is room for racialized ethnic categories, complex histories, and uneven relationships with the Nepali state. To reiterate, workers who pass as Sherpa do not actually
perform skills or knowledge to gain prestige in the foreigner’s imaginary field of trekking—rather, they claim symbolic skills, knowledge and embodied strength that foreigners associate with the “Sherpa” brand. Trekking guides emphasize that they aren’t actually Sherpa, meaning that they don’t identify as belonging to the Sherpa ethnic group and don’t identify as Sherpa in their personal lives—they are Rai, Magar, Limbu. It is really only among Westerners and in various trekking industry situations that they pass as Sherpa. Paradoxically, although non-Sherpa workers do not see themselves as “authentic” or “real” Sherpas, they are Sherpas in the eyes of tourists. In other words, for tourists there is no difference between “real” or “situational” Sherpas. Passing as Sherpa disrupts primordialist understandings of ethnicity and instead demonstrates its mutability as a social identity with real material effects.

CONCLUSION

In Nepal’s lucrative trekking industry, the relationship between Sherpa-ness and labor has been shaped by interconnected political-economies and processes of racialization that are perpetuated by Western stereotypes. The historical representation of Sherpas as loyal mountain laborers has transformed into an international “Sherpa brand” that hundreds of corporations, from ski resorts to clothing companies, have appropriated. Although ethnic Sherpas seem to enjoy a higher status in the trekking industry, they also experience a greater degree of labor exploitation, and even death, as a result of the political-economic processes that have increased the cost of living in the Solukhumbu and pushed many Sherpas into high-altitude portering jobs at a young age. Despite a generally higher positioning in the mountain labor hierarchy, this status does not translate to better pay or safer working conditions. Every year, Sherpas die performing the dangerous labor that keeps the Everest industry profitable. Sherpas may be romanticized by
Westerners, yet this romanticized notion of superhuman strength and skill devalues Sherpa lives as they are consistently placed in high-risk positions with inadequate insurance or pay. In being “Sherpa”, non-Sherpas gain access to perceived physical strength, mountain knowledge, closeness to the Everest landscape and qualities of loyalty and trustworthiness.

Revisiting the Sherpa phone app, my online discussion revealed the entrenchment of the reified “Sherpa brand” across diverse socio-spatial contexts. The phone app, alongside clothing lines, travel companies and countless other Sherpa-branded products and services, perpetuate inequality by essentializing Sherpa bodies and positioning them as helpers for (mostly white) consumers. As an individual strategy of mobility, passing as Sherpa unintentionally reproduces the conjugated oppression of all mountain workers in the Everest industry. Although recent events like the tragic 2014 avalanche on Everest have shed light on the dangers of being a climbing Sherpa, the international “Sherpa brand” continues to be used with impunity.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


