

Navigating Unequal Power Relations:

Examining Intimacy and Neo-Colonial Tendencies in Volunteer Tourism

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Abstract

The study aims to uncover and examine unequal power relations as well as practices that perpetuate and exacerbate these within the volunteer tourism program established by Brenderup Folk High School in Sermathang and Tahongsa in the Nepali Himalayas. Further, the thesis will consider ways that the volunteer tourist program is utilized strategic by the host community as a part of a livelihood diversification process happening within a context of climate change. After two periods of fieldwork in Nepal, a combination of Participatory Action Research methods and Constructionist Grounded Theory was applied to gather and analyze data. It is argued that intimacy is central to the creation of a positive narrative within volunteer tourism projects that volunteers,

hosts, and the sending organization use and produce, but also that intimate encounters cloud the structural inequality that the program is based on. Also it is argued that a social justice pre-departure training is necessary in order to challenge neo-colonial tendencies within volunteer tourism, and in order to develop a more critical volunteer tourism with a potential to contribute to creating more equality and a more just global community.

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Firstly I want to thank the people of Sermathang and Tahongsa.

It has been a rewarding, fun, and educating experience to visit your beautiful home in Nepal. I want to thank people there for opening up their homes, and for offering tea, food, laughs, and good company. I also want to thank participants for committing their time and insight to this research project, and I sincerely hope this project will help ensure the future of the collaboration will be based on mutual agreements and inclusiveness.

On the 25th of April and then on the 12th of May two major earthquakes deeply affected the lives of people in Nepal. Thousands of people died and many have lost friends or family members.

Sermathang and Tahongsa were seriously affected by this earthquake, one community member died, and the villages are now facing a period of reconstruction and recovery. I send my warmest thoughts and sympathy to everyone there now and throughout the recovery.

I also want to thank the people at Brenderup Folk High School as well. Thank you for allowing me to become part of your school and of the project in Sermathang and Tahongsa. And for personal support and the good times and experiences shared both in Denmark and in Nepal. Also, thank you for opening yourself to constructive criticism.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Volunteer Tourism – From Deep Eco-Tourism to Neo-Colonialism

Over the last decade the number of volunteer tourism projects have increased rapidly (Tomazos and Butler 2009), as has the body of literature examining and discussing this particular kind of tourism (McGehee 2012). Volunteer tourism is by McGehee and Santos defined as: “utilizing discretionary time and income to travel out of the sphere of regular activity to assist others in need” (2005, 760). The volunteer tourist is by Wearing defined as: “those tourists who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments, or research into aspects of society or environment” (2001, 1).

Literature on volunteer tourism has mainly focused on the tourist and the experience of the tourist (Zahra and McGehee 2013, 23). Using different arguments, volunteer tourism has been claimed to entail a potential to benefit the social, natural and/or economic environments in which the project takes place (Wearing 2001, 1). Further, some have argued that volunteer tourism can benefit both the tourist and the host (e.g. Wearing 2001; Higgins-Desboilles 2003; McGehee and Andreck 2009; McGehee and Santos 2005; McIntosh and Zahra 2008; Singh 2002; Lyons and Wearing 2008). This positive view of volunteer tourism as an alternative to some negative dynamics of mass-tourism (see for example: Gray and Campbell 2007) seems, in my experience to be in line with both

the mainstream public discourse on the topic and with the position of organizations who offer access to volunteer tourism projects. Volunteer tourism has been described as a more socially responsible, justice centered and pro-poor tourism (Sin 2010) which is why it has often been related to the concepts of sustainable tourism and to the somewhat fluid concept of eco-tourism (Raymond and Hall 2008; McIntosh and Zahra 2007). In academic literature, early volunteer tourism was often perceived as a form of deep ecotourism (Acott et al. 1998; Coghlan and Gooch 2011; Weaver 2001), a notion that was later disputed as I will delve into in the following section.

A more critical body of theory, representing a cautionary turn (Wearing and McGehee 2013), has emerged recently and the aforementioned potential is by many disputed. Where Higgins-Desboilles (2003) sees a potential for volunteer tourism to work as reconciliation and as a way of healing divided societies, Simpson (2004), using critical development theory, highlights issues of unequal power relations within volunteer tourism. She describes this kind of traveling as an attempt to “combine the hedonism of tourism with the altruism of development work” (2004, 1) and issues a warning that volunteer tourism projects might create over-reliance in the host community.

Academic researchers and journalists have argued that the experiences of volunteer tourists, in many cases, does not encourage critical reflection about poverty (Raymond & Hall 2008; Roberts 2004; Simpson 2004). Others claim that foreign interests, in many cases, are prioritized higher than local interests, and that there is a tendency that sending organizations and volunteers themselves receive more benefits than the host community members (Brown 2005; Callanan and Thomas 2005; Carey 2001; Fitzpatrick 2007; McGehee and Andereck 2008; Palacios 2010). These arguments have been part of a trend questioning whether volunteer tourism is in practice more critical, ethical or pro-poor than mass tourism (Guttentag 2009; Palacios 2010). For a more detailed review of volunteer tourism both as field of study and modern phenomena, see Wearing and McGehee (2013).

1.2 Research Trajectory: Political Ecology of Volunteer Tourism

Through this paper I will examine the political ecology of volunteer tourism through a case study of Sermathang Folk High School in Nepal (SFHS from now on), and the collaboration between this school and Brenderup Folk High School in Denmark (BHS from now on). The aim of this project is to uncover and discuss unequal power relations within this collaboration and volunteer tourism program, as well as practices that potentially perpetuate and exacerbate these. Specifically, the study will include considerations of the power relations between volunteer tourists and host community members, and the ways in which the volunteer tourism program is related to people's livelihoods in Sermathang and Tahongsa. Further, I will consider ways that the volunteer tourist program is utilized strategically by the host community as a part of a livelihood diversification process. Ongoing livelihood diversification happens in the context of climate change, development¹, and issues regarding migration impacting Sermathang and Tahongsa. I will consider these factors when presenting and analysing findings.

I will apply constructionist grounded theory (Charmaz 2008b) as a method to navigate and critically scrutinize my choice of theoretical framework. I have chosen this approach, in combination with the use of Participatory Action Research (PAR from now on), in an attempt to mitigate my own previous assumptions, as a university student from the global North. I see this as a risk especially when working within a context where one is not familiar with the language and complex culture, as well as an outsider, in one's research context.

Following Arturo Escobar, I regard it as important that political ecology, besides studying the relationship between society and nature in contexts of power struggles, includes and relates to discourses and practices through which nature is historically produced and known (1996, 325-326). This study will examine the findings I have made in connection to literature and discourses on livelihood diversification, volunteer tourism, and climate change. I will thus attempt to offer a contribution by examining this unique case study within a political ecology framework (Escobar 1996; Paulsen et al. 2004).

1 I am aware that the term 'development' is contested and do not use it uncritically.

1.3 Research Question

Through examining the Sermathang Folk High School-Brenderup Folk High School collaboration, I am interested in considering what we can learn about the ways volunteer tourism affects host communities. In particular, I am interested in exploring whether a project can mitigate unequal power dynamics present in many volunteer tourism projects, and be used strategically as part of a livelihood diversification process within the context of climate change in the Himalayas. To answer this overarching question, I will focus on the following:

- How are Sermathang and Tahongsa being affected by climate change, livelihood diversification, and development?
- How do community members in Sermathang and Tahongsa experience the volunteer tourism collaboration with Brenderup Folk High School?
- To what extent is the collaboration shaped by unequal power relations and does the collaboration impact (e.g. reproduce or challenge) these dynamics?

1.4 Contribution of Research

The thesis produces a relevant contribution to the understanding of the dynamics at play in Sermathang and Tahongsa involving issues of climate change, livelihood diversification and development from a political ecological perspective. Further, it adds to the body of research focused on the way communities in general are affected by volunteer tourism – a business that almost unanimously flows from the global North to the global South. With this contribution, the thesis aims be useful for improvements of development projects taking place in this region, to reshape volunteer tourism planning in general, and to consider how the Sermathang Folk High School-Brenderup Folk High School collaboration can mitigate unequal power relations and thus improve the volunteer tourism program.

This thesis is also relevant to the public debate about a more self-critical and political volunteer tourism and about the dynamic character of Sermathang and Tahongsa. Suggestions for the future of the volunteer tourism program made in this thesis are presented with aim of advancing the interests

of the community members in Sermathang and Tahongsa who have participated in this study and whose daily lives are affected by this program. All of these aims are related to challenging the practices and dynamics of BHS's volunteer tourism project in a way so it can play a supporting role regarding the well-being of the community and culture in Sermathang and Tahongsa.

1.5 Trajectory of Thesis

Through section 1 of this thesis, the introduction, I presented the political ecological approach that I employ throughout this thesis employs, then went on to detail the many different approaches that researchers have taken to volunteer tourism as a field of study. After which, I outlined the research questions that I investigate throughout the thesis and described the contribution I hope this research will have.

The following section 2 presents the context of the study. In this section, I present information about the two mountain villages as well as an account of the lifestyle and livelihoods of the community living there. Following this are some historical perspectives relevant to the current state of Sermathang and Tahongsa, and finally the community's experience of ongoing climate change and migration are presented as central aspects framing both the context and specific focus of this study.

In section 3, I justify my choice of research topic and present an account of my personal experience as volunteer in Sermathang and Tahongsa.

section 4 presents the methodology of this study. I explain the qualitative and participatory approach that this study is based on as well as particular methods employed. Further, the constructionist grounded theory through which I have analyzed my findings is described. Finally, I discuss some of the limitations of this project.

In section 5 I give a presentation of my findings and analysis. In the first of the sub-sections, I focus on the relationship between hosts and participants in volunteer tourism through a framework that, following feminist and queer theory, examines the critical role of intimacy. The second sub-section presents findings regarding the volunteer tourists' experience and approach to being a volunteer in a community very different from where they come from. Throughout this sub-section I will use a postcolonial theoretical framework to describe the 'othering' tendencies present in my findings. In the final sub-section, I present my findings and analysis with a focus on ongoing livelihood diversification in Sermathang and Tahongsa, as well as the ambiguous relationship to this phenomenon expressed by community members. This sub-section contains a discussion of the role that the volunteer tourism program plays in this process – a process related to climate change, migration and development.

In the concluding section 6, I summarize my key findings and make recommendations for future research and possible actions to be taken by BHS.

2. Context

2.1 Sermathang and Tahongsa

SFHS resides in the villages Sermathang and Tahongsa in the mid-hills of the Helambu valley in central Nepal. The two villages lie side by side, 2650 meters above sea-level, approximately 75 kilometers north-east of Kathmandu. They rest on a mountain ridge, with Tahongsa facing the Dorje-Lakhba mountains to the east and Sermathang facing the Gosainkunda pass to the west. Surrounding the villages on every side is forest, or jungle as the community calls it in English. From the jungle, firewood is cut and leaves used for animal fodder are collected. Since the villages lie within the buffer-zone of Langtang National Park, the cutting of firewood can only take place twice a year during a short period and firewood can only be harvested for personal use. These

regulations have been established within the last eight years by the national park and the Langtang National Park and Buffer Zone Support Project, an initiative trying to bridge and balance new conservation initiatives with the needs and abilities of the communities in the area. Most of the people living in the two villages are identifying as Hyolmo. The "Hyolmo wa" or "Hyolmo people" originates from Tibet, and is a Buddhist people who have been living in villages close to the upper ridges of the Helambu for the last centuries (Desjarlais 2000). The way of life in Sermathang and Tahongsa is heavily influenced by Hyolmo traditions and ceremonies. The inhabitants of the villages gather for weddings, funerals, birth celebrations, communal work days, prayer ceremonies and other such events, based on Hyolmo tradition. My friends shared a Hyolmo saying with me – there are 365 days in a year, but there are 366 festivals. For gatherings and for the preparations of them, it is often mandatory for each household to send a member to help. When households do not send anyone, they generally have to pay a 'fine' that sometimes involves providing tea, food or other such things, for example for the annual communal work days where the stone paths around the villages are renovated, and where holes in a section of the road leading up to the villages are filled.

2.1.1 Agriculture and Livelihoods

The inhabitants of the twin villages have traditionally been subsistence farmers and the farming system has been, and still is, a typical Himalayan combination of animal husbandry and terrace cultivation. The main crops of the region are potatoes, radishes, wheat and barley, and the animals people have kept for generations are cows and buffalos. The importance of this agricultural lifestyle and livelihood is reflected in the name of the valley, Helambu which originates from the Hyolmo word for potato, *he*, and radish, *labu*. Approximately two out of three households own one or more cow or buffalo, which are generally kept in a shed next to main houses. The milk from cows and buffalo is used within families, or treated and traded within the community, and their droppings are used as manure, a vital part of the farming procedure that keeps the soil fertile. Since the community has traditionally transported all goods from the outside of the community using baskets carried on their backs, either from Melamchi, a four hour walk from Sermathang, or from

Kathmandu, a walk that takes at least a full day, using chemical fertilizer was not an option. As of today community members often describe, with some pride, how the locally produced vegetables are 'pure' or 'organic', whereas the food being bought from further down the mountain has chemicals in it and is therefore seen as less healthy. Thus, the chemical fertilizer is still not being used though buses and trucks drive from Kathmandu and Melamchi to Sermathang on a daily basis outside of the monsoon season. Since cultivation is highly depending on manure (that is in some cases mixed with compost) the animal husbandry is, as reported by researchers doing case studies in similar areas of Nepali, an integral part of the farming system (Aase et al. 2010).

When I asked community members in Sermathang and Tahongsa about what constituted their daily work and livelihood, it became clear that agriculture is still a central component of livelihoods in the area. All of the women I talked to answered this question with answers such as: “working in the field”, “farming”, “collecting leaves for the buffalo”, and/or “collecting firewood”. Some of the women make money by selling potatoes to the military post that lies 45 minutes from Sermathang, or to people from the villages further down the mountain. Some community members sell milk and curd, and some make and sell the local wine, raxi, to make an income. Other sellable items produced in the villages include weaved bamboo mats and baskets. This is traditionally a task that the men of the villages perform. Eight to ten of the men are furthermore occupied with part or full time jobs as carpenters.

Traditionally much of the trading in the villages and surrounding areas has happened without the use of cash but through a barter system, typically where potatoes were exchanged for rice and other goods. To some extent this is still happening, but as a community member told me the current Sermathang is 'modern Sermathang' and many things are in flux. The interviewee Aruna explains the importance of having a cash income in these way: “it is quite necessary [...], it is more important to have more money to fulfill all our demands, in the current needs”. Several of my interviewees affirmed this importance and further explained that this, making an income, is the most serious challenge about living in Sermathang or Tahongsa.

In Nepal in general, agriculture provides livelihood for three quarters of the population and employs

seventy six percent of the labor force. Women in Nepal are more dependent on agriculture than men,; Ninety-one percent of employed women are working within agriculture, for men this percentage is sixty four (Aly and Shields 2010). My experience with gendered work and gender roles in Sermathang and Tahongsa seconds Aase et al. when they describe that gender roles in the mountains are far more relaxed than on the plains (2010, 234). In Sermathang and Tahongsa there is in general gendered division of labor, but my experience was that it is a flexible division. Women are in charge, as in many places in the Himalayas, of a majority of agricultural tasks (Aly and Shields 2010; Gururani 2002). My experience from Sermathang and Tahongsa however, is that both men and women do much of the agricultural work in collaboration. Women are further typically tasked with cooking, cleaning and taking care of children, and men are typically fulfilling tasks regarding the collection of firewood, construction work or carpentry. In some cases the men are occupied by religious duties, i.e. if the man is also acting as lama. Men have historically been more mobile than the women, meaning that in the older generation it was mostly men who went to school as children and mostly men who went to Kathmandu or abroad to work for periods at a time. This mobility implies that men in general are less vulnerable to issues such as climate change, pests in the crops or soil depletion. In Sermathang and Tahongsa there are many exceptions to this tendency. In my experience, it is not uncommon for men in the community to take part in house work and cooking, or for women to work for a cash income either within the villages or to travel abroad for education and work. Particularly when it comes to the younger generation both men and women are going abroad to study or work with gender parity (a reality described by some of my interviewees).

2.1.2 The Maoist Insurgency

An important part of the more recent story of the villages, has to do with the intense and diverse political unrest, often referred to as the Maoist insurgency, that lasted from February 1996 and ended with the Comprehensive Peace Treaty, signed in November 2006 (Lawoti & Pahari 2009). In 2001 the local school - Yangrima Boarding School - was closed after being bombed by Maoist insurgents (no students were inside during the bombing). Few people were staying in Sermathang

and Tahongsa at the time, as many had migrated to Kathmandu during the conflict.

However, many families have returned after the end of political unrest, especially within recent years. This migration seems motivated in part by the construction of a road leading up to the villages, plus the fact that the area now has steady electricity. Other explanations for the 'revival' such as development projects being initiated by both local people and outsiders, and the construction of new infrastructure are also given. A youth in the village, Sonam, who is from Tahongsa and lives part time there and part time in Kathmandu, describes the process of returning in the following words:

So there [was] a time when people wanted to leave their villages and go away and work for someone else and earn money, but even then they realized; for how long will that last, for how long will [they] work for wages? [...] people now have realized that land is a big asset. They left it, [but] now they want to come back and grab it.

Positive accounts of Sermathang's recent growth are echoed by Santos who explains:

All these development things are going on so rapidly, there is a lot of people targeting, even the local, the government people, local NGO's, they are targeting this place, [...] a lot of people have come, from grassroots-level to high level.

Co-existing with this optimism, several of my interviewees expressed doubts about whether the 'coming generations' or 'youth' will continue the traditional life in Sermathang and Tahongsa. When asked about this issue, Sonam reflected:

Young people would love it, but they cannot live all their life [in the village], that is how they are. They want to travel, they want to be in city places, so they can not, they don't have that capacity to be in the village and give their 100 % to that.

There might be other push factors involved in the current situation in Sermathang, but according to Santos the main issue is employment:

The problem is employment, if you are employed I don't think no one will go to a foreign country to earn money, so, if you have employment opportunity in your own place, then why should I go to other place?

2.1.3 Migration and Climate Change

Out-migration is a phenomenon happening in all of Nepal and has been framed in different ways.

Both within academia and activism a hypothesis linking out-migration to climate change has been re-occurring, for example seeing out-migration as a possible adaptive response to risks associated with climate change (McLeman & Smit 2006; Massey et al. 2010). Massey et al. tests this hypothesis using data from Chitwan in Nepal in a study where they operationalize environmental change, among other things, in terms of perceived decline in agricultural productivity. In their study they reach the conclusion that there is indeed a connection between a perceived decline in agricultural productivity, but that it promotes local moves more than distant moves (Massey et al. 2010). They furthermore conclude that although environmental change is something that everyone in a given community is affected by: “the response of individuals varies greatly by their socioeconomic conditions” (Ibid, 15). Thus they find that environmental effects on mobility seems to vary between men and women in a way that reflects the traditional gender-division of labor in Nepal. As mentioned the gender-division in Sermathang and Tahongsa is not in any way clear cut and this study will not focus further on gendered mobility.

The perception that productivity is declining due to climate change, was reiterated in 11 of my 14 interviews, which re-establish the value of presenting my findings in relation to a discussion about the connections between migration, climate change and diversifying livelihoods. This I will return to in the Findings section. For now I will use this finding as a bridge to establish that we, when addressing Sermathang and Tahongsa, are navigating within a context of climate change. All of my interviewees were describing how they have experienced changes in the weather pattern. They did not however describe these changes in the exact same way; some mentioned a decrease in snowfall, some warmer weather, some unsteady and more extreme weather, some longer monsoon period. The majority of these descriptions however are not mutually exclusive and together they paint a picture that the community in Sermathang and Tahongsa, through lived experience are testifying about a changing climate which brings along both feelings of sadness and worry. In this quote this is expressed by Durmi:

if it continues like this and increase year by year, there will be very less production of vegetables and crops and it will be difficult for the future generations to cope with that.

2.2 Sermathang Folk High School and Brenderup Folk High School

The folk high school movement in Scandinavia and in particular in Denmark is rooted in the educational philosophy of N.F.S. Grundtvig. It was the aim of this movement to make education available people beyond just those of the privileged class. In the aftermath of the French Revolution, Grundtvig saw it as necessary to offer education for the people, to enable them to take the “responsibility that coming democratic governments were to lay on their shoulders” (Kulich 1964). The liberal idea behind this movement was that school should be “for life” - which is understood as a school that is based in interpersonal relations in daily situations, and a school that wakens people, creates fellowship, and a desire to live life to the fullest (Ibid.). This is, according to Grundtvig, achieved through the “living word” - which has its source in idealism and is opposed to the “dead word” consisting of the bookish, academic knowledge of the Latin schools (Ibid., 417).

In the following, I will give a brief account of how the idea of opening a folk high school in Sermathang came about and how the collaboration between BHS and Sermathang has been central to the realization of this idea. A link between Brenderup and Sermathang has existed since 1997, where the first student from the Helambu region went to Denmark to attend BHS, an international folk high school with, at that time, an emphasis on International Peace Studies (Brenderuphøjskole.dk). Since then more than twenty students from Nepal have attended BHS.

Accounts of why a 'folk high school' that was opened in Sermathang, were revealed through interviews (done in 2014-2015), a document formulated by the Committee for SFHS in 2009 titled: “The Plan of Sermathang Folk High School” (Møller 2009), a document written by BHS in 2008 titled: “The “dream” between Brenderup Højskole and partner in Nepal” (Ibid.), and a feasibility study about the potential initiation of a folk high school in Nepal, written by Miriam Møller in 2009. Central to this story is the history of Yangrima Boarding School, which I will start by briefly introducing.

Yangrima lies approximately 15 minutes walking from Sermathang and Tahongsa, and currently has around 180 students. The school opened in 1987, and in 1989 it started to receive support and

volunteers from GAP Activity Projects (Yangrima.org). Currently it is supported by the UK based organization Friends of Sermathang – a group that has grown out of former volunteers sent by the project. The school is locally managed by people from the surrounding villages, some of whom currently live in Kathmandu. Many of the students attending Yangrima are receiving sponsorships from former volunteers tourists from organizations based in Denmark, the UK, and Canada. Since re-opening in 2009, the school has remained open and is running daily. The students of Yangrima vary in age from five to sixteen. Around 70 children are board at the school whereas the rest (about 110 students) walk to and from school every day. As mentioned above, Yangrima school was forced to close in 2001 when the school building was bombed because Maoists were threatened to bomb it again if the community attempted to open it again.

Around the end of the Maoist insurgency, in 2005-2006, a group of former students of Yangrima Boarding School formed the association YESS (Yangrima Ex-Student Society). They set up headquarters in Kathmandu with the goal of reopening the school. At some point the organization was visited by the headmaster of BHS and the idea of collaborating started to developed. Central to the idea of starting a folk high school in Sermathang, was that both parties involved saw potential benefit for the community in Sermathang and Tahongsa. In particular, they saw an opportunity to support youth in the community, who currently had no access to formal education. Santos explains the view of the YESS members at that time:

The students who are not able to go to school, they can also join the class [at Sermathang Folk High School] and the other people, those who are interested in learning English or other things, they also can join the class.

This aspect of the initial idea is expressed in the “Project plan from the Committee for Sermathang Folk High School” (Møller 2009) as formulated in March 2009. In this plan it explains that the aim of SFHS is to provide education for uneducated adults of Sermathang and the surrounding villages, but also: “as the reopening of the Yangrima school takes time, the school will temporarily provide supplementary English classes for children, too” (Møller 2009). A feasibility study of the folk high school project was done by Miriam Møller, using a participatory learning approach, with the aim of providing BHS with as much information as possible on the villages, the community members, and potential local partner organization (Ibid.). As part of this study, the people of Sermathang,

Tahongsa and Ngarku were introduced to the idea and reportedly expressed enthusiasm and eagerness to help and support in the construction of the school (Ibid.). To my question regarding whether the initiative and idea to start a folk high school in Sermathang came from Denmark or from the local community, Santos answered that the idea arose collaboratively - between community leaders in Sermathang and the BHS headmaster at the time.

In January 2009 the inaugural evening class was held amidst celebration. Since then, classes were held – in some periods, up to six evenings per week – until 2013 when the classes were forced to stop because the school lost the space where they usually hold classes. The evening classes at SFHS until now have been held in 3 different locations, but for the last year have not been running due to the lack of a space that can accommodate the class. Currently, a new building (that will be shared with the Langtang national park office) is being built. Since the beginning of the SFHS, BHS offered a “Travel Class” through which 'volunteers', after they attend BHS (in central Denmark) for about two months, go to Sermathang for between seven and ten weeks. Currently, one group per semester, varying in size from one to eight participants, undertakes this trip.

In the “Project plan from the Committee for Sermathang Folk High School” under the subtitle: “Economy of the Folk High School”, it is specified that the school run based on the income from foreign students coming through the BHS volunteer tourism project (10.000 Nepali Rupees (approx. 100 USD) per student). This amount then is supposed to pay for housing, food and other, less defined, services that the volunteers receive from the project coordinator, their host family, and often the whole community. In addition to the tuition fee, SFHS receives financial support from the Brenderup-Sermathang Friendship Organization.

The Brenderup-Sermathang Friendship Group is a Danish organization, with a board consisting of BHS staff and other people from Denmark who, at various times, have visited Sermathang and Tahongsa. This board gathers regularly to decide how the funds that they raise (in various ways) will be spend in Sermathang and Tahongsa. An important part of their support has been paying a salary to the teacher who coordinates and teaches the evening class at the SFHS.

The group of students attending the folk high school regularly are women from Sermathang and Tahongsa varying in age from around 30 to 75. Every woman I interviewed had no previous formal schooling. Since many of the men in Sermathang and Tahongsa have attended school for some time, tend to speak varying levels of English, and are more often working for a cash income in Kathmandu, the gendered classroom makes sense. The content of the classes was dictated by the student, and up until now has focused on English skills, singing, learning board games, doing yoga, as well as different kinds of cultural education focusing on the Hyolmo culture and religious studies. The volunteers who arrive from BHS have mainly been involved in supporting classes at SFHS as well as Yangrima Boarding School.

3. Justification of Research Topic and Positioning of Myself

In 2014, I completed a teaching internship at BHS and, as part of my responsibilities, spent seven weeks in Sermathang. I travelled there with one student from Denmark whom I spend most of my time in Sermathang and Tahongsa with. Through this, I gleaned some preliminary insight into the perspectives people at BHS held about the project in Sermathang before going to Nepal. Before departure I also attended a board-meeting with the Brenderup-Sermathang Friendship Group about their involvement during the time of my stay.

Before going to Sermathang I personally felt ambiguous about the project. On the one hand, I was excited about the chance to get to know people in Nepal and become familiar with a part of the world I knew little about. Further, I was going to be a 'volunteer' for the first time - something that I had heard about from friends in Denmark. Before leaving Denmark, our role was mostly described to us as “being part of the cultural meeting” – something that characterized the project as different from a traditional development and volunteer tourism project. I simultaneous critical of the collaboration – largely because I am often convinced by theoretical arguments about economic dependency. These discourses call into question any possibility of “improving” power relations or enabling equitable distribution through “third-world” volunteer tourism. This point is for example

expressed by Andre Gunder Frank's articulation that:

[...] historical research demonstrates that contemporary underdevelopment is in large part the historical product of past and continuing economic and other relations between the satellite underdeveloped and the now developed metropolitan countries (1966, 17).

My position, both as a volunteer and as a student, is that it is valuable to try to achieve a deeper understanding of these “economic and other relations” in order to, as far as possible, mitigate unequal relations and dynamics that reproduce these. The project in Sermathang and Tahongsa exists, and everything points to the continued existence of the project for years to come. This, I believe, justifies conducting my research project. Further, the project is, by many of those involved, seen and described as something entirely positive. My aim with this research project is prove this perspective wrong. Further, I certainly regard it valuable to attempt to understand and acknowledge the positive implications that the project reportedly has had for people involved, but also to insist on trying to uncover unequal power relations between volunteers and hosts, and how the project mitigate these in the future. I second Simpson when she writes that: “the globalizing language of culture, especially when combined with a colonial history, acts as a vehicle of imperialism, which at the very least needs critical engagement” (2004).

Before delving into my methodology and then detailed findings, I will give an account of my personal experience as a participant in the project. I felt rather unprepared as we were leaving BHS to go to Sermathang early in October 2014. What struck me as more problematic was that I did not feel that I was trained to navigate the challenges of being a volunteer which was something completely new to me. I acknowledge that perhaps there is not one way of doing this, but in our case the preparations were almost entirely missing. We had held some meetings with staff from BHS and talked a bit about what Sermathang and Tahongsa were like, what we might do and about the culture meeting. But none of this was very specific, reflexive or thorough. This made me worry that other students had left Brenderup in a somewhat similar fashion, especially since many of the students who attend BHS and who travel to Nepal to volunteer are young, and inexperienced both traveling independently and volunteering. This worry was confirmed by Hannah, a volunteer from Denmark, who I interviewed during my second stay in Sermathang and Tahongsa. When reflecting

on the pre-departure training she said:

[the classes] have not been wasted, [...] but I would have liked to perhaps have, and this is something that you can do on your own, [...] spent some more time getting inspired, being encouraged to think more about goals; what I can do myself, but also on how to think as a volunteer (my translation).

It is interesting to me that she view these missing components as something that one could do on your own. One main finding to come out of this paper is my recommendation of a comprehensive social-justice oriented pre-departure training – I will elaborate in my findings and conclusion.

Upon arriving in Sermathang I experienced that the receiving organization did not structure our daily time in any strict way. By this I mean that it was up to us, the volunteers, to decide what we wanted to spend our time doing, if we wanted to assist someone in their work, and in that case who, and what activities in the villages we wanted to join. Furthermore I experienced that it was very easy to be put in charge of teaching the children at the Yangrima Boarding School, not only as an assistant teacher but as the solo teacher of a full class. We were furthermore encouraged to teach on any topic that we wanted to. Since teachers were missing, we were encouraged to volunteer there as much as we wished and in any subject.

These experiences motivated my choice of research field. My initial idea was that both the community in Sermathang and Tahongsa and BHS could learn from my attempt to, in a participatory manner, obtain knowledge about how the community members in Sermathang and Tahongsa experience the project and what they want from the project both right now and in the future. Insisting on a more direct involvement of the host community members in the knowledge production about the state and prospects of the project is important in and of itself.

I think of this insisting as a potential first step on the way to mitigate issues regarding unequal power relations within the project. Learning what the next steps are was a part of the aim with this thesis. Currently it seems that the task of clearly and continually stating the opinions and ambitions of the different stakeholders in Sermathang and Tahongsa is a rather neglected task. This is, in a

way, surprising since it is the opinions of these people that should be the most important. On the other hand this seems to be the case in projects. What I have experienced is that a lot of evaluation and planning is currently being based on an exchange between the Danish part of the project, and the board of the Nepali organization - whose members are only men, and most of whom lives in Kathmandu.

This study is not supposed to be understood as a claim, that establishing a volunteer tourism program which mitigate unequal power relations is an easy task. Neither it is a claim that any of the people involved in the collaboration between Sermathang and Brenderup have intentions that I want to criticize. It is however an attempt to deconstruct and discuss some of the dynamics and processes within the project to learn from these. This is done with, yes I admit this even though some are questioning such a potential, a hope that the collaboration in the future can be advantageous for the host community and also give students from BHS an experience that they can learn from.

4. Research Methodology

I view language as creating social reality rather than as a reflection of reality and thus position myself within the post-structuralist tradition. This tradition is not denying 'a reality existing out there', but insists, relevant to this study, that we should examine reality, for example constructs of political ecology, as what Escobar calls a "specifically modern form of knowledge" (Escobar 1996, 325). Within this tradition, lies an important critique of naturalizing social constructions, analyzing phenomenas through the creation of binary oppositions, and of generalizing causal relations. An important epistemological consequence of this is that any reality is understood as always already existing within a context (Schulte 2014, Lecture 3). Keeping this critique in mind, has been a challenge in this research process, especially since I decided to do research in a culture that is new to me and I have caught myself in generalizing, extrapolating, and creating false dichotomies several times.

I have however attempted to handle this challenge by employing PAR and by using Constructionist Grounded Theory as theory and method when approaching the data that I collected in Sermathang and Tahongsa. My methodological triangulation thus includes informal interviews, a focus group, a SWOT-workshop and semi-structured interviews of eleven host community members, three members of the Folk High School Committee and two Danish volunteers. Further, I have performed a data triangulation, including my transcripts and field notes from both of my stays in Nepal and from during and immediately after the interviews, focus group and workshop.

This study is based on two periods of field work in Sermathang and Tahongsa, the first lasting seven weeks and the second three weeks. I have taken an ethnographic approach and attempt to create knowledge “from the bottom up” by identifying concepts and patterns in the formulations of the people who participated in the study and thus construct grounded research (Charmaz 2008b; Leopold 2011). Although the interviewees gave me permission to use their real names, I have chosen to use pseudonyms throughout the paper. This is a cautionary choice that I have made with the aim not to harm anyone who lives in the tight-knit community in Sermathang and Tahongsa.

4.1 Data Collection Methods

In the following three sections I will go through the methods which I have applied to collect data and finally the theory that I have then used to identify concepts and theoretical categories. The applied methods are developed to insist on the specific context and reality of the particular individual, and thus attempt to help the researcher avoid previous assumptions and generalizations. They encourage reflexivity and critically considerations about the representations and constructions created through the research.

4.1.1 Participatory Action Research

In planning my data-collection I have followed Chambers (1992; 1994; 2002) and Mikkelsen (2005). Initially I was attracted to the streams of PAR flowing from Activist Participatory Research in the way it is using dialogue and participation to enhance awareness and confidence and thus facilitate action (Chambers 1992). PAR and Activist Participatory Research has a focus on the underprivileged and on political action. Chambers articulates this focus in these words: “people are creative and capable, and can and should do much of their own investigation, analysis and planning” (Chambers 1992, 6). The outsider is in this method described as taking the role of “convenors, catalysts and facilitators” (Ibid, 7). Methodologically, PAR can entail many different modes of research, such as arts-based research, ethnographic research, workshops and interviews. This diversity fits the ambitions of this study, which is to learn something about what the community members in Sermathang and Tahongsa think about the volunteer tourism program. The community members were presented with the raw idea of a folk high school before it was started, and now, after almost five years of existence, this project asks their opinion about the reality of the program. This ambition flows from a belief, central to PAR, that people with lived and embodied experience of a given project are the most fit to investigate and analyze this project (Chambers 1992, 13; Kindon and Elwood 2009, 433).

4.1.1.1 Semi-structured interviews

For the majority of the interviews I conducted, I used an interview guide that I developed with theoretical assistance from Britha Mikkelsen (2005). She describes how PAR have contributed to make interviews more conversational, yet still controlled and structured (2005, 169). In the context that I did research, this conversational style was necessary since I found it important to maintain as informal an atmosphere as possible.

The loose structure of the interview, also means that the interviewer is often creating questions during the interview, which can be a challenge, but which also keeps one attentive and observant to the direction the interview is taking. I chose an interview-guide approach because of my previous

experience with interviewing in Sermathang and Tahongsa. The interviews that I conducted there in October 2014 were of a more informal conversational style. Before conducting these, I had thought through the direction in which I wanted to steer the interview and thus I did ask some previously decided questions throughout the interview. But to a large extent, I allowed the interviewee to control the direction. My experience was that this style of interviewing in combination with the specific situation in which I did the interviews, i.e. in a language that I do not speak and therefore using a translator, was not optimal. One of the main issues that I had with this, was that the translator ended up talking a lot of the time and many periods of “small talk” occurred, that I could hear were not being translated. Thus my experience was that the translator to an extent interpreted the answers in stead of translating them in a more word to word style. Although any translation can be seen as an interpretation, I felt that the 'distance' between me and the person I was interviewing was too big in the informal conversation style interviews. I therefore decided on a more structured style in the second round of interviews that I did.

I was using two different interpreters during my two stays in Sermathang. Both of these are from Tahongsa, and speak Nepali, Hyolmo, and English. Both are respected members of the community and became good friends of mine. During both periods of fieldwork, I had the chance, before starting to conduct interviews, to discuss the aim of my research and my methodological worries with my assistants. Both of them could then give useful advice and their input on how to approach the research.

One of the first practical steps of my data-collection was to develop an interview-guide (Appendix A). I designed this guide to contain questions about the interviewee's (changing) livelihood, the perceived (changing) importance of cash, ongoing projects and developments in Sermathang and Tahongsa. Further I asked questions about the interviewee's, if any, participation in SFHS, their experiences during class, and experiences with volunteers arriving through the folk high school project and spending between 7 and 10 weeks in Sermathang.

In all of the interviews conducted in March 2015 I asked the questions in the same sequence and the

interviews were conducted in the interviewee's home. In some cases before or after a meal, which was chosen in part due to practical reasons, but also in an attempt to make the atmosphere as informal and relaxed as possible. In some of the interviews, however, this meant that we were joined family members some of who made comments and jokes during the interview. In the situations where this happened, I paused the interview to I ask my interpreter if he thought we should postpone the interview. His interpretation of these situation was that this was not necessary. His argument for this was that the comments made were of a friendly kind. I therefore continued the interviews in spite of this and have, in the transcript, included the comments made by the people present other than the interviewee, the translator and me in places where they were translated.

4.1.1.2 Focus group

After arriving in Sermathang and Tahongsa the two volunteers from BHS and I, through the program coordinator, invited to a meeting in the so-called Friendship House. This meeting was held in order to organize payment and a final session of a knitting project that was initiated last year through the folk high school. My intention was to use this meeting to invite people to a SWOT-workshop about Sermathang Folk High School and to ask the women who were present to spread the word to the rest of the villages.

At some point during this announcement, the women was told that the coordinator of the project, who has been the teacher at SFHS, has officially ended his engagement with the project. This development is a consequence of a personal health issue that the women knew about, but they did not know until then that it had been decided to find a new teacher. It was now announced to them that this person has been found. The woman who has been hired is from another area of Nepal and is thus not Hyolmo. She speaks Nepali but does not speak the local language. This news sparked a longer discussion about the folk high school in general. The women talked about how sad they are that the previous teacher is not going to continue and also about their opinions regarding the way the school has been running during the first five years of its existence. I took down notes on everything that I could understand during this session and afterwards I interviewed my translator

about the contents of the discussion.

This unexpected focus group was an interesting chance to hear some of the thoughts that the women who has been attending the classes have about this. Furthermore it affected my methodological approach to the following workshop since I had a chance to experience the group dynamics and could see that some of the women talked much more than others. This impression was backed up by the opinion of my translator and confirmed my previous idea, to chose a structured workshop style where everyone is asked to give voice to their opinion in turn and where limited aspects of the problem or project is covered one by one.

4.1.1.3 SWOT-workshop

As I was interested in learning about how the students of SFHS had experienced the first years of the schools existence and how they imagined the continued existence, I decided to do a so-called SWOT-workshop. This name stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. In the workshop we did, these categories were translated into: “Best things about Sermathang Folk High School”, “Jabu mando (meaning 'bad' in Hyolmo) things about Sermathang Folk High School”, “Dreams and Hopes” and “Future Problems”. This renaming was done due to a methodological consideration brought about by previous research experiences in Sermathang and Tahongsa. Based on the interviews that I had conducted previous to the workshop, I had experienced how the women tended to give short answers when the questions were worded as asking for “negative” experiences or more explicitly for “bad” experiences. Using the Hyolmo term “jabu mando” seemed to have a more constructive effect on the interview situation. Asking if something is “bad” about the volunteer tourism program, seemed too direct, and perhaps too personal and intimidating, especially considering that it was me, someone send by BHS, who was asking. Using the term “jabu mandu” read more like: “what could be better” which in turn gave more detailed answers. The dynamics in play here are related to the issue of me assuming several roles, one of which is being hired by BHS - the organization that support the folk high school project and at the same time doing critical

research on this project. I will return to this issue in the section about doing research on your “own” organization.

In the practical facilitation of the workshop, I was following directions given by Chambers (2002). I asked the people who are not doing this in their everyday life, to take a seat on the ground so we were sitting in a circle. Both the ones assisting me in facilitating the workshop and the participants were part of this circle for as much of the time as possible. Then we went through the four categories one by one and each time I asked the participants to give their contribution, each of which was then written down in both English and Nepali and placed on the floor. When there were no more suggestions I handed out stickers, four stickers for each participant, and asked them to place the stickers on the suggestions that they thought were the best ones. This process proved difficult since many of the participants do not read in neither English nor Nepali, and my assistant thus took them through all the suggestions one by one before they placed their stickers. In the end we had created a wall full of suggestions and “votes” (see Appendix B). We had, due to limited time, a short discussion in the end about the results.

4.2 Data-Analysis: Constructionist Grounded Theory as Theory and Method

The data I have collected through semi-structured interviews, I have transcribed and then analyzed using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2008a; 2008b). I am following Charmaz in using constructionist grounded theory, which means an abandonment of the view that researchers have the ability and responsibility to: “remove themselves from the influences of their disciplines and the conditions of their research” (Charmaz 2008b, 160). I second Charmaz regarding the constructionist aim, that we as researchers should rather attempt to make these influences explicit. In the following section I will describe grounded theory as I have used this methodology and my experiences doing this.

4.2.1 Constructionist Grounded Theory

The basic aim in grounded theory as a methodology is, in Charmaz' words: “studying data and developing an analysis from conceptualizing these data rather than imposing a theoretical framework on them” (2008b, 165). This approach fit well into the PAR framework I have applied to collect data, since it insists on a continued interaction with the data. Grounded theory research ties the different parts of the research process and data-analysis more directly to the things that the research participants say. The data is approached through both action and analytic questions: “What is happening here?” and “What (theoretical category or theory) are these data a study of?” (Glaser 1978, 57).

I have approached my transcribed interviews through a round of 'initial coding' that follows the grounded theory approach. This consists in detecting actions and theoretical potential, rather than themes and topics (Charmaz 2008b, 163-164). This means that I, line-by-line, have picked through the 133 pages of text that my interview have been transcribed into and noted down actions that the interviewees describe, (i.e. “Treats people from Denmark like family”, or “The weather has definitely changed and this is having a negative effect on the amount of crops”). Also I have highlighted codes that I interpret contain a theoretical potential and that can be used as guidelines for the direction of the analysis.

All of these codes I have, through a process of selective coding, grouped into 'coding concepts'. For example I categorized 64 initial codes under the concept “changing livelihoods” and 52 codes under the concept “adaptation”. These concepts are meant to be inclusive, which means for example, that the “adaptation” category is containing both codes describing reactions to changes in the weather patterns, but also to other changes, for example political changes, economical changes or other such factors. These concepts then serve as a help to focus the identification of theoretical categories. This means that I, amongst the many codes within the coding concepts, look for codes that can provide the basis for further theoretical explanation of the empirical phenomenon that is being researched. The central codes that I have highlighted, so to speak, provides “analytic momentum” (Charmaz

2012).

In my transcriptions I identified the following coding concepts: "diversifying livelihoods; maintaining an agricultural base", "migration", "issues regarding development", "optimism regarding development", "adaptation", "conservation", "climate change", "advice for the future folk high school", "issues regarding the folk high school", and "good experiences with the folk high school". Several of these concepts overlaps, and I have, considering the aim of this research project, chosen to focus on certain of them as main-concepts, on the intersections between some of them and let some remain unaccounted for.

A part of the ideal grounded theoretical research process is the continuous writing and storing of 'memos'. This process is aiming to "capture ideas in process and progress" (Charmaz 2008b, 166) and is thought to be helping to keep the development of your ideas in mind during the different stages of the research. If newly analyzed data is giving you reason to assume a different theoretical position, this can more accurately be described by looking back at your earlier memos. This way, the researcher continuously contest the theory that is used to describe the collected data. In Charmaz' words: "grounded theorists can not anticipate where their theoretical inquiry will take them. The tentative categories arise through the analytic process and thus theoretical sampling may take them into new research sites" (2008b, 166).

In my study I found this method useful since I wanted to contest the theoretical framework with which I entered the research process. I was initially aware that I was in search of a theoretical framework that could be both critical and provide a kind of deconstruction of the dynamics that I was analyzing, but also I was interested in incorporating the statements that expressed some sort of positive position about the project. Constructionist grounded theory seems to facilitate this. For me this became apparent for example in the way that the described procedure assisted me in identifying intimacy as a theoretical concept that could explain the data I had collected in a satisfying way.

4.3 Limitations

4.3.1 Language Barrier

The first challenge I will describe was the language barrier that I had to work around while doing interviews in Sermathang. As Mikkelsen writes the interpreter is, to the researcher who is both new to the culture and the language, the filter of information (2005, 331). The interpreter issue did in my case become more complicated since I was doing participatory research about the volunteer tourism program and the folk high school. I had to explain to my two interpreters, who have both been very involved in the project, the importance of them translating as direct as possible, also if it was negative of the volunteer project. I acknowledge that a lot of knowledge is lost when the interview passes through the many filters that exists on the journey from the Hyolmo words to my paper, being translated, recorded and transcribed. In my research process however, the best solution I could ask for was to work with an assistant who is also a friend - whom I like, trust, and who understood these methodological challenges.

4.3.2 Doing Research on Your “Own” Organization

Performing PAR and critical research on an organization that you are yourself involved in, is not without risks. One issue is regarding how to maintain meaningful, informed consent of the people who you are doing research on, even when the action research project is evolving and potentially developing in unforeseen directions (Coughlan and Brannick 2014). Another issue is the risk of making friends and people you like feel uncomfortable or even angry. This risk is related to the way different roles are mixed when action research is performed within your own organization. In my case, I have been a teacher at BHS, a volunteer in Sermathang and Tahongsa, a friend of people in both places and am now, as a researcher, analyzing statements and actions of these people.

Integrating the different roles is an ethical challenge that you have to deal with when doing this type of research.

I have attempted to make use of my experiences at BHS and knowledge about the institution without aiming my analysis at individuals in any way. Instead I have attempted to point out structural issues and dynamics as the aim for future change. This is the type of knowledge that I, with this project, has been aiming at generating.

I discussed my idea about doing PAR in Sermathang and Tahongsa with part of the staff at BHS and with members of the community in Sermathang and Tahongsa before going to Nepal and I regard this paper as valuable to them and to their collaboration. It is valuable in so far as it is a critical evaluation of the project. Therefore I have not felt uncomfortable pointing out aspects of the project where I believe there is a need for change.

Another aspect within this section is the potential issue of being financially tied to, or dependent of, the organization that you do research on. I have, besides the three weeks I spend in Nepal this spring, where part of my time was devoted to performing a job for BHS, not been financially or professionally engaged with the school during the writing process. Thus I have felt any pressure to find certain results that presents a positive image of BHS, nor to frame my findings in a such a way.

4.3.3 Time and Unforeseen Events

As it is often done within a PAR approach, I was initially hoping to send my Findings and Analysis section to Sermathang and Tahongsa to have it presented to the research participants. My intention with this was to obtain informed consent about the way I have analyzed and utilized statements from the community members there. My hope was that they could give me their thoughts about the way I have framed their statements and tell me if they view my representation of them as

individuals and their community as fair. Unfortunately this has not been a possibility in part due to my own time limitation and also due to the current events in Nepal.

4.3.4 The Closed School

One issue that I have been considering throughout this process, is the fact that the I have not visited the community in Nepal while SFHS has actually been running. Finding a new program-coordinator and finishing the building where the classes will run in the future, has both taken more time than expected, and thus the classes have, as mentioned, not been running for about a year (approximately April 2014 to now). My worry regarding this is that my findings are not replicable, and that the way I experienced certain issues was due to this timing. I have been considering if I would have learned different things about the context of SFHS and the volunteer tourist program if I had arrived while the school was running. This worry was in a way confirmed in several of my interviews, when the women explained the social aspects of the school that they have been enjoying, and the participatory style of knowledge production in the class room up until this point. It would have been very interesting to experience and I will encourage BHS to do future participatory studies of the class room dynamics.

Regarding my worry however, I found, that embedded in the situation that caused it – the fact that the folk high school has been closed while I have been in Sermathang and Tahongsa, there is an issue regarding the missing inclusion of the women. What I refer to, is the discrepancy that I see as existing between the aim of the school and the current situation. On the one hand the school aims to give the students language abilities and practical skills, or in Adji's words “self-confidence, self-knowledge and self-power”. On the other hand decisions outside of the class room seems to be made without the inclusion of the women. This might be explained by some of the project's stakeholders as a practical necessity, but I found it interesting to try to reach an understanding of how the students experience this particular dynamic. In the process that I have witnessed, the one year gap where the classes have been paused, I would argue that the women of Sermathang and

Tahongsa have been treated as passive and has been placed in the role of being merely recipients. A workshop about what they would like the coming class room and school activities to be like could have changed this, but this did not happen - yet. Doing research while the school is closed was in this way, in my opinion, a well timed effort since it attempts to include the women's opinions in the planning of the future school.

5. Findings and Analysis

Through the following section, I will interweave findings and theory in three chapters, inspired by thematic categories and theoretical framing. The first chapter will explore the concept of 'intimacy' that, I argue in line with Conran (2011), is both one of the most important parts of the volunteer tourism interaction and also can cloud underlying social injustice that shapes the interaction. In the second chapter, I rely heavily on interviews with the volunteers as well as my own experience situated as 'volunteer' in Sermathang, to reflect on neocolonial power dynamics present in the exchange. Finally, in chapter three, I investigate the way diversifying agricultural livelihoods is linked to the volunteer tourism project, and critically interrogate the importance of the project in the community. Overall, all three chapters affirm the importance of a social justice pre-departure training for volunteers to try and mitigate the potential harm of neocolonial power dynamics perpetuated that at present are sometimes clouded by intimacy in encounters, in the context that is livelihood diversification and climate change in Sermathang and Tahongsa.

My initial research question focussed on both the dynamics between volunteers and the community, as well as the SFHS. My findings related to ideal futures and current power dynamics present within the SFHS (which you may recall is funded by the the Sermathang Brenderup Friendship Group) were excluded from this thesis because of time and space limitations. However, some preliminary findings are delineated in Appendix B – particularly those regarding hopes for the future and how the Folk High School in Sermathang might work to be more accessible.

5.1 Volunteer Tourism, Intimacy, and Unequal Power Relations

The promise of what some scholars have called 'intimacy' plays a central role in marketing volunteer tourism (Wearing 2001), and is certainly present in BHS' marketing of their collaboration with Sermathang. The first paragraph that one meets when clicking the headline; "Travel class – Nepal", on Brenderup Folk High School's website declares: "[w]hen you travel with Brenderup Højskole you're not just traveling to see the world – you're going to participate in the world. The Travel Class is ideal for you, if you really want to get to know the people you meet out there, and you will get a deep insight into their culture" (Brenderuphojskole.dk).

Work by other scholars shows that intimacy is an important part of volunteer tourism experiences. Conran writes: "Intimate embodied encounters with host community members are a major motivating factor in volunteers' decisions to volunteer rather than only travel abroad" (2011, 1460). She finds that intimacy, too, permeates the way the host community describe their experiences (Ibid., 1462). Intimacy is understood here as a feeling of closeness that makes an experience transcend superficiality. As Trauer and Ryan describe, intimacy requires something emotional and 'real' and furthermore an: "... enduring involvement ... rather than purely situational involvement ..., and a commitment to wanting to identify with the other" (2005, 484).

Conran unfolds the argument that intimacy can be regarded as overshadowing the structural inequality on which the encounter within volunteer tourism is based (2011). Intimacy as a notion, being a personal and embodied sentiment, often avoids cultural criticism.

Intimacy is thus performing a rather complex function: on the one hand it mediates the most valued experiences and facilitates positive narratives for the involved people, both hosts and tourist. On the other hand it is, alongside notions such as goodwill and compassion used, as is the case in colonial encounters, to depoliticize and justify the volunteer experience (Conran 2011). Conran's argument is based on feminist and queer theory as well as geographical and anthropological literature on

embodied encounters. (Ahmed 2006; Berlant 2004; Crouch 2002).

My findings reveal similar tendencies in the BHS-Sermathang collaboration – thus I present findings below framed by the notion of 'intimacy', and critiques of intimacy as clouding structural inequity.

5.1.1 Findings

Regarding the community's opinion on hosting volunteers from Brenderup High School, people mainly responded positively with some caveats. Most people's answers included some of three themes: the first being positive social aspects of the experience which I have understood as related to intimacy, the second regarding the importance of volunteers as a source of income, and the third, indirect criticism of the program. No interviewees responded to my question explicitly about negative aspects of the program – however, five interviewees alluded to negative dynamics when asked about their experience either hosting or having volunteers in the community.

My findings show that intimacy shaped the way people in Sermathang and Tahongsa experience volunteer tourism. Almost every interviewee described positive experiences they have had talking to, hosting, and exchanging 'culture' with volunteers. In these descriptions, people used words like 'friendship', and 'fun' to describe the experiences they had with volunteers. Some explained how they feel happy to see the volunteers arriving and enjoy spending time with them. One interviewee articulated that she thought the volunteers always come with 'a good purpose'.

Another example of the way in which intimacy seems to be a key component of the positive relationship to volunteers described by all the community members is the way Adjji, a community member from Tahongsa, explains that she has treated whoever comes from Denmark as a family member and: “when they leave some of them shed tears”. This is seconded by another interviewee

who says about the volunteers who has stayed in her house: “... whoever comes in [my] house [I] regard them as a family member” (Aruna)

This focus on intimacy is entailed in the answers that the volunteers who I interviewed gave when asked in what way they thought that their presence could benefit the community in Sermathang and Tahongsa. One of them, Claudia, explains that before leaving Denmark, she thought:

[...] especially the women, they should experience that 'folk high school feeling' [...] I thought; that is something I would like to share [...] it is very much a feeling of community [...] it does not have to be something big or wild that you do, it could be just sitting together and then singing a song and then thinking; that was a good evening. (my translation)

This quote seems to reflect Claudia's desire to create opportunities for meaningful, 'intimate' interactions, and is reaffirming of one of Conran's hypotheses that volunteer tourism is structured around creating opportunities for intimate encounters and “backstage” experiences (Conran 2011; Sin 2009).

In line with Conran's argument, it seems from the above, that volunteers and the host community both *value* the close interactions formed (2011), especially when compared to the more distanced relations, which in Sermathang and Tahongsa could be exemplified by the hiking tourists who, in the hiking season, pass through the village, maybe stopping for a meal or for one night. Another Brenderup volunteer, Hannah, confirms the ambition of experiencing something 'authentic', as she describes one of her ambitions: “to live in a Nepali way”. This example shows the desire for embodied encounters or “sensuous experiences”; and the tendency that merely learning about a culture is not the aim of volunteer tourism. The aim, both in terms of marketing and expectations of volunteers, seems to be obtaining a much embodied experience and to “live” the culture (Cloke and Perkins, 1998; Sin, 2009). My understanding of embodiment is following Crouch who describes this as something more than an intellectual or reason-based experience, but as: “a process of experiencing, making sense, knowing through practice as a sensual human subject in the world” (2000, 68).

5.1.2 Volunteer Tourism and Class

Another recurring theme in interviews with community members is the value of the project in that volunteers represent a source of income. This was also articulated by almost all of the interviewees who had already hosted volunteers. Aruna articulates how she feels that she benefitted in three ways from hosting volunteers:

the first one is that [I] could earn some money, and [...] got the opportunity of talking english almost all the time, [I] also could give some cultural things to them, also that was the important thing.

The relative importance placed on different aspects of hosting seems linked to the socio-economic status of the interviewee. This is exemplified by the way one interviewee directly links hosting and being able to send her child to school. A woman of a lower socio-economic status reported that: “[I] really want to host volunteers in the future and [am] thinking that one day to repair my house and make some small rooms, and ... make some income through that so [I] can send [my] children to school and [for] some expenses”

At present, volunteers are only presented with the option to reside in homes where they can have their own separated bedroom – thus, typically host-families are not from low socio-economic backgrounds. Income generated through hosting seems to have relative importance that is different based on socio economic status. Further, the dynamic that volunteers can only stay in larger homes in Sermathang, could be contributing (on a small scale) to increasing inequality in the community. This could be an example of one structural power dynamics that is clouded or normalized by the intense focus on intimacy.

The third group of answers could be seen as recommendations or as indirect references to negative experiences with previous volunteers. These responses are regarding what expectations the community members have of the volunteers. Five of my respondents were explicit in their answers that volunteers should not drink too much: “if they drink too much and get drunk [...] bad rumors

just spread all over the community” (Dawa), “they should not go outside and roam for late night”, and “they should follow the cultures here, and should not drink lot of raxi and wine” (Durmi). Another interviewee said: “the people from Europe they also should be oriented, should be told not to come and stay the way they are living in Europe, if they want to learn the culture, they should be living in a way of the Hyolmo's style” (Sirmar). Again, these negative experiences people had with volunteers could be related to systemic power dynamics and not brought into the forefront because of the focus on the intimate encounters, instead of tensions present in the exchange.

5.2 Volunteer Experiences and Neo-Colonialism

The use of volunteers, who often have little knowledge or experience of the work they are undertaking [...] calls into question their ineffectiveness and raises the specter of neo-colonialism in the tacit assumption that even ignorant Westerners can improve the lot of the people in the South (Brown and Hall 2008, 845).

The assumption that some lives are for saving and some for being saviors, the “helping narrative”, has been equaled with development projects in general (McEvan 2001) and, too, seems implicit in volunteer tourism. This component has more recently been criticized both in public media and in academic research (Conran 2011). McEvan describes how a main issue underpinning postcolonial critiques of development work is: “the need to destabilize the dominant discourses of imperial Europe, including ‘development’. These discourses are unconsciously ethnocentric, rooted in European cultures and reflective of a dominant western world-view.” (2001, 94). Within volunteer tourism as a study, different arguments have been articulated by researchers. Common to their criticisms is the way that the dominant discourse within volunteer tourism is based on an imagined dichotomy between ‘us’, the volunteers and ‘them’ the hosts (Simpson 2004; Sin 2010). This discourse divides the world into an affluent “first world”, “global North” or “West” and a poorer “third world”, “global South” or “Orient” (Said 1978; Sin 2010). The “helping narrative” reproduces the notion that the first ought, and has the ability, to be responsible for the latter, an assumption that has clear neo-colonial implications. As Sin explains: “The latter is [...] often deemed to be incapable of eradicating its problems, poverty, and the lack of sustained development,

and therefore needs the privileged “North’s” assistance and resources” (2010, 985). Thus the volunteer tourism project rests on an unequal power relation where the volunteer, the “care giver”, assume a position of power or privilege (Sin 2010).

The “helping narrative” is expressed quite explicitly in the following quote. Brenderup volunteer, Hannah, explains what she feels she can offer the community:

[...] I thought maybe with a function that helps getting things started a little bit [...], things just take a long time in Nepal, and that is charming in some ways, but maybe there is some things which are important to get done; that there is someone who makes sure there is a continuous development and that something happens all the time for the better (my translation).

Many aspects of this quote could be highlighted, as telling of the “helping narrative”; that development will have to come to the “charming” global South, where things “take a long time”, from the global North. Further, it contains an articulation of Euro-American capitalist logic; that things need to be 'sped up' and that the good life is ensured through development and 'improvements' happening 'all the time'. Finally, the quote reflects what Simpson (2004) calls the 'get on with it attitude'. Characteristic to this attitude is the way development is viewed as something that is 'done'. Implicit in this is the idea that enthusiastic, non-skilled, volunteer tourists are tools in this process and as Simpson describes: “[t]he dominant ideology is that doing something is better than doing nothing, and therefore, that doing anything, is reasonable” (2004, 685).

This ideology to some extent shaped my own experience being a volunteer sent by Brenderup Folk High School to Sermathang and Tahongsa. As described in the Justification section, I did not feel well-prepared before leaving Denmark, a feeling which was confirmed by the many conversations my fellow traveller and I had regarding uncertainty about our position in the community upon arriving in Nepal. My experience was not that the (lacking) pre-departure preparation at Brenderup Folk High School reflects a claim that development is something that is 'done' in Sermathang and Tahongsa through the presence of volunteers from the global North. To the contrary I am aware that the staff of BHS involved in the volunteer tourism program, are to an extent worried about the consequences of their involvement in Nepal. What I have however experienced, is that the school's

volunteer tourism program is based on the idea that there is inherent value in inter-cultural meeting and exchange. This is reflected on BHS's website where their stand on peace-building is explained in the following words: “if there is but one precondition for the effort for peaceful coexistence in the world, it must surely be the unbiased interaction of people from different cultural backgrounds” (Brenderuphojskole.dk). The presumption that an intercultural meeting can be unbiased, given prevailing global power relations that often manifest in personal relationship, seems naive.

The language applied by Brenderup Folk High School, both in their PR-material and in the preparations I went through before leaving to be a volunteer in Sermathang and Tahongsa, supports Simpson's (2004) findings that (international) development language is rarely used in gap year marketing and discussions. In the case of Brenderup Folk High School the word development is mentioned once on their website, but both on the website, and in the preparation before departure, the main focus is on the “cultural meeting”. This tendency is exemplified in the following question translated from the website; “what does it mean to meet a culture and some people that has completely different conditions in their daily lives, and in which ways can you, as a representative from the “rich” world, be part of creating a life with more opportunities – for you and for them?” (Brenderuphojskole.dk). According to Simpson the development language is avoided in order to avoid questioning regarding such an agenda, but the agenda exists none the less. I second her conclusion that questions need to be asked about the way in which these organizations, Brenderup Folk High School included, are attempting to mobilize development. Relevant to this issue, is the way in which the parallels between development projects in general have been criticized by many (i.e. Said 1978; Sharp and Briggs 2006), whereas this critique is relatively new within the debate on volunteer tourism (Palacios 2010; Conran 2011).

The consequence of avoiding development language in volunteer tourism projects, is that participants often enter volunteer projects with a simplistic understanding the notions; 'development', 'poverty' and the power dynamics that they, as volunteers, are a part of. In this context Brenderup Folk High School's self-proclaimed ambition of facilitating 'unbiased interactions' should be reconsidered. Instead, one could argue for a pre-departure social-justice

training – to attempt to deal with presuppositions and sensitize participants through a more critical interrogation into unequal power relations. Then, instead of claiming to facilitate an 'unbiased' meeting, Brenderup could seek to reduce potential harm and mitigate reproduction of systemic power dynamics whenever possible.

The simplistic account of development showcased in the 'get on with it' attitude is linked to the "helping narrative" in presuming that westernization is a part of the development process. As Hannah's quote expressed, the volunteer tourist is seen as the one who has the skills to "make sure there is a continuous development." In this attitude to development as westernization, western economics are not only presented as universal, but also western social and cultural value systems are universalized (Simpson 2004).

To the question what she is attracted by regarding what she herself called "living in a Nepali way", Hannah answers:

[...] I think one of the things they can give us is this experiencing something very different. Maybe both that it is more primitive here, but also these women are really hard working, I mean, as a Dane I am used to going to school [...], but here it really looks like hard work [...] I think they are really tough (my translation).

Combined with the previous quote, this quote confirms the dichotomy built between 'us' and 'them', wherein the host community is represented as offering a 'different' and 'more primitive' experience.

In my own experience being prepared to be a volunteer, my time spent in Sermathang and Tahongsa, interviews with other volunteers, and informal conversations with past volunteers, I have not experienced that this perspective has been critiqued or challenged by Brenderup Folk High School.

In accordance with the researchers who emphasize a more "cautionary platform", I suggest that volunteer tourist organizations must be aware of the neo-colonial tendencies this kind of tourism

has (Wearing and McGehee 2013). To do this, it is important that the above mentioned narratives, and rhetoric are not ignored, and thus reproduced. Instead, this language must be critically challenged in the way volunteer tourism is marketed and especially in the way the organizations prepare their participants. I agree with Simpson (2004) that a social-justice training is necessary both in an attempt to achieve this and to give participants a more critical understanding of 'poverty' and 'development'. Further, I agree with Conran (2011) that the focus, which was highly present in my findings, on the individual and the intimate must be broadened. Thus the criticism must be more detailed and complicated. For volunteer tourism projects that want to challenge the practices and policies reproducing and clouding structural inequality, often that the projects claim to be aiming to counter-work, attentiveness and training to these dynamics is imperative. I think this is necessary if a given volunteer tourism project wants to, to a full extent, take serious the opinion, that even though: “the exploitative possibilities of tourism remain important to consider, tourism also suggests opportunities for embodied engagement, counter experiences of everyday life, education, interpretation, and advocacy” Pezzullo, 2007, 50-51).

5.3 Volunteer Tourism and Livelihood Diversification

Within on livelihood diversification in a Himalayan context, discussions surrounding how to frame mountain livelihoods and environment, as 'fragile' and in 'crisis' (e.g. Jodha 2005) or to apply an optimistic term such as 'dynamism' (e.g. Aase et al. 2010; Gurung 2004) have been important. Aase et al. (2010) argue that understanding Himalayan communities as 'fragile' can easily present a picture of ecological crisis and impending doom for agricultural livelihoods. This view is also disputed in the work of the late Dr. Harka Gurung a Nepali academic who argued that the idea of 'fragile mountains' is a conceptual fallacy. Gurung suggested that: “it would be more realistic to consider mountains [and mountain ecosystems and livelihoods] as dynamic, certainly not fragile” (2004, 16). This framing, as doomed or dynamic, I argue, has a significant impact on how people, including non-Nepali volunteer tourism organizations, *interact* with communities. The 'helping narrative' and the mentality that doing something is better than nothing (in terms of development) can more easily exist if a community is framed as in trouble, 'fragile', or 'in need'. While Brenderup does not *actively*

perpetuate this kind of language, they do not challenge these discourses that seem to color some participants' assumptions about Sermathang and Tahongsa, and thus reproduce harmful power dynamics.

As I established through my introduction and context, my fieldwork revealed that climate change is ongoing and increasingly impacting livelihoods in Sermathang and Tahongsa. Sermathang is, as many interviewees confirm, a community undergoing change on several levels. Santos, one of my male interviewees explained that:

I should say [Sermathang] is modern now, because it has changed a lot, people have changed their mind, their way of working, [...] their way of thinking. So everything has changed.

My fieldwork revealed that the community is diversifying their livelihoods in many different ways. There was also a perception amongst many interviewees that this diversification is a necessity which is articulated clearly by Achyut in the following quote:

In the future it is not just doing one job, you can not only fully depend, you can not survive by doing only [growing food in the fields], because then you see the climate change it can destroy that. [...] If you are staying in the village, [...] you have to work [in the fields] and carpentry and different things to adapt very well [...] If you do like that, with a combination, then the future is good.

The sentiment in this quote was expressed by many of the women in Sermathang who I interviewed regarding their livelihoods. The livelihoods of all of my interviewees are currently centered around agriculture, but many described that they are currently diversifying their farming methods, adopting new vegetables, and trying out new growing methods. In the context of climate change this is, as the women themselves explain, becoming a less steady road to follow than it has traditionally been. This is reflected in the way the women are including “new” venues for making an income. Some of the women describe how they are in the process of opening a so-called home-stay and consider to open a tea house and a lodge. Some are already making money by hosting. For example one woman explained that she for a period has been hosting workers who are hired as part of the construction of a new hotel elsewhere in Sermathang. The motivation behind opening a home-stay, one of the women described in an interview, is the positive things she has heard about hosting volunteers from BHS. She explained that:

it is nice to do at least something new, rather than staying at home and working in the field, [...] the home-stay could be the best idea, because lots of volunteer tourist are flowing in, especially in this village and the folk high school has helped a lot to make [me] think out the home-stay plan (Ibi).

In this way the volunteer project play a direct role in the diversification of livelihoods. Another link is the knitting-project that was started last year through the BHS when a group of danish people visited Sermathang and Tahongsa. Several community members commented on how this project has given them a small income. Many explained that they are interested in receiving more training of this kind; leading to more income generating sources.

In this context it is relevant to ask whether the volunteer project is running the risk of creating an over-reliance. This is not the story that my findings tell. When discussing with a community member whether people in Sermathang and Tahongsa are afraid that the collaboration with BHS will end, he explained:

in Sermathang there are a couple of project and selected people are directly involved [...] those who are fully involved, they have fear ending the project [...] which could be even 3 persons. Many, many percent, 90 percent, [...] don't have so much fear (Sonam).

This opinion is echoed almost unanimously in my interviews. None of the women I interviewed described the income generated through the volunteer project as necessary to sustaining their livelihood. The importance of this income source seems to vary according to socio-economic background, but in general the responses I obtained reflects the attitude that the community is resilient enough to do without the income brought by the volunteer project. However, the project plays a role in the development of Sermathang and Tahongsa and I see the community as an example of what Conran describes:

local communities that seek to utilize volunteer tourism as strategy for economic development and as a platform from which to gain support for local issues may find that their agendas are in many ways compatible with those of the tourists and thus find the touristic space a profitable site of articulation (2011, 1466).

This is however not an reason to be less aware of the aforementioned neocolonial tendencies that volunteer tourism projects show. The way in which the volunteer tourism project is interwoven in the livelihood diversification is complex and interesting and could serve as an entry for the participants to develop an understanding of the notion 'development'. This, however, will, as discussed above, not happen without a more ambitious pre-departure training.

5.3.1 An Ambiguous Relationship to Development and Livelihood Diversification

Another concept that I have identified within my findings, is an ambiguity regarding the development that Sermathang and Tahongsa is going through. In the majority of my interviews it was articulated that, through the life of the interviewee, it has become increasingly important to have a cash income. Such an income might be established from selling vegetables or other like milk, wine or bamboo-mats. Others reported that their income is coming from hosting volunteers, and in many cases remittances send by family members working in Kathmandu or abroad plays an important role. In almost all cases income is established through a diversity of these and/or other things. Some people have saved up some money by working for a period of time abroad and then chosen to go back to Nepal and to their house and previous lifestyle in Sermathang or Tahongsa.

Overall, a positive attitude towards these developments– which people tended to talk about as diversified livelihoods, increased cash income, increased access to education, and increased cross-cultural contact – permeate the interviews. Several interviewees link having cash to being able to fulfill needs and wants, and to an improved standard of living. That having cash is central to being able to send your children to school was a sentiment stressed by many of the women. But cash is also understood as connected to certain negative, emerging issues in Sermathang and Tahongsa. One example of this is given by Dawa:

the growing importance of cash, for the positive it can be, [that money] can fulfill all [your] wants, and even pay the school-fee for the children, and the negative aspect is that people started using money for the bad purpose, bad purposes I mean, for drinking a lot of alcohol.

Several interviewees express worries about “bad habits”, such as drinking, gambling, and excessively consuming, entering the community as a consequence of people having more cash at hand. Some expressed that they regard cash as the source of jealousy and conflict among neighbors. A more general issue regarding the development in Sermathang and Tahongsa is regarding a worry articulated by several interviewees, about forgetting traditions and language. This is linked to a fear

of losing identity. Adji expresses this with the following question:

we have to keep the whole tradition, the whole culture, [...] if we forget our culture, what will happen to the coming generation of coming people?

These conflicts in the community's relationship to development re-confirm the risks of having a volunteer project that sends participants with an unchallenged approach to meeting 'others', and the need for participants with a sensitized understanding of their position in the community. The constructive and forward-looking question to ask then, is how best to re-shape the project. One important consideration is the development of a preparation program that challenges the unspoken development narrative and actively counterworks presumptions that might reproduce unequal power dynamics. This preparation could allow the participants to learn more from living in Sermathang and Tahongsa, and help address multiple concerns that I have illuminated through my findings.

6. Conclusion

During this research project, I have examined the Sermathang Folk High School and the volunteer tourism program that Brenderup Folk High School is running in collaboration with this school and the community in Sermathang and Tahongsa. Through the use of PAR methods and Constructionist Grounded Theory, I have focused on the way community members in Nepal experience this involvement in their village and the ways in which the volunteer tourism project plays a part in ongoing livelihood diversification in the area. By including a comparison and discussion of my findings regarding the community's experience of climate change, community opinions about the effects of this on their traditional agricultural livelihoods, and thoughts about the volunteer tourism program, common threads were singled out and discussed through relevant, constructionist theoretical frameworks. I will detail my findings below.

6.1 Summary of Findings

One central aspect of my findings is the complex role that intimacy plays in the project. In this

thesis I argued that intimacy is central to the creation of a positive narrative within volunteer tourism projects that volunteers, hosts, and the sending organization both use and produce. Intimacy thus acts as a tool that mediates positive experiences shared by different participants of the program. But intimacy too, it is argued, clouds the structural inequality that volunteer tourist encounters are based on. After establishing this, I argued that the focus on the individual and on intimacy must be broadened to create a more political volunteer tourism, and to do away with the simplistic understanding of development that is currently reproduced through the program. The realization and handling of these issues is a necessity if the the sending organization – BHS - intends to mitigate unequal power dynamics within the program.

Another finding key presented in this study is the unequal distribution of the financial resources that are brought to Sermathang and Tahongsa through the volunteer tourist program. It is shown that the community members who have the means to 'properly' accommodate volunteers, (i.e. housing them in a separate room) are the ones who make an income through the presence of the volunteers. These community members are usually not families with a low-income background. This finding is relevant to BHS when they, in the future, consider the way housing and hosting is organized. A suggestion for the future, could be for BHS to insist that also the families who have no separate room for hosting a volunteer, are offered the possibility of hosting. An alternative solution could be that volunteers sleep in the house of one family and eat, or occasionally eat, with another family. Thus the income could, at least to a further extent than currently, counterwork socio-economic divisions in the host community instead of futher perpetuate them.

A central finding of this study has to do with the (lacking) pre-departure training of volunteers. Through an analysis of interviews, it is argued that volunteers articulate and reproduce an unchallenged understanding of development. The understanding that they articulate is presenting 'development' as something brought to the global South by members of the global North such as themselves. It is further argued that the discourse employed by BHS is not critical enough to seriously challenge and handle the neo-colonial tendencies that are implicit in volunteer tourism. In this context I, in line with the arguments of the most recent body of critical research on volunteer tourism, argued that a social justice pre-departure training is necessary to give the participants a

standpoint from which they can better understand and learn from the ongoing processes in the host-community. Such a training is necessary if the project has an intention to avoid reproducing a simplistic and Euro-centric approach to their role in the community and reason for being there. Also, such a training would counterwork trivialization of poverty and challenge the inherently unequal power dynamic that are reproduced by untrained volunteer tourists. In this context the articulation used by BHS; 'unbiased interaction' is criticized and a call for critical engagement with their own practices is repeated.

The final focus presented in this thesis is regarding livelihood diversification that is happening in Sermathang and Tahongsa. Within this focus, I considered how SFHS, BHS, and the volunteer tourism program is involved in this process, and it is established that many community members express an ambiguous relationship to ongoing process of development that they experience. The previously presented findings regarding the folk high school project and the volunteer tourism program are in the final section inserted into the framework of ambiguous considerations expressed by the community members in Sermathang and Tahongsa. In this section it is established that the existence of the volunteer tourism project is not crucial for the well-being of the dynamic and resilient Himalayan community, but that the project is utilized strategically by the community. This strategic use serves as yet another motivation for BHS to consider how they market their project, train the participants that they send to Nepal, and organize their stay in Sermathang and Tahongsa.

6.2 Recommendations For the Future

If the risks and responsibilities brought to light in this thesis are realized by BHS, and if the institution is ready to act on the findings presented here and in other critical research, I second the body of research arguing that there is an emancipatory potential in volunteer tourism (Conran 2011; Pezullo 2007; McGehee 2012; McKinnon 2006). The intimate experiences and embodied engagement, which has been a less discussed part of the findings I have presented in this thesis, are none the less important aspects of volunteer tourism, and should be considered alongside the pitfalls. As argued above, it is critical that these positive aspects are not allowed to cloud the

decision makers' reflexive and critical view of the project and its dynamics.

An example of the engagement that is created through the volunteer tourism program in Sermathang and Tahongsa, is the way aid was channeled to the villages in a matter of days after the earthquake that hit Nepal on the 25th of April. The resources raised to help the community in Sermathang and Tahongsa are not earmarked or followed by any demands, but emerged out of a desire to assist the people who have lost their homes. In the aftermath of such an event the many social links that have been created over the years between people in Sermathang and Tahongsa and participants of the project from different parts of the world, became apparent on different social medias and many supporting and heartfelt exchanges occurred, including exchange of financial capital that was necessary for emergency relief and the beginning of the rebuilding process.

This research project positions itself within the critical or cautionary body of theory surrounding volunteer tourism throughout the thesis. My conclusions support the necessity of questioning whether volunteer tourism is in fact a more critical, ethical and pro-poor type of tourism than mass-tourism, or if these are buzz-words used for marketing of the projects. Further, the study argues for the need of a change in the approach and training that organizations such as BHS stand for, particularly the incorporation of a social-justice training.

A very simple and broad definition of social justice could be: the recognition of inequality and the seeking of social change (Bell 1997; Wade 2000). Since unequal power dynamics tend to reproduce themselves if they are not explicitly addressed, sending organizations must engage with the way their participants relate to 'others'. This is articulated clearly by Simpson:

Without employing a social justice approach, issues of inequality will remain substituted by questions of luck, and complexity and diversity replaced with binaries of 'us and them' (2004, 695).

I acknowledge that this type of pre-departure training would be both time consuming and that a trained facilitator would be needed. However, I argue for the importance of a social-justice pre-departure training in order to mitigate potential power dynamics in the exchange.

If it is the goal of volunteer tourism organizations to offer platforms where volunteer tourists can achieve a more complex and critical understanding of host communities, and notions such as 'poverty' and 'development', so central to the existence of volunteer tourism, there is a pressing need for such organizations to become more reflexive and critical of themselves. This too is necessary if their aim is to, in any way, contribute to creating a more equitable and a more just global community. If these challenges are taken serious there is a hope that volunteer tourism can have positive implications for all of its participants.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Guide

Tashi Delek,

My name is Jeppe Pontoppidan and I am a university student from Denmark.

In my master thesis I want to learn about what the Folk High School in Sermathang could do better and also what the existence of the school means to you.

Since one of my goal is to make the folk high school better in the future, it is important to me to hear your honest opinion on both the good and bad things about the school.

I am also very interested in hearing your opinion about having volunteers from Denmark coming to Sermathang every spring and fall.

If you would like it, your name will not be attached to the answers you give.

Also it is important for me to say that you don't have to answer any questions you do not feel like answering. If you don't understand the question, please do not hesitate to ask me to repeat it or explain it.

1 First I would like to ask some questions about you:

- 1.1 What is your name?
- 1.2 How old are you?
- 1.3 What is your gender?
- 1.4 Are you married?
- 1.5 Do you have children?
- 1.6 Where are you born?
- 1.7 Did you attend school?
 - 1.7.1. If yes, up to what class?
- 1.8 What caste do you belong to?

2 Then I would like to ask some questions about your livelihood:

2.1 What kind of work do you do in one day?

f.ex.: Farming? Cooking? Cleaning?

2.2 Do you have a cash income?

2.3 Does anyone in your family have a cash income?

2.3.1. If yes, who and what is that person doing?

2.4 Has your livelihood (your way of making a living) changed in your life?

2.5 Has cash been important in Sermathang all your life?

2.6 What do you think are the positive/negative consequences of the growing importance of cash?

2.7 Do you think the new hotel will change Sermathang and Tahongsa?

2.7.1. If yes, how?

2.8 Did you eat Helambu apples from Sermathang and Tahongsa at some point in your life?

2.9 How do you feel about the re-planting of the Helambu apples?

2.10 Have you noticed any changes in weather patterns in Sermathang?

2.10.1. If yes, how has that affected your livelihood?

3 Then I would like to ask some questions about your experience with the Folk High School:

3.1 Have you attended the classes at Sermathang Folk High School?

3.1.1. If yes, how often

3.2 Did you like the classes?

3.2.1. if yes, what did you like about them?

3.2.2. if not, why not?

3.3 Have you learned anything through the classes?

3.4 How would the ideal folk high school look if you could decide?

3.4.1. How often would the classes run?

3.4.2. What would the classes be about?

4 And regarding another important aspect of Sermathang Folk High School:

4.1 Have you had volunteers staying in your home?

4.1.1. If yes, when?

- 4.2 If yes, what was your experience like with hosting volunteers?
- 4.3 Do you like having volunteers living in Sermathang
- 4.4 Have you had any negative experiences with volunteers?
- 4.5 Is there anything the danish organization (Brenderup Folk High School) could do to change the volunteer program to make it better for Sermathang

5 The most important issue

I would like to hear what you think is the most important issue(s) for the people living in Sermathang. If you were doing research – what would be your topic?

Or in other words:

When you think about your life here in Sermathang, what do you see as the most important problems to work on finding solutions for?

Thank you very much!

Appendix B: Findings Related to Ideal Futures and Power Dynamics

In my research, I focused on two aspects of the project in Sermathang and Tahongsa, one being the SFHS-classes and the being volunteers. Included in this section is my findings from the focus group and the SWOT-workshop. In my interviews I found a clear overweight of positive responses regarding the project and the volunteers. Several of my interviewees (who had been SFHS students), described that attending SFHS to them meant: "being with friends", "trying to learn something new", and "forgetting the daily worries". Learning English was reported to allow these interviewees to make new friends, and as something that has build up self-confidence. Further, learning English was described as facilitating the opportunity to share cultures with volunteers. Also, it was by several interviewees described how they valued making an income through the folk high school.



(Source: Own photography: Jeppe Pontoppidan 2015)

These descriptions are echoed in the findings of the SWOT-workshop: regarding what the participants saw as the best things about Sermathang Folk High School; 14 votes, out of 58, were placed on “Able to communicate with tourists and friends from foreign”, 8 votes were placed on “New skills, e.g. knitting” and 8 votes on “Being together with volunteers”.

Regarding the future of the folk high school I found that the women who have been students until now are focused on getting a good teacher in the future. This is defined by Dawa as someone who: “can understand [our] problems, who can understand [our] psychology, and teach with the, according [to our] wish”. Several reported that they wish to develop their reading and writing skills and that they want SFHS to include teaching them new practical skills.

The results from the workshop regarding “Dreams and Hopes” was that 11, out of 56 votes, were

placed on “english conversation”, 7 where placed on “Spacious classroom”, 7 on “Audio-Visual Aids in Classroom”, and 7 on “Good teacher”.

The results that I have found among the women who, due to different reasons, have been unable to attend the classes are not echoing this positive attitude towards SFHS. One described feeling excluded and lonely when she was unable to join the class. She furthermore explained that she felt that this time was hard and embarrassing due to a feeling that she was: “kind of misbehaved, or [...] not treated as equal with the other women” (Nomo). Concluding this interview it is described how the interviewee experiences a hierarchy related to the folk high school and that women who do not participate face: “a kind of discrimination” (Nomo). Another woman in this situation explains: “others are speaking english and I have to just look and do nothing, so it feels a little awkward” (Yangra).