

SOCIAL PROCESS ON THE HINDU PILGRIMAGE TO MUKTINATH

Donald A. Messerschmidt
and
Jyoti Sharma
Kathmandu

Acknowledgements

Donald A. Messerschmidt is an Associate Professor of anthropology at Washington State University, Pullman, Washington. Jyoti Sharma is a Nepali who recently received his Ph. D. from Claremont Graduate School and now resides in Claremont, California. The field research was supported by the National Geographic Society of Washington, D.C., and by a grant from the E.O. Holland Travel Fund of Washington State University. The authors wish to thank Stephen Mikesell and Nancy Atkinson for their help with the research and its analysis, and Dor Bahadur Bista for his critical review of an earlier draft. For related publications see Messerschmidt and Sharma 1980, 1981, n.d/a, n.d/b.

Muktinath, in the northern Nepal Himalayas, is a quest for only the hardest of pilgrims. For Hindus it is sacred as a shrine of Vishnu, Lord of Salvation. For Tibetan Mahayana Buddhists it is the shrine of the Serpent Deity, Gawo Jogpa (*dGa'-bo 'Jogs-pa*, Tib.).

The name Muktinath is translated as "Lord (*nāth*) of Salvation (*mukti*)." It is also known in Nepali by three other names: Mukti-chhetra, or "Holy Place (*chhetra*) of Salvation"; Muktinarayan, for Narayan (another name for Vishnu); and Salagrama, for the fossils (*sāligrām*) which abound here. Salagrama is its most ancient name, that by which it is identified in the *Mahabharata* and the *Purānas* and by which it is known by some geographers such as Dey (1927), Bhardwaj (1973) and Schwartzberg (1978) (see also Messerschmidt and Sharma n.d/a). Muktinath's local Tibetan name is Chu-mig-brgya-rtsa (literally a "hundred-odd springs", Snellgrove 1979: 106).

The physical site of Muktinath is sacred to Hindus as a complex of temples, springs, trees, and other natural features -- especially the *sāligrām* fossils, or ammonites -- imbued with supernatural characteristics. There are two Hindu temples (*mandir*), a small Buddhist temple popularly called the *gompa* (*dgon-pa*, Tib.; monastery), and a number of small outlying shrines and sacred monuments. The main Hindu temple houses an image of Vishnu/Gawo Jogpa in the form of a black ammonite. This three-tiered pagoda style temple is bounded on the east (uphill side) by running spring water channeled through 108 spouts. It is these water spouts that give Muktinath its Tibetan name.

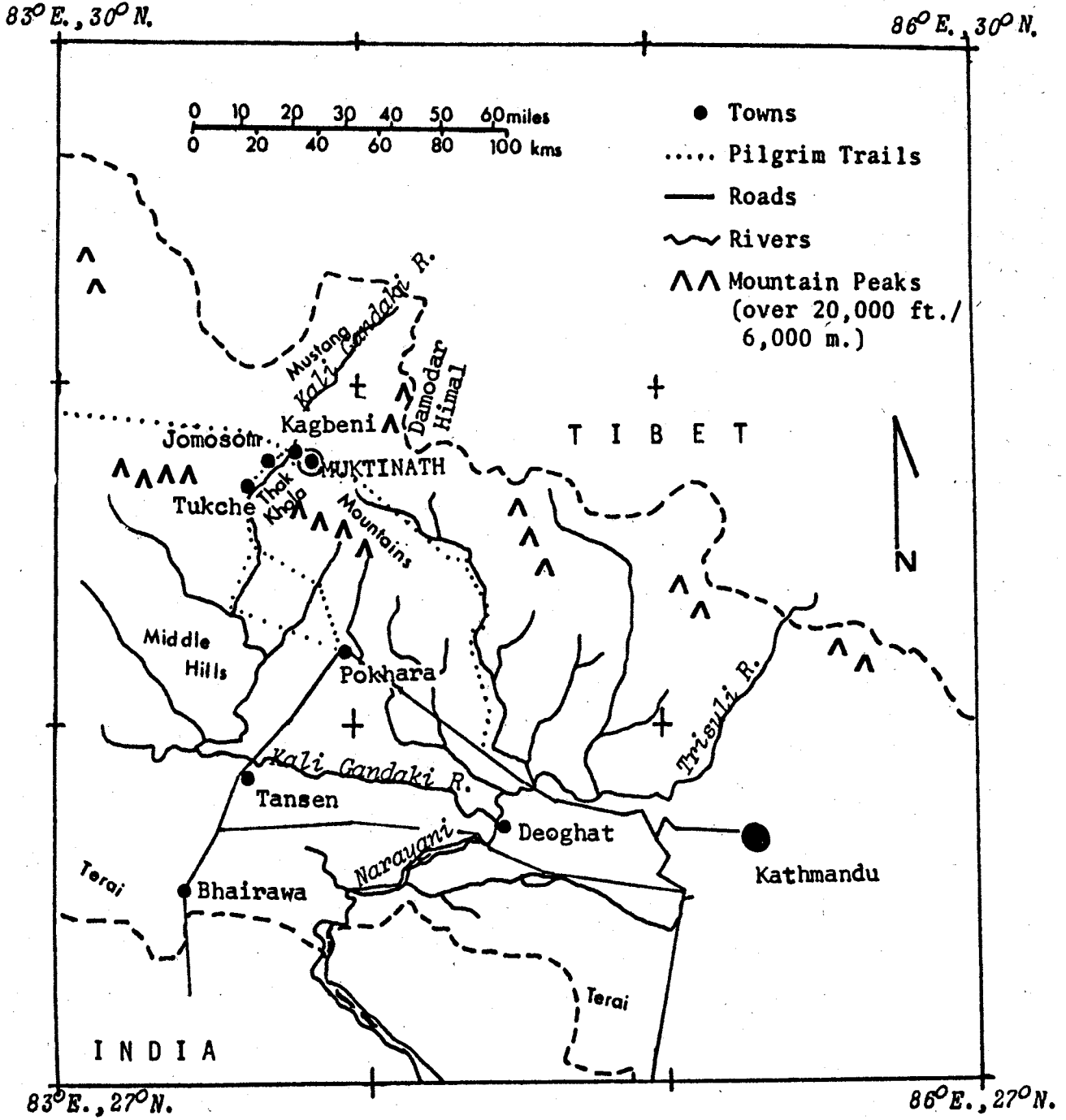
The fame of Muktinath as a Hindu place of pilgrimage is renowned. The strong and the faithful have been attracted to it continuously for centuries from all over South Asia. The site was recorded as one of the principal goals on the "grand pilgrimage of India" two thousand years ago in the *Tīrtha-Yātrā* or

pilgrimage section of the *Mahabharata* (Bhardwaj 1973: 51).

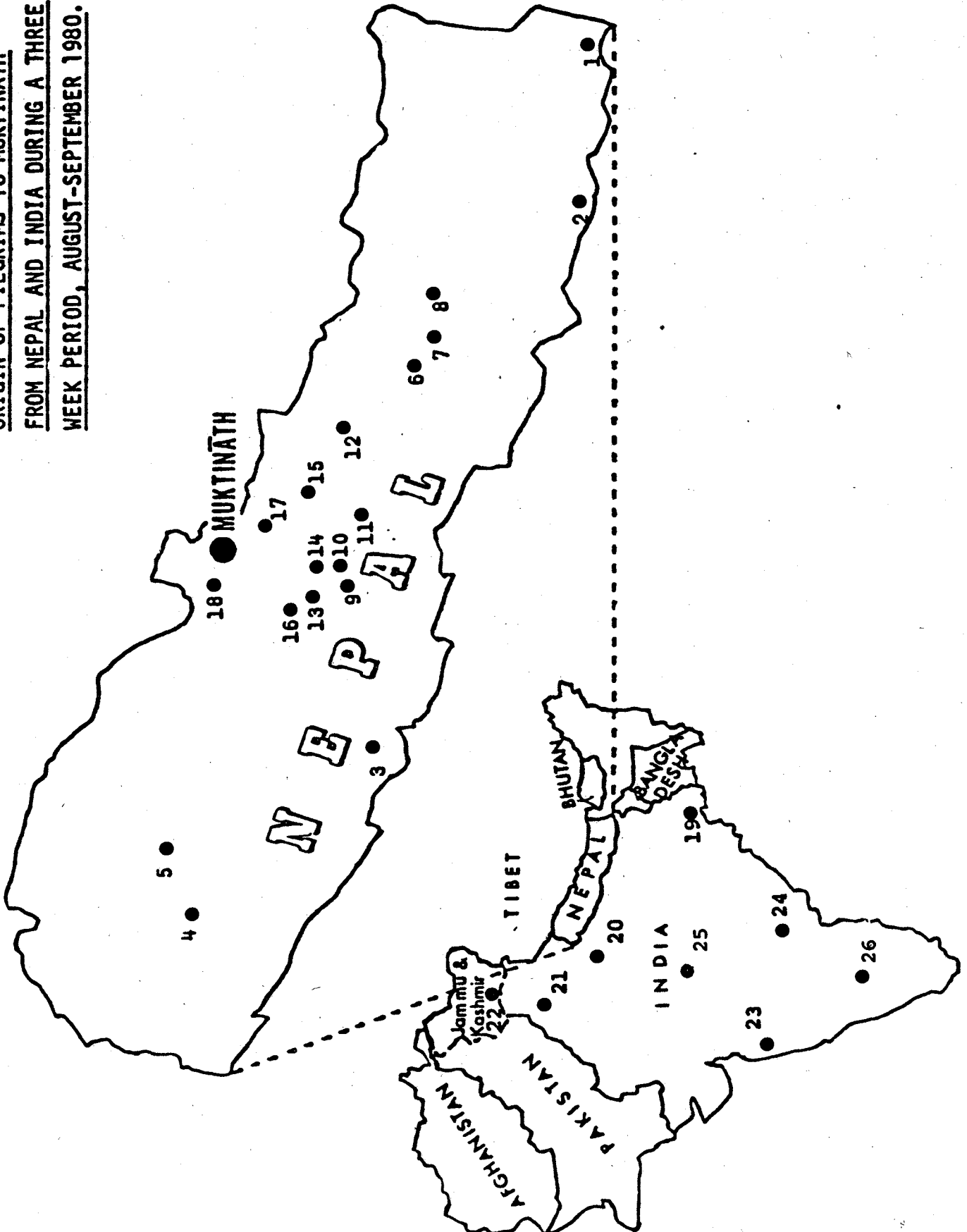
The research on the social process of the pilgrimage event was conducted at Muktinath in August 1980 on the occasion of *janai purnima* in the Nepali month of Bhadau. *Janai purnima* (or *janai purni*) is the full moon day (*purnima*) of the holy cord (*janai*). The *janai* is worn by men of the twice-born upper castes. (Another name for the occasion is *raksha bandhan*, from the term for a string, a protective bond or amulet, that a Brahmin priest ties around the wrist of the faithful of all castes when they visit a temple or shrine on this day.) For high caste men of the Nepalese caste category of *tāgādhāri* ("wearers of the holy cord," Hofer 1979), this is the one day each year when the sacred thread is changed for a new one. The yellow cotton cord is worn by men over the left shoulder and around the torso. It is first bestowed in youth at an investiture ceremony called *bratabandha*, and it is believed that the first such investiture was performed in antiquity on the same full moon day. According to Hindu practice, the cord is changed annually on *janai purnima* and a devout Hindu may travel a long distance to a particularly sacred pilgrimage site to perform the ritual. The ritual is elaborate and includes bathing, shaving, cutting the nails, and observing a partial fast. For pilgrims, there is the added exercise of observing caste rules that prohibit eating or touching unclean things, a part of the strict austerity and renunciation expected on such occasions.

The celebration of *janai purnima* at Muktinath attracted the faithful (and the researchers) north from southern and central Nepal (and from India), up over difficult mountain terrain, through high forests, and across rivers, directly through the main axis of the Nepal Himalaya to the borderlands of the Tibetan Autonomous Region (of China). (Map 1) At the time of the research, over a thousand pilgrims and visitors were present at the Muktinath shrine and at an accompanying fair, the local *yartung mela* or *ghora jatra* (horse festival).

Map 1.
THE REGION OF MUKTINATH AND WEST CENTRAL NEPAL



Map 2.
ORIGIN OF PILGRIMS TO MUKTINATH
FROM NEPAL AND INDIA DURING A THREE
WEEK PERIOD, AUGUST-SEPTEMBER 1980.



In our research we encountered, interviewed, and observed 128 individuals over a period of three weeks on the pilgrimage trek and at the sacred site. This select sample is distinguished from a much larger crowd of over 1,000 pilgrims and visitors present on the basis of two criteria. First, the 128 were known to be devout Hindus who had traveled long distances. Second, they were there for the principal reasons of worship, to take *darshan* (blessing, or "sight vision," Bharati 1981) or Vishnu and, for most, to change their *janaī*. (See Map 2 and Table 1)

The majority of the study sample, 112 individuals (87.5 percent) were *tāgādhāri*, in this case of the Brahmin, Chhetri, Thakuri, and Jogi castes, numbering altogether 70 men and 42 women (no children). (Table 2) The remaining sixteen individuals in the sample (12.5 percent) were either ascetics (*sadhu* or *sannyāsi*, 9.4 percent) or Vaishnava cult members who accompanied their Brahmin companions (a Magar couple, 1.5 percent) or were of unknown (but presumably twice-born) status (two Bengali men, 1.5 percent).

Hundreds of other Hindus and Buddhists were present, but the vast majority of them were Bhotia villagers and Thakali from the surrounding villages of Baragaun, Lo, lower Thak Khola, and Manang. Many of the local Bhotia came in village groups, in colorful parades heralded by traditionally impure Damai (tailor caste) drummers. Other spectators, primarily Gurung, came from the neighboring districts of Manang, Lamjung, Myagdi, Kaski, and others. (See Map 2 and Table 1)

A fundamental distinction in purpose became apparent in a socio-linguistic analysis of interviews recorded with members of the select sample and of the various ethnic groups present. The devout said they were going on *yatra* (or *tīrtha-yātrā*), a sacred journey or religious pilgrimage. Our ethnic Nepalese informants, however, indicated that they were going primarily on (or to the)

Table 2 . Social Identity of Pilgrim Informants (n = 128)

National Origin	Social Identity	Sex:		Total Number	Percentage of Total Sample
		Male	Female		
Nepal	Brahmin caste*	55	39	94	73.5 %
Nepal	Chhetri caste* (Kshyatriya)	7	1	8	6.3 %
Nepal	Thakuri caste*	6	-	6	4.7 %
Nepal	Jogi, ascetic caste*	2	2	4	3.1 %
India	Bengali (caste unknown)	2	-	2	1.5 %
Nepal	Magar, ethnic group**	1	1	2	1.5 %
Nepal	Sadhu (holy man, ascetic)	4	-	4	3.1 %
India	Sadhu (holy man, ascetic)	7	-	7	5.5 %
India	Sannyasi, lay ascetic	1	-	1	0.8 %
		85 (66%)	43 (34%)	128	100.0 %

* The Brahmin, Chhetri, Thakuri, and Jogi castes of Nepal (and some others) are considered in the first order of Nepalese caste, as taḡadhāri ("wearers of the holy cord") (Höfer 1979).

** The Magar ethnic group (as well as Gurung, some Newar, and others) are considered in the second order of Nepalese caste, as namāsinyā matwāli ("non-enslavable alcohol-drinkers") (Höfer 1979).

jātrā which, while having some religious connotations, is conceived of as a primarily or largely secular activity -- as in a fair or festival (*mela*). (Quite often, as in 1980, the *janai purnima* sacred occasion of the Hindu castes and the secular horse festival of *yartung*, put on by the local Bhotia, occur simultaneously at Muktinath.) Both terms, *yātrā* and *jātrā*, derive from the same Sanskrit root. Harka Gurung makes a very similar distinction in a recent article (1981: 31), and concludes that the two meanings "converge at the time of religious events when people travel to witness the procession of deities along prescribed routes or congregate at some sacred site."

The Muktinath Pilgrimage as Social Process

The concern in anthropology with the social process of pilgrimage comes directly from assumptions about the symbolic and structural attributes of such events, and especially regarding the presence or absence of "structure," "anti-structure," "communitas," and "liminality" (V. Turner 1974a, 1974b; V. Turner and E. Turner 1978).

Structure is "a more or less distinctive arrangement of mutually dependent institutions and the institutional organization of social positions and/or actors which they imply" (Turner 1974a: 272). Social structure such as Hindu caste or economic class are species of structure which produce "distance and inequality" between people (272).

Anti-structure, by contrast, is defined as that which "tends to ignore, reverse, cut across, or occur outside of structural relationships" (274). Structure "holds people apart, defines their differences, and constrains their action"; anti-structure is essentially egalitarian, "representing the desire for a total, unmediated [i.e., unstructured] relationship between person and person" (274).

In short, structure defines the Hindu's everyday social life in terms of the caste hierarchy and of economic class, and is epitomized by highly regularized and ritualized contacts, especially between members of different castes. Anti-structure is the temporary abrogation of rigid structural rules, and according to Turner, anti-structure is expected in and is exemplified by religious pilgrimage behavior. (A certain caution is advised in interpolating Turner's concepts of anti-structure and *communitas* to the Hindu situation, for most of his treatise is based on research about Christian pilgrimage.)

Turner associates anti-structure with liminality and *communitas*. *Liminality*, he writes, is that middle phase of a rite of passage (which, for Turner, includes pilgrimage) which is "betwixt and between the categories of ordinary [structured] social life" (273, after Gennep 1908). *Communitas* is a state of normlessness, of anti-structural relationships between people experienced during liminality. *Communitas* "liberates" social identities "from conformity to general norms" (274). It is quite distinct, Turner argues, from brotherly comaradarie which may be observed within otherwise highly structured, daily, normal social relationships.

If Hindu caste is structure, then *communitas* is the opposite of structure, a state of "undifferentiated, equalitarian, direct, extant, nonrational, existential, I - Thou. ... relationships" (274). *Communitas* essentially bridges what caste separates.

According to Turner, both anti-structure and *communitas* are expected conditions of religious pilgrimage behavior. But our data from Muktinath refute this hypothesis. There, we encountered more contradictions than conformity to the concept of *communitas*, particularly as it relates to social behavior between groups. Within specific groups of pilgrims we did, indeed, observe a number of examples of behavior supporting the *communitas* hypothesis. Sometimes it was seen in the overt actions of our informants

sometimes it was reflected in their conversations among themselves and in comments to or about others, and in several instances it was reflected in the makeup of the pilgrim party (Brahmins with Chhetris, Brahmins with Magars; see Table 1).

For example, while traveling in the company of the largest pilgrim group, mostly Brahmins (Table 1, No. 2) we overheard the womenfolk talking. One woman suggested that the group should purchase more rice in Tukche, one of the towns along the route. Another was concerned about who should carry it if they did. An argument broke out about it, and was stopped only after a third woman stated: "We are all in this together and we should stay as one group and not quarrel about who buys rice or who carries it."

At another time, at a point two days' walk below Muktinath, an elderly man and a frail elderly woman in the same party took ill. The entire group was visibly shaken by this ill-omen and by the groups' delay that it caused. The leader of the group, an imposing individual whom all called respectfully the 'Mahatma' (saint), was urged to arrange for porters to physically carry the sick the last two days to the shrine. The entire group bore the cost of this expensive arrangement. The following day, when the sick pilgrims were placed in the care of a hospital at Jomosom, the district town, the group divided into two parts. The larger part trekked wearily on through the dark to a lonely inn near Kagbeni where they had planned to stay the night. The leader and several helpers stayed behind to look after their ill companions. It was obvious that evening that members of the larger advance group were upset at being separated, and when, early the next morning the Mahatma and his helpers rejoined them there was considerable relief and rejoicing.

These are examples of *communitas*-like behavior within a group, among people who know each other well but who, under

stress, are fully capable of dissension and conflict.

We also witnessed considerable interaction between individuals of distinctly separate status groups. On one occasion, for example, a Brahmin woman was observed physically avoiding the touch of a Buddhist traveler by stepping to the side of the trail as they passed. On other occasions, the co-author, himself a Nepalese Brahmin, offered some fresh, uncooked fruit and vegetables and tea from a local tea shop to two parties of Brahmin pilgrims at various times. The tea was flatly refused on the grounds that it would violate the Brahminical code of avoiding food cooked by non-Brahmins. And only once were uncooked vegetables accepted, perhaps as much out of politeness, so as not to offend us, as anything else. On that occasion, we came upon the Mahatma alone on the trail negotiating the purchase of some fresh picked corn from a Brahmin farmer. When we offered to pay for it, the Mahatma refused at first, then accepted. He stuffed the corn into his small pack and hurried ahead to rejoin his group. We do not know what he told them about our part in the purchase, if anything. Given similar opportunities when our offers were unequivocally refused, however, we feel that his act of accepting the corn was out of character with the strict code of austerity and renunciation which Brahmin pilgrims typically display. The following account describes the more normal reaction where food was involved on the trip.

We had just concluded a taped interview with a small party of poor Brahmin pilgrims (Table 1, No. 15) by the side of the trail when an apple peddler happened by. We bought some apples, but when we offered them to the leader of this group, he refused, saying:

You are offering me this apple, but I don't want it. And in similar fashion I will refuse anything that anyone gives me. Even if you offered jewelry [*juhārat*], I would reject it. Why don't I want it? Because I am

tyāgi [renouncer; i.e, one who practices strict austerity, rejecting material things, and avoiding sin]. Now you rich, rich people from America have come over here. You buy this and that and offer us things. If we take them and put them in our pack, then what are we? Are we here to earn money? No! Whatever is written as our lot [or fate, *bhāgya*], that is what we have to go on. We must pray to god, and we must not sin. [Field-notes 9-23-80: 47-54]

Communitas between groups of unequal status was not entirely missing, however. On one occasion, after we had helped the Mahatma and his party through a difficult problem on the trail (with more moral support than physical help, however), the womenfolk of the party encouraged us to join them that evening in the singing of *kirtan*, hymns of praise to the gods. We did so, and were offered places to sit next to the men and women of the group on a village house porch. The event was staged late in the evening, long after they had taken their evening meal. In the absence of food our presence seemed less dangerous in the ritual sense.

So far, we have described some examples of communitas among the members of one status group, and several examples of non-communitas (with the exception of the latter example while singing *kirtan*) between people of unequal caste status. We still anticipated finding communitas manifest between groups of roughly equal status, such as between two groups of Brahmins. But the following example negated that expectation.

From near the beginning of our research trek, for a week up to arriving at Muktinath, we traveled in the company of several groups of high caste Hindus. We were especially interested in two rather typical pilgrim parties, one from the *pāhar* or middle hills of Nepal and one, led by the Mahatma, from Nepal's far eastern *tarai* lowlands (Map 2, Nos. 2 and 15, respectively). The Tarai group numbered twenty-three pilgrims (21 Brahmin and 2 Magar) and three porters (Pahari Brahmins). This group was, by

outward sign (ritual decoration) and their own definition, a Vaishnava devotional (*bhakti*) group. In dress and demeanor they displayed considerable means and sophistication. By comparison, the Pahari group from the Nepal hills numbered four pilgrims (two elderly couples) and were quite plain, poor, and unsophisticated in appearance. They wore simple garb, carried all of their own supplies, and displayed no decorations indicating any devotional cult. Given their Nepalese cultural identity, their same sacred quest, and their identical ritual status as men and women of the Brahmin caste, we expected that if anywhere, it would be between these two groups that we might witness *communitas*. Instead, we found that structure and distance were heightened, not diminished, between them.

One morning we encountered the wealthy Tarai Hindus performing their daily devotions and ablutions alongside a stream near the trail. They concluded by decorating their foreheads with the V-shaped colored marks (*tika*) that identify Vaishnava devotees. A short while later, we met the smaller, poorer group of Pahari pilgrims whose spokesman made the following observations about the Tarai group:

One cannot *see* the truth. The whole universe is truth and Brahma, Vishnu, and Mahesh [Shiva] came into being to create the living universe out of truth. There are people who worship Vishnu, and some who worship Shiva. Those who wear the white *tika* are Vaishnavas. ... We can also put on those *tikas*, but once you put on those sorts of *tikas*, you must become *tyāgi* [a renouncer, self-denying, unselfish]. When one becomes *tyāgi* he leaves everything and walks naked, without greed [*lobh*]. ... Those others are Vaishnavas in name and *tikas* only. They have porters, and we will have nothing to do with such ostentatious luxury [*sokh*] as their's !
[Fieldnotes 9-23-80: 47-54]

This hill Brahmin and his three companions steadfastly avoided the larger Tarai group, and as these critical remarks

suggest, the former had only disdain for the latter. This attitude is quite distinct from what is expected under the ideal conditions of *communitas*. This example, which is not in the least outstanding among several we recorded, clearly contradicts *communitas*. Obviously, something more profound than experiencing *communitas* motivated these pilgrims, a finding which corroborates Pfaffenberger's (1979) conclusions from a study of the Hindu pilgrimage to Kataragama in Sri Lanka. The primary motivation for going to Muktinath, or Kataragama, or, I submit, to any Hindu shrine, is to do worship and take *darshan* from the deity (and in the particular case of Muktinath on *janai purnima*, to perform the ceremony of the *janai*), and to behave with strict austerity on the way.

Turner's hypotheses of *communitas* and anti-structure are inappropriate on yet another level. It is clear that the very nature of the *janai purnima* pilgrimage is contrary to anti-structural behavior by definition. The ceremony of changing their *janai* is, for *tāgādhāri* men, a time of *super-structure*. It is on this day that the men of these high castes perform rituals in overt confirmation of their high social and ritual status. This ritual is for the individual and for the whole of Brahminism fundamentally *structure-affirming*.

All of the pilgrim men and women of the *tāgādhāri* castes were exceedingly careful to avoid contact with members of lower castes or ethnic groups (and westerners) encountered on the pilgrim route (with few exceptions). No Brahmin we observed would enter the abode of a lower caste person of any ritual station, nor buy or consume cooked food of any sort in the numerous inns (*bhaṭṭi*) or in the modern lodges which exist to serve Nepalese and foreign travelers. They stayed by these strict rules throughout the trek

going to Muktinath.¹

Given these and other contradictions to the hypothesis that *communitas* represents pan-human pilgrimage behavior, we posit an alternative hypothesis: that religious pilgrimage serves to highlight social principals which are idiosyncratic to a particular religious system. Thus, in Christianity, for example, *communitas* behavior may be expected, given the inherent principals and idealistic expectations of brotherly love and equalitarian social relationships. Much of Turner and Turner's (1978) work confirms this contention. Within the hierarchical system of Hinduism, however, highly structured or structure-affirming behavior is expected, which our data confirm.

1 By their own account, most of the *tāgādhāri* caste Hindus that we interviewed said that there are fewer restrictions in this regard on the return home. It is on the return that *communitas*, as an expression of anti-structure between unequal status groups, may have occurred, but we were unable to observe or record it.

REFERENCES

- Bharati, Agehananda
1981 "Theoretical approaches to the anthropology of pilgrimage." A paper presented to the plenary session on pilgrimage theory and method/anthropology in the conference: Pilgrimage -- The Human Quest. University of Pittsburgh, May 15, 1981.
- Bhardwaj, Surinder M.
1973 *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage in India: A Study in Cultural Geography*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Dey, Nando Lal
1927 *The Geographical Dictionary of Ancient and Mediaeval India*. Oriental Reprint Edition, 1971. New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corp.
- Gennep, Arnold van
1908 *The Rites of Passage*. New Edition, 1960. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Gurung, Harka
1981 "Relationship of public and private sectors of travel industry." *Nepal Review* 1 (7): 31-33.
- Höfer, Andrés
1979 *The Caste Hierarchy and the State in Nepal: A Study of the Muluki Ain of 1854*. Innsbruck: Universitätsverlag Wagner.
- Messerschmidt, Donald A. and Jyoti Sharma
1980 "Himalayan pilgrimage to the Hindu shrine at Muktinath, Nepal: Cultural meaning and social process." *National Geographic Society Research Reports* 1980. In Press.
- 1981 "Hindu pilgrimage in the Nepal Himalayas." *Current Anthropology* (Research Conclusions) 22: 571-572.
- n.d/a "The geography and sacred symbolism of Muktinath shrine, Nepal." Forthcoming.

- n.d/b "Hindu pilgrimage to Muktinath, Nepal," in E.A. Morinis, editor, *Crossing the Sacred Ford* Forthcoming.
- Pfaffenberger, Bryan
1979 "The Kataragama pilgrimage: Hindu-Buddhist interaction and its significance in Sri Lanka's polyethnic social system." *Journal of Asian Studies* 38: 253-270.
- Schwartzberg, Joseph E., editor
1978 *A Historical Atlas of South Asia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Snellgrove, David, editor and translator
1979 "Places of pilgrimage in Thag (Thakkhola): Tibetan manuscripts, produced by Tshampa Ngawang of Drumpa." *Kailash, A Journal of Himalayan Studies* 7: 73-170.
- Turner, Victor
1974a *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
- 1974b "Pilgrimage and communitas." *Studia Missionalia* 23: 305-327.
- Turner, Victor and Edith Turner
1978 *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.