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Mountains and Mountain Dwellers of the Global South and the Globalisation of Tourism: Imaginaries and Practices

Isabelle Sacareau

- 1 The call for thematic issues of the *Journal of Alpine Research* invited contributors to question the role the imaginary of mountains and mountain communities of the South plays in the globalisation of tourism. The globalisation of tourism can be defined as the historical process behind the spread of tourism worldwide. Both a factor and product of the different phases of globalisation which emerged from the 19th century, tourism has also been the agent of a specific form of globalisation which has produced its own type of flows and practices (Coeffe *et al.*, 2007; Duhamel and Khadri, 2011).
- 2 The Alps and the Pyrenees were the initial places that drove the invention of a new relationship to mountains in which a large part of contemporary tourist practices are based. However, mountains of Asia, Africa and Latin America began to be developed as tourist sites during the specific context of colonisation in the 19th century, and then in the second half of the 20th century driven by a global tourism industry quick to put past and contemporary imaginary into play. They have thus been gradually included in the tourist ecumene of Europeans and North Americans through practices such as mountaineering, eco-tourism or the discovery of ethnic minority villages. Mountain communities, however, have played an unequal role in the development of their territory as tourist sites. Indeed, this development has involved a localised system of actors, practices and places (MIT team, 2002) that vary according to the period and destination, and in which the geographical imaginary of 'elsewhere' and of the 'other' play a decisive role (Gravari-Barbas and Graburn, 2012). Since the beginning of the 1980s, the mountains of the Global South have entered into a new phase of global tourism with the influx of tourists from developing and emerging countries. In particular, over the last decade, the Asia and Pacific tourist area has risen to second place worldwide by becoming not only a

region that receives much international tourism, but also a region whose members participate in regional and domestic tourism.

- 3 As it so happens, the contributions to this special issue all focus on Asian regions, reflecting the current importance of the area in global tourism and the significance of mountain destinations for tourists. While there is some level of universality in the imaginary associated with mountains and in tourists' representations and contemporary practices (Bozonnet, 1992; Debarbieux, 1995, 2010), Asian mountains have a specific tourist imaginary which must be examined both in the different cultural and historical contexts of its construction and in the context of the global dissemination of images, values and practices (Sacareau, Taunay & Peyvel, 2015). Thus, beyond our case studies which reflect landscape and human diversity –Mount Everest in the Himalayan mountain range in Nepal (Etienne Jacquemet's contribution), the Western Ghats low mountain range in India, (Lucie Dejouhanet's contribution) or the low mountain range of Guizhou Province in China (Evelyne Gauché's contribution)– the historical origins of the construction of Asian mountains' imaginary and the roles local people play within the local tourism system are also analysed here.

Who benefits from tourism peripheries?

- 4 Viewed from Europe or the United States, the mountains of Asia appear as the peripheries of an international tourism system organised according to a logic of proximity, and one which largely privileges tropical beach destinations. The relatively modest and very spatially concentrated visits to mountains contrasts with the major place they occupy in the global imaginary which has transformed mountains such as Everest into top tourist spots (cf. Etienne Jacquemet's contribution). Tourist travel is driven by a "differential" between places (MIT team, 2002). It involves as much a physical and landscape reality and a social and economic difference, as it does the construction of a geographic imaginary, all of which induce the desire for 'elsewhere' and the 'other'.
- 5 The mountains of Asia largely differ from the mountains commonly visited by European and North Americans tourists because they are located at a distance from countries from where most international tourists come (Europe and North America), they are often difficult to access, and also because of their altitude and their impressive proportions as is the case of the Himalayan range. These differences are also reflected by the presence of fauna and flora partly unknown in mountains at temperate latitudes and by an ethnic and cultural diversity that is very large. They are a real "horizon of otherness" (Lazzarotti, 2006) that the actors of tourism seek to downplay as much as they seek to highlight. However, their diversity calls for the need to distinguish between immense mountain ranges such as the Himalayas, which are associated with high altitude and with associated specific practices such as mountaineering and trekking, and low mountain ranges of Asia. Apart from the spectacular Chinese or Vietnamese karst peaks, Western tourists are primarily attracted by the cultures of ethnic minorities, their rural landscapes, and the image of the jungle in these low ranges. Asia, however, is a distant and costly destination and there are very few western tourists, especially when compared to the massive tourist flows of the Asia Pacific basin and, in particular, to domestic tourists (Cabasset-Sémédo et al., 2010).
- 6 Viewed from an Asian perspective, these mountains cannot be said to be marginal in tourist flows. The Himalayas have long been a popular destination among Japanese and

South Koreans, and recently, among the Chinese and Indians as well. However, Asian tourists and domestic tourists in particular prefer hills to high snowy peaks. The mountain destinations they frequent *en masse* are often located in areas with low frequentation and are generally unknown to international tourists. Lucie Dejouhanet's contribution about the Ghats and Evelyne Gauché's article about Guizhou Province in China provides evidence with regard to this. Characterised by their coolness compared to the surrounding plains, the hills covered with forests populated with wild animals and ethnic minorities appear as particularly exotic destinations for these domestic tourists from large urban regions or the densely populated lowlands. While their mountain practices are largely similar to those of Western tourists (discovering and contemplating the landscape, taking walks and breathing 'fresh air'), their tourism is nevertheless related to other genealogies and filiations –pilgrimage, artist journeys– and prefers landscapes such as forests and waterfalls to the high snowy mountains (Sacareau, Taunay, Peyvel, 2015; Wang, 2015).

- 7 Although European mountains have largely lost their religious significance, the mountains of Asia have maintained a sacred dimension within those societies, which partly explains their attractiveness as a tourist destination. This is the case of the Himalayan peaks where Buddhist and Hindu pantheons can be found, as well as the five sacred mountains of China, which are much lower. With their Karst peaks, these sacred mountains covered with trees and shrouded in mist, represent the epitome of the mountain landscape in the Chinese imaginary (Berque, 1995), and are highly frequented by domestic tourists (Wang, 2015). Temples of numerous religious shrines, the Asian mountains are also important places of pilgrimage for Hindus, Buddhists and Taoists, where religious practice is increasingly associated with tourist practices. However, South East Asian forest mountains where many ethnic minorities can be found are considered by the ethnic majorities from the plains as peripheral, wild and relatively repulsive spaces. Associated with loneliness and melancholy in collective representations, they are also places of refuge and retreat from the world's turmoil for hermits, monks and poets. They are also places where city dwellers rejuvenate themselves (Peyvel, 2009).

The construction of an imaginary of high altitude in colonial times

- 8 The contemporary tourist imaginary of Asian mountains cannot be dissociated from the colonial context in which they were discovered. Indeed, it was in the 19th century that mountain tourism shifted from the Alps and the Pyrenees to mountains located outside these territories and which Europeans gradually conquered. The curiosity of scientists and mountaineers, driven by the strategic and colonial interests of the military, thus went to the Himalayan highlands, which were still *Terra Incognita*. The first reconnaissance expeditions were not only met with the remoteness of the mountain range and the harsh, high-altitude climate, but also with hostility and a closed policy regarding Himalayan kingdoms. The image of the Himalayan mountain range was that of a secret and inaccessible bastion, populated by people with strange ways, temples of religious shrines where hermits, yogis and Buddhist monks meditated, and where adventurers, mystics and orientalists sought to unravel its mysteries. Their narratives, descriptions of shamanic and tantric rituals and the photographs they brought back from their travels fed the imaginary of their contemporaries and the desire to visit these high

lands associated with spirituality and mysticism (Sacareau, 2014). In the first half of the 20th century, taking advantage of the logistical and financial support of the military and scientific expeditions, European mountaineers also played a major role in this discovery. They helped create the tourist imaginary of Asian highlands by providing an image made heroic by the use of the figure of danger, conquest and the ability to be able to surpass oneself (see Etienne Jacquemet's contribution). They also made the Sherpa, i.e., the mountain people of Tibetan origin who had enabled their access to this mountain range, enter into the Western imaginary.

- 9 Alongside the exploration and conquest of major peaks, European colonisation was at the origin of the development of the first tourist attractions in the low tropical mountain range located in peripheral colonial empires under construction. The hill stations built by the British at approximately 2000 m, in the foothills of the Himalayas or in the Western Ghats, for strategic and health reasons, were the first to put these mountains in contact with tourism. Once the colonial empires were secured, these elevated sanatoriums coupled with military cantonments became places of leisure for settlers (Kennedy, 1996). Tourism in the colonial era then drew on an imaginary of 'fresh air' that healed and nature that had a healing power, comparable to that which prevailed in European tourist resorts. It reconstructed in the tropics, but in a temperate climate, a green landscape, a "home away from home" (ibid.), which allowed the settlers to reduce the otherness of the colonised territories. It is worth noting that today, this European-style landscape no longer makes sense for Western tourists seeking tropical and exotic destinations. In contrast, this landscape largely differs from the one the domestic tourists who frequent these former colonial stations *en masse* are accustomed to in their everyday lives and are a convenient substitute for a distant and costly trip to Europe (Sacareau, 2011). In India, *Bollywood*, which willingly uses the image of a mountain covered by forests and refreshing waterfalls, dominated in the distance by snow-capped peaks and the tourist frequentation of hill stations, helps create a tourist imaginary that Indians project on to England or Switzerland.
- 10 From the pioneering phase of exploration, the Himalayan range has maintained a whiff of the forbidden and of adventure and danger, especially as access to some valleys of Tibetan culture is still restricted by the authorities through the need for permits and police controls. Tourists here are still motivated by the same imaginary: fascination for a vacuum, for hidden countries and for the forbidden. The mountains of the developed world, intensely popular, well-equipped and urbanised, have long lost their aura of mystery, and their sense of otherness has also decreased, at least for Western tourists, for whom they are essentially leisure and holiday destinations. Conversely, because of their remoteness, their difficult access and their ethnic diversity, the mountains of Asia attract the tourist practice of discovery among those seeking distinction and otherness. In a now widely explored world, and in the context of the expansion of mass tourism, they have become heterotopias, exclusive territories to which access must be earned (Goeury, 2011). In addition to this is the imaginary of unspoilt nature as was constructed in the United States through the invention of 'wilderness' and which was associated with contemporary ecological awareness. Presented as hotspots of biodiversity and climate change laboratories, many mountain ranges of the Global South have been identified as protected areas. The promotion of ecotourism is a response to tourists' yearning for an unspoilt nature. Tourism thus actively contributes to the global dissemination and media coverage at the local level of the imaginary of nature and the associated global issues.

- 11 Natural parks, however, contain more than just wild flora and fauna. They may also play the role of “ethnic conservatories”. As mountain communities have special cultural features and a way of life that seems to have escaped the developed world, the tourist market has seized this opportunity to set them up as a factor of attraction on the same level as the remarkable landscapes and monuments. “Mountain dwellers” are presented to tourists as people expected to live in harmony with nature, and who, until now, have only been approached by adventurers and ethnologists, other fascinating figures with whom tourists are invited to identify with. The lifestyles of mountain communities thus serve as the basis of an ethnic tourism (Graburn, in: Smith, 1989) based on the rendering exotic of the other, largely inherited from the colonial era (Staszak, 2008; Zytnicki & Kazdaghli, 2009).

The permanence of the colonial figure of ‘mountain dwellers’

- 12 Colonisation is part of a naturalistic attempt by European sciences to put the world in order, “giving rise to a particular type of human being appealed to for great posterity, the mountain dweller” (Debarbieux, 2010, p.34). After discovering the communities which inhabited their Empire, colonial administrators developed a highly ethnicised and hierarchical vision of the other that still persists in the contemporary representations of tourists (see the contributions by Lucie Dejouhanet and Evelyne Gauché). The ethnic and cultural diversity of colonised people was embraced by settlers from the same perspective, i.e., essentializing and discriminating. The classification of communities within the colonial empires was thus in response to a desire for political control of mountain areas, and for mountain dwellers, viewed as marginal dissidents relegated to the status of bloodthirsty, cruel and primitive savages and feeding all types of fantasies, to be subdued. However, some groups, such as the Nepalese Gurkha or the Garhwali people of India, both of whom resisted British advances in northern India, attracted the interest of colonial officers, who described them using martial qualities like courageous, obedient and combative, i.e., most apt to make good soldiers for their own troops. Once subdued, they were recruited as mercenaries, in preference to the Hindu masses from the lowlands, judged unreliable and potentially treacherous. Formerly perceived as fearsome warriors, the image of mountain dwellers took a dramatic turn. Presented as gentle and peaceful beings, they were now described as simple, honest, courageous and of moral innocence. Their community life and their lack of subservience stood in contrast to the indigenous peoples who occupied the lowlands, and their “primitiveness” meant they were closer to nature and to the forest in particular. As a result, game hunters, explorers and scientists employed them as guides in their mountain expeditions because of their knowledge of fauna and flora. Today, this prioritisation has been taken up by some mountain communities according to a process of self-exotisation. This is why Nepalese Sherpas can happily inform Westerners that their ethnic group is the best suited to live in high altitude locations and the most able to lead them to the highest mountains.
- 13 The exotic and essentialist vision of mountain dwellers of Asia is not unique to the colonising West alone. Ethnic tourism has also met with great success in India, China, and South East Asia among domestic tourists. In a world marked by the dissemination of the imaginary and of tourist practices, the vision contemporary Asian tourists have of the mountain and of mountain dwellers is not only related to the cultural representations

specific to these communities. It is also related to the filtering down of the colonial view in some communities which have acquired a dominant or even imperial position compared to minorities. For example, the Kinh (ethnic Vietnamese) majority feel superior to the Hmong, who are still referred to by the term *Moi*, i.e., wild, a name forged by French colonial administrators (Peyvel, 2009). In China, the curiosity of Han tourists for the country's ethnic minorities is also linked to a form of internal orientalism (Oakes, 1995). According to Oakes, it took shape after the imperial history of the territorial construction of China and of its relationships with the "barbarians" from the peripheral mountainous regions. The Maoist period did no more than reinforce the idea that ethnic minorities were at an inferior stage of development and must therefore benefit from communist modernity. Much like in India and Thailand, the development of tourism in the peripheral mountain ranges in China has become a means through which national territories can modernise and integrate, at little expense, poor and politically sensitive border regions. The villages of ethnic minorities in Yunnan, Guangxi and Guizhou, have been designated by Chinese authorities as tourist attractions that deserve to be visited for their special cultural characteristics (Nyri, 2006; Graburn in: Diekmann and Smith, 2015), even if this has meant fabricating authenticity to ensure these areas are consistent with the preconceived image they have been built upon (see Evelyne Gauché's contribution). As for Chinese tourists, visiting these villages with a mixture of curiosity and condescension is a means through which they can show their access to the modern world and distinguish themselves from peoples deemed to be at an inferior stage of development (Oakes, 1997; Taunay 2011). This same value judgment can be found in how the Indian caste society views the *adivasi*, still perceived as backward. Their poverty and the multiple forms of discrimination against them has placed them among scheduled castes, like the Dalits –previously known as untouchables– whom Lucie Dejouhanet analyses to identify the representations associated with these people in Indian society and among the tourists who visit their territory.

- 14 Across different periods, the mountains of Asia have thus represented a *terra incognita* to explore, ecumene limits to conquer, dissident margins to subdue, wild and backward tribes to civilise, 'ethnic conservatories' as objects of fascination and exotisation for ethnologists and, today, conservatories of biodiversity to protect. In this context, representations of mountain dwellers developed for centuries not only by the West within the framework of colonisation and the expansion of an international tourism strategy but also by the dominant social groups and the states concerned, explain in part, alongside other factors associated with actors' games and regional political contexts, the differentiated role these mountain people play in local tourist systems. This role varies according to whether or not they are stakeholders in developing tourism in their territory. A small number of these peoples have refused to be instrumentalised for tourism purposes when this does not benefit them and continue to perpetuate the earlier forms of domination they fight against, as Lucie Dejouhanet illustrates with the *adivasi* from the mountains of Kerala. Others passively accept the images projected about them in the hope that the promotion of their culture through tourism, even when it is reconstructed for tourism purposes, might allow them to preserve this culture in a context of accelerated modernisation; the Shui, studied by Evelyne Gauché, are a clear illustration of this. Indeed, the tourist imaginary can sometimes become a means to affirm, defend or renew collective identities (Debarbieux, 2012). It can also transform the status of the minorities who live in the mountains within their own society if they have the material, mental and political resources to get to grips with this imaginary, embody

it, and play around with it in order to benefit from the tourist system, like the Sherpa from Nepal. However, the younger generation of Sherpas studied by Etienne Jacquemet appears to want to shed, at least partially, this identity co-constructed through the eyes of Westerners (Adams, 1996) in order to claim their equality with foreigners by affirming that they are also integral members of a global world. Perhaps this is the price to pay to achieve a real decolonisation of the tourist gaze.

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