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## A Heavy Burden

Coloniality and Exploitation of the Subaltern in Nepal's Mountain  
Tourism Industry



*Photo by author*

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### Abstract:

This thesis analyzes the effects of mountain tourism on local people and communities in Nepal with a focus on three main questions: the equity of mountain jobs, the impacts of Western mountaineering's dominance on local cultures, and the respect and lack of respect for local workers' lives. Despite repeated accounts of precarious and dangerous working conditions the adventure and mountain tourism industry continue to exploit some bodies on behalf of others. Through semi-structured interviews, the lens of West-centrism, and the concept of the subaltern, this thesis explores the many ways the industry puts the local workforce at risk and in complex social and economic situations. The thesis explores how and why these conditions are upheld and justified through social and economic power dynamics rooted in colonial relationships. The results reveal a complex and significant impact on the local community's ways of life and qualities of life. The thesis concludes that the justification and continuation of these working conditions are only possible through the devaluation of locals' lives in a West-centric mode of measuring success and value. The structure of the industry is anchored in the exploitation of the local workforce – a Nepali mountain worker's life is worth less to the industry than paying customers. These lingering colonial and racist attitudes and practices keep mountain tourism workers stuck in the racial and colonial category of 'the helper'/'servant'. The thesis also explores what it means for local workers to try and break free from that category and the implications this has had on mountain cultures and their relationship to mountains.

**Keywords:** tourism, trekking, climbing, Subaltern, workforce equity, coloniality, Nepal

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## Introduction

Mountain tourism is a relatively new phenomenon in Nepal. Its initiation was a result of the long-awaited summit of Chomolungma (Everest) by Nepal's Tenzing Norgay and New Zealand's Edmund Hillary in 1953 (Norgay, 1955). The human reach of the 8843m peak, the highest point on earth, and the stories that followed put Nepal on the map for adventurers, expeditions, and tourists alike. Mountain tourism in Nepal was molded by and for adventure expeditions where the conquest of nature in its wildest form was the overarching goal and narrative (Ortner, 1999). Teams from Switzerland, England, and other countries in the West saw this vertical nation and its high peaks as the perfect playground to test strength, and chase after honor (Norgay, 1955; Ortner, 1999, Dashper & Wilson, 2022). Today, mountain tourism in Nepal looks very different. Trekkers with all kinds of backgrounds and skill levels find their way up the mountains guided and supported by local workers while having access to all kinds of luxuries. Even in the high camps of Chomolungma, one can find chairs, tables, kitchens, and Coca-Cola all carried there on the backs of local workers. Although tourists today enjoy very different conditions than those braved by Norgay and Hillary, mountain tourism in Nepal still echoes the same colonial dreams of conquest (Ortner, 1999; Frydenlund 2019). The high regions of Nepal are full of thrill-seeking adventurers dreaming to stand on peaks or trek amongst them – and through their motivation to do so, local populations and workers are often caught between a rock and a hard place.

Tourism has undoubtedly created working opportunities for locals in Nepal, but the working conditions and risks these jobs entail spark a debate on the morality and equity of the mountain tourism industry altogether. The West-centric and colonial narrative that has dominated Nepal's mountain tourism since its insurgence is still noticeable. Tourist endeavors and dreams are being prioritized above workers' rights. Local populations are taking on high-risk and back-breaking jobs for a salary that is not reflective of their efforts or importance to the industry. The vulnerable economic and social situation of many locals lends itself to exploitation and many take on these hazardous jobs in lack of other options (Dashper & Wilson, 2022; Frydenlund, 2019; Khadka & Paul, 2015; Mu & Nepal 2015; Miller & Mair 2019; Ortner 1999).

Nepal's mountain tourism industry is significant to the country and contributes to about 8 % of the GDP. Yet it fails to protect the people who are making it possible (Khadka & Paul, 2015). Porters routinely carry over 30 kilos and are often without sufficient equipment. Guides work 24/7 and expose themselves to huge risks to keep their clients safe, especially in the high mountains. The insurance, salary, and safety of guides and

porters are left in the hands of trekking companies that have little to no regulations for how to conduct their business or treat their workers. In addition, Nepali guides, and porters, who are also athletes and climbers, are almost completely missing in international media and are often mentioned only as a footnote in mountaineering stories.

The harsh working conditions and unjust treatment of Nepali mountain workers have been widely documented and studied (Dashper & Wilson, 2022; Frydenlund, 2019; Khadka & Paul, 2015; Miller & Mair 2019; Ortner 1999). There has also been research looking into risk perception amongst trekkers (Mu & Nepal, 2015), but little has been published about the way the social arrangement characterizing this work affects the way guides and porters accept risk. According to Dashper & Wilson (2022) and Camargo & Vazques-Maguirre (2021), there is a significant gap in research about the way tourism affects indigenous communities' sense of self and relationship to their environment and culture. I hope my research can fill in a fraction of that gap by exploring how mountain tourism in Nepal affects the lives of local guides and porters' and how they and tourists are justifying the harsh working conditions, risk, and lower regard for local lives that have become synonymous with the mountain trekking and adventure industry in Nepal.

### **Research Questions:**

1. What effects has Western dominance of mountaineering had on local climbers and local mountain culture?
2. Does the mountain tourism industry create good jobs for local workers?
3. How are the unjust distribution of risk and the seemingly lower regard for local lives perceived and justified by locals and tourists?

## Theoretical Framework

### The Subaltern

Subaltern, a term popularized by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, questions the structures surrounding what voices are being heard and allowed to create discourse in a certain space (Spivak, 1988). In contrast to the title of her article, *Can the Subaltern Speak*, Spivak is not claiming that the subaltern or someone in a subaltern state cannot speak as in the physical act of speaking. She has been criticized for her choice of words and some claim that she is silencing the subaltern by concluding that they cannot speak (Spivak 1988, 1999). By claiming that the subaltern cannot speak, Spivak is not saying that there is a lack of physical voice, but she is arguing that what is being said is not being heard. Speak, for Spivak indicates an ability to create discourse and be heard in the existing socio-political landscape. People in a subaltern position are not given that possibility. Spivak (1988) further explains that those who are not being heard, respected, or allowed to create discourse in their socio-political space by hegemonic powers are subalterns. The term is mostly used to describe colonized people who, through the violence of colonization, were silenced and dominated. However, it has also been used to describe other marginalized and disempowered groups such as women and animals (Fayaz, 2016). In my case, I will use the term to better understand local workers within the mountain tourism industry suggesting that they become subalterns in a white dominant space (the outdoor industry) that centers and prioritizes Western tourists and explorers (the hegemonic powers) in a way that repeats colonial ideas of conquest and silences their voices. I use this term for local workers while also recognizing that there are many complex internal hierarchy relationships amongst local workers that are important to consider.

### West-Centrism

I will also draw on critical theories of West-centrism (in my paper used synonymously with Eurocentrism) that will aid in an exploration of the industry itself. The term West-centrism describes a structure that champions European ideologies and worldviews as superior. Through colonial violence, this worldview was pushed as a global truth that still today supports the justification of the global dominance of Western powers and knowledge (Wijesinghe et al, 2019). West-centrism is thus a hierarchy of knowledge that privileges an episteme created by and for a homogenous white, Western, and male perspective (Grosfoguel 2012). That perspective has successfully undermined other perspectives as primitive and false. It has become institutionalized globally through colonial violence and later was and is upheld through educational hegemony whereby Westernized universities continue the narrative of Western supremacy. Grosfoguel (2012) argues that in this way Westernized universities have today become mass

producers of West-centric fundamentalism and are upholding colonial structures and ideologies in this so-called 'post'-colonial time. In short, West-centrism describes the un-voiced yet globally adopted belief that non-Western knowledge, perspectives, memories, and lives are 'less'. West-centrism convinces the world that there is a logic behind the unjust hierarchal structure by 'othering' all other perspectives and successfully selling the myth of western superiority. West-centrism manages to convince even those disempowered and silenced by this logic that this hierarchy is in fact not unjust but earned.

Wallerstein (1997) argues that critique against West-centrism often is West-centric in itself. He divides the critic into three groups. The first critique argues that the rest of the world was on the same trajectory of development as Europe at the time of colonization but was simply interrupted by the powerful blow of Europe's military might and geopolitical force. The second critique argues that what Europe did was nothing special but simply a continuation of what other nations had already been doing for centuries. The rhetoric here is to denounce Europe's self-proclaimed excellence.

Wallerstein calls these two arguments anti-West-centric West-centrism as they critique Europe by still holding on to Western standards as a desirable goal. Arguing that other countries were on the same trajectory as Europe poses colonialization as a desirable achievement, and it frames the colonized countries as being beaten to the finish line instead of uprooted and disrupted (Wallerstein 1997). It implies that if given the chance, the rest of the world would have also conquered the world through exploitation and violence which presents this outcome as a natural development. The second argument attempts to deny Europe credit but, according to Wallerstein, also denies Europe the blame. The third critique of West-centrism is what Wallerstein (1997) instead considers the only effective critique of West-centrism. That is to argue that the European expansion has been wrongly analyzed and incorrectly understood. Instead of trying to expand the credit for a modern capitalistic society to all, or take it away from Europe, we must completely denounce what Europe did as a positive or desired achievement altogether. Doing anything else will simply further West-centric beliefs and maintain them as the benchmark we measure all things against. It is in this last argument I found the most important connection to my own research topic.

The concept of West-centrism will be essential in understanding and addressing underlying and internalized beliefs amongst the local workforce (and amongst tourists) that may affect the way both value local lives. I will use West-centrism to help me dissect the distribution and justification of risk in the guiding profession and how it has become an inherent and accepted part of the mountain tourism industry.



## Research Method

Before arriving in Nepal, I knew that I wanted to write about the situation of guides and porters in the mountain tourism industry. However, due to my lacking real-life experience of my research field, I wanted to allow local voices to influence my research direction. I, therefore, started conducting interviews early on in the research process to let the topics I encountered shape the trajectory of my research. The first interviews were consequently (un)structured more like a conversation to let topics spontaneously emerge. Through the responses from the initial interviews, I gained a better understanding of the local socio-cultural and emotional landscape of the industry and could narrow down my research topic. As a result, a need for further data collection became apparent. I therefore conducted supplementary interviews with mountain guides and tourists alongside an in-person survey with trekking agencies.

My research is based primarily on semi-structured interviews as this style of interviews aided my intention of letting topics unfold organically and was a crucial part of letting local voices guide my focus as much as possible. All interviews were recorded and transcribed using partial transcription. To save time, conversations outside of my topic were omitted (McLellan, MacQueen & Neidig, 2012). I used thematic analysis to analyze my data once it was transcribed which allowed me to detect and organize patterns and themes from the interviews that had the most value for my research. Victoria Clark & Virginia Braun (2012) describe thematic analysis as a flexible way of identifying meaningful topics across a data set as it allows the researcher to analyze the data in different ways. It connected well to my wide set of data and my intention of finding topics relevant to locals.

To present my interviews a bit of background is helpful for the reader to follow along better. Nepal's mountain tourism industry is often simplified by outside sources. The many different types of jobs get boiled down to 'guides' and 'porters' or 'sherpas'. In reality, many different types of jobs make up the industry, all holding different functions and risk levels. Though not exhaustive, the following categories of workers more adequately reflect the mountain tourism industry in Nepal. I will use these terms alongside the umbrella term 'workers' when the context is not relating to one profession specifically.

### Trekking guide

Guides trekkers on low-altitude treks without technical climbing. In Nepal this can still involve 5000m passes.

### Mountain guide

Guides climbers and trekkers on high-altitude and to summits where technical climbing is involved. This requires more advanced and expensive training than trekking guide training.

### Climbing and High-altitude guide

Guides climbers on the highest most technical peaks

### High altitude support guide (sometimes disrespectfully referred to as high porter)

Carries equipment such as tents, oxygen, food, and cooking equipment between base camp and higher camps. They also sometimes accompany and support clients during summit climbs, filling the roles of climbing and mountain guides as well.

### Tourist porter

Carries loads for tourists on treks, which can include higher altitudes. Carries between 15-30 kg but it's not uncommon to see bags up to 80+ kg.

### Logistical porter

Carries building material, food, cooking equipment, etc. to build and supply teahouses. These porters are not affiliated with an agency and therefore lack insurance. They are often paid per kg resulting in loads up to 100+ kg.

## **Interviews**

I initially conducted eleven semi-structured interviews with local Nepali trekking guides in Kathmandu in connection with an internship for The Porter Voice Collective, an organization working for the rights of guides and porters. Given the substantial overlaps with my own research topic, these interviews were applicable to my own research as well. Once my research topic was narrowed down, a need for further input and research was evident. Thus, I conducted eight supplementary interviews with local workers, nine interviews with tourists, seven interviews with other actors in the industry, and an in-person survey with ten agencies in Thamel, Kathmandu's tourist hub.

### ***Initial Interviews***

The participants were sampled through a mix of casual meetings at the climbing gym in Kathmandu (KSCC) and the snowball sampling method whereby interviewees referred me to other guides. My sampling seemed random at first but was purposive in its nature as I had certain criteria for the interviews (Bryman, 2012). The criteria were for the

participants to have some sort of professional connection to the mountain tourism industry, but to what extent was not influential to the initial sampling. Participants came from diverse backgrounds and ethnicities which facilitated a diverse range of perspectives. All but one were trekking guides and all but two were female. The semi-structured approach allowed participants to direct the conversation to topics they felt most important and to stay in the realms where they were comfortable (Bryman, 2012). This enabled a relaxed environment and a conversation I experienced as honest.

### ***Supplementary Interviews with Mountain Guides***

These participants were chosen exclusively based on their profession as mountain guides or high-altitude workers to include voices that were previously missing from my research and to be able to cover topics specific to high-altitude. These interviews also followed a semi-structured interview style. The participants were found via a mix of connections, social media outreach, and personal websites.

### ***Interviews with Tourists***

These interviews aimed to include outside voices to understand if the exploitative structures and risks described by the local workforce were evident to tourists and to what degree they might be participating in creating them. Many tourists travel with good intentions and treat the local workforce well but can still be perpetuating colonial structures in the way they relate to and view locals. Tourists were chosen unsystematically while staying in teahouses along popular trekking routes. The minimum criteria were for them to be tourists in Nepal and engage to some extent with mountain trekking

### ***Survey with Agencies***

The tourism industry cannot be reduced to individuals alone: a critical analysis of the industry itself is also needed. Therefore, I conducted an in-person survey with trekking and climbing agencies in Thamel. Ten agencies were chosen at random while walking through the area on two different occasions. The survey aimed to gather data about the costs of treks, services, salaries, costs for guides, and insurance to give an insight into how agencies run their business. The survey provided data regarding industry standards and practices. It also yielded information on to what extent industry recommendations are being followed. I choose to exclusively ask about conditions related to the 'Everest' base camp trek, one of Nepal's most famous treks. The combination of this trek's popularity amongst tourists and its lack of road access pushes the conflict between tourist comfort and locals working conditions more into the light. Only asking about one specific trek also made comparing differences between companies easier.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations All participants were informed of the purpose of the interview before the interview started and were informed that they would be anonymous. They were clearly informed that they could withdraw their consent at any time. Consent to be recorded was also asked for verbally before the interview started. My main concern was that I would maintain colonial structures by engaging in extractive research. I wanted to center local voices but doing so demanded a lot of conversation and inevitably, a lot of the locals' time. Hence, I found myself balancing the desire to amplify the voices of locals and the fear of demanding their labor to do so. Jennifer J. Casolo et al (2022), argues that extractive research has become the default system in western influenced research, and states that this insight should inform the way we move forward as researchers so that we "(co)produce with communities and for academia" and carry with us the importance of on-going self-critique and awareness. Similarly, Paul Agu Igwe et al (2022) present what they call the 6R's methods where they utilize respect, relevance, reciprocity, responsibility, relationship, and relationality to assure a research practice that reflects on the colonizing legacy of research and tries to counteract it (Igwe et al. 2022). I have attempted to carry these concepts and practices with me throughout my research and continuously asked myself whether my research contributes to ongoing extraction or not. I have attempted to put these ideas into action by not entering my research with a concrete idea of my topic but instead letting local experiences and opinions narrow down and guide my research topic. This is to ensure, to the extent possible, that the focus of the thesis concerns real issues that are experienced by and relevant to the local community, enhancing the chance of my research being beneficial for the community.

## **Positionality**

My position as a researcher from a Western university doing research in the 'East' comes with a certain set of implications. My positionality had two contrasting effects. In some instances, I experienced it beneficial as some expressed a desire to get their stories heard through academia. In other instances, it created a reluctance to speak freely as some mentioned a fear of talking negatively about the industry or their employer as it might impact their job. This further highlighted the importance of maintaining the anonymity of my interviewees. Beyond my position as a researcher, my physical appearance and ethnicity had an unexpected effect. Being of double ethnicity, Iranian and Swedish, has given me a lifetime of experience in straddling divides and encountering differences. I was often, at first glance, perceived as a local, until my lack of Nepali exposed me. But this initial confusion proved to be beneficial as it fostered a conversation where similarities rather than differences were explored. When

overlapping bloodlines were found on the Indian subcontinent a connection had already been established before the conversation of research even started. My ethnical ambiguity contributed to blurring the otherwise clear divide between the interviewees and me.

## **Limitations**

As with any research, I wished that more data gathering was done. I did, however, manage to gather a quite substantial number of interviews that I believe offer a relatively wide selection of voices. I do however recognize my lack of inclusion of porters that were currently working as porters. The direct insight I got into the porter profession was given first by those who had started out as porters but now worked as guides, and second by talking to and observing porters while they worked on the Annapurna circuit trek. The reason for the lower number of porter interviews was mainly the language barrier as guides were more likely to speak English and finding porters that were willing to talk through a translator proved difficult. My geographical position in Kathmandu was also an obstacle as most porters stay in their villages in the off-season. I regret the exclusion of voices this created. Another limitation was found in the snowball sampling as it entailed an element of bias due to participants recommending friends or family. This was however mitigated by also finding interviewees through other avenues such as social media and personal websites.

## **Nepal and Mountain Tourism**

To understand the intersection of tourists, mountains, and locals, Thamel is a good place to start. It's a bustling neighborhood in the heart of Kathmandu, crowds mix with the sound of beeping cars and motorcycles. The electrical cord canopy looks down on tourists wearing colorful puffy jackets and hiker boots. Almost all trekking tourists pass through Thamel. The streets burst with trekking stores and cheap hostels but take one step outside of Thamel and you return to restaurants offering dahl bath instead of pizza and stores selling the newest fashion instead of trekking boots and souvenirs. Thamel has morphed into a trekking tourist paradise and is a bubble of its own in a city of vast interconnectedness. The windows of agencies are all filled with promises of "the best price" and "the most authentic experience."

With agencies on every corner, there is high competition for trekking tourists and Thamel offers a stage for people to engage in the linguistic sparring that characterizes this area. Locals set up shop here to access tourists and tourists come here in search of that promised, yet elusive match of a cheap price and an authentic experience.

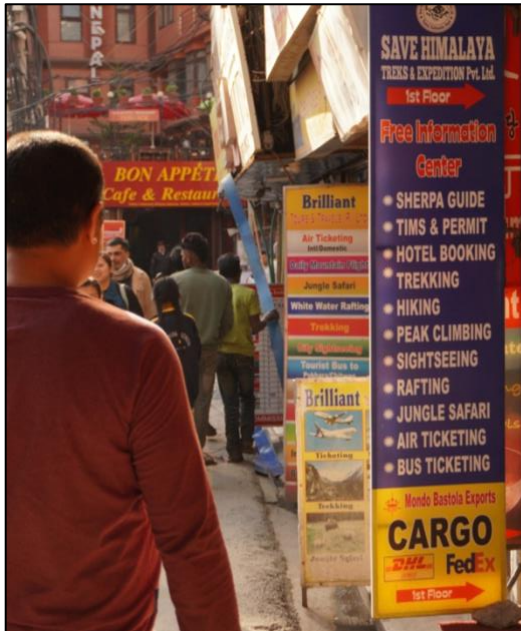
However, the consequences for that cheap price are felt, not in Thamel and not with the agencies that engage in the linguistic sparring, but in the communities far removed from its bustling streets. Even for those who are fluent in bargaining, the language of Thamel, there are certain costs that are non-negotiable. Permits, transport, and insurance are offered at similar rates across the board. Salaries, equipment, and other staff expenses, however, are not. So, while cutting corners to provide “the best price” agencies often cut the salary and equipment of their staff. Hammer & Ness (2021) write that through low-paid work, employment insecurities, and inadequate social safety net, businesses and governments effectively transfer social and economic risk to workers while staying clear of responsibilities. In Nepal this is evident in the lack of a protective regulatory framework from the government which allows predatory agencies to underpay their workforce and send them out to the mountains without sufficient training or equipment – this, coupled with budget tourists constantly pressing prices has paved way for the precarious working conditions that characterize the mountain tourism industry in Nepal today (Dashper & Wilson, 2022).

Trekking culture in Nepal is a phenomenon of its own, for most people hiking or trekking means traversing beautiful landscapes while carrying what you need on your back which offers a moment of self-sufficient freedom. However, in Nepal the part where you carry what you need yourself is optional. Most trekking tourists hire a guide and a porter – one person to logistically manage the trip and one to carry the needed (and not needed) items for the trip. Instead of taking on the self-sufficient lifestyle many associates with hiking, trekking, and climbing, trekking in Nepal most often involve teahouse hopping, light day backpacks since someone else is carrying your pack, and three cooked meal a day. For a cheap price, the trekking tourist can outsource the hardship of a trek to local workers.

### **Sherpa and sherpa**

It’s impossible to speak about Nepali mountains without mentioning the term Sherpa, it is a globally renowned term that has become synonymous with Nepali mountain workers. Those who have trekked in Nepal know the term to describe a job. A ‘sherpa’ can be a guide or a porter or a climber, the definition is somewhat vague, but internationally it has come to simply mean: a Nepali mountain worker. There is however an important distinction with the word that is often overlooked; Sherpa (capital S) is an ethnicity, noting those who are local to the Solukhumbu (Everest) region. ‘sherpa’ (lowercase s) is a simplified umbrella term describing the workforce that makes trekking and mountaineering in Nepal possible. Today most (but not all) of the workers on Chomolungma are members of the Sherpa community as the mountain is located on

their community's lands. But not everybody working on Chomolungma, or other high mountains, are Sherpa, and using 'sherpa' as a job title erases these other communities. Workers from Rai, Tamang, Khaling, Gurung, and Kulung Rai communities, amongst others, are also instrumental to the industry but their contribution becomes hidden when all workers are made into a homogenous group labeled 'sherpa' (Frydenlund, 2019).



Storytelling around Sherpa's abilities has paved the way for an international glorification, commercialization, and mystification of Sherpa culture and their abilities in the mountains. This has created a labor hierarchy where tourists ask for and want Sherpas as their guides and porters (Frydenlund, 2019; Ortner, 1999). This not only diminishes other communities' importance but puts them at a disadvantage when it comes to securing a job. However, it is not only the other communities that are disenfranchised by this term.

Despite the advantages the term has granted Sherpa workers, it has also reduced their identity to one function. Not all who climb are Sherpas, and not all Sherpas are climbers. Using their ethnicity to describe one single job function ignores their many varied skills and diversity (De Jesus, 2021). I will stay away from using the word 'sherpa' as a description of a job title. Instead, I will be using the admittedly less catchy words "local workforce", "local guide", "local porter" and so on. I will use the word Sherpa only when I'm referring to those who are members of the Sherpa ethnicity.

The sherpa versus Sherpa debate introduces a larger conversation about the complex labor hierarchy centered around caste and ethnicity inherent to mountain work in Nepal. Tourists favoring ethnic Sherpas as their guides due to Western storytelling is not the only factor that constitutes the labor hierarchies of the industry. Although many individuals in Nepal object the discriminatory caste system, it is still prevalent throughout society and has strongly influenced labor categories (Gellner, 2007). After the fall of the Shah monarchy in 1846 Nepal was declared a Hindu Kingdom under the Rana family (Geller, 2007; Frydenlund, 2019). This introduced the Hindu caste system to Nepal which was legally enforced in 1854 under the Mulukhi Ain legal code (Geller, 2007). This enforced the dominance of Hindu elites over non-Hindus which had devastating effects on minorities and lower cast communities (Geller, 2007; Dashper &

Wilson, 2022). Both Frydenlund (2019) and Dashper and Wilson (2022) argue that the racialized social structure and ethnic hierarchy the Mulukhi Ain introduced have seeped through to the mountain industry and are especially noticeable in how ethnic Sherpas have a dominant position over other ethnicities in the mountain industry. Many non-Sherpa mountain workers feel mistreated and disrespected by Sherpa workers and bear witness to being denied lodging and food because of their ethnicity. Some non-Sherpa workers have responded to this disadvantage by trying to pass as ethnic Sherpas to get more work and better treatment (Frydenlund, 2019).

It is clear that hierarchies still exist between workers today, even long after Mulukhi Ain has been abolished. Its principles and beliefs are still prominent and have left lasting effects on the industry's power dynamic (Frydenlund 2019; Dashper & Wilson 2022). Sherry Ortner (1999) argues that the Sherpa identity and dominance are not only a legacy of the racial hierarchies of the Mulukhi Ain, nor only a result of the Sherpa's beneficial geo-political location in the upper Kumbu (the most profitable tourism area in Nepal) nor is it solely created by Western storytelling and tourism. Ortner instead argues that it is in the intersection of them all that the Sherpa identity is formed. Ortner's argument makes it clear that the dynamics of the mountain trekking industry are multifaceted and should be understood from the intersections of its many factors. As Frydenlund (2019,3) argues, understanding the Sherpa identity (and dominance), and its many factors allows us to recognize how "race and ethnicity are intertwined with capitalistic labor dynamics" and adds to our understanding of the industry as a whole.

Both internal (caste system) and external (international storytelling of Sherpas) factors have created labor hierarchies where certain ethnicities and workers are valued above others. But although Sherpas generally have a better salary and more power over their situation, this does not mean that they do not face discrimination and unjust working conditions. In the end, the extractive structures of the tourism industry exploit all local workers regardless of ethnicity as the industry depends on local workers taking on precarious and risky jobs to facilitate tourists' dreams (Dashper & Wilson 2022; Khadka & Paul, 2015; Mu & Nepal 2015; Miller & Mair 2019; Ortner 1999).

### **The Colonial Roots of Mountaineering**

Ortner (1999) argues that the power dynamics present in today's mountain tourism industry find their origin in the historical relationship between foreign explorers and local workers that early on created hierarchies along racial and colonial lines. She argues that the oppressive structures experienced by workers today can be derived back to the early days of mountaineering as an imperial exploration and can be explained



only by those more-than-economic processes of race and ethnicity. To understand the lingering coloniality of the industry today one must consider the larger history of mountaineering in Nepal. Nepal was closed to non-SAARC foreigners up until 1951. This ban stopped the Welsh land surveyor George Everest from expanding his work from India into Nepal to map and measure its mountains. Since Everest or his team could not enter Nepal, they hired Indian mathematician Radhanath Sikdar who could. Sikdar traveled to the upper Kombu region where he first saw and measured Chomolungma (Myers, 2020). The mountain was already well known by local communities who had many different names for it. Chomolungma, the Tibetan name, translates into “Goddess mother of the Earth” and Sagarmatha, the Nepali, translates into “Sky Head” (Myers, 2020). However, when the Welsh land survey team was reached by news from Sikdar announcing that he had measured the world’s highest mountain, they named it after Everest who recently retired. Despite Sikdar’s indispensable part in the expedition, it is forever associated only with Everest as it is known by his last name alone (Myers, 2020). The mountain's local names already indicated an awareness of its significance in height, however, the measurement done by the Indian/Welsh land survey team still accounts for its ‘discovery’. Throughout my thesis I will refer to the mountain as Chomolungma, using the Tibetan name to recognize the heritage of its custodians, the Sherpa community, who is said to have immigrated from Tibet (Myers 2020).

The colonial story of Chomolungma, therefore, started in 1852 when the mountain was written into Western history carrying the name of the European scientist who never saw the mountain but claims its discovery by virtue of a today forgotten Indian mathematician. But it does not stop there. The race to the top and the many years of adventure tourism that followed is a story built on colonial tropes and imperial motivation (Myers, 2020). Reaching the summit of the tallest mountain on earth was almost treated the same as the race for the moon – nations fought to be the first placing their flags on the top to claim victory over nature’s elements. Military expeditions also used the Himalayan mountaintops as a stage to test and affirm their masculinity, especially in the aftermath of WWI (Westaway, 2018). Patricia Purtschert (2020) in her article *White masculinity in the death zone: transformations of colonial identities in the Himalayas* utilizes the characteristic storytelling of early mountaineering literature from the West to demonstrate the colonial narratives that have been inseparable from the sport. Purtschert (2020) points out that this specific literature is rife with detailed descriptions of local culture and people that are written using exotifying language that distinctly separates the locals from the mountaineers. As the mountaineers and authors continued to higher altitudes the narrative shifts from an ethnographical observation to a personal story of ‘overcoming the elements’, the climber often uses vocabulary like

‘conquer’, ‘fighting against nature’, and ‘winning or losing’ in terms of reaching the summit (Purtschert, 2020). Purtschert (2020) makes an interesting comment about the friendship between Norgay and Raymond Lambert, a Swiss mountaineer who attempted but failed, to reach the summit in 1952 alongside Norgay. In both Lamberts and Norgay’s self-biographies their friendship is affectionately depicted with what seems to be mutual respect (Norgay, 1955). Lambert makes note of a reoccurring feeling during the climb: “Am I the client? Is Tensing the guide? Or is it the opposite?” (quoted in Purtschert, 2020, 39). Purtschert (2020) argues that this demonstration of friendship could be seen as somewhat of a blurring of the colonial relationship that had characterized expeditions up until that point. But she goes on to conclude that the trans-racial friendship between Norgay and Lambert is not an antidote to colonialism but carries with it structures that let white masculinity reinvent itself, becoming “both a partner and old superior” (Purtschert 2020,40). The romanticized story of Tenzing and Lambert’s friendship excludes the arrangements that composed the expedition itself. Tenzing was the most experienced member with the highest chance of reaching the summit but was initially not part of the summit team which was all Swiss to maximize national pride should the attempt be successful (Norgay, 1955). Tenzing was allowed a spot only when two Swiss climbers dropped out because of exhaustion. This trans-racial friendship was, although seemingly mutually felt, still riddled with colonial and racist ideas (Purtschert, 2020). Driscoll (2020) concludes that modern big mountain climbing is structured around the white-male identity-making taking place on the mountain slopes. This identity-making is made possible through the exclusion and dominance of the local land and people. Driscoll argues that this relationship and identity-making *is* colonialism, thus making mountaineering in Nepal inseparable from its colonial legacy.

Using terms such as colonialism for Nepal’s situation can at first seem strange, as Nepal was never officially colonized despite its geopolitical importance. However, although Nepal circumvented direct colonization, it has been the target of a fair share of political and economic influence leading many to argue that Nepal suffers the same post-colonial hangover as many colonized nations (Crews, 2018; Khatri, 2020). However, when I use the term in this thesis, I refer more to the social relationships dominating mountaineering in Nepal rather than to Nepal’s political circumstances.

### **Whiteness and the Outdoor Industry**

In 1953 the first successful summit of Chomolungma was made by Tenzing Norgay Sherpa and Sir Edmond Hillary under a British-funded expedition (Griffiths, 2018). Norgay gained significant recognition for the feat, especially in Nepal and India, but there were still noticeable disproportions in how the two mountaineers were celebrated in the West. Hillary was knighted, gaining the title Sir, whereas Norgay was only

awarded the George medal of significantly lower rank than knighthood (Norgay, 1955). These early expeditions were completely dependent on local workers but their importance to the expeditions was never acknowledged. This disproportional distribution of work and recognition is still evident today as local climbers (working or not) are next to absent from international media and mountaineering stories (Meyer, 2020).

James Mills, an outdoor advocate, and author coined the term “Adventure gap”, which voices concerns about the gap in representation between races found in the outdoor industry. Studies have shown that 70 % of those who participate in outdoor recreation in the US are white and another study showed that 95 % of visitors to US National Forest and Wilderness areas between the years 2008-2012 were also white (Goodrid, 2018). In addition, research found that out of 4,602 pictures published in Outside Magazine between 1991-2001, only 103 were of African American people (Finney, 2014). These numbers are significant and show a clear underrepresentation of BIPOC in the outdoor industry. The explanation for this is multifaceted. Unequal access to education coupled with economic and employment discrimination has often left BIPOC with a compromised personal economic status that leaves little room for expensive hobbies such as camping or mountaineering (Humphrey, 2020). But it is important to note that although personal economics might be one factor, the underlying reason is race (Humphrey, 2020). In the US, non-white people were banned to enter or segregated in National Parks up until 1964, leaving plenty of room for white outdoor practitioners to define outdoor sports and excel in them (Ferry Lee & Scott, 2018). In Nepal, local communities and climbers were (and still are) kept in the category of ‘support staff’ and were rarely seen as true mountaineers or climbers. The whitewashing of history and land ownership has also played a big role in excluding BIPOC from outdoor spaces and the naming of outdoor spaces after their white occupiers is according to Humphrey (2020) part of a deliberate and intentional erasure of BIPOC who originally inhabited the land. In Nepal, Western mountaineering expeditions were historically framed as a testament to the excellence of the West and their victory over nature (and its locals) (Purtschert, 2020). The lack of acknowledgment of local workers' skills, especially at high altitudes, is thus baked into the industry from its colonial roots. Today, skilled Nepali mountaineers (for the most part) stand invisible behind Western climbers both tourists and professionals as they bask in the glory of summiting while conveniently forgetting to mention the locals who made it possible (Meyer, 2020).

BIPOC people have historically been excluded from the outdoors and outdoor sports which has created an overrepresentation of white athletes and a lack of awareness of BIPOC’s contribution and participation in the outdoors. The modern outdoor industry

has picked up where history left off as they continue to focus on white athletes' performance and making them the front cover of magazines and social media channels. This is one of the many expressions of the adventure gap. It's safe to say that BIPOC has always had to fight for a place in the outdoor industry both within and outside the so-called West.

## Analysis

### **From Holy Mountains to Commercialized Summits – The Effects of Western Mountaineering on Nepali Mountain Culture**

Although Nepali climbers today excel in mountaineering, reaching summits has traditionally not been part of Nepali culture. Karan, a student, and trekking guide told me: *I think I can speak for most Nepalis when I say that no one ever, especially in the early days would have seen Mount Everest and said: I need to be on top.* Karan clarifies that the lack of local exploration of the mountains prior to Western influence was not due to a lack of ability but instead rooted in the philosophies of life that influenced society at the time. He continues, *we [people from mountain areas] were often taught from the root of our culture that we should see nature as spirits.* Mountaintops were seen as something sacred and spiritual, and standing on their tops would be deeply disrespectful. Karan goes on to say that he has noticed a shift in paradigms and that the grip on these philosophies of life is loosening as ***the concept of financial gain has outweighed the cultural significance of the mountains.*** In other words, Nepali climbers are loosening their grip on their traditional beliefs to keep up with the mountaineering scene and adventure tourism.

In the aftermath of WWI, military expeditions sought Himalayan Mountain tops to test and prove the strength of their men, these high-altitude summits became a stage for these men to assert dominance over nature in an attempt to recuperate their bruised masculinity. For Germany, for example, Himalayan expeditions became a key way to try and rebuild faith in German manhood (Westaway, 2018). These early military-influenced expeditions introduced a, for Nepal, new way of viewing the mountains, a way in which summits became trophies to conquer, rather than goddesses to respect (Ortner, 1999). A language heavy with military remanence was during this time interwoven with the mountaineering world – climbers became 'soldiers' and summits were 'attacked'. This military and colonial attitude heavily influenced what mountaineering became, and the following adventure expeditions all followed the same logic and goal of conquest. What mountaineering values as successful is still today

intertwined with this West-centric mindset (Amor, 2019), and the best mountaineers are seen as those who climb higher, faster, and more. This stands in stark contrast to the spiritual relationship mountain communities in Nepal had (and still have) with mountains. Measured against the summit-oriented values of mountaineering these traditional views of mountains are belittled and deemed primitive, or at best they are fetishized as part of the mysticism of the East. Locals quickly became the background muscle to the early expeditions, carrying all necessary equipment while being exploited as helpers or servants but were never truly seen as part of the expedition. Thus locals (and nature) became background actors in the story of white male excellence (Westway, 2018). Still to this day, local climbers are locked into that colonial and racial category of ‘helper’ – essential to the expedition but not truly recognized. To free themselves from this category, they have had to adhere to Western mountaineering's narrow definition of success – they too have had to climb higher, faster, and more.

The local climber's ability to free themselves from this category has relied heavily on exceptionalism. Ueli Steck, a controversial Swiss mountaineer, is probably the only person who has gotten into a fistfight with local workers on Chomolungma (Driscoll, 2020). This fight followed an incident in 2013 when, during a speed record attempt, Steck and his team interrupted local workers who were fixing rope in the Kombu icefall, potentially endangering their lives. There is an unspoken rule on Chomolungma that states that no other climbers should climb on the day local workers are setting up ropes to the summit due to the high risk of that activity – a rule Steck violated. When confronted Steck called the workers “motherfuckers”, overstepping several cultural and social lines (Driscoll, 2020). Steck is perhaps the model example of the white hypermasculinity Susan Frohlick (1999) argues is an integral part of mountaineering. On Ueli's second attempt at the speed record in 2017 he partnered with local Tenjing Sherpa, whom he knew from previous summits. In an interview about the upcoming expedition, Ueli speaks highly of Tenjin and claims the local guide to be a good friend who is genuinely interested in climbing “not only making business” (quoted in Driscoll 2020, 55). Tenjing is welcomed and humanized as a friend and climber by fitting the mold of what Steck deemed to be a good friend and climber. Through exceptionalism, Tenjing is freed from othering and is briefly included into the story Steck gatekeeps. Driscoll (2020) argues that this mindset is an example of the already well-known phenomena of racial passing being possible for POC only through confirming to Western white ideals.

In Nepal, this is evident in how the local climbers that have managed to gain international recognition today are those adhering to the Western style of mountaineering by breaking records and standing out in remarkable ways. They have

thus proved exceptional enough to transcend the category of ‘helper’. Nirmal Purja, a Nepali mountaineer who stars in the documentary 14 Peaks is perhaps the most famous example. But no matter the level of exceptionalism Nepali climbers display, they are seldom viewed in the same light as Western climbers. They are often stuck in the category of helper, regardless of skills.

There are certainly a lot of Nepali climbers who are climbing and summiting out of their own interests and goals but there are many more who are climbing simply for financial reasons. But regardless of motivation, it is impossible to deny that the aggressive mountaineering style we see today is a product of the West and has been pushed onto mountain communities in Nepal through exploitative structures. The increased interest for Nepali climbers to climb and break records for recognition (alongside guiding) is an understandable reaction to being invisible in a field where they are experts. Locals can see the credit and opportunities following Westerners who climb a mountain they themselves might have scaled ten times and they understandably want a part of the share. Breaking records has been the way for local climbers to reach for that share. Purja mentions, in his documentary, that one of his main motivations for breaking the historical record was to showcase the strength and skills of Nepali climbers that otherwise are forgotten. When I asked Aanand if the rising fame of Nepali climbers could be an opportunity for Nepalis to claim their rightful place on the global mountaineering scene, he answered: *Claiming space is a Western concept and also, claim it for whom? – locals will get nothing out of that. Yes, it is good that Nepali and Pakistani climbers are being acknowledged for their skills but even if we frame it as ‘claiming space’, who is it helping? The mountaineering mindset and structure remain the same. It's just becoming more egotistical because now even more people are trying to climb these mountains and it will just increase deaths and add to the burden of guides.*

Wallerstein’s concept of West-centric anti-Westcentrism can offer further insight. Wallerstein argues that if we claim that non-European countries were simply beaten to the finish line and would, if given the chance, have been able to dominate the world in similar ways to Europe, we are engaging in what Wallerstein calls West-centric anti-Westcentrism as this poses domination of the world through colonialism as a universally desired goal that the rest of the world was also heading towards. Hence the West-centric violent ways of colonialism are not being questioned but rather glorified (Wallerstein, 1997). I draw parallels to the world of mountaineering where standing on summits, although a Western idea, is glorified as a universally desirable goal. Nepali climbers breaking records for recognition can be seen as an attempt to catch up to Western ideas and prove that Nepali climbers would have summited without Western

influence if only given the time. But fighting to keep up with Western mountaineering on the conquest-focused stage it has created only centers this way of relating to mountains, thus pushing other (traditional) ways of viewing the mountain further into the periphery.

Gaining recognition in a space that was not created for, or by, locals, but instead created through their erasure would not give local climbers the recognition they deserve. It would only help them pass into and strengthen the Western cis-male-identity modern mountaineering is anchored in. True recognition would, according to Aanand, allow room and appreciation for traditional ways of relating to mountains and let Nepali climbers themselves decide how they would want their mountains to be climbed. It would also mean recognizing the many ways Western mountaineering continues to exploit the local workforce through the adventure tourism industry.

Kami Rita Sherpa, who holds the world record for Chomolungma summits, said in an interview: “In every mountain, there is a goddess, it’s our responsibility to keep the goddess happy. Months before I start an ascent I start worshiping and asking for forgiveness because I will have to put my feet on her body” (Boren, 2019). Climbing not only strains local climbing workers in physical ways but also affects them mentally and spiritually as they must deal with the fear of angering their gods and going against their religious beliefs. Nepali climbers today are in a difficult situation, caught between trying to practice their beliefs and facilitate climbs. Although many do not want to climb these holy mountains, they do it anyway since being involved in mountaineering and adventure tourism offers financial and social opportunities most do not have the choice of turning down. And to successfully partake in this world, a long list of summits is to a climber’s advantage. It is not hard to see why *the concept of financial gain has outweighed the cultural significance of the mountains*, as Western mountaineering has tightened its grip on mountain culture in Nepal.

I do not intend to question or moralize the shift in paradigms that has happened with local climbers nor to diminish the importance of representation. We should question the lack of representation of BIPOC in the outdoors and mountaineering, but we should also question the very idea of mountaineering as it exists today. Especially when what has been created on the backs of its colonial legacy is an extractive and exploitative tourism industry that endangers local lives for the benefit of profit-seeking agencies and tourists’ dreams of conquest. It is impossible to know how or if mountaineering would have developed in Nepal without Western influence. But recognizing that the way mountains are climbed today is influenced by colonial ideas of conquest is one step towards reevaluating mountain sports and perhaps introducing less extractive ways to

relate to our natural world.

### **Is the Mountain Tourism Industry in Nepal Creating Good Jobs?**

Chandra, a young man in his 20s from the upper region of Solukhumbu is spending off-season in Kathmandu. He normally works as a support guide on Chomolungma but now sits across from me, sipping on a coffee, in stark contrast to his work life which includes carrying tents, oxygen, food, and other necessary and unnecessary items between base camp (5,364m) and camp four (7,906m) – if needed he also supports clients up to the summit. His job requires him to cross the Kombu icefall (the most dangerous part of Chomolungma) between 14-20 times per expedition, vastly surpassing a clients 2-4 times. Chandra routinely risks his own life to support the dreams of clients and despite (or perhaps because) working for one of the biggest expedition agencies, Chandra only takes home about 10 USD a day after paying his own expenses. Chandra is not a climbing guide but works as what is sometimes disrespectfully referred to as a ‘high porter’, Chandra prefers the title high-altitude support guide as it more correctly reflects his work responsibilities. The term porter diminishes his skills and training and allows agencies to cut salaries without tourists raising eyebrows. The industry survives on workers risking their lives to make a living and Chandra and his colleagues carry the heavy burden of balancing the lives of their clients and the livelihood of their families in just one heavy backpack.

There is a general belief that working in the mountain tourism industry in Nepal is a golden opportunity offering a ‘good job’ with a good income. In the words of Robert, a trekking tourist: *without really knowing what they make, I have understood that being a guide or porter is two of the best possible jobs you can have here.* Robert's words suggest a willingness to accept the notion of these jobs as ‘good’ even though the conditions are unknown. It also exemplifies a general theme amongst tourists I interviewed – very few of them knew what their guides and porters were paid or if they were insured, but they still held onto the opinion that their trek or climb facilitated a good job. Some, like Peter, were aware of the salaries but thought they were rising too much: *I tried to get a porter during the hike, but then I got annoyed when it was getting kind of ridiculously expensive.* When asked what he considered ridiculously expensive Peter answered: *They wanted about 50 USD a day for just going over the [Thorong La] pass. If I'd hired one in Pokhara it would be about 10 USD. It is not that expensive for me, but when you are leaving the normal price structure in any third-world country, I don't like it.* The ‘normal’ price structure Peter seems to be referring to is the price structure that allows foreigners from currency-strong countries to visit Nepal and get services for cheap. This echoes a common conception among tourists visiting Nepal:



everything is expected to be cheap. But in contrast, Nepal, especially Kathmandu, is an expensive place to live and the cost of living is constantly rising (Ethirajan, 2022). Peter continues, *if you compare it to most other wages in this country porters and guides make a lot of money*. To not “leave the normal price structure” or to celebrate salaries simply because they are higher than the (too low) average, would mean maintaining low salaries while the cost-of-living increases, hence trapping people in poverty and in a dangerous job.

Although it is true that the salary of mountain workers is higher than the national average the salary still fails to adequately compensate for the high risks, strenuous work, and lacking social security. Especially since mountain work is seasonal, which stretches earnings thinner. In addition, the risk these jobs entail is unprecedented. No restaurant worker is expected to risk their own life for a customer, yet this is the reality of mountain workers (Dashper & Wilson 2022; Frydenlund, 2019; Khadka & Paul, 2015; Mu & Nepal 2015; Miller & Mair 2019; Ortner 1999). Most of the workers I interviewed were struggling to afford further education or training that would give higher earning possibilities or other careers. Badal, a high-altitude climbing guide puts it simply: *The salary is not enough*. Deepesh, a climbing guide, further explains: *[Guides] have big responsibilities. You carry 50 people’s lives in your hands. You need to be strong, physically, and mentally and for such a low salary. It does not cover all your hard work*. Soneeya adds: *most workers use all their money to support their families, there is nothing left for study or training, and most people are stuck in this job as a result*. Chandra puts it in other words: *Every time I go up in the mountains, I’m essentially selling my body to the money-making side of things [...] the pay is very little for what I do*. If a salary fails to offer opportunities beyond survival it is questionable if it can be considered a good salary at all, regardless of the country's average. The fact that these wages are more than the national average becomes a convenient excuse for tourists and agencies. However, this argument is full of white-savior connotations as it cements the local worker as the poor Other who although underpaid is ‘saved’ through the simple existence of the job Western tourism creates and should be grateful no matter the consequences of that job. The complexity of local workers' situation is ignored as well as their own accounts of their situation. Instead of questioning the too-low national average salary, it is used to justify other exploitative salaries. Foreigners seem to hold on to the idea of these jobs as good to lull themselves into complacency by white-saviorism stories of providing jobs for poor people.

The idea of mountain work as a ‘good job’ also often leans on the assumption that workers are freely choosing, and even fighting to get into the industry. However, most of the time workers are forced into the industry to support their families. Simon, a

trekker I met in Lower Mustang, said: *I don't believe that there are no other opportunities. If you just work hard, you can get another job if you want to.* In contrast, Chandra told me: *If I had other opportunities that could earn me the same in another field, I would gladly accept, [...] the risk of being in the mountain outweighs any type of compensation, especially at my rate. But there are no other jobs in my area.* Pritam, a mountain guide with his own trekking agency added: *I'm going to say that maybe 70% of people are doing it because they have no other option, if they had a choice, they would do something else.* Pritam goes on to explain that the reason many wish they could get another job is because of the risk: *people can see how many people have died on the mountain in front of their eyes, that is the main thing. The second thing is family, most families do not want their kids to work in this industry.* Pritam has his own company and emphasizes that it is therefore easier for him to ensure a good salary and fair working conditions: *I did all the courses so I have more experience and can charge a high fee. And I always start my expeditions by telling my clients that if there is any risk of danger, we are going to turn around. I tell them that they must accept this, or I won't take them. So now I love this job [...] but maybe I won't do the bigger expeditions anymore, just smaller peaks. It can be a beautiful job if you are just paid and respected enough.* Through these words, Pritam expresses a key component of a good job, and of staying safe in the mountains: **autonomy**. For most mountain workers this is a rare luxury. I asked Deepesh, a climbing guide, how he sees the difference between workers and tourists regarding choice. *A tourist comes here willingly, but a guide or porter is working for his family and his life. Whatever the tourists want they must do. He can't stop in the middle. He can only stop if he nearly dies. If he says no [...] the client will complain, and it will be harder for the guide to get a job again. There is an obligation to work, to risk your life.* He continues: *if a guide gets sick and needs rest the clients might get mad. They have paid and expect the service. In that way, they buy his whole life. It's very sad. Sometimes in fear of losing their job, the guides go on even if they are sick. Today with the internet, if a client writes a bad rating, he kills a guide's life because now he can't get a job. This is also a big risk for guides.* Pritam and Deepesh's words exemplify the very complex social minefield local mountain workers must navigate to both keep themselves and their clients safe and satisfied. These conditions are often not considered when this profession is determined to be a 'good job' based on the salary.

The commercialization of Nepal's mountains grew exceptionally after a billionaire oil magnate summited Chomolungma in 1985 which introduced the idea and marketing strategy that "anyone can climb Chomolungma for a fee" (Amore, 2019). The Nepali government issues permit to just about anyone who can pay the fee of 11.000 USD regardless of their experience. Hence, novice climbers and trekkers without sufficient

experience outsource risk to local workers who must guide them step by step to the top. Trekking and climbing are inherently dangerous sports, climbing more so than trekking but there is always danger involved while moving amongst mountains. Although both clients and workers are moving through the same landscape the risk for workers is usually higher. In Chandra's case, the alleviated risk is directly connected to the share amount of time he spends climbing in dangerous environments with heavy packs. Inexperienced climbers add huge risk to local workers who must set up lines to the summits and put ladders over crevasses, and as Karan said: *babysit* climbers to the summit. Workers also carry up huge loads to facilitate services clients might expect on the climb: tents, food, and oxygen are carried by workers and add significant risk both directly and for future body aches. Working above base camp on Chomolungma is ten times more dangerous than the most dangerous non-military job in the US and has a mortality rate of 1,2 percent. As stated in an Outside Magazine article, "There is no other service industry in the world that so frequently kills and maims its workers for the benefit of paying clients" (Schaffer, 2013). Death in mountaineering is often perceived as a risk the climber freely accepts by starting the trip (Banff Center for Arts and Creativity, 2017). And although this is applicable for those who are choosing to climb, this logic should not be extended to the local workforce given the many social and economic constraints that might have forced them to take the job.

Some trekking tourists do recognize the negative impacts their trek might have. Maria, for example, told me: *My guide saved my life by pushing me away from a landslide. He got hit instead. After that incident, I was very concerned about his safety, he is also my friend. I think he did step away [from guiding] for a while but then he needed the income, so he went back. My impression is that they have less choice, they put themselves in harm's way because they need to feed themselves. When my guide got hit, I felt bad, he was there because I hired him and if I was not trekking, he would not be in that situation.* Those who are aware, like Maria, often try and make up for the lack of salary and high risk by tipping at the end of the trip. Although this can be financially helpful it does not question or change the structures that have left most workers dissatisfied and exploited. Pritam notes the problematic relationship that tips can create. *The extra money can be good for workers, but I always tell my staff not to expect tips. I pay my staff well and they know their salary from the beginning, their salary will not change if the client cannot summit. If staff is dependent on tips and summit bonuses, they might take on more risk since some clients get upset if they ask them to turn back. That is very dangerous.* Although tips are an efficient way for tourists to add to the lacking salaries it also creates power dynamics that are difficult for workers to navigate.

When asked what changes are needed for more fair working conditions Pritam answered: *the main issue is that we don't have fixed prices for tours. Agencies are competing to offer the lowest price and all tourists want to bargain.* Deepesh explains the repercussions: *If my client gets a cheaper price from someone else, I must decrease my price, and that tightens the budget which means I cannot take care of my staff or give the best experience to clients which then decreases the tips as they are not getting what they expected – but they still want the cheap price.* Pritam continues, *instead, all prices need to be equal, set prices for tours, and no bargaining. Workers should also be paid well with fixed salaries. Summit bonuses and tips should be included in the salary from the start. It's not the guide's fault if the client cannot continue. Workers should get their full salary even if they must turn around. That would be safer as guides won't push on because they need the bonus.* According to data collected in Thamel, spring 2023, porters on the Everest base camp trek were paid on average 22.2 USD/day and guides 27.8 USD/day. After expenses covering accommodation and food, they were left with 12.1 USD and 17.7 USD per day (Appendix 2). These numbers were given by the agencies that hire guides and porters, when workers were asked directly the reported salaries were often lower. The highest earning potential is found when working and especially guiding on Chomolungma which can, according to Dashper & Wilson (2022, 7) pay up to 3000-6000 USD for a season (about 30-60 USD/day). However, as Chandra and other studies have mentioned, most workers on Chomolungma take home a significantly lower amount after expenses are paid (Dashper & Wilson 2022; Frydenlund, 2019; Khadka & Paul, 2015; Mu & Nepal 2015; Miller & Mair 2019; Ortner 1999).

For mountain tourism to be able to offer good jobs and fulfill Pritam's and Deepesh's recommendations, a regulatory framework is needed. Today the only regulations are *recommendations* created by the Trekking Agencies Association of Nepal (TAAN), the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Civil Aviation (MOTCCA), the Nepal Tourism Board (NTB), together with various workers' unions that in theory should assure insurance and minimum wage for guides and porters (Khadka & Paul 2015; TAAN interview; JOTUFF interview). These recommendations however often lack enforcement as they are, contrary to common beliefs, not laws and TAAN cannot force its members (trekking agencies) to adhere to these recommendations. *We cannot punish our members [if they don't follow recommendations] we don't want to hurt their business* (TAAN interview). Soneeya, a trekking guide adds: *We have regulations, but they are not followed. People still get so little pay. I cried the first time I went to Solukhumbu – old porters were carrying heavily for minimal salaries.* As of April 2023, recommended salaries were, for porters around 12 USD per day and around 16 USD for guides depending on region (TAAN interview; JOTUF interview). These recommendations

were, during spring 2023, up for revision as workers' unions tried to get them raised by 40%, something TAAN did not agree with (TAAN interview; JOTUF interview). However, at the time of this thesis publication, the above-mentioned number was the latest released. Most agencies report to be paying above the recommended salary yet dissatisfaction with pay rates is still prevalent throughout the industry. TAAN is one of the most powerful actors when it comes to deciding these recommendations, yet TAAN's loyalty lies with its members. TAAN argues that it is not their responsibility to make sure members follow recommendations: *If agencies are paying too little, workers must complain to the Department of Labor*. This, however, ignores the social relationships that might make workers hesitant to complain – they might fear they'll lose their job, or they might be hired by family members they don't want to report. In conclusion, these recommendations have done little to ensure the quality of these jobs as they are only recommendations and not legally binding which limits the chance that they will be adhered to. In addition, the dissatisfaction with pay rates and working conditions today reveals the ineffectiveness of these recommendations, implemented or not.

The most noticeable positive effect of the recommendations is the increase in life insurance from 400 USD before 2014 to up to 15,000 USD today (Dashper & Wilson 2019). This was implemented as a response to the 2014 strike on Chomolungma where guides and porters canceled the climbing season to demand better working conditions after 16 local workers died in the Kombu icefall (Khadka & Paul, 2019). The strike exemplifies a rare event where a marginalized workforce successfully demanded better conditions with little to no support from international actors (Dashper & Wilson, 2019; Frydenlund, 2019). However, even though life insurance is standard in the industry it is often not covering the necessary costs. A high-altitude helicopter rescue is often far more expensive than the cover from the insurance (Schaffer, 2013). Many families who have lost breadwinners to the mountaineering profession still struggle to cover the funeral cost and cost of living and as a result, it has become commonplace for clients to start public fundraisers to raise money for the families of their employees. This goes to show that the protective laws are too weak and the (too low) minimum has become the standard. *Pritam* highlights the lack of responsibility and action from the government. *If the government acted, they could fix the problem in two days, with rules and regulations it is not hard, but they don't want to, they don't care.*

Despite the above accounts, most workers are not against mountain tourism. They simply wish for better salaries, working conditions, and respect. To turn mountain jobs into 'good jobs', the structures of the industry itself need changing. Changes within the industry that gives autonomy and protection to workers could, according to most

interviewees, turn the **trekking** tourism industry into something positive for locals. For trekking guides, this should mean better salaries. But for porters a better salary alone is not sufficient, as wrecking your body while carrying as much as 70+ kg cannot be compensated monetarily, here strict regulations of maximum loads are needed. However, as we venture up to higher altitudes the positive effects of structural changes are limited. Trekking workers could be sufficiently protected through effective and legally binding regulations but for climbing and high-altitude workers reality is different. I asked Aanand, a high-altitude trekking guide, what changes he wished to see for a more fair industry: *Given the lower risk of trekking, that could be a good job if structural changes are made, but for mountaineering, the only solution I see is to stop guiding, it's too dangerous to be a job. I'm not saying we can or should stop people from climbing but if you want to climb you should go with a team of experienced climbers who are choosing to be there. Only self-organized trips with a team who knows what they are doing. No more being able to buy safety from locals. This would decrease the number of deaths and it would give the mountains a break.* He concludes that to better the industry – to de-colonize it from its oppressive structures – it needs to be greatly restructured and partly dismantled.

I have offered some strong criticism against the notion of these types of jobs as good. However, it should be noted that the industry is a significant job provider and for some (mostly trekking guides with a choice) it has created truly good jobs, but for the majority, this is not the case. The existence of a job does not assure fair conditions and the current structure (or lack thereof) has created and survived off exploitative conditions. As Gita noted: *Tourism has helped a lot of the mountain villages, but it needs to be systematized, rich people control the industry [...] poor and marginalized communities sometimes get nothing.* Stories from the local workforce make it clear that although trekking tourism holds great potential it has a long way to go before it can offer local workers enough autonomy, salary, and safety for the job to truly be good. When it comes to climbing tourism's ability to become fair, the future looks bleaker as the industry depends on the devaluation of local workers to function in its current state.

### **Justification of Working Conditions**

If the precarious and dangerous working conditions that Nepal's mountain workers face were observed in a Western country, they would most likely be protested, yet in Nepal, they continue without much pushback from tourists or the industry. Through my conversations with local workers, local agencies, and tourists I observed a few common themes that were used as a justification for these conditions. I have listed the main ones below followed by a deeper dive into where this reasoning stems from.

***He is my best friend; they are all like family to me.***

Dough's words exemplify a common belief that local workers are family and friends, not employees. This offers a social circumstance that can, for the tourist, alleviate some of the potential guilt of having someone else take on your bags and risk for very little pay. It is common that a strong bond and genuine relationship to be created between the local guide and/or porter and the client. But, as Purtschert (2020) stated: friendship is not an antidote to colonialism. Similar to the arrangements of Tenzing and Lambert's relationship, which was introduced earlier, there are certain conditions that make up the relationship between workers and clients that affects the 'friendship'. Guides and porters are paid and regardless of their dedication to their jobs, they would not likely be risking their lives for someone else's dreams if monetary compensation was not involved. *Most people work in the mountains because they need money, it's not true for all, but most people would not work in the mountains if they had another choice.*

Pritam's words indicate that the stereotype of the forever smiling Nepali worker, who through becoming a friend rather than an employee 'willingly' takes on weight and risk, is a fabricated phenomenon maintained by someone's need for money and someone else's willingness to interpret commodified work for a friendship.

***Clients expect you to be like a bull or donkey, they don't think you can also get tired.***

Nishu, a trekking guide and Chomolungma summiteer's, words introduce the all-too-common connection between Nepali workers and the strength of animals that creates another justification for these working conditions. Maanya, a female trekking guide adds: *I was feeling tired, so I stopped and took an extra breath, and then a client asked: "do you even get tired?". It felt like she saw me as a robot, as her paying me made me into a robot, am I not allowed to be human and get tired?*

The local workforce, especially those from the Sherpa community has gained an almost mythical and idolized identity in the industry where they are posed as superhuman or perhaps, non-human beings with animal-like strength. Although this identity seemingly offers recognition of their strength and skill it has not resulted in fair working conditions but to the contrary practically justifies the opposite. Their supposed super/non-human capacities have been used as a justification for the many risks, responsibilities, and inhumane working conditions that are placed on them by tourists and the tourism industry. They are perceived as so strong that humane working conditions are not needed. As Lina, a trekking tourist argued: *they can take the hard work [because] they have huge resources that are natural for them. They are like fighters; they are like dogs.* Comparing the local workforce and their strength to animals further dehumanizes them and puts them outside of the sphere of moral considerations.

Their ability to deal with the workload is glorified and the workload is thus justified rather than questioned as inhumane.

***10 USD might not sound like much, but for these guys, it is.***

Robert's words bring us back to the illusion of any mountain job as a predominately good job, which is perhaps the narrative that is mostly used as a justification for these working conditions. Arguing that working in the mountains is overall a good job requires overlooking the many accounts of dissatisfaction and concerns that are voiced by local workers. Although some mountain jobs do offer good earning possibilities and those who have more autonomy over their situation are often satisfied with their jobs, it is impossible to deny the many harsh, dangerous, and inhumane working conditions that trekking and adventure tourism have created in Nepal. Even though the salary is above the national average that does not equate to fair working conditions. Robert's words, therefore, need a spoonful of denial to be digested.

The lack of knowledge, consideration, and interest in the working conditions of guides and porters demonstrated by tourists in my research can be seen as a type of 'not my country'-rhetoric where bad working conditions get justified by pinning them down to a perceived commonplace in the country the tourist travel to. The lack of resemblance to the tourist's 'normal' is even somewhat fetishized to add to the desired story of the lawless Eastern country the tourist so bravely has traveled to. Risking your life for 10 USD a day while supporting someone else's dream gets accepted by Robert's words presented above, leaving one to wonder if a country's average salary somehow, in Nepal, has come to measure the value of a life.

***We sherpas are strong – an internalized superhuman identity.***

While traveling along the Annapurna circuit I met Erjun. Erjun was accompanied by a 70 kg pack filled with tourists' personal items and climbing equipment that he carried for 11 USD a day. I asked Erjun how it felt to carry such a heavy pack for so long. He answered with a shrug of his shoulders and a simple: *What to do?*

Through the many conversations and interviews I had throughout my research it became painfully clear that the tourism industry in Nepal, and the lacking regulatory involvement from the government, is failing to protect and accurately compensate the people that are sustaining it. Local workers widely describe inhumane working conditions, and lack of protection and autonomy but also seem to have accepted their situation. *If tourists needed to carry their own oxygen, they would not be able to summit, so it's our duty to get them to the summit safely. Carrying oxygen is not an*



*issue for me, we sherpas are strong. The problem is the pay, it's too little.* Pritam's words exemplify the strong dedication to a perceived duty workers tend to have towards their job. *My biggest motivation is to help climbers reach their dreams, it's my responsibility to make them successful.* Chandra's words echo Pritam's, and both demonstrate the generosity of Nepali workers. However, both Chandra and Pritam also expressed dissatisfaction with their working conditions and Chandra asserted that if given the chance he would not be climbing mountains and taking huge risks for a low salary. It seems then that the dedication to helping tourists reach summits is not sprung from a love of the job itself but rather from a perceived duty to maintain the image of the sherpa and from an internalized belief that the sherpa identity (as created by the industry) carries honor – and of course from a need of money. The superhuman sherpa identity locks locals into a situation where they must take on huge workloads and risks in order to maintain this image and continue to be seen as extraordinary. I argue that this is seated in the colonial relationships that have permeated the industry since its start and have affected the way the local workforce views themselves. I asked Badal why he thinks clients are happy to pay Western guides more money but come to Nepal and bargain: *Nepali people are a bit shy; we think of ourselves as we are low.* Badal indicates that there is an internalized belief amongst local workers, conscious or not, that they are themselves different and subaltern.

Without discounting the voices that genuinely feel like it is their duty to *get them [clients] to the summit safely*, as Pritam put it, this narrative cannot be considered in a vacuum. Just like tourists, workers seem to justify their working conditions by leaning on the sherpa identity created around strength, duty, and historical and colonial tropes. Explaining that carrying heavy oxygen for tourists is not an issue since *the sherpa are strong* is one example of the power of the sherpa identity. However, Maanya's desire to be acknowledged as a human being that does get tired rather than seen as an invincible sherpa questions the sherpa identity and calls out the ways it harmfully justifies inhumane working conditions by othering and dehumanizing the local workforce – effectively trapping them in a subaltern position. The justification of working conditions by locals by way of internalization of the sherpa identity, therefore, seems to function more as a tool for enduring rather than an expression of workers' true opinion.

### **Keeping the Story Alive by Devaluing Local Lives**

The above rationalizations of working conditions have not appeared out of thin air but are rather the symptoms of a carefully narrated story told about Nepal. As noted above this story is rooted in early imperialistic mountaineering where this beautiful vertical nation was reduced to a place for foreigners to come and 'conquer' some of the most

‘remote’ places on earth and tick items off a bucket list to feed their egos. Locals play a part in this story but have not been allowed to write it.

White Westerners have dominated both the mountaineering sport and adventure literature – their accounts of the early expeditions were rife with ethnographic storytelling that put the local population in the background and erased them by equating them with the landscape (Purtschert, 2020). Central to this storytelling is the creation of ‘wilderness’ as a place far removed from ‘civilized’ human societies. The ‘wild’ has been a key element of the romantic allure the outdoor adventure industry has leaned on for years and Nepal is not an exception. However, in most places, the wilderness was never as wild as depicted and the remoteness was never so remote. People have inhabited these ‘wild’ places for centuries, but they now had to be erased to leave room for the ‘wild’ to flourish in adventure storytelling. Wilderness, in this way, is a Western fairytale concept that allows those who can afford it to escape an ‘ordinary’ life in pursuit of an extraordinary adventure. Included in this escape, however, is too often also the escape of consideration for the effects of these adventures on the host communities (Amor, 2017). The creation of the sherpa identity is perhaps the clearest example of this colonial storytelling that erases and silenced the local workers. By consistently referring to the entire local workforce as ‘sherpas’ rather than using their names, or correct ethnicity, tourists (and agencies) create a mystical sherpa identity and a nameless homogenous group where individuals and their feats in the mountains get lost (Dashper & Wilson, 2022, 7; De Jesus, 2021).

The mystification of local workers as ‘sherpas’ is nothing less than a fetishization that allows tourism and the industry to make workers hyper-visible and simultaneously invisible, to tell stories about them but not give them proper credit, acknowledgment, or space to tell their own stories. In the story of Nepal, local workers play the role of the supernatural representation of local cultures that add mysticism to the story but are simultaneously being kept enough part of the landscape (dehumanized) to not pose a threat to the ‘untouched wild’ the tourist wants to visit. Adventure tourism relies on maintaining the myth of wilderness almost as much as it relies on the anonymity, dehumanization, and exploitation of local communities and workers. Locals are allowed space in the story only as a backdrop – included enough to maintain the story yet excluded enough for the negative impacts of mass tourism to be conveniently pushed to the side. In this way, local workers are **valuable but not valued** – valuable for the story but not valued as human beings. Julia Michiko Hiro says, “The tourism industry traffics in both memory and amnesia” (Hori, 2018, 672). Which in Nepal is noticeable in how glorified colonial tropes of conquering nature are remembered as tourists tick adventures off their bucket lists, while the implications of the social asymmetries

mountaineering have created, and continues to create, are conveniently forgotten. As Bani Amor (2017) puts it, “mass tourism and colonial occupation are often one and the same, and POC bodies, cultures, and lands are the exotic dominion of the settler [tourist]”. Gita concludes *people come here and think that just because they have paid, they own you – that you have to do everything [for them]*.

*Today the only ones who actually climb are those setting the routes, the rest are just pulling on ropes.* Dev’s words expose a crack in the romantic story of mountaineering in Nepal. Although the physical act of getting their body up the mountain is (most often) a client’s own achievement, everything else is managed and served to them by the local workforce. Today anyone with a big enough wallet can climb by outsourcing risk and a lot of the work to local workers. (Driscoll, 2020). Even professional mountaineers climbing alpine style (without fixed rope or help) still utilize ladders over crevasses and porters to get their equipment to the starting line. Kami Rita Sherpa shares: “The sherpas [...] fix the ropes and the foreigners give interviews saying Everest is easier or talk about their courage, but they forget the contribution of the Sherpa. Sherpas have struggled a lot to make it happen, we suffer” (Boren, 2019).

There is perhaps no other place where the story of adventure is so prominent yet perverted as in Nepal in general and with Chomolungma in specific. The mountain has become the pinnacle of adventure storytelling and agencies are selling the highest peak on earth as the ultimate conquest of nature at its wildest. However, Chomolungma has long lost its remoteness and has today instead become a commercialized giant scaled by hundreds of people every year – people who can devour three-course dinners at base camp, have their sleeping pads inflated for them at camp four, and pull on pre-fixed ropes all the way to the top thanks to the local workforce. Service and accessibility have since long pushed away adventure on Chomolungma’s holy slopes by way of sacrificing the local workers. In other words, the story the tourism industry relies on, where clients can come to conquer their dreams at high altitudes, regardless of their previous experience, demands local workers to risk their lives. The local workforce is by far the most frequent victim of the Nepali mountains. 111 Nepali climbers have died on Chomolungma as of 2022. The runner-up nationalities in the death toll are India and Japan with 19 and the UK with 17. Locals’ deaths are often shrugged off as an unfortunate yet inevitable consequence of standing on top of the world, their lives are devalued to provide a service as their importance to keeping the industry going is valued above their lives (Schaffer, 2013).

Not only are they forgotten as they die but their contribution to the industry is rarely recognized. Nishu told me: *it’s so sad when the local workers don’t get recognition.*

*They are doing all the work, but the credit goes to the client. Gita adds: When they pay you, it sometimes becomes a slave relationship, the money erases locals as athletes, and they are only seen as workers. Most take the sherpas for granted because it is their job and they think that because they have been paid for it, they don't need to give recognition. But the lack of recognition has consequences. The social capital of big mountain climbing grants a person who climbs 8000+ peaks a certain social status that will provide financial as well as social opportunities. Many climbers go home to start careers as inspirational speakers or brand ambassadors while the local workforce who made the climb possible becomes a mere footnote in the story – purposefully forgotten anonymized, and dehumanized (Dashper & Wilson, 2020). Nishu concludes: When this kind of limelight is given it creates opportunities, but the opportunities are often given to the wrong people – not the locals.*

The way the world perceives, and respects Nepali (POC) climbers vastly differs from the way Western (white) climbers are perceived. Like Pritam, a mountain guide told me: *high-level media are run by Western people, not Nepalis, so they [show] what they want. That way white people are always on the front pages.* Nishu said: *Western mountain guides are treated like superheroes. We are more treated like slaves or an animal. There is a lot of racism behind that, and it affects our salaries.* Boris, a trekking tourist told me: *For a snowboard guide in the US, I pay 200 USD per day and that's okay. This trek [in Nepal] is way less, but they said this price, so I accepted that. I don't know how much goes to the guide though.* Boris's willingness to pay 200 USD a day to his US snowboard guide but lack of knowledge of what his Nepali guide was paid is one example of the lack of respect for Nepali workers.

A high-earning local climbing guide on Chomolungma can make up to 6000 USD for a two-month season, but a Western guide who is not doing the hard physical labor but is in charge of client communication can make up to 50.000 USD for the same season (even though Western guides are technically not allowed to work in Nepal) (Schaffer, 2013). Aanand expressed his frustration: *Why don't they want to pay the same to us as they would a guide in their own country? We are not even asking half the price and they still come here and bargain with us, fuck them.* Nepali climbers are constantly separated and othered from their international colleagues although both are providing the same service of keeping clients alive. I argue that these difference in treatment and salary stems from a colonial, West-centric, and racist mindset that dominates the industry.

Nishu gives another example: *My main concern is that when international travelers come here, they don't listen to or respect the local workers. [When I climbed Everest] there was a European guy that did not use his safety equipment and one of the guides*

told him to use it and then this guy snapped and said, “What the fuck are you talking about, I’m more experienced than you, who are you to tell me?”. I felt bad for the guide, his intention was not to dominate but to keep the client safe. Nishu’s experience with the lack of respect is shared by Chandra: *After we bring the client home safe, they are often appreciative, but some don’t even say goodbye and are very ungrateful. That is always hurtful.* Maanika adds that: *there should be more respect for guides and porters, they should be equal to the tourists.*

Badal told me a story about an expedition to Manaslu. While delivering equipment to camp one, Badal and his team of seven workers got caught in an avalanche, one lost their life and two more got injured. *The sherpas were carrying oxygen for them [the clients] and even though two were injured and one dead they wanted to continue. I and the sherpas wanted to give up, stay safe, and grieve but the clients did not, they said “We have paid money”.* Badal laughs. The clients get their will, and they continue towards camp one but are turned around by the weather. On the way down another worker gets caught in an avalanche and dies. Finally, the clients accept defeat and end the expedition. Badal concludes: *Two sherpas had to die for them to give up.* He laughs again but there is only frustration in his eyes. On top of the physical risk and strenuous work, local workers also have to continuously confront having their lives diminished and devalued as they work.

When asked if he felt like his life was valued the same as a tourist's, Deepesh had a quick answer: *No.* He elaborates: *If I fell down from lack of oxygen, they [clients] would not help me, that is very sad.* Santosh, a high-altitude trekking guide, concurs: *If you run out of oxygen there is a high chance no one will give you oxygen and leave you to die. A guide is expected to risk their life for a tourist, but a tourist would never do the same for a guide. Their lives are not valued the same. Human morality is dying up there.* Chandra adds: *The only help we would get if something happened is from other support staff. We can’t expect any help from the clients.* These words exemplify how different life on the mountain is depending on whether you pay or get paid. The myth of man versus (only) nature falls as local climbers must deal with far more risks and difficulties than only those posed by nature. In the current constellation of Nepal’s adventure tourism, economic and social dynamics puts the responsibility and risk on Nepali workers for the benefit of paying clients. It is not man versus the elements anymore, it’s the local workforce carrying risks that are not theirs in order to make a living while dying without consideration. As Badal puts it: *Some clients feel that if they only pay it will be safe for them, that we will take all the risk, that is not easy to deal with. But you must deal, you have to manage.*

When the local workforce raises concerns and discontent about their working conditions, they are rarely listened to. When I told Simon, a trekking tourist, about the many stories of bad working conditions, disrespect, and structural issues I had heard, he dismissed it by simply saying *I think they [local workers] just know what to say for people to feel sorry for them*. Simon does not represent all tourists' opinions as many do care about workers, but his words reflect how easy it is to dismiss local voices because of a lack of understanding. It is unlikely that workers would voice their dissatisfaction with a client who is in direct contact with their employer. Hence many tourists are sold a palpable version of reality that they happily accept and trust even when locals express contrasting experiences. The concept of the subaltern proves helpful to understand the situation of Nepali workers. Workers' voices, lives, and experiences are not heard, or respected, which allows oppressive structures to continue. Western tourists and media trust their own limited understanding of the situation above the direct words of local workers. This is an example of what Spivak calls the subaltern state. Local workers can and are voicing their experiences but are denied space and respect.

The arrangements that have turned locals into part of the background, dehumanized and erased them, taken away their credit as they climb, silenced their voices as they speak, and neglected them as they die, are only possible because their lives are valued less. It is only possible because they are othered so far into the periphery of moral consideration that their deaths and dangerous working conditions are justified and sanctioned. This is a result of a colonial and West-centric mindset that lingers in the industry and has made Nepali bodies subaltern and matter less than Western tourists. Those who work in the mountains are seen as strong enough to climb any mountain but not human enough to be seen as 'true' mountaineers, get sufficient pay, or have their lives matter.

## Conclusion

This study has critically examined the mountain tourism industry in Nepal, focusing on job creation, impacts on Nepali culture, working conditions, and the way the industry justifies these conditions by devaluing local workers. The widely held perception that tourism has a net positive influence has proven to be a much too simplified and largely inaccurate version of reality in Nepal's mountains. Although the industry does provide jobs, it fails to adequately compensate, protect, and respect the local workforce.

Complex social and economic power dynamics that stem from colonial relationships and West-centric ideals are structurally embedded in the industry and present formidable barriers to the autonomy of local workers and the formation of equitable working conditions. In addition, the Western style of mountaineering in which

mountains become a place of conquest rather than worship, has created a cultural shift whereby local communities are compelled to let go of traditional relationships to mountains and integrate Western mountaineering culture in order to make a living. This pushes local traditions into the periphery, together with the dehumanized local worker, to make room for paying clients to climb and trek mountains no matter the consequences. The lasting effects of colonial power dynamics have privileged some bodies over others giving them the ability to place risk on local workers under the pretense of creating good jobs. In the eyes of the industry local workers are deemed expendable and are placed outside of moral consideration for the benefit of paying customers and economic profit. This is a fundamental structure the current system depends on to function.

As long as local workers are not recognized, respected, and given autonomy in their work, no monetary compensation will be enough to address the complex struggles the workforce face. The accounts presented in the analysis above call for a change in the way tourists and the tourism industry relate to local workers and the way they show them respect. Giving local workers their autonomy and power would require an almost complete reconstruction and perhaps de-construction of the industry which would have to include proper engagement from the government and legally binding regulations. To value local workers' lives would be to not sacrifice them on the altar of (others') adventures. This, however, would make most mountaineering tourism in the Himalayas impossible – which illuminates the unsustainable and inhumane structures the industry depends on. Perhaps it is time to question commercial mountaineering altogether and ask whether someone's desire to reach a summit can ever justify the toll satisfying that desire takes on local workers and their communities. Mellissa Arnot, a US mountaineer, shared after her Nepali guide died: “My passion created an industry that fosters people dying. It supports humans as disposable, as usable, and that is the hardest thing to come to terms with” (quoted in Schaffer, 2013). Maybe, this is not something to “come to terms with” but rather something we should rebuke.

My focus for this thesis has been on Nepal's mountain tourism industry where the disproportions of respect and power are painfully obvious. However, these structures are characteristic of most places where tourism economies dominate society as tourism tends to create and survive off complex social and economic power dynamics that exploit locals. To decolonize tourism the dynamics that dehumanize and subaltern locals need to be addressed along with the lasting effects of colonialism that have created the racialized categories that locals are placed in to be diminished and exploited. This can only be done if local workers, their voices, and their values are allowed to lead the way in (re)forming the industry.

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## Appendix

### Appendix 1

#### *Initial interviews with local workers*

| Name    | Profession   | Place                  | Time  |
|---------|--|------------------------|---|
| Gita    | Trekking guide & Program Coordinator at Global Inclusive Adventure Nepal | Lazimpat, Kathmandu    | 90 min (group interview with, Syama, Aadita & Maanya) |
| Sumi    | Trekking guide   | Durbar Marg, Kathmandu | 90 min (group interview with Gavya, Aadita & Maanya)  |
| Aditi   | Trekking guide   | Durbar Marg, Kathmandu | 90 min (group interview with Gavya, Syama & Maanya)   |
| Maanya  | Trekking guide   | Durbar Marg, Kathmandu | 90 min (group interview with Gavya, Syama & Aadita)   |
| Nishu   | Trekking guide & Everest summiteer                                       | Naya Bazaar, Kathmandu | 60 min  |
| Santosh | Trekking guide   | Patan                  | 120 min (group interview with Aanand)                 |
| Aanand  | High-altitude trekking guide   | Patan                  | 120 min (group interview with Paak)                   |
| Maanika | Trekking guide and member of ladies' mountain league                     | Naya Bazaar, Kathmandu | 60 min  |
| Pema    | Trekking guide and Sherpa  | Boudha                 | 50 min  |
| Min     | Trekking guide and Sherpa  | Boudha                 | 60 min  |
| Kumar   | Trekking guide   | Thamel, Kathmandu      | 30 min  |

#### *Interviews with local workers, second round*

| Name  | Profession     | Where             | Time                               |
|-------|----------------|-------------------|------------------------------------|
| Badal | Mountain guide | Thamel, Kathmandu | 60 min (group interview with Daav) |

|         |  |                   |                                       |
|---------|--|-------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Dev     | Mountain guide and owner of a trekking agency. Sherpa  | Thamel, Kathmandu | 60 min (group interview with Badal)   |
| Pritam  | Mountain guide and Sherpa                              | Thamel, Kathmandu | 45 min                                |
| Karan   | Trekking guide and adventure tourist master student    | Boudha            | 90 min (group interview with Chandra) |
| Chandra | Mountain guide and high-altitude support guide. Sherpa | Boudha            | 90 min (group interview with Karan)   |
| Deepesh | Mountain guide and co-owner of trekking agency         | Thamel, Kathmandu | 50 min                                |
| Adesh   | Mountain guide   | Thamel, Kathmandu | 45 min                                |
| Soneeya | Trekking guide   | Pokhara           | 40 min                                |

*Interview with other actors in the industry*

| Name    | Profession  | Where                | Time   |
|---------|---|----------------------|--------|
| Maala   | Mountain guide and founder of Global inclusive adventure organization | Lazimpat, Kathmandu. | 45 min |
| Radha   | Founder of Radha Paudel organization                                  | New Road, Kathmandu  | 90 min |
| Pemfuti | Trekking guide and owner of a trekking agency. Co-creator of GHT      | Thamel, Kathmandu    | 60 min |
| Thomas  | Trekker & trekking agency owner                                       | Lazimpat, Kathmandu  | 90 min |
| Sweta   | Social worker   | Thamel, Kathmandu    | 60 min |
| TAAN    | Trekking agency association of Nepal                                  | TAAN office          | 90 min |
| JOTUF   | Joint Tourism Trade Union Forum                                       | Tourism Board Office | 40 min |

*Interviews with tourists*

| Name   | From         | Trekked  | Place                         | Time                                       |
|--------|--------------|--|-------------------------------|--|
| Peter  | Canada       | Part of APC  | Marpha,<br>Lower<br>Mustang   | 15 min                                     |
| Maria  | Canada       | EBC, Upper<br>Mustang                              | Kagbeni,<br>Lower<br>Mustang  | 45 min (group<br>interview with<br>Doug)   |
| Doug   | United Sates | Many<br>previous<br>treks. Now<br>upper<br>Mustang | Kagbeni,<br>Lower<br>Mustang  | 45 min (group<br>interview with<br>Maria)  |
| Robert | Canada       | Many<br>previous<br>treks. Now<br>upper<br>Mustang | Kagbeni,<br>Lower<br>Mustang  | 20 min (group<br>interview with<br>Susan)  |
| Susan  | Canada       | EBC, now<br>upper<br>mustang                       | Kagbeni,<br>Lower<br>Mustang. | 20 min (Group<br>interview with<br>Robert) |
| Lina   | Russia       | Upper<br>Mustang                                   | Kagbeni,<br>Lower<br>Mustang  | 20 min                                     |
| Boris  | Russia       | Upper<br>Mustang                                   | Kagbeni,<br>Lower<br>Mustang  | 15 min                                     |
| Mattis | Australia    | ABC  | Kagbeni,<br>Lower<br>Mustang  | 30 min                                     |
| Simon  | Portugal     | Lower<br>Mustang                                   | Kagbeni,<br>Lower<br>Mustang  | 30 min                                     |

## Appendix 2

### Data collected from trekking agencies

The gathering of this information was done in Thamel, the tourist district of Kathmandu. 10 different trekking agencies were asked questions about a 14-day, all-inclusive trek to Chomolungma (Everest) Base Camp. This trek is one of the most popular treks in Nepal and was chosen because of its popularity. Almost all trekking agencies offer it, and it was believed to be a good measurement of comparison between the agencies.

### To better understand the data, one should know:

4. All prices are in USD.
5. Agencies were randomly selected while walking around the district.
6. “All inclusive” includes the following but the quality of food and accommodation was not specified: Permits, Guide, Porter, Flights, ground transportation, accommodation and food x3/day

|                                  | Cost for EBC | Salary for guides/day | Salary for guides/day after expenses | Salary for porters/day | Salary for porters/day after expenses | Cost/day Guides | Cost/day Porters | Total salary (14 days) after expenses (guides) | Total salary (14 days) after expense (porters) | Where does porters stay?                  | Maximum carry weight | Insurance  | Female guides?                                      |
|----------------------------------|--------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------|------------------|--|--|---|----------------------|--|---|
| Pristine Nepal                   | 1400         | 25                    | 21                                   | 20                     | 11                                    | 4               | 9                | 294  | 154  | In separate porter lodges                 | 20 kg                | Health. No Helicopter rescue. Life insurance: 7500 | Not for EBC but Annapurna                           |
| Nepal Promote treks & expedition | 1654         | 25                    | 15                                   | 25                     | 15                                    | 10              | 10               | 210  | 210  | In separate porter lodges                 | 30 kg                | Health. No Helicopter rescue. Life insurance: 7500 | No  |
| View Nepal                       | 1300         | 35                    | 15                                   | 30                     | 10                                    | 20              | 20               | 210  | 140  | In separate porter lodges                 | 25 kg                | Health. No Helicopter, life insurance: 10.000      | Yes, 2 guides and porters. Porters carry only 10 kg |
| Trekking team group              | 1400         | 20                    | 20                                   | 15                     | 7                                     | FREE            | 8                | 280  | 98   | In separate porter lodges                 | 20 kg                | Health. Helicopter rescue. Life insurance: 10.000  | No  |
| Himalayan Spirit Adventure Trek  | 1375         | 25                    | 19                                   | 25                     | 19                                    | 6               | 6                | 266  | 266  | Same as tourist but in different place in | 20 kg                | Health. No Helicopter rescue. Life                 | No  |



|  |             |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |     |                           |       |  |  |
|--|-------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|-----|-----|---------------------------|-------|--|--|
|  |             |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |     | establishment             |       | insurance: 14000   |  |
| <b>Loyal travels &amp; Tours</b>           | <b>1800</b> | 55 | 30 | 36 | 12 | 15 | 15 | 420 | 168 | In separate porter lodges | 20 kg | Health, Helicopter rescue. Life insurance: 4500                            | Not on staff but can arrange                                     |
| <b>Manukkarana</b>                         | <b>1895</b> | 19 | 5  | 19 | 5  | 14 | 14 | 70  | 70  | In separate porter lodges | -     | Health, No Helicopter rescue   | No   |
| <b>Annapurna mountain trekking company</b> | <b>1200</b> | 19 | 10 | 19 | 10 | 9  | 9  | 140 | 140 | In separate porter lodges | 30 kg | Health. No Helicopter rescue   | No   |
| <b>Mountain trail company</b>              | <b>1695</b> | 20 | 14 | 15 | 5  | 6  | 10 | 196 | 70  | In separate porter lodges | 25 kg | Health. Helicopter rescue. Life insurance: 10.000. Yearly medical checkups | No   |
| <b>Eco travel</b>                          | <b>1330</b> | 35 | 20 | 18 | 10 | 15 | 8  | 280 | 140 | In separate porter lodges | 30 kg | Health, Helicopter rescue Life insurance: 4000                             | Not on staff for hiking but can arrange (have for rafting trips) |

### Data summary

The cost of the trek varied from 1050 - 1895 USD with an average of **1504,9 USD**

### *Guides*

7. Salary for guides varied between 20 – 55 USD with an average of **27,8 USD**.
8. The cost for guides to do the trek (food and accommodation) varied from free – 20 dollars with an average of **9,9 USD**.
9. The net average salary for one day: **17,7 USD**
10. The total salary for 14 days after expenses for guides varied between 70 – 280 USD with an average of **236,6 USD**.

### *Porters*

11. Salary for porters varied between 15 – 36 USD with an average of **22,2 USD**.
12. The cost for a porter during the trek (food and accommodation) varied from 6-20 USD with an average of **10,9 USD**.
13. Net total salary for one day: **12,1 USD**.

14. The total salary for 14 days after expenses for porters varied between 70 – 266 USD with an average of **145,6 USD**.
15. The maximum weight for porters to carry varied between 20-30 kg with an average of **24 kg**.
16. Out of 10 agencies only one claimed that their porters stayed in the same place as tourists but noted that they still stayed in a different part of the hotel.

### *Insurance*

All offered insurance for both guides and porters but only 4 of 10 included helicopter rescue in the insurance. Life insurance varied between 4000 – 14000 USD with an average of **7500 USD**.

### *Gender*

Out of the 10 agencies only 1 had female guides on staff for EBC-trek but 2 more could arrange when needed.

### **Takeaways:**

- Guides total salary varied greatly between agencies with 210 dollars between the biggest and lowest earner. This indicated that agencies set the salary and there is a lack of regulation or standardized salary even on the same trek.
- Porters pay on average 1 USD more for accommodation and food during the trek even though they earn on average 61,4% of what guides earn.
- Maximum carry weight for porters varies with 10 kg indicating that there is no standardized weight, and the safety of porters are in the hands of the agencies.
- Not keeping females on staff and only hiring females when asked for makes male guides the norm and leaves female employment in the hands of conscious tourists.
- Providing life insurance for staff is mandatory for agencies but what the insurance includes and how much it covers is not regulated which is reflected in the 10.000 USD difference in life insurance from the data collection.