Writing Traveling Cultures: Travel and Ethnography amongst the Yakkha of East Nepal

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Abstract This article addresses the debates surrounding Clifford’s paper ‘Traveling Cultures’ and its argument that greater attention should be paid to ‘routes’ as well as ‘roots’ in anthropological research. It is based on research into the socio-cultural effects and outcomes of migration amongst the Yakkha, a Tibeto-Burman ethnic group originating in the middle hills of East Nepal. It considers the methodological implications of Clifford’s approach through the description and analysis of thirty-six hours spent in the company of a Yakkha family and friends in the Nepalese Tarai, serendipitously encountered while the author was ‘en route’. The conclusion drawn is that Clifford’s ‘strong’ form of ‘fieldwork as travel practice’ is more difficult to justify than his ‘softer’ suggestion that ‘routes’ and ‘roots’ be studied together.

Keywords Nepal, travel, ethnography, Yakkha, migration

This article is based on research into the socio-cultural effects and outcomes of migration amongst the Yakkha, a Tibeto-Burman ethnic group situated in the middle hills of East Nepal who, like many similar ethnic groups in the country, have spread widely to other parts of Nepal, northeast India, and beyond. The Yakkha have been largely ‘missing’ from anthropological and ethnological studies of Nepal. From 1989–90 I spent twenty-one months based in the village of Tamaphok (known as Tumok in Yakkha), a dispersed, predominantly Yakkha settlement of about 2,000 people in the middle-hill district of Sankhuwasabha, East Nepal, situated at an altitude of 4,000–7,000 feet. This village could be said to be one of the heartlands of Yakkha ‘culture’. The question of what constitutes Yakkha identity is a complex one, even in Nepal (Russell 1997). However, as an ethnic group in their own right with their own sense of identity and belonging, the Yakkha have barely appeared on the ethnographic map.
Nepal is often marginalized in studies of migration with a South Asian focus (e.g., Clarke, Peach & Vertovec 1990; Peach 1994). Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka notwithstanding, in much of the literature ‘South Asia’ is often synonymous with ‘India’. The political, civic and ethnic categories represented by the terms Nepal, Nepalese, and Nepali (let alone the multifarious ethnic groups, such as the Kirant, Rai or Yakkha, found within them) are frequently excluded from such ‘macro-level’ accounts.

Migrants remain peripheralized in many ethnographies, the people to whom one says ‘goodbye’ but can rarely follow on their travels, their departure leaving an emptiness at source that is largely ignored – filled in, ethnographically speaking, by the people who are ‘there’. They are ‘missing’ both physically and representationally; they are the ‘ill apparent’ (O’Hagan 1995). Alternatively, migrants appear as people one says ‘hello’ to in their destinations, but rarely with knowledge of their places of origin, nor of the travels and travails in between. My study sought to link the two – place of origin (Tamaphok) and migrant destinations (other parts of Nepal and north-east India), to understand the relationships between them.

In Tamaphok, Yakkha identity is focused around a variety of markers – language, kinship, religion, clothing, food, and recreation – and derives as well from the ‘social environment’ (Barth 1956) provided by fellow Yakkha as well as members of other ethnic groups. In east Nepal these comprise other Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups such as the numerically superior Limbu (known autonymically as Yakthunga), the various Rai groups, and the Sunuwar, with all of whom the Yakkha vicariously identify. Following the temporary success of the democratic revolution in Nepal in 1990 and the growth of indigenist janajāti (‘people’s movements’) since then, all these groups, but particularly the Yakkha, have been subsumed under the increasingly influential ethnic category ‘Kiranti’ or ‘Kirata’, a term of uncertain etymology (Subba 1999: 22–25). Within the village there are also the very important Indo-Nepalese ‘caste Hindus’, such as Brahmins and Chhetris, and the so-called ‘service’ castes such as Damai and Kami. The Yakkha in Tamaphok are an example of a Sanskritized group (i.e., one following, or aspiring to follow, the social practices of the high caste Hindus such as the Brahmins), although however Sanskritized their beliefs and practices appear to become, they always maintain a distinctiveness that sets them apart from their Indo-Nepalese neighbours (Russell 2004). Increasingly, the domains of Yakkha social interaction are extending beyond the geographical limits of Tamaphok, to encompass hill towns such as Dhankuta, the lowland towns of the Nepalese Tarai, and Kathmandu itself.
It became apparent during my first period of fieldwork that those present in the village were only one component of the group called ‘Yakkha’, since a large number of temporary or permanent migrants, predominantly but not exclusively men, were away from the village at any one time. They were to be found living and working in a variety of places elsewhere – in other parts of Nepal; northeast Indian states such as Sikkim, Assam, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh; other parts of India such as Delhi or Mumbai; the kingdom of Bhutan, and further afield (e.g., the Middle East, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Britain, and Japan) (Russell 1992). Conversely, people who had moved beyond the confines of the village in their lifetimes returned with a heightened sense of themselves and their place in a social, physical and spiritual world. Those who had spent long periods of time in Assam, northeast India, for instance, were known as ‘Assame’, while those who had been in the British, Indian, or Nepalese armies were known as lähure, after the Pakistan city Lahore, an important recruitment centre during the colonial era. Returnees, like those ‘missing’ at the time through their temporary or permanent migration to other places, gave the lie to neat, bounded, somewhat functionalist and/or essentialist approaches to the study of villages, ethnic groups or hill-farming ‘systems’ in Nepal.2

Any study that seeks to understand the Yakkha as a whole, then, needs to take migration and the people it involves into account. Hastrup (1994), following de Certeau (1988), distinguishes ‘maps’ and ‘tours’. In approaching the Yakkha with the intention of putting them on the ethnic ‘map’, it had become apparent instead that something of a ‘tour’ was necessary. However, the efforts I made to extend my ‘field area’ to incorporate Yakkha living outside Tamaphok was seriously affected by political and personal events during my fieldwork that largely prevented the expansion of my horizons in this way (Russell 2000a). I therefore returned to Nepal in September 1996 with a three-month project to trace Yakkha migrants from Tamaphok to other parts of Nepal and northeast India, regions to which there was a long history of movement.

I flew first to Delhi, India, from where I took a train to Varanasi (‘Kasi’, a place of great significance in Yakkha mythology) and thence by plane to the Nepalese capital, Kathmandu, now a home of sorts to many Yakkha, including some from Tamaphok. After a week here I went east, via the southern Nepalese lowlands of the Tarai to Tamaphok, where I was to spend two weeks celebrating the Hindu festival of ‘Dasain’ and obtaining the addresses of Yakkha who had left the village. It was here that I also recruited the
services of a research assistant, Magman Linkha, with whom I subsequently embarked on a journey back to the Tarai and on to northeast India, to find as many of these people as was possible in the five weeks at our disposal. We travelled to Dharan and Jodha in the Nepalese Tarai, continued across the Indian border to Darjeeling in West Bengal, Namche in southern Sikkim, and got as far as Tinsukia in the far east of Assam. After this we retraced our steps to North Lakhimpur in central Assam before heading south to Shillong and the coal town of Ladrymbai in southeast Meghalaya. All the time our journey was punctuated by the hit Hindi film song ‘Pardesi’ (‘migrant’), its falling tones seeming to encapsulate the importance of migration in everyday life (Russell 2000b).

In following Yakkha from a specific place of origin (Tamaphok) to their destinations in this way, I was attempting to site Yakkha culture (Olwig & Hastrup 1997) at its diasporic extremes as well as its cultural heartlands. I wanted to explore the experience of people outside Tamaphok, including whether or how their identity as Yakkha was externally, situationally or subjectively experienced and expressed. Scholars who have focused primarily on large and often relatively affluent internationally mobile populations, studied in their destination areas, have often overlooked such ‘micro-diasporic’ identities (‘micro’ in the sense of both numbers and distances travelled).

However, the case presented in this article came before this more epic journeying. It concerns thirty-six hours spent with a Yakkha family in the small town of Itahari in the Tarai while I was ‘en route’ for Tamaphok, who were encountered serendipitously and not as part of my wider research programme. Their case illustrates vividly some of the pitfalls along with the promise of ‘tours’ as a form of fieldwork.

‘Traveling Cultures’: A Methodological Conundrum

In his seminal paper ‘Traveling Cultures’, Clifford makes the suggestion that we conduct forms of multi-locale ethnography that can ‘do justice to transnational political, economic, and cultural forces that traverse and constitute local or regional worlds’ (1992:102). Clifford advocates paying greater attention to ‘routes’ as well as ‘roots’ in cultural anthropology research, asserting that ‘ethnography (in the normative practices of twentieth-century anthropology) has privileged relations of dwelling over relations of travel’ (1997:22). For Clifford, participant-observation since the 1920s has come to be seen as a sort of ‘mini-immigration… Ethnographers, typically, are travelers who like to stay and dig in (for a time). Unlike other travellers who
prefer to pass through a series of locations, anthropologists tend to be home-bodies abroad. The field as spatial practice is thus a specific style, quality, and duration of dwelling’ (ibid.:22). Clifford talks of the need to reconstrue this ‘field’ to incorporate those ‘blurred boundary areas, historical realities that slip out of the ethnographic frame,’ such as the means of transport, the ‘capital city/national context’, the places one has to go through in order to get to ‘the field’, the university home of the researcher and the sites and relations of translation (ibid.:23). Clifford argues that ‘routes’-based research (incorporating the ‘getting there’ of oneself and others) should be foregrounded and celebrated rather than being hidden from the readers’ view or ‘written out’ of ‘official’ fieldwork monographs. He invites us to look at ‘fieldwork as a travel practice’ (ibid.:8), as ‘less a matter of localized dwelling and more a series of travel encounters’ (ibid.:2).

Various criticisms have been made of Clifford’s central thesis. One is that, despite the supposed plethora of ‘dwelling-based’ narratives, journeying is nothing new in anthropology. Ethnographies frequently start with some kind of journey in which the ethnographer plays a central role, such as the classic start of Malinowski’s *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*: ‘Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone…’ For Hutnyk, ‘the ‘field’ was never a discrete and bounded scene, however much ‘being there’ was privileged over ‘getting there’, or even ‘being there on the shelf’ (1999:48).

The use of ‘travel’ itself as an anthropological leitmotif has also been criticized. If it is taken as a synonym for others’ mobility, ‘travel’ covers a range of different sorts of movement, such as labour migration, displacement from war, the search for asylum, and the slave trade. Clifford himself admits that he struggles, ‘never quite successfully, to free the… term “travel” from a history of European, literary, male, bourgeois, scientific, heroic, recreational meanings and practices’ (1997:33). Hutnyk criticizes Clifford for his tendency to use ‘travel’ without due regard to its political and ethnocentric ‘roots’, with issues like the slave trade showing ‘the likely inappropriateness of generalising extensions of the travel trope in its Euro-American modes’ (Hutnyk 1999:49).

Partly in anticipation of such criticisms, Clifford advocates research into previously ‘hidden’ modes of travel, such as travel avoiding the hotel-motel circuits, clandestine immigration, the servants and others who accompanied many Victorian travellers and explorers, and ‘how women have travelled and currently travel’ (197365:32). Clearly there is some ideological and historical (not to mention physical) baggage inherent in the notion of ‘travel’. In other words, not all types of travel are the same (Kaplan 1996:2).
Fabian (1983) traces the relationship between travel and ethnography back to a common ‘topos of travel’ utilized by the European Enlightenment. Where previously travel had consisted primarily of pilgrimages, crusades, and missions to the centres of religion or to the souls to be saved, ‘for the established bourgeoisie of the eighteenth century, travel was to become (at least potentially) every man’s source of “philosophical”, secular knowledge… secular travel was from the centers of learning and power to places where man was to find nothing but himself’ (ibid.: 6 – emphasis in original). A new discourse was built ‘on an enormous literature of travelogues, collections and syntheses of travel accounts. The manifest preoccupation in this literature, in its popular forms as well as in its scientific uses, was with the description of movements and relations in space (“geography”) based primarily on visual observation of foreign places’ (ibid.:7). As Pau Rubiés puts it, ‘the European ethnographic impulse was the product of a unique combination of colonial expansion and intellectual transformation’ (2002:243). As such it has been based on differential access to the technological revolutions that over the past 500 years that have made the ‘the primal act of witnessing’ (Greenblatt 1991:122) more achievable for some groups rather than others (Musgrove 1999). Hutnyk talks about ‘the violences underlying all travel, including that which enables ethnographic projects, such as the colonial power that makes the world safe for ethnographers and tourists’ (1999:49; cf. Pratt 1992). Thus in many respects, as bell hooks puts it, ‘holding on to the concept of “travel” as we know it is also a way to hold on to imperialism’ (hooks 1995:43). According to Fabian (1983:87) ‘somehow the discipline “remembers” that it acquired its scientific and academic status by climbing on the shoulders of adventurers and using their travelogues, which for centuries had been the appropriate literary genre in which to report knowledge of the Other. In many ways this collective memory of a scientifically doubtful past acts as a trauma, blocking serious reflection on the epistemological significance of lived experience and its autobiographic expressions’.

In defence of Clifford, perhaps all he is doing is recalling to us the convergent roots of the impulses for travel and ethnography. As an ethnographer, this article argues, sometimes ‘travel’ is all one has. If we meet ‘informants’ while either we, or they, are ‘on the move’, it is unlikely we shall be able to achieve the polished ethnographic prose that a ‘dug-in’ ethnographer should be able to muster. Such issues are to the fore in the vignette I shall use to illustrate this argument, namely an account of thirty-six hours spent with a Yakkha family in Itahari, a small crossroads town in the Nepalese Tarai in
October 1996. I was ‘en route’ to Tamaphok when I met them serendipitously. How do we research and write effectively while ‘on the move’ in this way, about movement and travel in the context of diaspora, globalization, and culturally distinctive ways of travel? Do we risk, as grounded ethnographers, losing that ground in the rush to become more peripatetic and Cliffordian ‘travel writers’? If so, what are the risks, are they worth taking, and how can they be ameliorated? Or is anthropology liable to become, as Louch (1966) would have it, ‘only a collection of traveller’s tales’?

The Yakkha in Transit

Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone at a dusty chowk (crossroads) in the intense midday heat of Itahari, a crossroads town in the middle of the Nepalese Tarai. Ahead, the road to Dharan, the town where the middle hills of Nepal start their dramatic rise from the flat plains. To your left, the road leads west towards Kathmandu and, to your right, to the Indian border village of Karkhabitta, jumping off point for Siliguri and destinations in the northeast India and beyond. Behind you lies the road from Biratnagar, the second largest city in Nepal after Kathmandu.

Through the kindness of strangers that characterized my whole journey in search of Yakkha migrants, I had been given a lift for the twenty miles or so from Biratnagar airport to Itahari that morning in an agricultural extension officer’s landcruiser. The sights during the drive lived up to my expectations and previous experience of the Tarai: the roads full of buses, lorries, buffalo carts, agricultural machinery and bicycles, the brilliant greens of the rice fields, the ochre-coloured streets lined with small factories and workers’ houses, the whole scene emblazoned with the striking, brightly coloured sarees and dresses of the Tarai women. Who would not willingly leave the relative hardships of life in the middle hills for the socio-economic vitality of such an area?

From the chowk, I walk across the dusty waste ground to the first hotel I can see, ‘Mama Restaurant and Lodgings’. I step through a shop selling sweets and cigarettes into the main restaurant: two curtained booths at the back, one of them occupied by the landlord who is dressed in a vest and lungi. A man with a bad cold gets up, sniffing, to turn on a fan as I enter. I order a Sprite and sit looking around the room: bright blue and cream coloured walls hung with Chinese pictures; a cement floor, metal tables and plastic chairs. A boy sits with his head on a table. The atmosphere is similar to the cinematic portrayal of one-horse American western towns, with everyone
either sitting around listlessly as if waiting for something to happen, or asleep. Desultory conversations start and falter in the stifling heat.

I am in search of a Yakkha man I once met in the British Gurkha barracks in Church Crookham, U.K., who has subsequently retired from the army. I have his address (Itahari-1, House no. 86) and hope it might be possible to stay with him. When I later enquire at the Post Office in Itahari, however, no-one seems to know the whereabouts of Itahari-1, House no. 86. It is still early, so I take ‘time out’ to experience the pleasures of a melā (fair) that has been set up in a field nearby, with its games of chance, motorcycling, and a small ferris wheel. While riding the wheel, being tossed briefly into the air for fleeting glimpses of the flat terrain and a further horizon, I think about the options still available to me. There is only one other Yakkha family I know of in Itahari. Six years before they were living next door to another agricultural extension officer friend who is now away on training in Bangkok. So after exhausting the delights of the melā I decide to chance on visiting this family instead.

The extension officer’s house looks closed up as I walk past, apart from one open window and a dog lying asleep outside. I pass by to the house next door and, taking a deep breath (for I only met the mother of this household briefly six years ago), I enter the compound through a jasmine entrance bower. I cross a circular cement verandah, past a bicycle and a sitting dog. Various household members and friends in a porch at the rear scurry to their feet in surprise at my arrival. A young woman comes out to deal with me who speaks excellent English. She is a daughter-in-law who says she has only been with the family for a month. A teacher at a Boarding School in a small hamlet about three kilometres from Itahari, she came to Nepal from Shillong (capital of Meghalaya, northeast India) two years earlier, leaving her BA half-finished, in response to a letter from a friend already in Itahari who said she could find her a job. The daughter of a Nepali (Sherpa) couple born in Shillong, her parents were forced to move from rural Meghalaya into the city in 1987 due to tribal land disputes in the area, which culminated in serious violence and some deaths. She was living next door in the derā (rented accommodation) of the family in Bangkok when she met Niraj, the second born son of the household, and moved in with him as his wife.

The elderly mother from my previous visit comes through from the kitchen to the parlour where I am seated. She lives in the house with her son, three grandsons (one of whom is Niraj), a granddaughter and the new buhari (daughter-in-law) (see Fig. 1). Her natal home is Chaubise in Dandagaon.
district, a village to the south of Tamaphok and known in the area for its high proportion of Yakkha inhabitants, although there is little direct contact between the two villages. Lilmaya’s husband, also a ‘Chaubise’ Yakkha, fought for the Indo-British army in Burma and Ladakh in the Second World War and became a commissioned officer in the Indian army in 1955. He was the subject of a shamanic healing ritual which had been a talking point during my previous brief contact with the family, involving the use of a dhāmi (shamanic priest/healer) summoned from the hills, who kept him alive for nearly five more years. The two younger of Lilmaya’s three surviving brothers live nearby, and her elder brother’s son also has a house, although he is currently in Hong Kong with his wife and two children. Lilmaya speaks of the futility of using Yakkha – ‘Where will they understand Yakkha? Only in the house’ she says, looking to a Chhetri (caste Hindu) woman standing in the doorway for confirmation.

Looking through some family photographs I discover that Niraj’s mother died of leukaemia, two months after his grandfather. One can see some Yakkha traditions transferred to the Tarai in the funeral pictures, for example a white cloth and red band of material suspended on strings over the grave, covered in sindur (red powder) to signify the death of a married woman.
Niraj, aged 20, comes in later. I appear to have stepped into the middle of a marital drama. He and his wife married, or announced they were married, just one month ago. His wife’s parents (in Meghalaya) do not know and she thinks her father will be angry when he finds out. She is already saying she doesn’t like the stay-at-home life – she wants to get out and about more to see things, to be free. She only earns 1600 NRs (about $48) a month at her school job and has to do private tuition to support her career. I try to imagine the emotions that may have galvanized her match: the loneliness of the long-distance single woman teaching in Nepal; Niraj, a striking figure spied through the closed shutters of the house next door washing himself at the well in the back garden, perhaps. Others frequently comment on Niraj’s height (he is six feet tall, an exceptional height in Nepal) and his strength. He plays football, cricket, and Tae Kwan Do (which he can practise three to six times daily if he likes, he tells me), for which he has earned a red belt, and won a certificate at a competition in Ilam (in the middle hills). But he is still only a young 20-year-old. He likes to hang out with the lads, friends since his youth. He has failed his School Leaving Certificate and is planning to go to Arabia for two years with his elder brother (a trip that will be arranged through a broker in Kathmandu for 55,000 NRs – about $1,500).

Niraj tells me all this as we go for a walk round the sights of Itahari, which he describes as being ‘like a village’. He thinks his father-in-law probably won’t be too angry about what has happened, and hopes he and his wife can visit Shillong during the upcoming Dasain festival (unlikely, I can’t help thinking). We stop at a friend’s ‘Cold House’, a small red hut with a few seats outside in a dusty commercial area near the chowk. Niraj and the owner were at school together, and we all sit outside drinking Cokes and watching the world go by. We wander in a group back to the melā, then back to the chowk and out on the Kharkabitta road. Finding Itahari-1, House No. 86, seems like a lost cause, as no-one seems to know any house numbers. Niraj recommends the JayNepal Hotel as a place to stay over the Mama Restaurant and Lodgings, and leaves me for the evening.

Next morning at 8 o’clock Gyanendra Kharki (a Chhetri – caste Hindu – friend of Niraj’s) arrives with two others, Akash Subba (a Limbu) and Daru Sunuwar (from the eponymous Kiranti group). Niraj’s marriage is clearly the talk of the town. Gyanendra tells of his astonishment at returning from Kathmandu (where he is studying for a BSc in biology) to hear that Niraj had got married, since Niraj is the youngest of all four of them. Apart from Gyanendra, who once spent a year at a school in the hill town of Chainpur,
these young men haven’t been to the middle hills much – Niraj, for example, once reached the hill town of Dhankuta and has been to Ilam district, but that is all. Others have seen photographs taken by relatives but haven’t been to the hills themselves. Yet mangpa/phedangba (the Kirant words for two categories of priest/shamans) are still regarded as necessary for ritual purposes – Niraj’s mother’s funeral, for example. One can either summon them from the hills, or seek them out in the villages round about, but the best are reputed to come from the hills.

After we walked back into town, Gyanendra takes me to his family’s home, an old wooden building in the centre of town near the chowk. Gyanendra’s grandfather, one of five brothers, originally came from the hill district of Bhojpur on a horse. When it was built, their house was one of only three or four in Itahari. Gyanendra’s mother, having been raised in Chainpur, is familiar with the title Yakkha, but says that most people aren’t. She describes them as ‘good living’ people who sometimes get angry. She also knows them (as indeed they describe themselves to outsiders sometimes) as not just Yakkha but Yakkha Rai, after the numerous Rai groups in the hills. She thinks she remembers seeing a TV programme about the Yakkha on Nepal Television once, but she can’t remember very much about it.

From here we take a rickshaw to Akash Subba’s house. Gyanendra suggests it is the most beautiful house in Itahari, being shaped like a UFO on stilts, with a large concrete statue of a duck (the symbol of peace in Nepal) over the entrance portico. The curling corners of the roof remind me of South East Asian architecture, and add to the house’s exotic allure. A sign points to an art gallery downstairs, but we enter through a side gate and go up some wooden stairs to the first floor where there is a wide corridor with rooms off to either side. The room we enter has sofas and a large carpet. Cardboard cut-outs of the King and Queen of Nepal look down from above, and there is a bust of Pasang Lhamu Sherpa on one of the cabinets, renowned as the first Nepalese woman to climb Everest and a female ‘hero’ of Nepal (Adams 1996). From here we go to another room where I am told young men have always gathered for dance, discussion and song. One such, Santosh Adhikary (a Brahmin name), sits playing the guitar. There are raised box seats with cushions on three sides of the room, and posters of western pop stars on the walls. There is a drum kit beside my seat, covered with a deer skin, which Gyanendra says indicates that the family who own the house are Limbu. Two men sit talking politics on the veranda outside.

Akash comes back from paying a final demand phone bill in town. Like
Niraj he is 20, and is a ‘cousin brother’ because his mother is Niraj’s aunt, a younger sister of his father (see Fig. 1). Akash’s paternal grandmother, whom I saw in photos that morning with Niraj’s paternal grandmother at the funeral, is sitting on a veranda outside. We talk about food habits and taboos – Gyanendra says his caste rules prevent him eating pork, a dish he loves but can only consume outside his house; he contrasts this transgression with the habits of the Nagas in Nagaland, northeast India, who are infamous for eating dog.

Akash takes a keen interest in contemporary politics (his father is a local politician) and suggests there is the potential for a military style insurrection against the government in due course. Already there is military activity in some of the western Tarai districts. He mentions he has a Limbu-Nepali-English dictionary distributed by an organization two years earlier that isn’t in the shops. ‘Ten years ago the police would have arrested you for possession of such a thing, but now nobody cares’, he says. Conversation lapses in the warm afternoon, and I am taken downstairs to see the art studio run by Vikram Shree, a Calcutta-trained artist who shows us around. I can see plaster casts evoking a variety of cultures and politics – outside there are busts of Queen Elizabeth, Pasang Lhamu Sherpa, B.P. Koirala (an important figure in recent Nepalese political history) and the head of the communist party killed in a ‘car crash’ two years earlier. Akash has copied a card sent to him from Hong Kong (but printed in Singapore) of the ‘Kailashbasi Association’ with a picture of the severely lacerated Kirant martyr Sirijun Jeongsi. Born in Sinan, East Nepal, in 1704, he was killed by Buddhists in west Sikkim in 1741. Three Kirant ‘national symbols’ can be seen below this image – a bow and arrow, a jibrum (large drum), and a cross made out of bamboo, feathered at the tips, the arms of the cross linked by concentric kāncho dhāgo (village-made thread) that is used by dhāmis. Vikram Shree shows me a small statue of another Kirant hero, Yelambar, and points to the dochā (boots to the knee), the labedā (cloak) used at night, and the patuki (cummerbund cloth) on the statue as significant in establishing the figure’s ethnic identity. Another picture, executed in bamboo, shows the habit of Batabunge, the last rajah of Vijaypur (an old fortification outside Dharan) of putting a stake through the heart of sahadus (Hindu holy men). Batabunge was hung by Prithvi Narayan Shah, the unifier of present-day Nepal.

Nepal – the lads express a keen awareness that the boundaries of the country today could have been different. As a result of the Sugauli Treaty signed by the British in 1815, Gyanendra says, Nepal lost control of lands in Darjeeling.
and Sikkim. At the Tista river (in Assam), he claims, one can still see a stone pillar inscribed ‘Nepal’, marking the old frontier of ‘greater Nepal’.

Back in the big room, Akash finds his dictionary and gives it to me. It was published in 2049 V.S. (1992) in Biratnagar. Gyanendra Karki and Daru Sunuwar sit playing guitars and singing Nepalese and Western songs (such as Hotel California) under posters of Bon Jovi, Def Leppard and Bryan Adams. ‘How do you like our company?’ Gyanendra asks, after a while. After some tea and biscuits, I suggest jäne belā bhayo (the rather less propositionary, more tentative equivalent of ‘it’s time to go’) and it seems that others are ready to go as well. A big wooden pillar to one side of the staircase reminds me of the Yakkha myth of O’a’mi, the house spirit who resides under the central pillar of every Yakkha home. Outside, I take a picture of the group looking back from the gate towards the duck, but when Gyanendra tries to do the same he inadvertently opens the camera and the numbers return to ‘0’. Although the film may have been spoilt, I cheer myself with the thought that, if light has affected the photos produced, it will be an appropriate record of the vaguely hallucinatory experiences of the day.

That evening, Niraj’s father, who has been away working for two days in Jhapa (another Tarai district) comes to visit me in the JayNepal Hotel. He previously worked as an artist for a health project but is currently an AIDS-awareness worker for an American NGO. A keen photographer and erstwhile footballer, he is an exceptionally perceptive and interesting man. He was also surprised at Niraj’s ‘marriage’ – he came back from training in Kathmandu to be told it had happened. He doesn’t mind, he says, but agrees that both Niraj and his bride are kalilo (young). There hasn’t actually been a ‘wedding’, but they may conduct a ceremony and have a feast after Dasain. He goes on to tell me more about the family. The death of his wife, following on so soon after that of his father, has hit the whole family hard. Akash’s mother is his second-born sister. His older sister is living in Salakpur, another Tarai town, having made a ‘love marriage’ with a Brahmin. His youngest sister is in Dharan, married to a Rai (not a Yakkha, he thought) who is with the British army in England. Niraj’s father explains his own and many people’s apparent lack of interest in their ethnic origins as being either due to simple ignorance or because in the past they were beaten for expressing such an interest – sometimes by their own mothers.

I check out of the JayNepal Hotel and leave Itahari on a gear-grinding, body-shaking bus journey into the immense hills first thing next morning.
Discussion: Writing Traveling Cultures

A serendipitous encounter during a short stop in a Tarai town. The vignette presented plays out the challenges of studying and writing about migrant cultures in such a transitory situation. Itahari is what Favero (2003) would call a ‘starry’ place, where lines of communication converge. For tourists, it would be a ‘non-place’ (Augé 1995), a setting ‘of transit and fast encounters disconnected from history and identity’ (Favero 2003:553). As a non-place, fast encountered, it is a classic venue for the postmodernist, ‘traveling cultures’ approaches to anthropology. My experiences have been presented, quite deliberately, as something of a ‘surrealist moment in ethnography’ (Clifford 1988:146), reflecting the ‘incongruous and the hybrid’ (Clifford 1997:57).

Sitting listening to Bryan Adams in a house with a duck portico on the outskirts of Itahari, a place of mélange, provided the incongruous ‘critical moment’ which I hope has helped bring into focus the ‘starry’, hybrid nature of Itahari for the young men in question. Such a presentation may ‘open up spaces hitherto foreclosed by traditional approaches to ethnicity and migration, and involve anti-essentialist projects and critiques of static notions of ethnicity and culture’ (Anthias 2001:620).

It was impossible not to be moved by the remarkable story that unfolded during my time with Niraj, his wife, family and friends. It was time to put aside my original research protocol (Yakkha from Tamaphok to other parts of Nepal and North East India) for a while and record what are essentially ‘travellers’ tales’ – of Niraj’s marriage, of his interactions with his family and friends. In doing so, I am representing an example of Yakkha migrants that would otherwise have been missing from even a ‘roots/routes’ type of study.

For me, Niraj and his friends say something important about the diversity and mutability of ethnic identities, particularly with second and third generation families such as his. True, one can focus on the social, political and economic realities that have made the displacement of people necessary – the lack of opportunities in the hills, the work opportunities in foreign armies and the sex trade, the desperate quest by those who are able to achieve qualifications to help them ‘get ahead’. But one is also struck by the presence of images from the opposite direction that may also (wrongly) seem ‘out of place’ – ducks, popstars and Queen Elizabeth – and the local identities within these global fields of relations that are formed through inter-ethnic friendships and marital dramas played out in a ‘starry place’. Weiss (writing of urban Tanzania) could have been writing about Niraj and friends in his description of how ‘the proliferation of contemporary modes of fantasy is an
unmistakable empirical actuality. Profound and enduring relations have been forged in the medium of fantasy and a diaspora of images is everywhere in evidence’ (2002:97).

Bryan Adams, Tae Kwan Do, trips to his new ‘in-laws’ for Dasain, journeys to Arabia – these were the objects of the imagination for Niraj. For him, the concept of an ‘ethnic identity’ barely applied. The concept of ‘being Yakkha’ was certainly not a major component of Niraj’s identity, and he expressed no great interest in his ‘roots’ in the hills. Rather his priority was the chance of ‘routes’ that would take him to other parts of the world, where his ethnic identity as Yakkha would be even less salient, a characteristic I noticed subsequently amongst Yakkha migrants to northeast India, for whom the identity ‘Nepali’ or, in some places, Dewan Rai, tends to be favoured (Russell 2000a). Subba’s analysis of the situation in India, where the living conditions of minority ethnic groups such as the Yakkha has forced them to become absorbed ‘under the umbrella of the Nepali or Gorkhali nation (nation meaning peoples here, not nation-state)’ would appear accurate. In the Indian context, identities of groups such as the Yakkha ‘had to be submerged in order to constitute a force strong enough to resist Bengali domination and ensure their common survival. Thus they became a part of the Gorkhali or Nepali people and the Nepali language became their language as well. In the process, their own languages and scripts were pushed into oblivion, often unable to be revived due to inadequate numbers of speakers in a particular locality’ (Subba 1999:1). Exploration of Yakkha ethnicity in this context is supportive of Cohen’s comment that ‘ethnicity is first and foremost situational’ (1978: 388) rather than primordial in character (cf. Okamura 1981). As Toland (1993:13) goes on to suggest, ‘it is a dynamic process in which the interactive situation determines the level of inclusiveness used in setting up the self/other relationship’.

It is also possible to see new forms of identity, and identity politics, forming in the interactive situation of this group of friends. As Bhatia (2002:61) puts it, ‘identities are not fixed by some core, singular, essential, universal properties. Rather they are contested, multiple and shifting and are embedded in cultural and historical practices’. The success of the pro-democracy movement in 1990 was followed by a growth of interest in ethnic minorities who had previously lacked a voice in the nation state. The lifting of the ban on minority language dictionaries such as the Limbu dictionary of Akash Subba bears testament to this. However, for a relatively small group such as the Yakkha (whose language had never been formally recorded) such options were irrelevant. For them, the growth of interest in a broader Kirant
identity (an amalgam of Limbu, Rai, Yakkha, Sunuwar and others) promises more. Schlemmer writes about the emergence of what he calls a ‘new past’ amongst the Kirant ‘indigenists’, his term for ‘intellectuals who write about (usually their own) ethnic groups, promoting their culture, identity, and rights in the nation’ (Schlemmer 2003/4:120). Niraj and his friends, like the indigenists ‘are…cut off from most of the rural Kirant’ (*ibid*), and it is interesting to see their appropriation and discussion of elements of Kiranti history (such as Sirijun Jeongsi, Yelambar and Batabunge) that are different to those identified by Schlemmer (whose list includes the concern with heritage of an ancient nation of Kirant, the creation of ‘Kirantism’ as a pan-Kirant religious category, and the re-invention of a federation of religious dances of the soil). The Maoist rebellion, which subsequently expanded from the western districts identified by Akash Subba to cover the whole country (see for example Thapa 2002; Gellner 2003; and Hutt 2004) is also prefigured in the lads’ discussions. Finally, there are the appropriations of other, more national heroes such as Pasang Lhamu Sherpa, B.P. Koirala, and the consideration of the Sugauli treaty by Gyanendra.

However, the thirty-six hour ‘fieldwork as a form of travel practice’ here presented also serves to problematize the more strongly ‘routes-based’ versions of Clifford’s ‘traveling cultures’ agenda. Favero (2003:552) makes an admirable attempt at describing ‘an arrival’ in a New Delhi market as a total sensory experience, but suggests he has ‘not offered much of a coherent ethnographic description’ in doing so. A similar criticism could be made of my account. Fabian posits a situation in which ‘an ethnographer constantly “on the move” may lose his ability to make worthwhile ethnographic experiences altogether, for the simple reason that the Other would never have the time to become part of the ethnographer’s past’ (1983:90 – his italics). Writing about my experiences, ‘traveling cultures’ style, risks presenting a text which is (to quote Hutnyk, criticizing Clifford) ‘a phantasmogoric, but ultimately limited, cabinet of curiosities, relics and snippets’ (1999:57). There is a danger that, in disembedding ethnographic practice, one ends up ‘writing traveling cultures’ that are nothing more than stereotypic constructions of places, spaces and peoples and hence contribute further to hooks’ (1995) imperialistic hegemony of travel and ethnography. Whether or not it is imperialistic, the resulting account is inevitably only partial, dependent on contingency and the serendipity of who is met. The description and its analysis might have been very different, for example, had I been able to find my way to Itahari-1, House No. 86.
Clifford provides us with his own example of what he means by ‘fieldwork as travel practice’ in his piece ‘Palenque Log’, a description of a visit to some Mexican ruins in Chiapas (Clifford 1993). In it, we are given details from his personal experience such as weather reports, the news that he has dropped his camera on the bathroom floor, breakfast details and bus itineraries. There is no denying the ‘I was there’ authority such an approach commands. However, like much of the reflexive trope in anthropology, we learn more about the writer (probably far more than we want to) than we do about the world in which the writer is embedded (or, more accurately, moving about in). According to de Botton (2002:15) ‘the anticipatory and artistic imaginations omit and compress, they cut away the periods of boredom and direct our attention to critical moments and, without either lying or embellishing, thus lend to life a vividness and a coherence that it may lack in the distracting woolliness of the present’. We yearn for what Musgrove calls ‘the shift from “seeing with one’s own eyes” to discerning the meaning of what is seen’ (1999:31). Travellers, as Spufford criticizes them, ‘are notoriously bad at saying why’ (1996:2).

While there are echoes of Clifford’s approach in this piece, I have held back from following his exhortations in full. I could have written, travelogue style, about leaving my ‘university home’, for example, or the journey from the capital city/national context (Clifford 1997: 23). Yet such high levels of reflexivity seem unwarranted. If Clifford drops his camera (as mine was dropped), Hutnyk asks, ‘why should we care?’ (1999:53). One can have every sympathy with the view that the reader who wishes to learn about other places and peoples is little helped in this endeavour by accounts of what the ethnographer had for breakfast, or what happened to his or her camera. However, Hutnyk goes on, ‘we should care about Clifford’s trip, not because he is illustrating that the “ethnographer” is little different from a tourist . . . but because of the context’ (1998:346; 1999:54).

The significant context for my research, I would argue, is the ‘dwelling-based’ research carried out in Tamaphok in 1989–90, the fact that ‘routes’ was tempered by ‘roots’ even when, in this case, there was no overt connection between the two. The sedentary period in Tamaphok provided time for the Yakkha to become part of my past (to paraphrase Fabian). It was an essential precursor to finding myself travelling to the duck house in Itahari and, more importantly, to making any sense of what I experienced there. The two fieldwork periods together formed what is in many ways the ‘softer’ version of Clifford’s travelling cultures agenda, the proposal that anthropology should
focus on a ‘culture’s farthest range of travel while also looking at its centers, its villages, its intensive fieldsites’ (1997:25). For Featherstone, ‘to be aware of the construction of local communities, societies, and nation-states as sedentary homelands does not mean that we should switch to the opposite assumption that the normal condition of human beings is, or should be, one in which everyone is a nomad or a traveller. Rather we need to develop theories of culture that do justice to its processual and relational aspects’ (1997:259).

Looking at the relationship between ‘routes’ and ‘roots’, I would argue, rather than at either in isolation, has led to just such a processual and relational understanding of Yakkha culture. It provides a much more vibrant picture of human agency and human actors, and of the more qualitative aspects of the migrant experience, than is usually the case with analyses based on economic or demographic causes and consequences, the ‘push-pull’ factors to which the study of migration in South Asia is frequently reduced. 7

My research set out to explore what it means to be Yakkha in different situations, in this case when you are a second generation young man born and raised in the lowland Tarai of Nepal. It illustrates the dissipation of Yakkha ethnic identity as it becomes situationally irrelevant in more distant geographical and social contexts, and its mutability into new forms. Yet to deem people in such circumstances as irrelevant to our understanding of ethnic identity and the effects and outcomes of migration is to miss out a significant proportion of individuals and families whose voices and stories still deserve to be heard.

Conclusion

This article has taken issue with Clifford’s ‘traveling cultures’ work, arguing that although the motivation to include a wider range of people in one’s fieldwork through bringing together ‘routes-based’ and ‘dwelling-based’ studies is laudable, his emphasis on ‘fieldwork as a form of travel practice’ is problematic. It has done this through the example of a thirty-six hour sojourn with a historically migrant Yakkha family met fortuitously while I was ‘on the road’. There is ideological and historical baggage inherent in the notion of ‘travel’, and ethnographic limitations in writing travelling culture based on transitory stays. On the other hand, ‘fieldwork as travel practice’ has in this case given the chance to represent something of the life and times of a specific family and generational group who would otherwise have been easily missed. Such experiences help to expand, and challenge, the conventional geographical and socio-cultural boundaries of groups such as the Yakkha.
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Notes
1. The Yakkha are mentioned in a handful of works, but never in any great detail. Bista, for example, points out how Yakkha often call themselves ‘Dewan’ and brings up the question of how similar they are to the Rai (Bista 1987:32, 38). The Gurkha army officer-scholars Northey and Morris (1928:215–6; 239 fn) describe the Yakkha as ‘less tractable’ than other Rai, (the Rai being the other major branch of the Kirant with whom they considered the Yakkha were becoming increasingly intermixed). Hodgson (1857) provided a basic word-list of Yakkha, and the German linguist Alphonse Wiedert had completed a study of the Yakkha language before his notes were stolen from him whilst on an Indian train. He was subsequently shot dead while running a bar in Bangkok, Thailand. The only other anthropologist known to have worked with the Yakkha subsequently is Tanka Subba. He spent time in a village on the other side of the valley from Tamaphok in 1993 as part of his study of the Kirant (Subba 1999).
2. Cf. Clifford’s ‘practices of crossing and interaction that troubled the localism of many common assumptions about culture’ (1997:3).
3. Malinowski is something of a paradox, invoked by Clifford as the archetypal ‘digging in’ type of anthropologist, but used by Marcus (2002) as an example of early ‘multi-site’ ethnography. Critiquing Clifford, Hutnyk suggests that Malinowski’s commitment to ‘deep’ fieldwork has become ‘overdetermined’. He goes on, ‘it is important to note that the circumstances of the paradigmatic deep fieldwork scene are more mobile than is often glossed. Malinowski moved back and forth between several islands, between the islands and Australia, and between the villages and...
the huts of traders, missionaries and magistrates’ (1999:45–6). Crick argues along similar lines: ‘Malinowski’s portrait of landing on a Kiriwina beach, himself alone among savages, is a palpable nonsense. There were other Europeans there whose company he often sought out, and his diary and monographs make it very unclear in what sense he was “participant” in the lives of the locals’ (1995:214–5).

4. Permanent migration from the hills to the Tarai only began with the commencement of malaria eradication in the three easternmost Tarai districts in 1962. In 1969 the government established a Resettlement Department which offered new land in the Tarai at subsidized rates. The Tarai population grew rapidly, increasing by 59 percent in the decade 1970–80 (Gurung 1987:112). However, by the beginning of the 1980s most land had been used up and prices had risen alarmingly so that few could contemplate moving there permanently from the hills any more.

5. However, just as the travel trope makes certain assumptions about the universality of what is a Euro-American phenomenon, so it may be that ‘the stories we tell ourselves that we are all becoming global, hybrid and diasporic can only be told by those who occupy… a space of “new stability and self-assurance”’ (Anthias 2001:619, quoting Young 1996:4).

6. This increasing concern with ethnic identity has been a feature throughout Nepal. See, for example, Macfarlane (1997) on the Gurung.

7. For Gurung (1987), the primary reason for migration away from rural areas of Nepal is the ‘push’ of population growth (cf. Rana & Thapa 1974). For Poffenberger, it is the ‘pull’ (or is it ‘push’?) of ‘the need for cash which can purchase consumer goods which… are a reflection of the rising standard of living of hill people over the past one hundred years or so’ (1980:66).

References
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