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The Production of Authenticity in Thamel, Nepal

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The Production of Authenticity in Thamel, Nepal

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The Production of Authenticity in Thamel, Nepal

By

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An Undergraduate Thesis

In

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Abstract

Thamel\(^1\) is Kathmandu’s tourist district. In the narrow streets of Thamel, one can find many western style coffee houses, Internet cafes, late night bars, and tourist shops. While conducting my research, I noticed that it is also a place in which authenticity thrives. Sellers use specific techniques in order to create an air of authenticity around their products, which seems to increase the most obvious and easily measurable declaration of value, the product’s price. I studied tourist consumer habits of pashmina, thangkas, khukuri knives, and singing bowls in an effort to understand more about people’s perceptions of value through interviews and participant-observation with tourists and Nepali sellers. It seems that how people create and consume images of value and determine an object’s worth is ultimately a fusion of the object’s mythology, and consumer-preconceived notions, and contexts.

\(^1\) The “Th” in Thamel is a retroflex aspirated t.
When tourists come to Nepal, most descend upon Thamel\textsuperscript{2}, Kathmandu’s tourist district, where they will come in contact with pashmina, thangkas, khukuri knives, and singing bowls\textsuperscript{3}, the four most popular and widely available souvenirs representing Nepal. Pashmina is extraordinarily soft, thin wool, available in pure wool or wool and silk blends, and woven into shawls and scarves for lightweight warmth. Thangkas are Tibetan Buddhist paintings, rectangular or square in shape and framed with a red, yellow, and blue silk brocade; the imagery in thangka paintings is religious and the commissioning of a thangka painting for Buddhists often has ritual significance. Khukuri knives are the official knives of the Ghurka army, well known for bravery and military excellence and a symbol of national pride. Singing bowls are small, stout bowls made of alloyed metal and shaped into varying sizes. In order to elicit a humming sound from a singing bowl, one must stroke the mallet around the lip of the bowl. Pashmina, thangkas, khukuri knives, and singing bowls together represent the climate of Nepal, the Buddhist religion, and the spirit of the Nepali people.

I initially designed my research project with the intent to focus on the way people develop perceptions of value in regards to material culture. A study of tourist goods serves as a theoretical locus in which to study how people construct varying images of value, while at the same time lends it as a case study for debated notions in the anthropology of tourism. After completing several interviews, I began to notice a pattern in Thamel: everywhere the tourist, an identity I acquired as a foreigner in Nepal, is bombarded by authentic words including “original,” “genuine,” “traditional,” “old,” and

\textsuperscript{2} See Appendix items 5-8 for images of Thamel.
\textsuperscript{3} See Appendix items 9-10 for images of pashmina stores, 11-12 of thangka stores, 13-14 of singing bowl stores, and 18 for a khukuri knife store.
“hand-made.” Sellers promoted the authenticity of their products and tourists actively searched for them.

Interviews and observations in Thamel generated many questions about authenticity: What is authentic? Why do Nepali souvenirs need to be authentic? How does an object come to be perceived as authentic? What does it mean for one culture to literally buy “authentic” goods representative of another culture? Midway through my research I focused on recording stories about the pashmina, thangkas, khukuri knives, and singing bowls and about what in particular made these four souvenirs special.

I will retrace the context of my fieldwork in order to give a more complete picture of the research. In January of 2004 I flew twenty-six hours from Philadelphia to Nepal. I did not know the language, and I did not know anyone in Nepal. I lived in a six-story cement house in Kirtipur with six American undergraduate students, seven Nepali masters students, including my roommate, Nirmala. For two months I studied Nepali in intensive classes and conducted background research on material culture and the anthropology of tourism. As part of a requirement of Cornell University’s program, each American found her own housing located near her own research site. I spent the majority of my time in Thamel,4 where I conducted formal and informal interviews. During my first week of field research in Thamel, I felt that sellers perceived me as just another tourist; however, as I began to do more interviews, word circulated among local sellers that I was conducting a research project, spoke limited Nepali, and was a student living in Lazimpat.

4 Thamel is directly west of the Palace and is a fifteen-minute walk from Lazimpat.
Methodology

I set out to interview tourists and sellers in Thamel. First, I determined how I would define “tourist”. Is a tourist simply a foreigner? Or does one’s tourist status hinge on cultural induction instead? For the purposes of this study I defined tourists as English-speaking foreigners, since English is my native language; as a result, the tourists I interviewed were from America, England, or Singapore. The tourists were visiting Nepal on a temporary basis (less than three months) and defined themselves as foreigners; they were not employed in Nepal and did not own any land in Nepal\(^5\). Although the criteria I established are largely arbitrary, each serves the purpose of limiting this study to a specific kind of tourist who is still very much attached to his/her homeland culture and generally eager to visit souvenir shops. “Sellers” were much easier to define: they were Nepali, maintained a shop, and sold one or any combination of the four main souvenirs in Thamel. Since an over-abundance of similar souvenir shops exist in Thamel, it is an excellent location for this particular study.

Through interviews with many informants, I recorded product stories or mythologies without having to account for differing location as a major factor. I use the term “mythologies” here not to imply that sellers are falsely promoting their products, rather the product stories that circulate in Thamel are popular beliefs that have become intimately knit with Nepali identity. The stories that emerge concerning pashmina, thangkas, khukuri knives, and singing bowls are an amalgam of each product’s true origins and culturally constructed stories (from a variety of sources), which may or may not always stem from literal truth. I conducted all of the interviews in Thamel with the

\(^5\) Only citizens may own land in Nepal.
exception of a few seller interviews in four charity-associated stores. Ideally, contrast between the bazaar style stores of Thamel and the more established atmosphere of charity-associated stores provides some insight into the method of “authenticating” souvenirs. If the charity-associated stores do a better job of “authenticating” their wares to tourists, it would seem to follow that a correlation exists between the perceived authenticity of a product and the price a tourist is willing to pay.

During the first two weeks of interviewing, I approached sellers in their own stores with my translator, Narinda. Before conducting an interview, I declared my research intentions to the sellers; if they were uncomfortable being interviewed or did not have free time, I left their store. I took great care to emphasize to the sellers that I was the interviewer and that my translator was present only to aid me if I could not understand their replies. I attempted to conduct all of the interviews in Nepali; however, occasionally a seller would prefer to speak in English in which case we would. I tape-recorded most interviews, which Narinda and I later reviewed for accuracy and details.

Halfway through the research month, I interviewed sellers without Narinda, and I collected information in English, as a tourist would. Without Narinda’s presence or the tape-recorder, sellers tended to be more at ease. I also found this to be a valuable method for obtaining product mythologies. In an effort to assure my seller informants, especially those that were hesitant to speak freely with me, I decided not to reveal the store names (with the exception of the charity-associated stores). For the stores that I am not naming

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6 I interviewed sellers in Lazimpal at Third World Craft, Folk Nepal, and Mahaguthi; although Mahaguthi has multiple locations in Kathmandu, Dhapulala Thangka Center is located on Durbar Marg, five minutes walking distance away from Thamel.

7 Banu Oja, the Cornell Nepal Study Program coordinator arranged for Narinda to be my translator. He was a former CNSP student, spoke excellent English, and understood basic anthropology research. CNSP paid him a small stipend for his services and bus transportation.

8 Two sellers refused to be tape-recorded.
in this paper, I listed each numerical reference, which I use to distinguish sources. I have listed the names of the charity-associated stores, as none of them objected to the use of their store name. Not all sellers were uneasy with my questions; in fact some viewed me as an opportunity to gain more business: during a few interviews I was inundated with copies of store business cards, magazines, calendars, and/or pamphlets. Through Narindra’s aid, I was able to interview sellers in their native language; however, the informal conversations as a tourist with sellers, elicited more elaborate details about the authenticity of the souvenirs, which is an indication that perhaps the language of authenticity is more prevalent in seller-tourist conversations.

I approached tourist informants in cafes in Thamel. Initially I hesitated to approach tourists in Thamel because of my own experience as a tourist in Thamel. Each time I visited Thamel, I understood it in a new way. The first time I ventured into this tourist haven, I had been in Nepal for less than two weeks; everything was unfamiliar. Thamel was an anonymous place and a barrage on all of the senses. Rickshaw drivers rang their bells but otherwise showed no apparent concern for pedestrians; on any given street corner three different songs simultaneously competed for the attention of tourists, and every store appeared to be identical with the next. As I became more familiar with Thamel, faces and stores became familiar. Thamel was personalized; however, the merchandise still looked the same everywhere. Even though I came to know Thamel well, it still drained me of energy to resist reacting to sellers who called out to me or other tourists nearby. I heard phrases from male sellers along the lines of, “I have been waiting for you”; “I love you”; “Come into my shop”; and “Namaste”\(^9\) [the Nepali

\(^9\) When sellers called out Namaste, they would nod their heads in a flirty manner while drawing out the syllables in an abnormal way, saying Naaaah-maaaaah-staaay.
greeting]. To me these “calls” felt like the Nepali equivalent of an American
construction worker calling out to an unknown woman on the street. Although the “calls”
feel like a verbal assault, the seller’s intention is to draw the tourist into the store. I do
not believe that sellers called out to tourists with malicious intent, rather it seems that the
“calls” were a genuine effort on behalf of the sellers to solicit customers. Initially I
hesitated to corner tourists on the street for interviews; however after my advisor, Peter
Moran, suggested that I use a particular cafe as a meeting point, to facilitate meeting
tourists. The Pumpernickel Cafe and Restaurant is an excellent venue for tourists to meet
other tourists who are generally lingering about with a cup of coffee or tea. Tourist
interviews were less formal than the ones with sellers in their stores. With tourists I
would start a general conversation, which afforded the opportunity to introduce particular
questions about souvenirs in Nepal. When I was not interviewing tourists or sellers, I
spent time lingering in Thamel, observing the habits and behavior of sellers and tourists.
Through a methodology of participant-observation, interviews with sellers as tourist and
researcher (two identities I am not sure sellers distinguished between), and interviews
with tourists in coffee shops, I searched for perceptions of value and happened upon the
production of authenticity.

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10 Dr. Peter Moran is an anthropologist from Trinity College, who lives in Kathmandu. His latest book, *Buddhism Observed*, is an anthropological study that examines the encounter between Western travelers and Tibetan exiles in Soudhanath, on the outskirts of Kathmandu and analyses the importance of Buddhism in discussions of political, cultural, and religious identity.
Background

Thamel as Kathmandu's main tourist district provides tourists with everything they might need during their stay in Nepal: hotels, a variety of restaurants, pharmacies, book stores, bars, and a plethora of souvenir shops. The most popular and conspicuously Nepali souvenirs of pashmina, thangkas, khukuri knives, and singing bowls, are available in Thamel in abundance and range of quality. Levels of seller-produced authentication distinguish stores, sellers, and consequently what is perceived as the product's authenticity. But what of these Nepali souvenirs- how do these commodities represent Nepal, how are they valued? Through an examination of the relationship between people's perceptions of value and authenticity, we might gain insight into the subjective nature of material culture and value.

In order to assess the value of Nepali souvenirs and therefore to locate the production of authenticity, one must first examine what affects the perception of the souvenirs. I will examine (1) The Nepal Tourism Board's tourist rhetoric and promoted image to foreigners and potential tourists, which often gives them something to look for in their experience in Nepal; (2) Thamel as a place, where most tourists will stay and purchase souvenirs; and (3) What it means for an object to be viewed as a Nepali good.

The image of Nepal as exported abroad is a compilation of the Nepal Tourism Board's promotion and tourist rhetoric, its organized tourism conferences abroad, travelers' stories, news media, Internet, and Nepal's exported handicrafts. The international news coverage of the Maoist insurgency and sometimes violent student

\[11\] Political update in Nepal from Cnn.com, February 9, 2005: "King Gyanendra sacked the government last week saying its leaders had failed to hold elections or restore peace amid an escalating civil war with Maoist rebels who have been trying to topple the monarchy since 1996. The move was condemned around
protests presents Nepal as a place of unrest and chaos. The Nepal Tourism Board promotes Nepal as an exotic, adventure-filled destination. In China, The NTB presented Nepal as having “pristine natural attractions, ancient cultural heritage including the birthplace of the Lord Buddha in Lumbini, as well as exciting adventure activities” (NTB newsletter 2004). The Nepal Tourism Board March 2004 newsletter touts its rankings on iexplore.com, an adventure oriented website, which describes the Annapurna Circuit: “yak herds, eagle–like Himalayan griffons, blue sheep, fluttering Buddhist prayer flags, and hot springs dot this central Nepal route, which starts in lush green foothills and climbs into higher-altitude desert typical of the Tibetan plateau.” For the Indian market, Nepal is touted as the “ultimate pilgrimage destination” (NTB Newsletter 2004).

According to one author, Nepal’s lure to the outside world is its history of isolation through which it “developed a certain mystique” (Satyal 1998:30). This kind of tourist-geared rhetoric cultivates a specific aura for Nepal that is “pristine,” “exotic,” of a “raw energy,” “a unique cultural experience,” “a once-in-a-lifetime adventure” (NTB newsletter 2004). This rhetoric encourages the perception of Nepal as a place where one can experience something unique and buy an equally unique souvenir.

Thamel is a place of cultural encounters. It is within walking distance of Kathmandu Durbar Square and a short cab ride away from Swayambunath12, two of Kathmandu’s main tourist attractions. A billboard prominently displayed on Tridevi Marg, the main entrance to Thamel from Kantipath, one of Kathmandu’s main roads, boasts a “Restaurant’s exquisite food” (the bold letters are red on the billboard, which

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12 Kathmandu Durbar Square is the old site of the royal palace; Swayambhunath, located in the Kathmandu Valley, is the site of one of Nepal’s oldest stupas, a holy Buddhist monument.
causes the eye to read “sexquisite.” The rather explicit allusion to sex in this billboard helps to set the pervading tone for Thamel in the context of Nepal’s sexually conservative culture. Perhaps the “sex” reference is indicative of the tourist culture’s influence on Nepal. In Thamel’s Internet cafes, advertisements for west meets east parties can be found. One advertisement lists “Wednesday ladies night” and Saturday performance by “DJ Impact” while on the flip side of the flyer it offers five Nepali cultural excursions:

“an introduction to Hindu philosophy...introducing you to one of the oldest religions of life...tantric meditation and tantric healing on mental, emotional, physical levels, distance healing...a 1 day excursion to discover the centuries old power zones...an introduction to pottery with exclusive Nepali designs...[and] cooking courses to learn how to make the best of the Nepali and Asian cuisine in a four hour course” (flyer for ViaVia Café sponsored events).

ViaVia’s advertisement is geared towards tourists who are interested in learning about Nepali culture by day and enjoying themselves in western bars and parties by night. This Nepali-foreign cultural mixture is ripe in Thamel. Thamel’s “s exquisite” billboard and ladies’ nights are unlikely to be found in such a concentration elsewhere in Kathmandu and certainly not elsewhere in Nepal, where the majority of the population is Hindu.

Thamel occupies its own distinct space different from the rest of Kathmandu. Sellers like Thamel because “it’s developed. It has many facilities that we do not have in other places.” One seller even went so far as to say that “Thamel is one of the most popular places in South Asia,” while also noting that Thamel “feels like anyplace in Europe” alluding to its high ratio of foreigners. One tourist who had spent three weeks in Thamel complained about its atmosphere, yet declared that she

“found Thamel disgusting and fascinating at the same time. It’s familiar and I like the food. I’m afraid to wander out too much because of the protests...I’m a bit frustrated with the constant hassling in Thamel. I don’t want to be rude but I’m tired of the constant and abrasive ‘shop here’ attitude [from the sellers].”

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13 See Appendix item 5 for photograph of “Restaurant’s exquisite food” billboard.

14 See Appendix item 23-24.
Others find Thamel to be a retreat for meeting travelers and a place to relax before and after a long trek in the mountains. Ultimately in the tourist perspective Thamel's environment contains elements from Kathmandu and the tourist's homeland, while at the same time providing if not forcing opportunity for tourists to purchase Nepali souvenirs.

According to sellers in Thamel, pashmina, thangkas, khukuri knives, and singing bowls are popular with tourists because each represents an important aspect of Nepal. These are supposed to be the Nepali souvenirs for tourists through which they can find something unique and different, which they are promised in Nepali tourist literature. Tourists cited pashmina to be popular because of its cheap price, relative to their home country. Although some tourists noted that they were wary of purchasing any pashmina because of a personal inability to locate and recognize a high quality product and a fear of being tricked into buying a lesser grade. Pashmina was also valued by tourists for its ability to fetch a high price at home. One tourist bought enough pashmina to sell on eBay through which he made enough profit to pay for his roundtrip plane ticket to Nepal from America. One tourist bought a singing bowl on his last trip to Nepal because "it looks cool at home." In Thamel he found the singing bowls cheesy, because the sellers on the street make the singing bowls "sing" in order to induce tourists into buying them; however, once the singing bowl was out of its tourist-geared context, it appealed to him more and he kept it for himself, while he gave the rest of his purchases away to friends and family. Some tourists noted a lack of "manly" gifts available for their male friends at home. If they did not want to buy one of the wool hippie-style handicrafts, they tended to prefer khukuri knives or thangkas as masculine souvenirs. Thangkas are Tibetan in origin, and paubhas are Newari, but some make no distinction in their speech. One
tourist said that she was looking for a "unique treasure" but had not found anything after three weeks she had spent in Thamel because "every other store is identical." Indeed one can find vast quantities of these products of varying quality in just one street of Thamel.

With the arrival of many Tibetan refugees in Nepal, it seems that many Tibetan products have become souvenirs for those visiting Nepal. It is not necessarily the case that these souvenirs are naively seen as "Nepali" by tourists but instead that in the minds of many tourists the culture of Tibet and Nepal to is close-knit and intertwined. In Boudhnath, a Tibetan enclave of Kathmandu, a foreigner visiting Nepal can eat at Tibetan restaurants and buy Tibetan wares. This Tibetan influence has spread across the tourist industry in Kathmandu so that now the ever-popular thangka is widely available in Thamel among other places. And in fact, Tibetan goods are not the only ones that have entered the souvenir market in Thamel. Paper-maché creations and embroidered shawls from Kashmir are also widely available even under the guise of being an "authentically Nepali" product.

In spite of the prevalent theme debated back and forth in academia that “tourism commoditization leads to a loss or corruption of cultural distinctiveness” (Meethan 2001:43)16, tourism is typically seen in Nepal as a means of preserving culture. The abundance of souvenirs and Nepali, Kashmiri or Tibetan goods would not exist without the demand from tourists.

“As part of the cultural role of tourism, the incentive of local crafts and industries and artistic skills of the people is increased because of the demand for local products. Folklore, traditional ceremonies, art and industry are revived because tourists are interested in them” (Satyal 1998: 14).

15 See Appendix item 3.
Additionally, tourism is seen as a benefactor, luring foreign capital into a country that is seen as lacking in development. Mark Liechty finds evidence of this identity in the rhetoric of “schools and government-run media”:

“Nepali conditions are deemed inferior in an evolutionary sense. The rhetoric of backwardness, development, foreign aid, and education collapses time and space such that Nepali youth learn to situate themselves on the margins of a meaningful universe as consumers of an externally generated material modernity (Fabian 1983)” (Liechty 2003: 237).

The other side of the debate argues that tourism is part of a greater movement of globalization that “has been criticized for its likeliness to induce elements of cultural imperialism, domination, and transculturation” (Acharya 2002: 59). A UNESCO World Culture Report declared that “globalization offers both opportunities and threats to cultural diversity of various peoples around the world,” a statement which Acharya uses to further his point that tourism is the root cause of the loss of original, traditional crafts and more importantly of the destruction of Nepal’s cultural heritage and environment (Acharya 2002: 48). Thus depending on one’s alignment in the anthropology of tourism debate, the tourist is envisioned one of two ways: as a person who, alienated by modern life, unwittingly contributes to the destruction of the traditional, authentic life that existed in Nepal before tourists, or conversely, the tourist is seen as a means for ensuring the longevity of Nepali culture, providing the financial means to support production of pashmina, thangkas, khukuri knives, and singing bowls. Most anthropologists no longer align themselves with either side of the debate, realizing that people are carriers of culture, who when in contact with another culture may adopt or at least make some alteration in their own beliefs, attitudes, and behavior.

Without the tourist, the cultural product/souvenir would be merely over-produced, of varying quality, and unjustified in its overproduction. Through the purchase of
souvenirs, the tourist literally buys into some level of acceptance of the product as a valuable good, often but not always as a result of seller-provided product mythologies and self-imposed perceptions of Nepali culture.

A Nepali commodity’s value does not depend entirely on its cultural value or on its value as a tourist product but is equally determined by the person perceiving and imposing value onto the product. As Appadurai recognizes, “value [for Simmel] is never an inherent property of objects but it is a judgment made about them by subjects” (Appadurai 1986:3). Souvenirs available in Thamel are imbued with meaning from tourists, sellers, and the culture within which they are found.

The seller, the buyer, and the producer all value and likely perceive the commodity in different ways. The commodity also retains its inherent material value. One commodity of low material value can acquire additional value based on its ritual use or personal associations. Another can obtain value based on the fact that its production process is difficult and time-consuming. In Thamel there is an over-production of similar commodities (principally the four discussed here). Sellers produced and promoted a repertoire of mythologies about the product’s production and purpose in order to elevate the products’ authenticity and subsequently, the product’s value.

A small contingent of travelers, like Susan Hoivik, co-author of, co-author of Nepal: A Living Heritage, prods readers to avoid souvenir shopping and to instead find the authentic experience in relationships with locals. Hoivik declares to her readers:

“Tourists will shop and buy souvenirs, although this author (S.H.) detests both activities...Whether you decide on an expensive gold-decorated thangka or crimson paubha, a Tibetan rug, a primitivist Mithili painting from Janakpur, a pashmiri shawl...buy it because you like it, not because of its supposed worth” (Sherpa and Hoivik 2002: 119).
She prods her readers to look beyond the seemingly imposed value of the souvenir and instead to value the object—that is if the reader does decide to partake in this “detested” activity—from her own individual perspective. The “supposed worth” refers to the object’s evaluation not based on the individual’s perception, but based on the seller’s presentation, an imposed worth. Why is souvenir shopping such a detestable activity? She contrasts this quote with stories throughout her book describing ways to experience something more in Nepal than what one might in a typical visit to Nepal’s tourist sites. She references her Nepali friends, too, helping to establish herself as a model to her readers to go beyond tourist culture and to explore Kathmandu and Nepali culture. To Hoivik souvenir shopping is located in the realm of the inauthentic.

Many tourists, however, find merit in souvenir shopping and will stop and talk and sometimes even share a cup of Nepali tea with sellers in Thamel. If they are on a short trekking trip especially, this may be their only opportunity for intimate contact with Kathmandu’s locals. How do tourists choose which stores to shop at and what to buy when there is so much of the same thing available? Authentication techniques allow sellers to promote an image of authenticity to tourists about themselves, their stores, and their products.

**Authenticity and Production**

The majority of seller authentication techniques concern production, which tourists are often curious about. One seller observed, “tourists always ask, how is this made? Where is it made?” Sellers who avidly promote a sense of authenticity seem to strategically publicize their production techniques, including by whom their product is
produced, for whom it is produced (if it is produced primarily for tourists this aspect may be left out), the location of production (if it is in Nepal or Tibet), the duration of production, and whether traditional or old production techniques are employed. Other techniques elevate the status of the store or product. Some might assert that the product is more than a craft; sellers can assert their product as art through the promotion of product mythologies. Some elevate the status of the store by creating a brand name or through alignment with a charity cause, NGO, INGO\textsuperscript{17}, local artisan group or through a record of export to foreign countries. Still, more techniques directly concern price. To say that “we only have fixed price” eliminates bargaining and garners a higher price. Not every store in Thamel exploits authorization techniques, but many do. Through authentication techniques sellers can acquire a larger profit, while appeasing many of the qualms tourists might have about product validity through cues of authorization. In many ways tourists produce the need for specific “mythologies” through the questions they pose to shopkeepers, who in turn try to satisfy the tourist’s search for authentic goods.

Who produces an object, whom the object is produced for, and where an object is produced provide the basis of assessing a product’s authenticity. Buying “Nepali” handicrafts that are mass-produced by machines in China for tourists in Nepal has much less appeal and does not seem to qualify as a Nepali handicraft compared to buying something that a local artisan handcrafted for local people. “Authentic” thangkas were “Lama made” (#5); or made “by local artists, with master artists” (#9, son). “Lamas made these thangkas…and then bring here to sell. Design is from Tibet but made in Nepal because Lama people are in Nepal” (#5). It was important to these sellers (and for the

\textsuperscript{17} NGO= Non-Governmental Organization; INGO= International Non-Governmental Organization.
sake of the authenticity of their product) to trace the provenance of the product from Tibet to Nepal. Neither seller said that the thangkas were made in Tibet, but one emphasized that the maker was from Tibet and the other emphasized that the design has Tibetan origins. Min Bahadur Shakya declares in his book that

"It has been a tradition in the west to believe that the paintings created in thangka factories by Nepali boys are fake and are quite badly finished paintings and hence they do not benefit Tibetans, Tibetan art and culture or western Buddhist practitioners. It is said that they have no religious value. This notion is a gross mistake. Not all the paintings by Nepali artists are of that kind. It is because they are not familiar with genuine Nepali artists on whom they comment" (Shakya 2000: Preface).

He is attempting to override the perception that many of the thangkas are fake and not authentic, because Buddhist monks did not make them. Shakya tries to persuade his readers away from the notion that many of the thangkas made for tourists are inauthentic. He promotes the icca that "genuine Nepali artists" do exist and are of high quality. Similarly, pashmira are "made in Nepal." One seller told me that "the raw material comes from Tibet, but it’s our own [Nepali] product. We have craftsmen in a factory near Thamel where our workers work under masters" (#7). The notion that this product is made under "masters" elevates it. An expert in pashmina manufacture is guiding the workers to make a fine product. The guidance of a master in the local production of pashmina and thargkas increases the authenticity and value.

Not only is the creator of the product important, but for whom the product is produced and how it is ultimately used is worth examination. Khukuri knives are made for members of the Ghurka army. They are “one of the best souvenirs of Nepalese culture and made for high government officials for ceremony.” “Tourists like Service #1 best because it’s made for the British Ghurkas. It is stainless steel and has a leather case that straps on the belt. It is used in jungle, battalion, and ceremonially. It is very famous” (#10). The production of these knives, the khukuri knife’s life outside of the
tourist industry, seems dangerous and mysterious and unrelated to tourists like so many other souvenirs are, or at least this is the image that is promoted. Sellers highlight the use value of the knives: even when the khukuri knives are not associated with the Ghurka army, they are linked to images of idyllic village life: people “use them [khukuri] in the kitchen to cut meat. Most people have them. That’s why they’re Nepali. For festivals they use khukuri knives to cut meat and sacrifice the animal. Or they use them to cut wood for kitchen to make a fire in a rural place” (#13). One store promoted itself as

“one of the only suppliers of khukuris to the British Ghurka units, the Ghurka Contingent of Singapore Police, the Ghurka Reserve unit in Brunei and the Gurkha Museum in the UK. The House now sends its knives to number of shops all over the world as well as retailing its products in Kathmandu” (#13 brochure).

The phrase “one of the only suppliers” presents an image of authenticity without actually making a specific claim to the fact, allowing the reader to falsely conclude that the store has sole access as supplier of khukuri knives to the army. In an additional attempt to authenticate their claim, the brochure\(^\text{18}\) contains a replica of a letter of recommendation from the army with an additional note that they are “the only army recommended company for genuine Ghurka knives in Nepal”: ‘Mr. Lalit Lama is one of the suppliers of traditional Gurkha soldiers of the British Brigade of Gurkhas. I can commend his khukuris as being of excellent quality’ signed by Colonel Plavender (#13 brochure). This khukuri store authenticates itself by implying a direct relationship between the store and the Ghurkha army.

Singing bowls, too, are promoted based on who uses them and how. “Buddhist and Hindus use singing bowls differently. The mountain/hill people use singing bowls for different purposes. Buddhists use it for meditation, relaxation of the physical. The

\(^{18}\) See Appendix items 16-20.
Nepali villagers use is to eat, drink" (#10). It is important to note here that the
information provided in interviews by sellers is not necessarily literal truth, but it does
provide some insight into the seller’s perception of the product and of tourists (what
sellers have found they want to hear). Buddhists may or may not use singing bowls for
meditation, but this is what sellers say to prospective buyers—whether they believe it or
not. Seller (#10) noted that singing bowls could be used in a variety of ways by different
kinds of people- Buddhists and Hindus. He never said, however, that tourists use singing
bowls as a memory of Nepal or just to make a sound. Instead he focused on the Nepali
villagers’ and Buddhists’ use of singing bowls for meditation. Store emphasis on product
manufacture for Nepalis and not for tourists is important to the total perceived
authenticity of the product.

Sometimes sellers present the product as for sale to “professionals.” One seller
showed me a very old, darkened, and faded thangka and told me,

“this is an old, original Buddhist thangka. It is for professionals who know the difference and is
at the fixed price of $2500. This [other thangka] is a duplicate. It looks the same but the smell
is different. But it’s a good duplicate. It goes for US$200” (#9, son).

He distinguished it as having been an “original” Buddhist thangka, insinuating that it
was not produced for tourists or even professionals (presumably antique dealers); he
said that now it is “for professionals,” alluding to its former context in which it could
have been commissioned by a Buddhist in order to gain good karma. 19 Although the
duplicate is not the original thangka, it was a “good duplicate” and perhaps through
its association with the original thangka garnered more force as an authentic object.
The fact that this store carries original Buddhist thangkas also gives weight to the

19 For other “original” Buddhist commissioned contexts see Jackson and Jackson 1984: 9-11.
store’s authenticity in that they can determine the difference and carry a range of stock from originals to good duplicates.

For a souvenir to be authentically Nepali it must be made in Nepal. One seller explained that the fiber for his pashmina arrives “not from China but from the Himalayas and Mongolia” (#21). The distinction that these pashmina come from rural regions and were not mass-produced in China allowed the seller to ask for a higher price. Some of the product might not have been harvested in Nepal, but the seller emphasized that the fiber did not come from China (the implication here is that pashmina from China is of lesser quality). Interestingly, the seller does not mention the possibility that the pashmina could have come from India, from where many products in Thamel are imported.

Khukuri knives that come with a small description card nearly always name the place where the khukuri was manufactured. One company’s khukuri’s specifically came from the Dharan, Dhankuta20, and Chainpur, all of which are located in eastern Nepal (#13). Thangkas, too, tend to be made “in our local workshop” or “our local factory” many of which appear to be located in the Kathmandu Valley. Distinguishing the souvenir as being manufactured in Nepal is important to the product’s identity as a conspicuously Nepali commodity, to its authenticity as a ‘real’ Nepali good, and consequently to its desirability from the tourist perspective.

A long product manufacture period can attach a higher level of worth to an object. If someone has to labor intensely for a long period of time, the souvenir, becomes more valuable since it is not cheaply and/or quickly mechanically mass-produced, as many tourists fear. Additionally, the image of someone or many people laboring over one

20 The calendar actually lists both Dhakute and Dhakuta; however, Dhakute is not a place in eastern Nepal and since this particular information was gathered from the store’s promotional calendar—which has many spelling mistakes, I have just included Dhakuta here.
product at a time implies a better product quality as well as an individualized, unique vision of the product. "The most expensive, best quality thangkas take at least four months to make (a medium sized one). They have lots of fine detail and tiny dots that make up the shading. They also use lots of 24k gold and have the fine details in the face" (#9, son). One thangka producing company that sells thankas on their Internet site offers what they call the "thangka cam" (#11): By posting one photo of their current project every two weeks they try to emphasize the effort that goes into making one. "On this page," they say, "we give you the opportunity to watch the creation of a masterpiece thangka in our workshop...Observe the development of the painting process. In doing so, you will realize the time required to finish a quality scroll painting from Dharmapala Centre" (#11, website). As with many of the authentication techniques discussed here, the customer has to rely on the seller’s honesty. In this case, the honesty of the company is demonstrated by posting the photos as they are produced in real-time. The same concept could be applied to the khukuri company that boasts the need of many workers to produce one knife: "The making of a single knife keeps four men fully occupied for an entire day, sometimes even more. Everything is done by hand and the only machine used is a lathe for shining the khukuri" (#13 brochure). In this case the product duration period is not very long, but the fact that it takes four men to produce one knife, and that it is "all done by hand" is impressive. It implies that the object was carefully crafted. Many of these authenticating techniques could be used by dishonest sellers to make their objects appear most authentic and of higher quality when most customers cannot tell the difference. I do not mean to imply in anyway that any of my seller informants were dishonest, the point here is that I do not know if they are honest or dishonest, but that
some appear more honest and their product more authentic because they are better at
promoting their goods as authentic through the employment of many of these techniques.
The level of perceived authenticity of the product is a matter of marketing the product.

According to Meethan,

“tradition is a term used to justify all manner of social practices and institutions on the
commonsense basis that, having survived for a number of years, they therefore possess some
intrinsic value for the culture in which they are located. In short, they are the embodiment of
authentic ways of life” (Meethan 2001: 95).

This sentiment rings true with many tourists. If a souvenir is newly manufactured, a
recent invention, it seems to have less authority. However, if something has a history of
cultural production, the object has in a sense earned its place within the culture. Perhaps
the object’s existence in Nepal before the tourist industry really developed makes it more
authentic. The khukuri is traced back from its original function up to its role as a
souvenir by one khukuri dealer’s brochure:

“Khukuri is the rational knife of Nepal, originating in ancient times. More than being just a
revered and effective weapon, however, the khukuri is also the peaceful all-purpose knife of the
hill people of Nepal. It is versatile working tool and therefore an indispensable possession of
almost every household, especially those belonging to the Gurung, Magar, Rai, and Limbu
ethnic groups of central and eastern Nepal. Moreover, apart from the fact that the khukuri
symbolizes bravery and valor and is a Nepalese cultural icon, it also represents an exquisite
piece of Nepalese craftsmanship and is indeed a unique memento for you to take back home”
(#13, brochure).

Not only is the khukuri from “ancient times,” an ambiguous but very old time of origin,
but it is the “hill people’s” choice, an “indispensable possession.” What the brochure
does not state is that many of these knives are newly manufactured and some have no
association with the Ghurka army. The “Balance [a particular style of knife],” for
instance, is a “beautifully shaped knife” and “one of the most difficult to craft,” but “it is
not an army knife and Balance does not have any special reason. It is just an extra
additional to the skill craftsmanship” (#13, calendar).
The association with tradition and an old line of production is also important for the authentication of thangkas. "Thangka painting is a traditional art from the Buddhist and Hindu tradition. These are newly made but from old designs. It is an old art" (#5). The seller admitted that these thangkas were newly manufactured, but he quickly added that the designs were old. He also added that they come from the Buddhist and Hindu tradition, which attaches to the thangkas a Buddhist and Hindu aura of the ancient. One tourist, an avid collector of thangkas, had lined up seventeen thangkas to purchase while on a quick two-week trip to Nepal. As soon as he found out that they were made with a new kind of pigment and were not old, he decided that he would not buy any. Not only do sellers verbally associate thangka painting with tradition, but they also point out when the thangka has been made and with traditional techniques: "all of them [thangkas in the store] are made with canvas and white mud, dried and rubbed smooth" (#9, son).

Although some of the thangkas in his store are produced in his thankga factory in Kathmandu, he also buys thangkas from wholesalers, which adds another dimension to the seller’s product knowledge. While many sellers are knowledgeable about the products they sell and can decipher some history of the product just upon examination, other sellers may not be so knowledgeable and are dependent upon the wholesaler to provide the product information and background that the seller then relays to the tourist. Buying products from a wholesaler would seem to reduce seller authenticity; each additional step in the process of acquiring souvenirs to sell, signifying a increasingly indirect relationship between seller and producer, devalues the authenticity of the souvenir.
Singing bowls are sectioned off into two different categories for general pricing: old singing bowls and new singing bowls. One seller commented, “older ones have a good sound rhythm that should match the heart rate for healing power.” A singing bowl guidebook widely available in Thamel suggests that a singing bowl’s “powerful vibrations spread quickly through our body, which consists of more than 80% water after all, and this results in a very delicate internal massage of all the cells” allowing the body to “tune” its “vibrations and wavelengths” to “vibrate to the frequency of the bowl” and “when it is synchronized it can vibrate independently” to a healthy, synchronized rhythm (Jansen 2002:39). According to this outlook, it is more important to purchase the old singing bowls for meditative, healthful purposes. A different seller declared that “the decorated are newer ones for tourists, for people who don’t know. Those who know the differences, who only want to make sound, buy the new types of singing bowls. Real singing bowls have a healing power, meditative effects that can relax you and are used in yoga. The new ones are made in Patan and most of the design is done by hands and completed by machine. The real ones are from collections” (#10).

In this case the seller perceives old singing bowls as synonymous with “real singing bowls...from collections” and the new singing bowls are “for tourists.” A certain kind of terminology and the use of “old,” “new,” “real,” and not-real distinctions allows the seller to provide one authentic product to his customers and one obviously tourist-geared product, while both are in actuality tourist-geared. The juxtaposition of the two styles, however, promotes the authenticity of one even though it may diminish the authenticity of the other, “newer” singing bowl, which is covered in Devnagari or Tibetan writing in what seems to be an effort on the part of the maker to visually corroborate the product’s Nepali or Tibetan identity.

One singing bowl seller emphasized the association between Buddhism and singing bowls in respect to the Maoist “situation” while at the same time shifting the
focus from the image of turmoil in Nepal to one of peaceful people in Nepal and why everyone should own a singing bowl.

"Nepal has a lot of terrorism, a bad political situation. And according to the religion of Buddhism, we say that to reduce this terrorist activities and different things we say that the singing bowl makes things peaceful and it gives a peaceful sound which makes people's minds change from terrorist to peaceful. And then the country will also be relieved of these terrorist activities" (#4).

**Elevating Authenticity Levels**

Yet another authentication technique is to raise the level of the product from craft to art, which can have an infinite value and can sometimes fetch what might seem like an irrationally high price. "We use traditional Tibetan things—cloth (canvas) and framing...these thangkas are made on mud cloth canvas" (#9, son). When I went back to this particular store and asked if I could take a picture of the store, the father of the boy I had interviewed earlier refused to let me take a picture of their ‘masterpieces’. He explained that he did not know who I was and that I could be trying to steal his masterpiece designs, implying that his store had unique designs. He said that "craftsmen” make some of his thangkas but “master artists” make some too (#9, father).

"If a customer likes,” his son said earlier in an interview, “he can pay 1,000 Rps and if he does not we can give him for 500 Rps” (#9, son). Later however, he said “for masterpieces it is not ok to bargain.” Clearly the “masterpieces” were valued much higher than a simple craft and this value places it in a category not for bargaining. The distinction between craft and art is interesting. The seller had determined that it was ok
to take photos of the thangkas that he called “craft” but not the ones called
“masterpieces”; he was not worried if I pirated the “craft” designs. Perhaps he wanted to
me to acknowledge that his merchandise varied from art to craft, a distinction through
which art is elevated with a special aura that can only be made by someone with a special
vision or talent.

Higher end stores typically do not support bargaining policies. In Kathmandu you
can bargain in a bazaar type atmosphere (namely Thamel) but not in stores associated
with a charity cause. However, some stores within Thamel refuse to bargain for specific
items. The majority of stores that exported abroad, which already maintained higher
prices, bargained, but only minimally. Bargaining or the open negotiation of price
between seller and buyer decreases the overall value of the product.

Tourists (many, but not all) expressed concern over their inability to determine a
product’s quality. Some stores in Thamel and often stores associated with a charity cause
have created a brand name, something the tourists I spoke with can understand as an
indicator of the product’s quality.

“Tourists always ask about the quality. They want to know if all of these [pashmina] are
available and if there are duplicates. We have a company tag- we guarantee the quality. We
have had this trademark label for two years. We sell these on the website too- there is a fixed
price. But if you buy a larger quantity, we sell a little cheaper” (#7).

If you buy in bulk at this store- ten pashmina, for example- the price of each comes down
by 100-200 Nepali Rupees each (about a 10-20% discount)\(^\text{21}\), not much in comparison to
bulk-deals that can be made at other non-brand name pashmina shops. Their “fixed
price” is also something many foreigners understand and respect. On their website, this
particular brand name pashmina store proposed to be “one of the largest manufacturer,

\(^{21}\) 210 Nepali Rupees is roughly equivalent to 3 U.S. Dollars.
exporter & wholesaler of pashmina shawls & other pashmina products for domestic & international markets.” Elsewhere on their website they name twelve other countries to which they export, in addition to “many more throughout the world”. It seems that this company is very worldly, or at least putting forth that image. They have carefully crafted their language: they are “one of the largest” pashmina dealers; much like the brochure promoting khukuri knives (#13), the “one of” phrase gives the image of being the largest manufacturer when in actuality they are only giving this image without explicitly saying that they maintain that status. This pashmina dealer’s website states: “our factory is located in Kathmandu, Nepal. We are always aware about maintaining the centuries old tradition in its original form.” They are promoting themselves as necessarily Nepali. The location of their factory is in Nepal, and they are concerned with maintaining not just tradition, but a “centuries old” tradition. The language of the website supports the company’s reputation of high quality and reliability. “Our quality pashmina is exported to various foreign countries” (#7). Having a history of exporting abroad legitimizes the company’s reputation, especially in the eyes of foreigners, as if to say people all over the world, people like you, know and appreciate our quality and brand name.

A khuuri store (#13) also goes to much effort to promote its khukuri knives in association with its brand name. Not only does this company have a documentary video demonstrating how their own khukuri blacksmiths create the knives, but they also provide you with much information concerning the history of the knives and store in the form of a calendar, brochure, website, and tiny cards that come with each individual knife describing its unique character. In fact the store, calendar, brochure, and website all bear a variety of similar yet different slogans. On the website the motto is that this specific
brand name acts as “the maker of the finest and genuine khukuri in Nepal.” The brochure describes this company as “the official khukuri supplier to Ghurka units” and Nepal’s first genuine Ghurka knives and original Nepalese khukuris manufacturer.” The shop is also “owned by ex-Ghurka officer.” The calendar touts its knives as “Nepal’s first genuine Gurkha knives store” and having “no frills because we [they] wanted to present these khukuris to the world in its original and untainted form. Simple at the same time powerful and elegant” (#13). Also on the calendar a definition of khukuri and [company brand name] works to elevate the store and overall product authenticity:

“Khukuri- the all-purpose versatile working tool, the history maker, is a Nepalese icon and represents an exquisite piece of Nepalese craftsmanship...A medium-length curved knife of each Gurkha carries with him in uniform and in battle, as his identity and an extension of his arm. [Brand name]- the largest and best manufacturer and distributor of genuine Gurkha knives and original Nepalese khukuris presents the first ever khukuri calendar” (#13, calendar).

Outside the physical shop, above the door a sign begs tourists to come in by publicizing “Genuine Gurkha Knives” (#13, my emphasis). The website and pamphlet also provide a brief history of the Gurkhas as if to incorporate more of the Gurkha essence into its knives. The business aim is to attract customers based on having more authentic knives through a display of comprehensive knowledge surrounding the product manufacture process, product differences, and history of the Gurkhas. Through this khukuri brand rhetoric including authentic words such as “genuine,” “official,” “original Nepalese...manufacture,” and “untainted” the company’s effort to create an image of authenticity is apparent. However this labored effect through authentic wording is not where this khukuri store’s brand name power lies.

This khukuri store’s brand name power (#13) allows the store to make claims against the competition. Their calendar, brochure, and website all warn of imitators. A threatening red triangle tab lingers in the top right-hand corner of the brochure’s front
page: “be aware of imitation and copycats” as if to say, we are the only place that is legitimate—everyone else is just imitating us. Inside the brochure an entire paragraph is dedicated to disparaging other stores who imitate its brand name:

“Be aware of imitation: [Khukuri brand name] has been in the business in Nepal for over ten years and has proved to be the best khukuri manufacturer in the country. This achievement of ours is largely due to our strict adherence to quality and the customer satisfaction is our motto. Of late, some khukuri shops have come up in the city, which deal in imitation of our khukuris. They not only imitate our products but almost everything from our name, style, and literature to decoration. We strictly caution customers to be aware of such scamps and pledge to uphold our reputation of genuine khukuri manufacturer in Nepal. We inform our customers that we have only two retail shops-cum-show rooms in Kathmandu” (#13, brochure).

They distinguish themselves from their “imitators,” “copycats,” and “scamps,” (the “fake” khukuri knife dealers) and establish their brand name in association with having been in the business for “over ten years” as the “best khukuri manufacturer,” promising “customer satisfaction.”

Charity-associated Stores

Stores associated with a charity organization generate more of an authentic aura than stores for personal profit. Tourists have said that they “feel more comfortable” shopping at a store like Mahaguthi. One tourist said that she felt “you get a better sense of where the stuff comes from” and “you really get a fair price and do not get harassed” at charity stores. Even if the price is higher at a charity-associated store, other tourists have noted, “you know the profit and your money is going to a good cause”. The idea that the profit of charity-associated stores eliminates the need for the consumer to bargain for prices or worry that they are not receiving a fair evaluation of the souvenir’s worth. Instead, tourists will chalk up an extra profit that charity-associated stores have earned as a simple donation, a good deed.

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22 See Appendix items 25-26.
Third World Craft (#15), Mahaguthi (#16), Folk Nepal (#19), and the Dharmapala Thangka Centre (#11) are four charity-associated stores within walking distance of Thamel. Three of these four stores (all except Dharmapala Thangka Centre) are within five minutes walk of each other on the same side of the same street, creating in some tourists confusion about the difference, especially when they offer a very similar collection of products for sale. Folk Nepal is an officially registered Nepali Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) with a counterpart in Norway. Folk Nepal exports goods to Norway via a catalogue and physical store abroad. In the catalogue Nepali goods are mixed in with goods from Indonesia, Mali, India, Peru, Nigeria, Ecuador, and Mongolia (#19, Norwegian Version of Catalogue). The Folk Nepal catalogue has many images of people making handicrafts in rural settings. Folk Nepal describes a variety of charity works it funds in Nepal’s rural areas, mostly dealing with public health issues (#19, flyer). Thirc World Craft offers help to support “the small scale and home based artisans/producer groups of Nepal by providing them with design assistance, market information and support to access European, USA, and Asia Pacific Market” (#15, website). Their website also lists a wide variety of producers ranging from ambiguous descriptions like “socially motivated enterprise” and “family enterprise” to clearer ones like “NGO” (#15, website). Mahaguthi’s full name, Nepal Charkhaparcharak Mahakarya Samarak Mahaguthi, loosely translates as Nepal Handicrafts All-People Indigenous Fund. It promotes itself through its locally well-known brand name as well as through store literature, which explains how some of their merchandise is made by widowed women without families; the profit goes to helping these women with skill training, allowing them to be self-sufficient.
Dharmapala Thangka Centre displays its level of authenticity on its website by listing its status as a “website selected by UNESCO,” an internationally respected organization and a stamp of authenticity that many foreigners recognize (#11). The Dharmapala Thangka Centre’s charity association is with an orphanage in Frankfurt, Germany. Twenty percent of donations are given to this orphanage and “after you receive your thangka, the City of Frankfurt, Germany will send you a document certifying your donation to the orphanage” (#11, website). The association with a charity in combination with its rhetoric of authenticity creates an air of legitimacy surrounding the final product. The store’s website states:

“more than twenty years, the Dharmapala Thangka Centre (P) LTD, located in Kathmandu, Nepal, has been creating authentic, high-quality thangkas—intricate scroll paintings depicting ancient Buddhist iconography. Supervised by lamas of the Nyingma order and closely adhering to traditional Thangka painting customs, the artists of the Dharmapala Centre have been broadly recognized as masters of this sacred tradition, and their exquisite paintings have been displayed at numerous international exhibitions. All the artwork is done under the guidance of chief artist Karsang Lama” (#11, website).

However, a clerk in the Dharmapala store told me that “anyone can make the thangka” and that “even I [he] could make the thangka.” The store’s rhetoric, much like the rhetoric of other self-authenticating stores surrounds that of artists, an established tradition in Nepal, and some association with countries abroad (and legitimacy from them). The Dharmapala Thangka Centre offers the option of buying “consecrated thangkas” online (and in its store) so that your thangka will be completely authentic:

“Before your thangka is shipped, you may request that it be consecrated in a traditional prayer ceremony in a Buddhist monastery in Kathmandu” (#11, website). Offering the utmost customer satisfaction you can even “commission the creation of your own thangka by email” (#11, website).
The DTC website invites its customers to compare their artwork (through photographs on the web) with low quality tourist paintings:

"Nowadays most Tibetan Thangkas are made in India or Nepal. The vast majority of these scroll paintings are sold to tourists, who usually do not have much understanding of this art...the majority of thangkas which are made today are of low quality. It often takes only one or two weeks to finish a painting of this type. The artists of the Dharmapala Centre create their paintings with the greatest devotion and skill. To paint even the smallest Mandala (30x30 cm, which is 12in.x12in.) takes them a minimum of one month's time...[and sometimes] two years time to complete. To give you the opportunity to see and compare the differences in quality between these two kinds of thangkas, Dharmapala Centre presents here some examples" (#11, website).

Like the brand-name khukuri store, the Dharmapala Centre disparages low quality thangkas, the cause of which is attributed to demand from tourists, and elevates its own product in the process.

The common denominator between these four stores (besides their charity association) is that for the most part they are not suffering financially as a result of the decline of tourists, which has been in steep decline since 1998, but instead they have been somewhat profitable. The Folk Nepal store manager attributed his store’s success due to its “fair price (every item in the store has a fixed price), selective goods, and charity work.” What he did not refer to was how much of store’s merchandise is exported to Norway. A store manager at Mahaguthi claimed that their customer base was fifty percent Nepali (local) and fifty percent foreigner; he did acknowledge, however, that the foreigners accounted for 85% of sales, while locals accounted for the remaining 15%.

The location of a store in Thamel affects the value and perception of the products. The overproduction of similar merchandise causes the objects to be less valued than they would in a charity-associated store. The association with a charity allows them to charge a higher price. They also maintain a wide variety of
handicrafts and distinctly Nepali souvenirs without having too much of each available within the same closed environment. In Thamel, on the contrary, the short term visitor with no familiarity with pashmina, thangkas, khukuri knives, or singing bowls one may find it difficult to distinguish one pashmina store from the next or a low-quality product from a high-quality one. Thus, many ultimately depend on the seller for cues regarding the product’s authenticity. But what do these levels of authenticity that are constructed and constantly reconstructed by sellers mean?

Consumption and Authenticity

Appadurai states that “there is a particular set of issues concerning authenticity and expertise that plagues the modern west,” which sometimes “revolves around the issue of good taste, expert knowledge, ‘originality’ ” (Appadurai 1986: 45). By concentrating on the production, sellers create a singular aura for the souvenirs. Only in Nepal are the authentic Nepali souvenirs, made in Nepal, by Nepali people and for Nepali people, available. Sellers consciously or unconsciously impose a vision of authenticity and authority on their stores, which affects the way that the tourists then perceive the commodities. However, shops with authentic souvenirs do not necessarily have higher sales than shops with less authentic ones. Some tourists are simply looking for a cheap memory of Nepal for themselves or for family and friends without caring much about product quality. “Tourists tend to like the biggest and cheapest thangkas. The Mandala\textsuperscript{23} is famous; people want it… and if they don’t know the difference they’ll buy anything with it. These kinds of tourists

\textsuperscript{23} The Mandala is a Buddhist geometric design symbolic of the universe.
go to many shops and wherever they find the cheaper, they’ll buy,” said one seller (#9). A tourist confirmed that she searched for cheaper gifts for friends and family at home. She was strapped for cash and would not even attempt to shop somewhere that “looks fancy... because it looks more expensive.” She also shopped at charity-associated stores, which tend to be higher in price. She justified this behavior saying that she wanted to remember this experience, and she would know the difference in quality (or rather, authenticity), but her friends and family would not. Although, authenticity and value have a unique, almost direct relationship of value for the tourist-consumer authenticity levels do not necessarily correlate with increased sales.

The point of this paper is not to determine whether these four Nepali souvenirs are authentic or not, but instead to understand how people develop an understanding of the value of objects. We are inclined to conceptualize objects as having inherent value, but in reality in the process of perceiving the object we are attributing it with value. We can manipulate an object’s value by changing any part of its mythology (for instance, aspects of its production, its presentation, its associations, etc.). Images of authenticity tended to raise the price and value of souvenirs in Nepal, and the majority of tourists looked for “genuine” and “authentic” souvenirs. Many tourists (according to both sellers and tourists) demonstrated great concern for the souvenir’s identity, its history of production and purpose; some tourists were even willing not to buy any Nepali souvenirs if they felt the souvenirs were inauthentic. But why do we want or need commodities to be authentic?

The term tourist is a stigmatized one. People generally prefer the term traveler, connoting a different identity concerned with culture and experience.
According to these stereotypes the tourist would buy any souvenir, but the traveler, being interested in what it might be like to truly experience a foreign place and culture, would only be interested in buying an authentic Nepali commodity. The way that someone comes to value an object in turn reflects and affects the value of the entire experience as a whole. Ultimately, it seems that consuming images and products of authenticity are necessary to complete the “real” experience in Nepal, coming full circle with the image of travel to Nepal that is promoted by the Nepal Tourism Board as a journey filled with unique, mystical, and “genuine” experiences.
Works Cited


Typical rural scenes of Nepal:

1. View from Muktinath, a holy pilgrimage site along the Annapurna Circuit in rural Nepal.
2. View looking down onto the house of the family I stayed with in Syang for a week.
3. The stupa at Bodhanath, a Tibetan enclave
Thamel

5. A billboard along the main entrance to Thamel
6. Images of Thamel
7. Images of Thamel
8. Images of Thamel
9. Pashmina shop in Thamel
10. Another pashmina shop in Thamel
11. Thangkas, Poubhas, and Nepali watercolor scenes in Thamel
12. Thangkas, Poubhas, and Nepali watercolor scenes in Thamel
13. Singing bowl shop in Thamel (the “newer” and painted singing bowls are on the top three shelves and the “older” singing bowls are on the bottom four shelves)

14. Another singing bowl shop in Thamel
15. Demonstration of how to make a singing bowl "sing" (Jansen 2002:52)
16. Khukuri knives that are available at the Khukuri House (the Balance is in the top row, fifth to the right)
17. Khukuri House brochure cover
18. Photograph of Khukuri House khukuri display [brochure]
19. Photograph of men making khukuris for Khukuri House [brochure]
20. Reproduced image of official letter declaring Khukuri House khukuris to be traditional and of excellent quality [brochure]
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21. Last Resort flyer, front
22. Last Resort flyer, back
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THE LOUNGE

Via Via

THURSDAY: 7:00PM

Kathmandu guest house
Thamel centre

VIA VIA CAFE' - situated in a centuries old RED building
OPEN from 11 am - 11.00 Late
CLOSED on Sundays

THE LOUNGE

Via Via

THURSDAY: 7:00PM

Kathmandu guest house
Thamel centre

Via Via

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short course introducing to you one of the oldest
religions of life...

> tantric meditation & tantric healing
mental, emotional, physical levels, distance healing...

23. ViaVia Cafe flyer, front

24. ViaVia Cafe flyer, back
Nepal abounds with medieval superlative and artifacts from its indigenous artisans. These artifacts can be found in our temples, houses, and above all in our handicraft products. It is our cultural heritage.

Mahaguthi Craft, a Conscience est. 1984 is an income generating sister organization of Nepal Charkha Pracharak Gandhi Smarak Mahaguthi the oldest NGO of Nepal. Our major profit goes to Tuls Meher Mahila Ashram, a home for destitute in Kathmandu and many other social services throughout Nepal. Our mission is to empower women and to develop their entrepreneurship. Our workshop has only women artisans and our outside producers are mostly women.

So your purchase of Mahaguthi crafts helps the deprived women of Nepal to enrich their skills, build their self-confidence, and become self-reliant. Our handicraft products are from indigenous raw materials that are harvested in a sustainable way so you help preserve our global environment.

Your every buy of Mahaguthi products help over 1400 indigenous artisans earn their living, and preserve the traditional handicrafts. Mahaguthi is sustaining these traditions in our ten product lines, made with superb quality at fair price. And above all this helps all of humanity, without any discrimination of caste or religion.

Our motto is your satisfaction. Our aim is help indigenous artisan earn. We believe in Fair Trade Principle. We seek your try to our products. We promise our sincerity.

25. Mahaguthi brochure cover
26. Mahaguthi brochure