

A Tale of Two Temples: Culture, Capital, and Community in Mustang, Nepal

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Introduction

This article focuses on two religious and community institutions. The first, Thubchen Lhakhang, is a 15th century temple located in the remote walled city of Lo Monthang, Mustang District, Nepal. The other, located near Swayambunath in the northwestern part of the Kathmandu Valley, is a newly built community temple meant to serve people from Mustang District. This paper asks why Thubchen has fallen into disrepair and disuse over the last decades, only to be “saved” by a team of foreign restoration experts, while the financial capital, sense of community, responsibility, and cultural commitment required, one could say, to “save” Thubchen by people from Mustang themselves has been invested instead in the founding of a new institution in Kathmandu. Through two narrative scenes and analysis, I examine who is responsible for a community’s sacred space, how each of the temples is being repaired or constructed, designed and administered, and the circumstances under which the temples are deemed finished. Finally, I comment on how these temples are currently being occupied and used, since restoration/construction efforts were completed.

More generally, this paper speaks to anthropological concerns about local/global interfaces, particularly how the expectations and visions of cultural preservation, which often emanate from the west, impact and are impacted by communities and individuals such as those from Mustang. The circumstances surrounding these two projects illustrate larger questions about aesthetics and identity, agency, and transnational movements of people, resources, and ideas, as well as nostalgia for things “local” and “traditional” generated both by people from Mustang and their foreign interlocutors. I do not aim to suggest a simple dichotomy or polarity between the agendas represented by these two temple projects. Likewise, I do not aim to question the inherent value of restoration efforts such as those undertaken at Thubchen, or to imbue efforts such as the construction of the new Baragaon and Kingdom of Lo Community Temple in Kathmandu with a romantic or idealized notion of “Mustang community”. Rather, this paper examines the dynamics under which both projects are taking place and the different assumptions and understandings about culture, community, and capital (social and economic) they represent. I hope to show how these perspectives, and the social actors that they encompass, speak both to and past each other.

A few words on methodology are in order, before continuing with a brief introduction to the geography, history, and ethnographic setting of Mustang, and then moving into the scenes themselves. I have been conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Mustang, and among people from Mustang, since 1993, and was based in Mustang in 1996-1997 while on a Fulbright fellowship. Since 1997, I have been conducting ethnographic work – primarily through formal and informal interviews – among people from Mustang now living in New York City. The materials for this paper have been gathered through interviews in Mustang, Kathmandu, and the US, as well as through an analysis of Thubchen restoration project documents, some of which are available to the public through the Worldwide Web. In addition, I draw on the 2002 NOVA documentary, “Lost Treasures of Tibet”, which explores the history of the Thubchen restoration project and the controversies surrounding the artists who painted Lo Monthang’s temples, as well as the dynamics between the people of Lo Monthang and the foreign restoration experts.

Mustang, Nepal: Geographic, ethnographic, and historical setting

Mustang District is located in Nepal’s Karnali Zone, along the western massif of the Annapurna Range. The Mustang District Headquarters is located in Jomsom, a five-day walk south from Lo Monthang and a four-day walk north from Beni, Myagdi District, and the roadhead leading to Pokhara. Mustang District is divided into upper (northern) and lower (southern) regions. These distinctions are both locally and nationally defined, and have economic, social, political, and cultural ramifications. For the purposes of this paper, I refer to upper and lower Mustang as areas that are “restricted” and “non-restricted,” respectively, as defined by HMG of Nepal. However, the internal divisions, dialects, and distinctions of Mustang’s populace are much more complex than this division asserts. For our purposes, the most important areas to distinguish are Baragaon, a region of nineteen settlements (not twelve, as the Nepali name for this area implies) comprised of speakers of Tibetan dialects, clustered around the Muktinath Valley, and Lode Tshodun (Tib. *glo sde tsho bdun*), the seven principalities of the kingdom of Lo, a Tibetan-speaking area of which the walled city of Lo Monthang is not only the capital but also the “capitolium” in the classical sense of the term.¹ The village of Kagbeni marks the division between upper and lower Mustang, in that foreigners are not allowed to travel north beyond Kagbeni without a special, expensive trekking permit. The region just north of Kagbeni and south of Lode Tshodun is known as

¹ For more information on the history and ethnography of Mustang, as well as local distinctions in terms of territory and identity, see Dhungel 2002, Fisher 2001, Jackson 1984, Ramble and Vinding 1987, Ramble 1990, Ramble 1995, and Ramble in press.

Shöd Yul and is home to people who, despite close cultural affinities with both the people of Lo and Baragaon, speak yet another language. The regions just south of Baragaon are known as the Thak Khola and Panchgaon, and are historically home to the Thakali, an ethnic group that speaks a Tibeto-Burman language.²

The entire region encompassed today by the Mustang District, and in particular the Kali Gandaki River Valley, has been a locus of trans-Himalayan trade for centuries, particularly in the exchange of lowland grains for Tibetan salt. The people of Mustang have depended on a combination of agriculture, animal husbandry, and trade to wrest survival and even prosperity from this landscape that stretches from the southern slopes of the Himalaya to the high, dry Tibetan plateau. Mustang is also a locus of Tibetan Buddhist, Bön (Tib. *bon*), and shamanistic traditions and practices and contains many sites of religious pilgrimage, including the Hindu shrine at Muktinath. Indeed, it is one of the few places in the greater Tibetan-Himalayan cultural world in which such a diversity of social and political forms, as well as religious institutions and practices, continue to shape the living landscape.

Lo was first founded in the late 14th century, emerging as an independent kingdom in 1440 AD (Dhungel 2002: 4). Yet from its founding until the Gorkhali conquests of Jumla in 1789, and in some senses until the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1959, Lo retained strong cultural and political ties to the ancient kingdoms of western Tibet, namely Guge and the Gung Thang region of present-day Ngari Prefecture, TAR (Tib. *mnga' ris skor gsum*). The present king of Lo (Tib. *rgyal po*, N. *rājā*), Jigme Palbar Bista, is the 25th in a lineage of rulers dating back to the late 14th century. The kingdom of Lo has been a part of the nation-state of Nepal since the Gorkhali conquests. However, due in part to the then king of Lo's cooperation with Gorkhali forces in the 18th century, and in part due to the implementation of the Dependent Principalities Act of 1961 by the government of Nepal, Lo was allowed to maintain a degree of local autonomy; many of the *rājā*'s traditional rights, allowances, and honorary positions were respected (ibid.: 4-5). Until their formal incorporation into the Nepali administrative district of Mustang, the regions south of Lo were also organized as clusters of semi-independent principalities that, while recognizing the authority and territory of the king of Lo, also maintained their own social and political boundaries.

As this brief history illustrates, the diverse communities that comprise Mustang District have retained strong cultural, linguistic, political, and economic ties to Tibet. Given this history, it is perhaps not surprising to note that, after 1959, the Tibetan Resistance (Tib. *chu bzhi gangs drug*) chose Mustang as their base of operations, from which they waged guerilla war on

² See Vinding 1999 for a comprehensive ethnography of the Thakali.

People's Liberation Army forces from 1960 to 1974.³ Colloquially known in Mustang and greater Nepal as the "Khampa", these resistance forces were eventually subdued by the Royal Nepal Army; yet the legacy of the Khampa presence is still felt in Mustang, and was one of the principal justifications used by the Nepali government for keeping upper Mustang forbidden to foreign access until 1992.

Mustang today: Thubchen restoration in contemporary context

The opening up of the kingdom of Lo to tourists in 1992 encouraged tides of foreign visitors, donors, scholars, and seekers of "authentic" Tibetan culture to Mustang. The kingdom of Lo is often depicted as a territory unspoiled by Chinese occupation or modern encroachment, a glimpse into the world of "old" Tibet. This vision of upper Mustang articulated by Nepalis and foreigners alike is often less a recognition of Lo's historical and geographic ties to western Tibet or its burgeoning commercial links to the Tibet Autonomous Region, China, than it is a vague, Shangri-La poetic of lost realms and hidden kingdoms.⁴ However, this "opening up" of Lo to the so-called outside world has ushered in changes spearheaded in part by the very forces that also seek to preserve and profit from upper Mustang's stark beauty and traditional culture, as well as by the Loba, or people of Lo, themselves.

Over the last decade the people of upper Mustang, including Lo Monthang, have borne witness to and helped to create micro-hydro electricity projects, schools, and eco-tourism ventures, to choreograph cultural shows, and build kerosene depots and campsites within their villages. Foreign foundations, multilateral aid institutions, Nepalese conservation and development organizations, individual trekkers, and local investors have funded this work. Meanwhile, the government of Nepal has not honoured an agreement promulgated in 1991, which stated that sixty percent of the \$70 per person per day trekking fees collected in Kathmandu for foreign travel to upper Mustang would be returned to the region for community development (Aryal 1999). Lobas of all socio-economic positions are aware of this broken promise; most feel powerless to confront the Nepali government on this issue.

Since 1999-2000, the building of a road south from the Mustang/Tibet border and north along the Thak Khola to Jomsom has also preoccupied

³ For more information on the history of the Tibetan Resistance and its impact on Mustang, see Knaus 1998, Norbu 1979, and Peissel 1967.

⁴ See Craig 2002 for a more detailed discussion of Mustang's position vis-à-vis contemporary visions of Tibet and "Tibetanness" in global context. See Lopez 1998 and Schell 2000 for discussions of Tibet and Tibetans as objects of western imagination.

people throughout Mustang District, and has marked a major shift in local life. Significantly, this “farm road” has relied almost exclusively on local and regional funds, as well as migrant labour from neighbouring districts to the south. To date, no foreign donors have been directly involved in the execution of this road project. In fact, many foreigners with stakes in Mustang have perceived this new road as a threat to the region’s cultural heritage, as well as its tourism industry.⁵ Others warn, perhaps rightly, against environmental and political havoc that the road could bring. Despite these ambivalent tenors surrounding the road, most people from upper and lower Mustang see the road as an economic windfall – decreasing the cost of rice, cooking oil, and other necessities, linking upper Mustang traders with economic centres to the north and helping to offset post-1992 inflation, while at the same time shortening the burden and the distance for people throughout Mustang to make the journey from Jomsom to Pokhara.

Although this new motor road has begun to create profound social and economic changes in Mustang, particularly in Lo, the largest project in the kingdom, in terms of financial investment and foreign involvement, is the Mustang Gompa Conservation Project. This venture began with plans to repair and restore Thubchen Lhakhang, a temple built in 1472 and located in the heart of Monthang. First conceived in 1992 but commenced in 1998, this effort has brought together a host of players: a US-based foundation, Nepalese conservation and development organizations, a Kathmandu-based international architecture and restoration firm, foreign and Nepali subcontractors, and the rather nebulous category of “community support”. Representatives of the US foundation itself estimate that the foundation’s contribution alone exceeded US \$3 million by the time this restoration project was completed in 2002-2003 (Bruce Moore, personal communication 2002).

According to project documents, the mission of this endeavour is threefold: 1. to train local people and craftsmen in conservation technology and make them proficient in the conservation and maintenance of historic structures in Upper Mustang; 2. to stabilize the structure, repair the roof, conserve and clean wall paintings, and create a photographic inventory of Thubchen’s frescos; and 3. to develop conservation technologies appropriate to Mustang. The project team defines their mission with urgency, embedded within a narrative of “modern” encroachment onto “traditional” lifestyles.

“All over the world traditional settlements and cultures are losing out to modernization and are disappearing at an unprecedented rate. When a

⁵ In a show of more general concern for the architectural and aesthetic integrity of Lo Monthang as a whole and the wall that surrounds the city, in particular, the architects and planners involved in the Thubchen restoration project, argued strongly for the rerouting of the motor road to avoid impacting Monthang directly – a move that met with initial local resistance but that has since been adopted.

culture loses its forms or when people no longer enliven those forms, their life quickly slips away forever”, reads one project document. “In Mustang, intervention to save the physical heritage of its monuments has started. If sufficient local commitment is manifested and supported it is hoped that the non-tangible aspects of cultural heritage can be conserved as well.” Also key to the project rationale is the place Thubchen’s artistic treasures occupy in the larger history of Tibetan painting, the scholarly imaginings of what Tibetan civilization at its apex might have produced, and the place of Thubchen’s iconography in a pan-Asian art history.

As it is represented in project literature and the NOVA documentary, Thubchen’s neglect and disrepair exemplify a vision that locates modernity in its myriad forms as a bankrupt agent, coercing locals to abandon tradition, making them indirectly culpable for their cultural demise. The lynchpin of this perspective is that cultural heritage is under threat by an onslaught of global modernity and must be protected. While there is truth to this argument, a more subtle, in-depth analysis of why such changes are occurring – the socio-economic, political, and even aesthetic underpinnings of Thubchen’s neglect – as well as the place of Mustang’s people as agents of this change, is rendered superfluous to the larger mission: to preserve, protect, and restore cultural heritage as a catalyst for what the arbiters of this perspective see as “positive” local practice. Although some of the motivations for restoring Thubchen remain opaque, the validity of the endeavour is never questioned. Combined with an “objective” aesthetic appreciation of Thubchen’s artwork and an invocation of religiosity,⁶ the impulse to restore and the means to do so are justification enough.

Before the restoration project commenced, Thubchen bore the marks of time poorly. Although local and regional artists and artisans had restored this temple two hundred years ago, its roof had since shifted, causing walls and beams to crack. Rainwater had ravaged one entire wall of paintings, and the main statue of Sakyamuni Buddha, to whom the temple is dedicated, was covered in a thick layer of dust, its copper patina all but vanished. Once the domain of the king of Lo and the site of many village gatherings, Thubchen is now rarely used by villagers. The fields that belong to Thubchen, once cultivated by villagers to produce surplus for the king and to support seasonal festivals, have lain fallow for some time; some have been sold or leased to private families for their personal use.

Why such shifts have occurred? Many explanations are possible. In the wake of the Chinese takeover of Tibet and the closing of the Nepal-Tibet

⁶ The temple restoration is couched by donors as a merit making activity, in Tibetan Buddhist terms. Project documents often make reference to the team’s sponsorship of religious rituals at the start of the project and in Kathmandu. See Coburn 1998 for a discussion of the religious ceremony that was conducted before work on Thubchen commenced.

border in 1959, Monthang's great religious institutions – centres of learning and pilgrimage sites for centuries – lost access to similar institutions in Tibet. Quite rapidly, the flow of cultural and religious knowledge was arrested and re-routed to religious institutions established by Tibetans-in-exile in Kathmandu, India, and abroad. Monthang went from being a centre, often visited by highly esteemed teachers, to a remote, “backward” locale – a sense that is profoundly felt by all generations of people from Mustang, albeit in different ways.⁷

Since upper Mustang was opened to tourism, local inflation has increased dramatically. This, combined with anger and resignation at the Nepalese government's broken promises and misuse of funds, has contributed to an already significant tide of out-migration and further shifted historical patterns of seasonal movement (Tulachan 2002). Adding to this is the perceived lack of educational and employment opportunities available within Mustang. Despite the opening of some private and foreign NGO-funded boarding schools throughout the district, many of Mustang's children are sent to schools and monasteries in Kathmandu or India, where their parents also migrate seasonally or semi-permanently in search of cash income. Many people from Mustang now live abroad, including about 700 people from Baragaon and Lo living in New York City (Craig 2002). Beyond this, all Loba – from those who do leave to those with no recourse to passports or visas to foreign countries – are acutely aware of the inequalities in standards of living and economy between urban and rural Nepal and more globally. Most see the influx of wealthy tourists to Lo without the fulfilled promise of government returns to Mustang's communities, as both hypocritical and damaging. Many Loba are cognizant of being kept in what one resident of Tsarang described to me as a “cultural zoo”, their lives frozen as exemplars of “tradition” by those who hold the purse strings: foreign donors, tourists, trekking agencies, and the government of Nepal.⁸

⁷ These historical circumstances could be read in the light of academic discussions of postcolonialism, in particular Gupta's (1998) discussion of “backwardness” as part of the postcolonial condition, and in the context of Nepal, part of what being *bikāsī* or *abikāsī*, “developed” or “underdeveloped”, means to many Nepalis (cf. Pigg 1992). Further, the fact that Lo has shifted over time from being a centre of Tibetan religion and culture to a peripheral and neglected part of a still “peripheral” country, and then, after 1992, propelled into the limelight in great part because of the artistic “treasures” found in places like Thubchen by those at the centre of global consumption of Tibetan culture, illustrates both the power and the limitations of World Systems theory (cf. Wallerstein 1997) in an age of globalization.

⁸ The situation in upper Mustang is distinct from the unrestricted areas of Mustang. In lower Mustang, locals have recourse to earning money from tourism, either through owning or working in trailside lodges or tea shops, by renting animals for portage, selling trinkets or antiques, or working in Jomsom's airline or hotel industries. However, in upper Mustang, foreign trekkers are required by

Further, the establishment of Tibetan monastic institutions in exile has affected a sea-change in perceptions about how religious institutions should be built and managed. A non-residential temple like Thubchen, associated with a lineage of married *rnying ma* householder-priests (Tib. *sngags pa*) has less cultural cachet than it used to. Throughout the diasporic Tibetan world, as well as culturally Tibetan Himalayan hinterlands, one can observe a shift toward monastic centres as the quintessential representation of Tibetan Buddhism or “Tibetanness” more generally. The celibate, monastic model of Tibetan religious organization, as a self-perpetuating and in some ways more circumscribed institution than its *rnying ma* counterparts, is more conducive to garnering patronage from both “insiders” and “outsiders”, than more fluid community-religious institutions like Thubchen.⁹

Finally, although Mustang is one of the very few Nepalese districts (three out of 75 at last count) to have escaped the violence of direct combat between the Royal Nepal Army and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), or Maobadi, during the eight years of the People’s War, the impacts of this civil war are still felt throughout the district. Tourism has plummeted, and with it local livelihoods. Also, current military injunctions against lowland migrant labourers (Tib. *rong pa*) entering Mustang, combined with the loss of labour power due to more permanent out-migration of Mustang’s residents, has meant that fields normally planted have remained fallow, community labour power has dwindled, and the maintenance of social and religious duties has become less feasible, if not less important, to those who remain in Mustang.

It is within this complex social, economic, and political context that the restoration of Thubchen and the construction of the Kathmandu-based Mustang Community Temple has occurred, and to which I now turn in more detail, through two ethnographic scenes.

law to travel in organized trekking groups. With almost no exception, the food and labour (guides, porters, etc.) for these excursions come from outside Mustang. Loba are prohibited from opening restaurants or tea shops, supposedly for ecological reasons, as this area is designated a “fragile” ecosystem. Most local development remains in the jurisdiction of the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP), a division of the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation (KMTNC) – a fact that is resented by many local residents, including district-level politicians in Jomsom.

⁹ This distinction between “insiders” (*nang pa*) and “outsiders” (*phyi pa*) is a double entendre in Tibetan; it also distinguishes between Buddhists and non-Buddhists and, in the case of Mustang, between people of one’s community or not (Ramble 1997).

Scene 1: Thubchen Lhakhang, Lo Monthang, Mustang

By mid-morning, the sun had warmed the adobe roofs of Monthang. The alleys that stitch together this labyrinthine walled city of several hundred households just south of the Tibetan border were quiet. King Jigme Palbar Bista rode off early this morning toward the Tibetan border, in anticipation of the trading season to come. The *mkhan po*, or abbot, of Chöde, Monthang's main *sa skya* monastery, presided over prayers to an audience of young monks – students at the monastery school. Elders spun prayer wheels by the city gates. Their sons, daughters, and grandchildren – at least those who are not working abroad on invalid tourist visas or away at boarding school – were otherwise occupied: herding sheep, goat, and horses, gathering dung for household fires.

On this day in midsummer, Thubchen's exterior walls of fading vermilion earth belied the activity that had been going on inside the temple. An Italian fresco expert was poised for another day's work. His task: to erase from the murals on Thubchen's walls damage caused by several centuries of weather and smoke from ubiquitous Tibetan butter lamps. This was a delicate operation, akin to re-colouring a tattoo. He and a team of local and Nepali assistants, whom he has helped to train over the past year, will spend the day cleaning frescos and stabilizing walls by injecting, literally with a syringe, new mud behind the old paintings. Then, they will carefully clean the images, renewing the vibrancy of earthen pigments and semi-precious stone colours. Although the work was difficult, the Italian believed he was doing something extremely worthwhile. As he stared into the flaming gold and lapis eyes of a protector deity or caressed the contours of a *bodhisattva*, he whispered to himself, "So much beauty. Such lovely lines. This, this was a Renaissance, too. A Tibetan Renaissance" (Pushpa Tulachan, personal communication 2002).

At a town meeting the day before, villagers saw for the first time what the Italian saw everyday by headlamp – thanks to high-powered lights brought to Monthang by the NOVA documentary film crew. The Loba were amazed by the paintings' brilliance. Some even cried. They whispered among themselves, wondering how such a transformation was possible. Some of the local workers tried to explain their techniques, but were often met by confused expressions. "What do you mean you make a new wall behind the old one?", asked one villager. "How is it possible to lift a god off a wall and then put it back again?", questioned another.

Yet the main focus of this meeting was not to bask in Thubchen's glory but to try and answer a pressing question: Who would care for Thubchen once the restoration is complete?

The Chairman of the Village Development Committee, the man who called this meeting, was notably absent. Apparently, a pressing business deal across the border in Tibet was more important to him. The king and the

abbot both attended, as did a quorum of villagers. Under the cinematic glow of the NOVA lights, the abbot turned to the principal architect, an Englishman who had worked in Nepal for years and who spoke Nepali, and made a bid for the temple. He said he and the monks of Chöde would take care of the structure, so long as they could collect the funds from entrance tickets they planned to charge foreigners.

At a similar meeting during the first phase of the project, the abbot said the following (and his attention also turned toward the foreign sponsors and architects): “For us, it is as though you are bringing light to a dark room, or delivering sight to the blind”, one project document recorded. This statement is as striking as it is ambiguous. Read in one way, it can be seen as an expression of the “colonized mind”, (c.f. Marglin 1990, Nandy 1983) albeit recast here in the context of neo-colonial relationships between international foundations, national governments, and local people. Read with more sympathy, this statement is blazingly true, particularly when considered under the glow of NOVA’s high-powered lamps. This restoration work has unveiled a part of Mustang’s cultural and religious history that, for several generations, had been unknowable under the layers of dirt and decay. Whatever the essence of this statement, it is telling that the abbot also recently asked for the architect’s consent to use one of the entry rooms in Thubchen as a library for Tibetan Buddhist scripture. The architect approved, though seemingly without any recognition of the irony that Mustang’s religious superior now felt the need to ask the permission of the foreign architect to use Thubchen – a reflection on how concepts such as propriety and value, senses of ownership and responsibility have been interpreted by both local and foreign players in the project.

Since the beginning of the temple restoration project, the townspeople of Monthang have provided clay for roof reconstruction and unskilled labour at prevailing rates. After the king negotiated a deal for the supply of timber from Tibet, villagers were also held responsible for transporting these beams and planks from the Tibetan border to Monthang. Other supplies have been flown in via helicopter at the US foundation’s expense. As is revealed in much detail in the NOVA documentary, the exchange of architectural knowledge and skilled labour has not only been a one-sided transfer from foreign and Kathmandu-based experts to Loba. Although the foreign team has taken pains to train local artisans in new and in some cases high-tech restoration techniques, much of the restoration effort involved an appreciation for and revival of the rammed earth construction techniques that are unique to this part of the world and, in that sense, part of the indigenous knowledge of Mustang. Likewise, the foreign team took pains to allay initial concerns on the part of commoners (Tib. *mi dkyus ma*) and nobles (Tib. *sku drag pa*) alike about the proposed restoration techniques

and to do this through “participatory” town hall-style meetings.¹⁰ However, divisions persisted, both between the “insiders” and “outsiders” and within the community of Monthang itself. For instance, some, though not all, Monthang residents felt that while they had honoured their responsibilities to contribute to temple repair, the king and the abbot had not been as forthcoming. While the abbot manoeuvred to make a claim on and perhaps a profit from Thubchen, the king said little about the course of the restoration project and the long-term plans for Thubchen, despite his obviously strong feelings about Thubchen, a temple over which his ancestors presided.

Scene 2: The Baragaon and Kingdom of Lo Community Temple, Kathmandu

On a late summer afternoon, I made my way toward Swayambhunath, a Buddhist stupa at the northwestern edge of Kathmandu. Over the last few years, Swayambhu has been transformed. Once a principally Newar site, this so-called “monkey temple” has now metamorphosed into a shrine that bears the distinctive marks of Tibetan spiritual territory and the financial largesse of several of Nepal’s Tibetan-speaking cultural groups, particularly those from Manang District, just east of Mustang. In recent years the kora (*skor ba*), or circumambulation route, around the base of Swayambhu hill has been fitted with new prayer wheels; the road has been widened and re-paved, and a giant statue of the Buddha has been erected at the back entrance.

I was on my way to the site of the Baragaon and Kingdom of Lo Community Temple – a project I had first heard about from Mustang friends now living and working in New York City. I headed toward an imposing structure tucked in between the fray of Ring Road and the forest that encircles and shelters Swayambhu from the city below. The three-storey building was painted in signature “monastery” red and bore many of the same architectural flourishes as other Tibetan temples: afternoon sun reflected off a golden rooftop and classic Tibetan patterns trimmed the roofline, defined the doorways.

Originally from the village of Purang in the Muktinath Valley, Ngodrup was Vice Chairman of the Kathmandu-based Community Temple Managing Committee and the principal designer of the building. He had come to this

¹⁰ It should be noted, however, that even though “participatory” approaches are currently in vogue within an array of development circles – from the World Bank to small, grassroots organizations – the meaning and function of said participation can vary widely. “Participation” is still implicated in relations of power that often serve to mask and/or re-inscribe social divisions and silence debate. For a critique of such approaches see Cooke and Kothari 2001.

job with a relevant, if not motley, occupational history. The middle child of a well-off family, Ngodrup was ordained as a monk at a young age, a vocation to which he adhered through his early twenties, when he disrobed, married, and began the life of a businessman. During the eighties, Ngodrup made a living selling Nepali-made goods and occasionally dealing in gold in Bangkok and Hong Kong, while others from Mustang were off selling sweaters to tourists in Assam and Benares. In the nineties, Ngodrup switched his focus to real estate, and worked the Kathmandu scene. Ngodrup's real estate connections made possible the purchase of land on a sought-after corner of the Kathmandu market. Although not an architect or designer by training, Ngodrup has cultivated his natural aesthetic talent over the last few years, and has honed his skills as an amateur general contractor. Together, we walked the perimeter of the ground floor of the temple, a meeting room larger than a basketball court, with space enough to seat and cook for 500. The walls remained bare. Support beams had been cast in concrete to resemble the carved wooden beams of Mustang's monasteries and homes. The kitchen included two industrial size sinks, tiled counters, plenty of outlets for rice cookers, and a buffet bar that faced the main hall.

"If we can't feed everybody", Ngodrup said, "what sort of community place would this be?" I was struck by the contrast to Thubchen, in which the kitchen was being transformed into a museum and visitor centre.

From the gathering hall, Ngodrup and I headed upstairs to the main shrine room. A few young Newar craftsmen were hard at work, forging Buddha eyes and hands in meditative *mudrā* positions out of clay and cement. The central figure on the altar – Shakyamuni Buddha – was headless but otherwise complete.

"We hope to finish the statues sometime in the next few months", said Ngodrup. "But definitely before Losar [Tibetan New Year]."

"Are any of the people working on the temple from Mustang?", I asked.

"Not really. Not any of the craftsmen, anyway. We've got a couple of boys working on the construction, but mostly they're Newars, Tamangs – people from here in Kathmandu."

As we toured the rest of the complex, Ngodrup explained that the original plot of land at Swayambhu was bought ten years ago for \$17,000 by a consortium that became the temple's Managing Committee. This fifteen-member group includes the crown prince of Lo, the head *sngags pa* of Muktinath, and other wealthy and well-respected businessmen from Baragaon and Lo. However, the dream of building a community centre and temple has only begun to be realized since 2000-2001, a time during which the committee received a much-needed influx of \$66,000 from the New York Mustang Association. Combined with the approximately \$50,000 that

had been raised within Nepal over the last decade, construction was able to begin in earnest, Ngodrup explained. The association later acquired the plot adjacent to their original purchase with some of these funds, and now held title to several hectares of prime Kathmandu real estate.

Ngodrup and I continued up the stairs to the next floor. I was shown the main temple, a library, two bedrooms with attached baths, and a small kitchen, to be used by lamas who would come to give teachings. None of the rooms were painted, though they were tidy and usable in a makeshift way. When I asked Ngodrup to outline the purpose of this temple and community centre, he answered, “This place should be of benefit to many people. It is a place to celebrate marriage festivals and to mourn when people die, to feel like you are in Mustang even if you are in Kathmandu. This is important now because so many people have left Mustang. Young people in New York, Kathmandu, Tokyo are marrying differently. Before people started going abroad, someone from Lo hardly ever married someone from Baragaon. But all that is changing now.” Ngodrup’s comments gave me pause. How possible is it, I wonder, to recreate home in a displaced realm? How does nostalgia service the illusion of memory? What is memory, if not the warding off of displacement, loss?

“This is a root (Tib. *rtsa ba*) place”, Ngodrup continued, “and a meeting place (Tib. *thug sa*) for all the people from Lubra and Kagbeni north, everyone from Baragaon and Lo, but not for the people from Panchgaon or Jomsom, not for Thakalis.” Ngodrup emphasized the geographical borders of this displaced temple’s jurisdiction not with ill-will, but with a sure sense that the people of Baragaon and Lo belonged together in a way that the Thakali ethnic group from further south along the Kali Gandaki River Valley did not.

This distillation of local diversity into a sense of “Mustangi” identity by those from Baragaon and Lo now living in Kathmandu or abroad is also a reflection, I argue, of a growing sense of the global cultural capital associated with “Tibetanness” and a desire, by some from Mustang, to be identified as such (Craig 2002). Combined with this is a burgeoning sense – fostered by foreigners and the Nepalese state, though in different ways – that Mustang’s heritage is quintessentially Tibetan and coincidentally Nepali.

Of course, local realities complicate this picture. The linguistic, religious, and economic distinctions between these regions of Mustang are formidable, but the borders of identity within Mustang are at once more fluid and more nested within local networks of kin and commerce than this picture allows (Fisher 2001, Ramble 1997). Mustang is neither monolithically Buddhist nor of one mind about its relationship to the Nepalese nation-state, Chinese Tibet, or Tibet-in-exile. Within Baragaon and Lo, *rnying ma*, *bka’ brgyud*, and *sa skya* schools of Tibetan Buddhism are

represented, as is *bon*, the label ascribed to a diversity of “pre-Buddhist” Tibetan religious practice. Knowing this, I asked Ngodrup if any particular sect or lama is going to be bound to this temple.

“No”, he answered. “So far, we’ve had *sa skya* lamas here, but there are *rnying ma pa* and *bka’ brgyud pa* on our committee. Anyone can give teachings. Even *bon po* is okay.”

Despite careful budgeting, funds had begun to run low. Ngodrup now faced the task of finishing the parking lot, public toilets, and altar, as well as painting the inside of the building. He had hosted several fundraising events, and had put pressure on all the committee members to donate as much as they could to the completion of the temple. “I haven’t taken a salary for the last few months. It is more important to finish now. I can always do more business later.”

As we stood on the roof, Ngodrup motioned toward a dilapidated shack near a pile of wood, some bags of cement, shovels and trowels. “Once we finish here we’ll make a guest house over there”, he said. “A place for people to stay when they come on pilgrimage, especially the elders. We’ll let people stay for fifteen days with free fooding and boarding. If people want to stay longer, they will pay something, or they can work. The idea is not to make money. We have enough hotels in Mustang. And many people from Mustang are already making a lot of money. This is a place to practice religion and celebrate Mustang culture. But right now we don’t have the money to finish this plan. Maybe next year.”

The Swayambhu temple was inaugurated in the summer of 2002 and blessed by Chopgye Trizin Rinpoche, a revered *sa skya* lama as well as the maternal uncle and one of the so-called root teachers (Tib. *rtsa ba’i bla ma*) of the king of Lo. Other VIPs included the king of Lo and all the members of the temple committee. Although the altar was not yet complete, Chopgye Trizin Rinpoche consecrated the new statues and recited prayers. Video-tapes of this event filtered back to the New York Mustang Association, though not in time to be shown at the annual Fourth of July gathering in Central Park, although it was played later as the New York Mustangis celebrated their New Year, an occasion known in Mustang as “bringing home the trade”. Indeed, it is this transnational practice of remitting capital that has made it possible for people from Mustang to build a new form of long-distance community in the shape of the Swayambhu temple.

Between worlds, behind walls: Analysis and theoretical implications

These ethnographic scenes raise many practical and theoretical questions. What motivates the US sponsors to spend millions restoring this temple in remote Nepal? Why are New York-based Mustangis so intent on remitting,

not only to their individual families, but also to the creation of a shared religious and social space outside of Mustang – a space in which belonging is not defined at the village or clan level, but rather at the level of being from Mustang? Why is it so important for both parties to focus their energies on a physical structure? Beyond ethnographic specifics, what can we glean from these two distinct though interrelated tales about the local/global interface? How can this puzzle of culture, capital, and community encompassed by and extending beyond Mustang help us to think about globalization and transnationalism? What can these ethnographic scenes – at once local and global stories – speak to the ways communities are imagined and imagine themselves?

In order to answer these questions, it is useful to examine the common reference points of these two temple projects. Although actual work on these projects only commenced three to five years ago, plans for both were begun more than a decade ago, in the wake of Nepal's democratic revolution in 1990 and the opening up of Lo in 1992. Both projects would not be possible without a synergistic combination of foreign (or foreign-earned) capital and community-based support. The motivations for this support can be compared and contrasted. In both Monthang and Kathmandu, people with money and connections are determining the course of community building. In Lo, those with negotiating power are the foreign sponsors, the abbot, the king, and a select group of Lo nobles who are helping to manage local labour forces. In the case of the Swayambhu temple, the managing committee is a somewhat more diverse group, in part because wage labour abroad and the rise of a Mustangi *nouveau riche* has shifted social roles and economic expectations among people from Mustang. As a woman born into Lo nobility and now married to a Baragaon noble put it, "Before people started going to America, there was money but it was different. People still knew their social place. Now, with all this new money, it doesn't matter as much where you were born, who your ancestors were. What matters more is if you have cash." As such, the Swayambhu temple includes arbiters of both "old" and "new" Mustang wealth; it is dominated by those most powerful within the diverse group of people who classify themselves as belonging to this temple. Yet the explicit lack of foreign involvement in this project still points to a different type of sponsorship dynamic – and a different scale of social and economic capital – than the Thubchen restoration endeavours.

Another point of convergence between the two temple projects: In the end, the abbot and Chöde Monastery in Monthang did accept the responsibility to care for the newly restored Thubchen. By shifting Thubchen's religious domain *away* from the king, the villagers, and *rnying ma* traditions with which it has historically been associated, and *toward* the abbot and Monthang's *sa skya* monastic customs, the restoration team has contributed to a particular vision of the "little Tibet" aesthetics to which upper Mustang is at some level expected to conform – a shift that is also

reflective of the more general trend toward identification with large monastic institutions, as discussed above. As illustrated by the consecration ceremony held at the Swayambhu-based temple in Kathmandu, *sa skya* teachers have also risen to the top of the ranks at the new temple. This could suggest, as did Ngodrup, that these teachers are currently the most important lamas for Mustang; yet the influence of *sa skya* teachers in Mustang could change over time, as it has in the past. Or, it could be yet another iteration of the more pervasive shifts in Tibetan religious practice and community organization, away from fluid structures and toward more rigid institutions. This shift has distinctly diasporic roots and transnational implications.¹¹

Aside from these parallels, many differences exist between the two temple projects. While the Thubchen project is driven by a foreign model of “cultural preservation” inextricably linked to a “traditional” place, the Kathmandu-based temple recognizes that Mustangi culture extends beyond the physical boundaries and cultural lifeways of villages in rural Nepal. While Thubchen’s utility is primarily that of a heritage site, and is representative of what could be called the museumification of culture, the Swayambhu temple hopes to be a place less about the preservation of tradition per se, and more about community gatherings and religious practice – a site where one can celebrate being from Mustang. Nowhere is this clearer than when one considers the kitchens in both temples. Thubchen’s kitchen will now be a visitor centre and museum, while in the Kathmandu-based Community Temple the ability to provide for and sustain people is central to its design and utility.

I would like to turn for a moment toward the metaphor of prisons and walls. While visiting a Loba friend in New York, he described his existence there as living in a “prison without walls.” I explore this comment in more detail elsewhere (Craig 2002), but a few points are worth noting here, specifically as they relate to this tale of two temples. Most people from Mustang now living in New York are illegal immigrants. They reside in the US, but their jobs and their visa status bind them to the blocks of Brooklyn and Queens, from where they commute to Manhattan and New Jersey. They are at once transnationally mobile and locally confined – an arresting paradox of late capitalism and globalization.¹² Even more striking, however, is the fact that most Mustangis living in New York continue to work for

¹¹ See Zablocki 2004 for a detailed discussion of transnational Tibetan Buddhism.

¹² Similar dynamics, in which engagement with the global economy (through migration, employment, trade, etc.) brings people at once a new level of wealth or power at a local level and yet serves to entrench more systemic divisions of wealth at regional, national, and global levels are illustrated well by a number of recent ethnographies and works of social theory (e.g. Finn 1998, Freeman 2000, Spyer 2000, and Tsing 2000).

either Indian or Chinese bosses. The old Nepali adage, in which Nepal is a “yam caught between two boulders” is recast on the streets of the USA.

Although younger, unmarried Mustangi immigrants are more likely to gravitate toward the electric excitement of New York, older Mustangis view their tenure in the US as a liminal time, economically productive but socially unmoored. In order to create a network of financial and emotional support they founded the New York Mustang Association. Among other activities, the Association hosts parties to celebrate festivals that draw on both Baragaon and Lo customs. Over the last three years, the association’s coffers have grown, making possible the large donation to the Kathmandu-based temple. Perhaps the New York Mustang Association saves and remits and instructs Ngodrup to build in the hopes of cobbling together a sense of home between their memories of village days, their dreams of a comfortable Kathmandu-based retirement, and their present state, a life of little rest and minimum wage inside America’s economic underbelly, in which participation in Mustang life is limited to long-distance phone calls and videos shuttled between the Kali Gandaki Valley and the boroughs of New York. Many of their actions are informed by nostalgic sensibilities – a theme reflected in a diversity of modern displacements, from the refugee who escapes the violence of genocide to the global worker who leaves his home and country to earn income abroad.

Let us now consider this idea of a prison without walls in light of the wall that surrounds Monthang. Taken metaphorically, the earthen wall that surrounds Monthang can be conceived as a prison of tradition or, as some Loba themselves describe, a “cultural zoo” to which they have been relegated by the government of Nepal, foreign sponsors, and tourists, and whose preservation has taken precedence over other types of development efforts, from clean drinking water initiatives to maternal and child health care projects. It is significant, then, that many Loba are now choosing to build new buildings – from schools to houses – outside the walls of Monthang. This represents a certain rupture of social structure and physical space, in that such construction, historically forbidden by Lo’s nobility, is no longer challenged by the current king, but instead by outsiders, including foreigners interested in the maintenance of Monthang’s historic and aesthetic integrity.¹³ These circumstances also capture something of the paradoxes that define life in Mustang these days. On the one hand, what was once a barter-oriented economy has become monetized and placed in dialogue not only with rupees but also with dollars, either foreign-earned or foreign-donated. In turn, this has contributed the rise in land prices in and

¹³ A number of ongoing disputes exist between the king and other members of the royal family of Lo, as well as between local villagers and the foreign restoration team about how and under what guidelines building outside the wall should be handled.

around Monthang as well as a growing resentment among locals about their inability to acquire the sort of capital that draws foreigners to Mustang in the first place. On the other hand, the sense of international value and “world heritage” attributed to Lo Monthang and Thubchen, has further shifted how Loba conceptualize the value of their history and culture, and has raised questions about who bears the responsibility for so-called cultural preservation.¹⁴

The foreign and Nepali restoration team’s desire to renew Thubchen can be viewed in the light of assertions about the workings of multiculturalism in a global age (Turner 2000). Turner’s critique of globalization grants a weakening of the nation-state, often cited by globalization theorists, but couples this consideration with a rise in consumerism, the “fetishes of multiculturalism”, and the “salience of ethnicity” in constructions of globalized visions of culture. Here, the shifting place of the nation-state can be seen in the international consortium brought together to restore Thubchen at a historical juncture when the Nepalese state could not be weaker, as well as the transnational capital and labour mobilized to do so. Turner further argues that this sort of multiculturalism focuses on the superficial instead of honing in on the political and economic causes and conditions that are shaping the globe. When turned toward an analysis of the Thubchen project, this translates into a sharpening of the division between “traditional” and “modern” societies or places (Lo Monthang versus New York, for instance) as opposed to an analysis of the ways these two ends of a social and geographic spectrum are interlinked, and an examination of the fact that the reification of “tradition” and quests for “authentic” culture itself are products of modern life. The desire to preserve cultural diversity and what Turner calls “the salience of ethnicity,” in this case the social capital and exoticism associated with Tibet in general and Mustang as a quasi-Tibetan “forbidden kingdom” in particular, can be applied to a more cynical reading of the foreign restoration team’s good, if somewhat paternalistic, intentions. That is, harbouring more vulnerable, less powerful groups from the exploitative, homogenizing forces of global modernity. And yet, in making such claims to cultural preservation – as do Thubchen project documents and other representations of this effort – a vision of the people of Mustang as essentially un-modern proliferates. Their place in the 21st century as agents of their own cultural change and wielders of transnational capital, albeit on a different scale, goes unrecognized. Questions about who can own modernity, as well as who can own tradition, remain unanswered.

Let us return for a moment to the first ethnographic scene I presented.

¹⁴ The two main temples in Lo Monthang, Thubchen and Champa, were in fact being considered as additions to UNESCO’s World Heritage Site list in the late 1990s. However, due to disagreements between the UNESCO delegation and local residents, as well as among Loba themselves, the application for World Heritage recognition was abandoned.

The Village Development Committee Chairman's decision to attend to his business deal in Tibet, instead of the meeting that would determine the future stewardship of Thubchen, signals some of the paradoxes described above. We could view the chairman's absence as that of a person who chose between taking care of his local responsibilities for a "traditional" place and taking care of more "modern" economic concerns. Alternately, we could say that the modern invention of Thubchen as a quintessentially traditional place, in which he is implicated, bears less on his personal life-world than does the window of economic opportunity available for him through seasonal trade in Tibet. Perhaps he felt less invested in the decisions about Thubchen than he did in engaging in cross-border commerce. What is interesting, though, is that this trade also represents a convergence of "tradition" and "modernity". It is a moment of cultural continuity and change, in which the chairman enacted his part in a centuries-old trans-Himalayan economy, albeit with a transformed roster of commodities. Instead of bartering salt for grain, or horses, yak, and goat, he now traded in Nepal-made biscuits, Hindi film videos, and cash, which he exchanged for ready-made Chinese goods. Still, it is significant that he chose to place his efforts, and in that sense his solidarity, not with the cross-cultural cultural preservation agendas but instead with the maintenance of another form of Mustang social life.

But what of the tears Loba cried when they saw the artwork of their ancestors restored? This speaks to something beyond strategy or simple categorizations. An old temple like Thubchen is a paradoxical object, a site of passionate ambivalence. At once treasure and cage, living institution and museum, it is symbolic of the cycles of decay and renewal in Mustang that demands both a broader historical view and a closer reading of the contemporary context in which this effort has taken place – particularly when considering questions of motivation and responsibility for so-called cultural preservation and the more emotive and aesthetic aspects of such endeavours. In contrast to Turner, Appadurai's (1996) efforts to sketch out the universalizing trends of global modernity speaks to this less material and more emotive aspect of the two temple projects. Although Appadurai has been criticized for the ways he attempts to define global modernity in terms of "scapes", "ruptures", and "deterritorialization", without much recourse to the political economy in which such phenomena occur, his project is valuable precisely because he attempts to show how imagination circulates, and through these movements, transforms ground truth realities across the globe. Appadurai's focus on culture flows, rather than political economy, is useful in thinking about the motivations and desires behind the circulation of capital in both temple contexts – what motivates the foreign restoration team, the king and abbot, the committee chairmen, and all the people from Mustang who have contributed funds to the Kathmandu-based temple or in-kind labour on the Thubchen project.

In the case of the Swayambhu temple, the goal is to use cash earned abroad to create a space that is expressly not about money. At least, this is how the managing committee of this project talks about it. However, without access to hard cash generated by people from Lo and Baragaon engaged in the transnational remittance economy, this temple could not be. Here, the idea of “flexible citizenship” described by Ong (1999) in relation to powerful and wealthy Asian corporate nomads can be applied to a different category of flexible citizens: mostly illegal Mustangi workers. They are using their foreign-earned cash to re-imagine a community and create a social and spiritual space whose meaning is explicitly not limited to an expression of material wealth and, even more significantly, not dependent on foreign sponsors as the source of that wealth. This in itself is a powerful statement about questions of ownership and responsibility for Mustang culture, writ large.

In contrast, the Thubchen restoration project, which is billed as an urgent call to restore “traditional” (and in that sense non- or pre-capitalist) cultural values, is almost entirely dependent on foreign capital and also quite out of synch with the socio-economic realities of Lo Monthang, in terms of the sheer amount of dollars invested and, ironically, the “pricelessness” attached to the artistry found on Thubchen’s walls. In the actions of some people from Mustang – from the absent chairman to the eager-to-please abbot or the resigned king – we see the paradoxes that arise when large sums of cash pour into geographically marginal, yet well-connected places. And, when examining both projects, we see a development truism (and often a mark of development failure) in action: that it is easier to build or restore a physical structure than it is to realign social, economic, and political realities at a more systemic level, in a way that allows those dubbed the representatives of “traditional culture” to survive and adapt to massive change.

Finally, when thinking about the impetus for people from Mustang to invest in the Swayambhu-based temple, I am reminded of Benedict Anderson’s discussion of “long-distance nationalism” (Anderson 1998). Anderson argues that nationalism is often a child of exile or diaspora. It is precisely these long-distance circumstances that fuel an impassioned imagining of home. Furthermore – and this bears particularly on the migrant workers of Mustang – there is what Anderson calls a “differential tariff on labor” within the workings of global capitalism, which can contribute to the fermentation of nationalist sentiment. The events of September 11, 2001 could be seen as one example of these displaced nationalist networks. We might see an alternate, more benevolent vision of this labour differential in the global economy in Mustangis’ abilities, even as poorly paid workers in the underground economy, to build something of beauty and significance back home.

The fact that people from Baragaon and Lo are now uniting to erect a community temple is also an example of how transnational labour patterns contribute to the reshaping and re-imagining of “community” itself. This could be seen as a classic reformulation of Fredrik Barth’s thesis in his *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, about the relational and imminently flexible nature of social divisions (Barth 1969). Yet the frames of community are no longer simply bound to a geographical space, but instead exemplify a different kind of boundary drawing, at once tied to Mustang’s geography and transcendent of it. Here, the economic logic of global capitalism – the place for illegal workers within vast, chaotic urban economies and what they choose to do back home with what they earn abroad – is remaking social and physical landscapes from Mustang to Manhattan and back again.

Conclusion: On finished products and further change

In conclusion, I offer a few words about utility and “finished” products. I also take a moment to bring the stories of these two temple projects up to date.

The completion of the Swayambhu temple has been relatively straightforward. The walls remained bare for a time, the statues unpainted. But the altar was consecrated, the statues continued to take form, and the kitchen was functional. The space began to be used for weddings, religious rituals, and social gatherings of other sorts after its official inauguration in 2002.

To finish Thubchen, however, was another matter. In the opinion of the foreign donor organization and the architects, the Thubchen restoration project was considered complete once the structure was secure and the frescos were cleaned. However, many of the temple’s paintings had been partially destroyed over the years. As discussed in some detail in the NOVA documentary, villagers, the king, and the abbot all wanted to see these religious images restored to wholeness. In particular, they asked that these icons’ shadow limbs be redrawn by today’s best painters, a project that Monthang residents argued would also provide local and regional employment. However, the foreign team opposed this idea, saying it would destroy the authenticity of the original 15th century frescos. Although a sincere lauding of the genius that created Thubchen – whoever the artists were – this perspective represented an ideal of artistic integrity and art history that did not correspond to the ways these images were viewed by the community in which the art is located. To Loba, the idea of leaving a protector deity or *bodhisattva* half complete, not for lack of resources or talent but because the artistic touch might vary, is anathema to what they saw as the primary purpose of these paintings: namely, guides to religious practice and sacred images first, cultural relics and exemplars of Tibetan art on the global scene second. While the westerners continued to focus on the question of who the artists of Thubchen were, Loba remained less concerned about individual

claims to authorship and more concerned with the overall aesthetic, from their cultural perspective. However, the preservationists won out on this point in the end – a further push, one could argue, toward the alienation of people of Mustang from their so-called living cultural institutions. In turn, this contributed to the impetus among people from Mustang to create a cultural and religious space of their own, outside the realm of contested cultural politics, outside Mustang.

But what of the two temples today? By the winter of 2003-2004, massive gatherings of people from Lo and Baragaon took place at the Swayambhu-based Mustang Community Temple. In the weeks leading up to the Tibetan New Year in February 2004, Trizin Rinpoche, the head of the *sa skya* school, gave a series of religious empowerments (Tib. *dbang*) at the temple. These events drew hundreds of people, mostly from Mustang, on a daily basis. In an interesting turn in the forging of “Mustang community” outside Mustang and the re-invention of tradition, the community temple also began offering classes in Mustang’s songs and dances to the generation of Mustang’s children who have been educated in Pokhara, Kathmandu, and India. Yet despite these signs of success and the demonstration of this temple’s utility, many people from Mustang whom I interviewed about the role of the community temple continued to view it with ambivalence. As one person from Baragaon put it, “The place doesn’t really have a root. It is sort of like how Mustang is becoming – empty. There is no main teacher, even though the *sa skya pa* have been around a lot. It makes us all wonder whom the place is for.” In that sense, questions of local and regional identity – of what it means to be from Mustang and who is responsible for maintaining cultural continuity – have not been solved by this locally-funded effort, but rather recast. Others I spoke with were more cynical. As one woman from Monthang put it, “Oh, that place is supposed to be about religion and making merit. But really it is just another place for all those women whose husbands are in America to show off their gold.” And so, a place that was constructed with the explicit hope that it would not be about money – and not be controlled by foreign funding or “outsider” visions of what Mustang should be – has become in some people’s experience a site of conspicuous consumption for those who are the conduits for another type of foreign-earned wealth.

The legacy of Thubchen project continues to evoke strong responses in people from upper Mustang – both positive and negative. In particular, many find it both frustrating and shameful that it has taken foreigners – and so much foreign money – to restore places that they feel belong to them, but whose ownership has been called into question and recalibrated through this international effort. Some from Mustang expressed questions that are at once practical and ideological about the value placed on upper Mustang’s cultural relics as compared to foreign and Nepalese investment in Mustang’s living population. Despite this ambivalence, the team of local, regional, and

foreign expertise that was assembled to carry out this work has gone on to fund and oversee the restoration of three other of Lo's artistic and architectural sites: Champa Lhakhang, a temple to the Buddha of the Future (Tib. *byams pa*, Skt. *Maitreya*) also located in Monthang; Lo Gekhar, a monastery complex several hours' walk south of Monthang, that is associated with Guru Rinpoche and the founding of Tibet's first monastery at Samye; and the main monastery in the village of Tsarang, founded in the 11th century and, at its height, home to a community of more than 2,000 monks. As such, a sense of pride and compromise has been reached in this cross-cultural endeavour. But the question of what these newly restored institutions will be used for remains, now that notions of propriety, ownership, and responsibility have been realigned.¹⁵

In closing, I recall a conversation with a friend from Lo Monthang during his visit to the US in 2003. On previous occasions, this doctor of Tibetan medicine (Tib. *am chi*) and royal priest to the *rājā* of Mustang, had expressed appreciation for and ethical consternation over both the restoration work being done in Monthang and the drive of people from Mustang to invest their foreign-earned capital not in community institutions in Mustang (such as the school of medicine and health clinic he helped to found) but instead in Kathmandu-based efforts like the Community Temple at Swayambhu. He had argued with foreign representatives of the restoration team over issues of public property and land rights during project meetings in Monthang. He had also expressed his hope to a meeting of the New York Mustang Association that they would consider channeling funds to more projects in Lo itself in the future, challenging them to question why "local development" always seemed to emanate from foreign efforts and pockets. What was it about the relationship between "insiders" and "outsiders" in Mustang, and about the politics internal to Mustang, that contributed to this dynamic, in which foreigners funded projects in Mustang while people from Mustang invested elsewhere?

On this occasion, I had taken my friend to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. We had toured through the Egyptian tombs ("How did they possibly get all those rocks here? It must have cost so much!"), wandered through early Christianity ("Now, I know that the man stuck to the wooden beams is Jesus, and the woman there is his mother. But who is Jesus's father?") and made a failed attempt to visit the Nepalese and Tibetan collections, which happened to be closed. Next, we arrived in East Asia, and came to stand in front of a giant fresco. This mounted fragment of a much larger Chinese work depicted the lives of the *bodhisattva*. At more than four metres tall and twice as wide, it impressed us both. Again, my friend asked me how

¹⁵ Since its restoration, Thubchen has not been the site of much local religious ritual, but has instead been used primarily as a gathering for staged cultural and political events, such as those sponsored by ACAP.

something so fragile, so old, and so large, could have made it to New York. “What motivated people to bring it here?”, he asked. I did my best to explain how large museums like this had acquired such “treasures”. For a while, we just sat on the museum benches, both a bit overcome by the beauty of the piece, and what its presence here meant. “This is the sort of place that the paintings in Thubchen and Champa belong”, he said. “They don’t belong in Mustang anymore.”

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