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Stories from the Solukhumbu: Exploring the Complexities of the Adventure Tourism Industry of Nepal

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Title: Stories from the Solukhumbu: Exploring the Complexities of the Adventure Tourism Industry of Nepal

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Abstract:

Mountaineering is the cornerstone of Nepal's \$370-million-a-year adventure tourism industry. Each year, Climbing Sherpas lead foreign mountaineers (paying clients) up the southeast ridge of Mt. Everest as they make their bids for the summit. These Sherpas commit themselves to securing and saving the lives of their clients by doing much of the dangerous labour, often jeopardising their own lives in the process (Davis, 2014; National Public Radio [NPR], 2013; Peedom, 2015).

Social justice concerns arise as tensions grow between the international demand to climb and the risks and fatalities associated with summit attempts. Mountaineering is an extreme sport, historically reserved for highly skilled climbers. However, it is becoming increasingly blurred with our understandings of adventure tourism, as a recreational activity open to anyone with the financial means to participate. Consequently, the industry is critiqued for the ways in which people with "means," regardless of experience, pursue mountains like Mt. Everest (Davis, 2014; Shaffer, 2013). Moreover, within current mountaineering, tourism, and leisure discourses, perspectives from Sherpas have been limited (notable exceptions are Bott, 2009; Ortner, 1999). Stemming from critiques of Nepal's growing adventure tourism industry, and recognising the centrality of Sherpas' roles within it, this presentation considers Climbing Sherpas' stories of living and dying in mountaineering within the Solukhumbu (commonly known as the Mt. Everest Region) of Nepal. Drawing on fieldwork observations and audio- and video-recorded interviews conducted in Nepal in 2015, this narrative inquiry explored the stories of current and retired Climbing Sherpas to glean insights around how they experience life and death on the mountainside. In this presentation, visual representations (e.g., film excerpts) are used to privilege Sherpas' voices in this presentation, decentering dominant narratives (e.g., foreign climbers, media accounts) (Bochner, 2001; Pink, 2007, 2015). As the Climbing Sherpas have a vital role to play with regard to the sustainable development of Nepal's mountaineering and adventure tourism industries, it is imperative that tourism researchers continue to include and consider their voices and complex stories.

Analysis of narrative findings reveals an interplay of death, pride, responsibility, and power in experiences of freedom on the mountainside. Sherpas' participation in mountaineering expeditions is reflective of socio-economic pressures faced off the mountain, but is also increasingly related to the perceived name and fame that comes with successful mountain summits. Furthermore, encounters with death provide a space to critique tourism development. Sherpas affected by disasters, death, and the like find themselves "betwixt and between" (Turner, 1969, p. 95). Liminality, an anthropological concept introduced by Arnold van Gennep (1960), becomes transformative, as Sherpas and their communities use these moments of uncertainty to take stock of the purpose of their lives, mobilize agency, and challenge the status quo of the "Everest Industry."

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