

SHANTI'S BIRTHDAY: REFLECTIONS OF A TOURIST/VOLUNTEER/ ANTHROPOLOGIST

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ABSTRACT

While doing volunteer work in a Nepali village, I participated in the birthday celebration for a young girl. This photo essay includes nine of the photographs I took that night, showing people sharing food, dancing, and resting. My goal is to tell the story of my experience that evening, but also to question my own position and impact as well as to explore some issues of power and authenticity that arise with the practice of photography. Taking pictures is not a neutral way of documenting; it relies on, and in turn affects, power relationships between people.

For three months during the fall of 2010 I volunteered for a local non-governmental organisation in Nepal, first teaching English in a Buddhist monastery and then helping with the design of a research project to assess the organization's development projects in rural communities. As part of this, I spent ten days living with a local family in Jitpurphedi, a village located about 17 kilometres from Kathmandu. Nepal is one of the poorest countries in Asia, ranking 157 out of 195 on the United Nations Human Development Index (UN Development Program 2014). Since the 1970s, tourism has been growing steadily and by 2013 provided seven percent of all jobs in

the country (WTTC 2014). Foreigners are an important source of revenue, and Nepalis joke that the country has three main religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, and tourism.

The photos included here were all taken during one evening as the family I stayed with celebrated the ninth birthday of their daughter Shanti.⁶ Along with three other volunteers, I, a 36-year-old German-Canadian, spent the evening sitting on the narrow porch, eating with the family, dancing awkwardly, and taking photographs. My agenda with the camera was very much that of a tourist: capture that which seems different, intriguing and moving. While at the time I did not think much about this process, whenever I browse through the images or share them with friends and family, they raise more questions for me. In this photo essay I aim to describe my experience of that birthday celebration as well as to reflect on my role and on some of the issues of power and authenticity that are so entangled with the practice of photography. My goal is to raise questions and direct attention to some of the complexities of photography in the context of a specific setting.

⁶ All names are pseudonyms.



Figure 1

The preparations for Shanti's birthday had begun during the day, and shortly after dark, several family members arrived at the house. After the evening meal, a relative from Kathmandu brought out a cake for Shanti (in blue) and helped her cut it, as her sister Amita (in red) and friend Radha (in purple) looked on. During the ten days at the family's home the exact family relationships never became clear to me. People visited frequently during the day but were never introduced to us volunteers. Most of my communication was through Bishal, Shanti's father, who spoke English well. With the other household members and frequent visitors I used fragments of Nepali I knew, pieces of English they understood, and gestures we both hoped would translate.

The birthday celebration had started slowly, with people assembling casually and the women preparing the meal. We four volunteers sat in the far corner of the porch. There was a long period

when family members spoke Nepali amongst each other, laughed, and told stories that no one translated for us. Once the cake was brought out, attention shifted to Shanti.



Figure 2



Figure 3

Bishal gave his daughter a chain of marigolds, assembled by Amita during the afternoon, and a *tika* (or *tilaka*), the red mark on the forehead; both are meant to bestow blessings and good fortune. During festivals and other special events like birthdays, older family members typically give *tikas* to the younger ones (i.e. Granoff and Shinohara 2003).

While the houses along Jitpurphedi's main road are connected to the electrical grid, this does not guarantee power. Electricity in Kathmandu and the surrounding area is cut regularly in order to avoid overloading the system which results in scheduled power outages that can increase to several hours per day. The first picture was taken with a flash and makes the scene appear far lighter than it was; electricity was off during the whole evening, and the porch was lit only by a few candles. I took 35 photos in total that night, and the other three volunteers took many as well. We had

asked Bishal's permission at the beginning of the night, and he had said "Of course", shaking his head sideways in the local equivalent of a nod that is so confusing to Westerners. But did he know how many times we would use the flash, no doubt startling people on the dimly lit porch?



Figure 4

I missed – with my camera – the exact moment when Shanti got her *tika*, but I captured it when Amita leaned forward to receive hers. Tourists often seek “the authentic” in their journeys (MacCannell 1976; Wang 1999). This certainly seems like a real moment: the foreign ritual, the connection between the people, the pure joy on the girls’ faces. Why are we so intrigued by other people’s ritual practice? Travel itself has been described as a secular

ritual in which we seek to come close to the sacred before returning home (Graburn 2004).

Ironically it was only afterwards, when looking at the photos, that this moment became the ‘special moment’ for me, the one in which I may have caught a glimpse of the sacred. At the time I had been crouching on a low stool for almost three hours. My back was getting sore. I remember worrying about when to go to the toilet, not wanting to interrupt or miss anything. To what extent did the photos record the special moment then, and to what extent did they help create it?



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

After we ate the cake, there was music and dance. The men drummed and sang, while the women sang and clapped their hands. Amita danced several times, but Shanti seemed shy and had to be coaxed to take her turn. The other volunteers had stayed for a couple of weeks already and knew the songs well, whereas I struggled to follow along. Petite Silvia from Portugal expertly imitated the movements of the local women, while Brian from England threw in some hip-hop moves. I remember feeling big and awkward as I swung my arms around. But no matter our performance, the family clapped and cheered for the foreigners in their midst. I wonder how Shanti will remember our presence – were we mainly fun, strange, annoying, threatening, interesting, or simply irrelevant? All or none of the above?

It has been suggested that “the tourist gaze” is a way of exerting power over people (Urry 1990), and Sontag writes that photography “turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed” (1977:14). I remember wondering about the appropriateness of taking photos at the time, but only when looking at the pictures later did I start to wonder how much I had actually ‘taken’. I had the means to capture private moments of this evening; I had the power to decide what to take the pictures of.



Figure 8

This photo is different. People do not look as beautiful or happy as in the other pictures; it shows a moment when nothing much was happening, and people were taking a break. Shanti got very tired by the end of the evening. You can see garbage on the floor; poverty and exhaustion have become visible. Some anthropologists have pointed out that, while we tend to stay away from poorer areas in our own hometowns, as tourists we may find poverty quaint and exotic (Pruitt and LaFont 2004). Tourist brochures, postcards and souvenirs often market romanticized images of the poor. Throughout my stay I remember feeling unsettled by the obvious difference in material wealth. While Bishal's family is one of the wealthiest in the village, partly from receiving payments from volunteers, the fact remains that all of us Western visitors are materially far more secure than this family. We

have chosen to experience living like this for a short period of time; we are only here for a momentary glimpse of the life of “the Other” before we return to the comforts of home.



Figure 9

The next morning I walked along the village road, turned around and took this picture of Bishal’s house. The road was unusually quiet except for a woman carrying a heavy load, a common sight in rural Nepal. I remembered feeling both connected and disconnected from people the previous evening. A member of the Mursi, an Ethiopian tribal group, once complained to an anthropologist about tourists taking pictures: “You tell us – why do they photograph us?...Is it just that they want to know who we are, or what?...What do they do with the photographs” (Turton 2004:8)? Was my photography a way of getting closer, of coming to know better? As time passes, I will forget more and more details of my

visit with Bishal's family; the photographs provide a way of reaching back, but they also already shape my memories of that experience.

Photography is never a neutral act; it plays out in a web of power relationships and adds its own dynamic. It does not simply document relationships but also creates them in the process (i.e. Edwards 1997; Pinney 2011). It was a position of power in the first place that allowed me to take these photographs, and, while the images give me a feeling of greater connectedness with people, in a certain way they also perpetuate the power differential between us.

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