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## Where the Yak Became One with the Soil: Reflections on Life and Research in a Himalayan Village

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# Where the Yak Became One with the Soil: Reflections on Life and Research in a Himalayan Village

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This article explores the role that Briddim, a small village in northern Rasuwa District, Nepal, played in the intellectual development of two students who visited the region nearly three decades apart. After a brief historical survey focusing on the village's position on a trans-Himalayan trade route connecting Kathmandu with Kyirong, the authors use a personal and reflective lens to explore Briddim's changing fortunes in relation to international exchange networks and geopolitical forces. In many ways Briddim encapsulates the socioeconomic and cultural changes sweeping contemporary highland Nepal as a result of rising educational opportunities, tourism, and migration. By comparing notes from 1984 and 2013, the authors bear witness to very different circumstances in the village's changing relationship with the outside world.

**Keywords:** Nepal, ethnography, tourism, migration, culture change, development.

## Introduction: Journal Entries

I have a desire to travel into the unknown, unaccompanied. Whether by conscious effort or not I steered [trekking partner] Dan toward Langtang. I came up here alone as I had wished, and on the way got lost. Below me lies a village, my probable residence for an evening or two. Here goes!

[3 hours later] Stone houses with wooden floors; smoky, dimly lit interiors. No electricity, no toilets. People dressed in ragged clothing, their health seems poor. Goiters, goiters, goiters. A man just approached; recent scars on his forehead, one side of his jaw drooping. A bell is ringing. From where? The gomba? The sun is setting, darkness encroaches. Tonight shall be difficult. Culture shock? Damn straight. To deny it would be ludicrous. (Geoff Childs' diary, Oct. 11th, 1984).

The village described above is Briddim, a settlement of roughly 40 households populated by people who identify themselves as Tamangs, Sherpas, and Tibetans. Situated in northern Rasuwa District, Nepal, Briddim straddles a major artery connecting Kyirong—a historically important trading town in Tibet—with Kathmandu. When I [Geoff] visited in 1984 as a naïve and impressionistic student,<sup>1</sup> the village seemed like a remote backwater. Relatively speaking it was off the beaten track, a result of geopolitical developments rather than geographical location. Until the 1960s, Briddim's residents witnessed a steady flow of merchants, lamas, pilgrims, dignitaries, and an occasional

army marching in conquest or retreat. By 1984 the trail to Kyirong was a dead end due to China's usurping control over Tibet and diminishing cross-border exchange opportunities. Meanwhile, the village lay north of the well-trodden trekking route to Langtang and therefore received few foreign visitors. Thus, from the viewpoint of a novice, Briddim appeared to be a remote locale untainted by exogenous forces. However, Briddim's place in the global economy was never destined to remain static.

First day out to Briddim. The monsoon season is slowly ending and the road out here has been difficult. We spent the entire day yesterday venturing to Shyabrubesi by bus. It took us nine hours through the winding road. We had to switch buses, which forced passengers to walk a half-mile stretch through deep mud along the landslide-damaged road. I was impressed by the Nepali youth who carried a full-size refrigerator through the mud and lifted it on top of the bus, probably to be used in a guesthouse down the road for tourists.

After our 'light trek' uphill, we reach Briddim. It is different than what I remembered visiting as a tourist in 2010, but still very quiet, peaceful, and beautiful. There are electric lines running through the houses and many feature tin roofs instead of the wood and stone shingles. The new road built along the Trisuli River is not visible from up here. I found the homestay committee has broken apart and now each homestay is its own small enterprise.

They say it's because of disagreements among committee members and complaints from the tourists about beds not being long enough, smoke hurting their eyes, or snakes coming in the room from the roof.

I am excited and ready to get things started at the village. I am anticipating it will be a little awkward in the beginning, but hopefully by the end of the week the villagers will at least know who I am. (Alyssa Kaelin's diary, Sept. 12, 2013).

By the time I [Alyssa] visited in the fall of 2013, even the most fertile imagination would struggle to portray Briddim as a place lost in time. The village's fortunes were being rapidly transformed by migration and remittances, and by international tourism with a cultural twist. Nowadays a significant portion of Briddim's population travels abroad seeking income opportunities, and the village has become part of a new trekking route, the Tamang Heritage Trail, which promises to provide foreign visitors with intimate glimpses of local cultural life.

Briddim represents an initial site of ethnographic research for the two of us who, as students, visited nearly three decades apart. Having subsequently met at a conference and spent an evening discussing our impressions of the village and the changes it has undergone, we decided to write this essay on Briddim's position in Nepal's cultural and historical landscape and the salient position the village occupies in our own career trajectories.

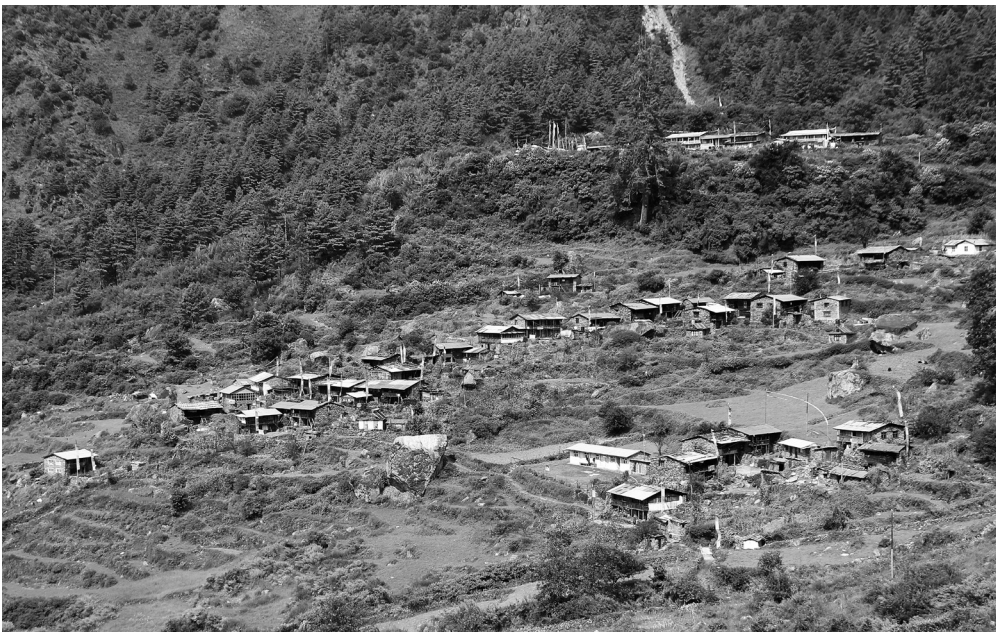


Figure 1. Briddim in 2013.

(Alyssa A. Kaelin 2013)





Figure 2. Briddim in 1984.

(Geoff Childs 1984)

### Early Apparitions

Briddim was placed on the ethnographic map in the early 1970s by Jean-Christophe Victor, at the time a novice scholar who subsequently distinguished himself as a political scientist and diplomat. In a 1975 article Victor described Briddim as, “a homogenous rural community of roughly 50 houses existing without evident external interference” and provided basic descriptive information, including notes on social organization, the subsistence strategy, and religious practices (Victor 1975). Since then Briddim was occasionally mentioned in studies of neighboring Langtang. For example, Cox points out that Langtang Tibetans often invite people from Briddim to funeral ceremonies (1989: 14). Residents of Briddim even made a modest contribution to Tibetan Studies through their preservation of Tibetan manuscripts. While working with the Nepal-German Manuscript Preservation Project, the intrepid German scholar Klaus-Dieter Mathes visited Briddim in 2000 and photographed part of the Collected Works of Chökyi Wangchuk (1775-1837), an incarnate lama (*sprul sku*) from nearby Dagkar Taso Monastery in Tibet (Mathes 2007).

Regarding the village’s origins, Briddim is mentioned in Domar Shabdrung Migyur Dorje’s (b. 1675) text regarding the hidden valley (*sbas yul*) Heavenly Gate of Half Moon Form (*gnam sgo zla gam*) located in the Langtang Valley. Migyur Dorje writes:<sup>2</sup>

Regarding the origin of the name Langtang, long ago in Briddim (*'bri bstim*) a lay patron killed an ox during a consecration feast honoring the construction of a gold and silver stupa.<sup>3</sup> That evening,

through its own extraordinary powers, the ox fled to the hidden valley. Afterwards, although the lay patron gave chase, he only found the ox’s dung. For this reason the place came to be known as Langtang (*glang 'phrang*; Ox Path).<sup>4</sup>

The Tibetan spelling of Briddim provides important clues to the origin of the village’s name: *'bri* is a female yak, *bstim* is the past tense of the verb meaning to be dissolved or absorbed into. This etymology is confirmed by a local legend recounting an event that parallels Mingyur Dorje’s account.

There was a marriage ceremony to be held in Tibet. In those days, during the ceremony they were to sacrifice one ox (*glang*) and one female yak (*'bri*), and they were discussing how to manage and kill them. The animals overheard it and so they made a plan to escape. They escaped, and a shepherd followed behind them. There is a place near Timure<sup>5</sup> where they rested for a while . . . After that they came here and the female yak vanished into the soil. So it is called Briddim.<sup>6</sup>

On the basis of the spelling and story, we interpret Briddim to mean [Place Where the] Female Yak Was Absorbed [into the Soil].

Precisely when Briddim was first settled is a question that cannot be answered with the evidence on hand. Because of its location on a major trade route connecting Tibet with Nepal, the site has been in close proximity to trans-Himalayan traffic if not actual settlement since at least the seventh century when Kathmandu’s Licchavi rulers engaged

in trade with the plateau via Kyirong (Welpton 2005: 19). Since then several famous Buddhist practitioners passed through the area. For example, Tsangnyön Heruka (1452-1507) journeyed between Kyirong and Kathmandu around 1498 (Lewis and Jamspal 1988).

Because Briddim is mentioned in the early eighteenth-century writings of Mingyur Dorje, we can presume that the village existed then. From the 1700s onward, living along a major trans-Himalayan trade artery had its downsides. Briddim's residents were no doubt affected by the expansion of the Gorkha Kingdom and subsequent wars between Nepal and Tibet in 1788-1792 and 1856. Specifically, the Gorkha ruler Prithvi Narayan Shah took Nuwakot in September of 1744, thereby laying claim to the Trusuli River Valley up to the border with Tibet (Stiller 1975: 110-111). Briddim's residents witnessed Nepal's troops marching northward into Tibet in 1788 and 1791, as well as Chinese troops repulsing them in 1792, as battles were waged just north and south of Briddim (Stiller 1975: 204-214; Shak-abpa 1984: 158-169). The village even appears on a map drawn by a high-ranking Chinese official who toured the border region, following the war, in 1795. Reference Mark 4 on his map, transcribed as Baodamu, most likely refers to Briddim (Boulnois 1989: 98).

Briddim made its appearance on British colonial maps through an Indian pundit tasked with mapping a route to Lhasa (Montgomery 1868). He passed through Briddim on several occasions in 1865 while travelling up and down the Trisuli River in hopes of gaining access to Tibet via Kyirong. Having been thwarted by the District Commissioner (*rdzong dpon*) of Kyirong, the pundit eventually crossed into Tsum, traversed to Nubri, and from there entered Tibet. Although excerpts from the pundit's diary published in Montgomery's 1868 article do not mention Briddim, the detailed map includes a village labeled Biting. Based on its location, Biting can only be Briddim.

At the time of the pundit's visit, and presumably since the upper Trisuli came under the domain of the Gorkha rulers in the 1700s, the inhabitants of the entire area were subjected to forced labor demands imposed by their overlords. Most relevant to the lives of the people of Briddim was an army post at Rasuwa—the border crossing point<sup>7</sup>—as locals were forced to supply the garrisoned soldiers. People from nearby villages complained that the soldiers made incessant demands, acting more like an occupying force than a border protector. As one man recalled,

They would come and say, "Make a trail. Make a wooden bridge." Whatever they wanted you to do, you had to do...They would beat on the doors

with their *khukuris* [traditional curved knife] and tell people to come out. They said they would cut and kill them unless they came out. Once people were out the soldiers would seal the house and not let them return until they had finished the work. (Holmberg, March, and Tamang 1999: 39)

After the 1856 conclusion of a war between Nepal and Tibet, villagers throughout the Trisuli Valley had to supply compulsory portage for 108 loads of tribute that was transported every third year from Kyirong to Kathmandu. Members of each village were responsible for moving the loads down the valley to the next village, so the people of Briddim had to carry them to Shyabrubesi. Each load weighed from 108 to 150 pounds (Holmberg, March, and Tamang 1999: 40).

In the twentieth century Briddim's residents witnessed considerable mercantile traffic as porters ferried loads of rice to Rasuwa, and then returned laden with highland products such as salt and wool. According to Tilman, who camped at Briddim in 1949, roughly 5,000 loads passed along the trail every year (1952: 31). Newari merchants living in Kyirong controlled the trans-Himalayan trade (Jest 1993).

Briddim was socially connected to Kyirong through inter-marriage and people who fled from the north. The "Earth-Dog Year [1958] Household Contract Being a Census [of Land and People] in the Nine Divisions of Kyirong District," a document that enumerated all government taxpayers in Kyirong, specifically refers to people who cross the border in order to escape the Tibetan administration's tax and labor obligations. It states,

Taking into account during the tenure of the previous District Commissioner from the Water Snake Year [1953] to the Fire Bird Year [1957], the births and deaths, leave granted for religious reasons, and exchange of people are accounted for as per requirement in the endorsement made in the household register... Similarly, arrangements of marriages, entering into religious life, and exchange of subjects are not permitted without prior permission, [this applies] especially to those ignorant ones who flee to other lands thinking that they will be more secure and have a better life. Such persons making flimsy excuses to flee from the country must be stopped with tight security and the leaders and people have taken oath that such incidents will not be allowed to occur (see Childs 2008: 281).





Figure 3. Geoff's hostess in 1984.

(Geoff Childs 1984)

Cross-border migration was a two-way path in those days. Not only did individuals flee across the border after committing crimes or failing to pay their taxes, but also several men from Kyirong married women from villages on the Nepal side of the border, including Briddim.

Physical proximity between the residents of Briddim and Kyirong narrowed considerably in the early 1960s when many Tibetans slipped into Nepal to escape oppressive Chinese policies.<sup>8</sup> Those who crossed the border with their cattle remained in villages near the border hoping to move back when the situation in Tibet improved. Families lived in bamboo huts until around 1970 when the Nepal Red Cross Society built camps for the refugees, including one with 14 houses in Briddim, which increased the village's population by about 70 individuals. However, the refugees encountered difficulties making a living. Some produced handicrafts, while others sharecropped local fields keeping half the yield while relinquishing the other half to the land's owner. Accessing pastures for their cattle was also a problem. To do so, one would present a local family with a gift of *chang* (fermented barley beverage) and then ask permission to graze in a certain area. If permission was granted, one's cattle could move to the pasture only after the locals had sufficient time to graze first. As one man jokingly put it, "we didn't have any pastureland disputes because our animals were grazing on leftovers."

I [Geoff] first entered Briddim in 1984 and made my way to the uppermost houses near the village temple where I was greeted by a young mother who offered me food and shelter. Dawa<sup>9</sup> was a wonderful hostess. At the time I had acquired a smattering of Tibetan and Nepali, which

facilitated basic communications. For ten days I ate all my meals with the family, a diet of potatoes, *tsampa* (roasted barley flour), coarse bread, and chili peppers as a condiment. I slept on their roughly hewn floorboards, doggedly defended the contents of my backpack from chickens and rats, and helped out with various household chores. When Dorje, the elder child, announced every morning, "*nyima lebsong*" ("the sun has arrived") I walked out to the fields to participate in the barley harvest. Although the family appreciated the itinerant addition to their labor force, my incompetence in performing agricultural chores drew continual snickers of derision.

I still retain vivid memories of domestic scenes in Dawa's home, sitting cross-legged beside the hearth as she prepared dinner while nursing a newborn child. The two older children, aged three and five, would start niggling each other until the daughter would break into a chant, "Dorje *kyakpa*, Dorje *kyakpa*" ("Dorje is shit, Dorje is shit"), to which the boy would retort, "*bumo shi, bumo shi*" ("die girl die"). The childish mantras would increase in volume until quashed by a sharp crack as mom's wooden ladle restored domestic harmony through a swift, unceremonious dispensation of corporal punishment. After a relative calm punctuated by sobs and sniffles, the two would recommence their daily skirmish

The residents of Briddim were poor in those days. The household's economy was almost entirely based on agro-pastoral production, with scant opportunities beyond carrying loads to earn cash income. Educational opportunities were limited, consumer goods were nearly non-existent, most still dressed in homespun clothing, and the

nearest place with electricity was a two-day walk to the south. Although Briddim seemed to be an “untainted” cultural landscape at the time, in reality it was only experiencing a relative lull between periods of higher economic activity.

### Briddim’s Re-Entry to the Global Economy

Today, while only a handful of villagers themselves emigrated directly from Kyirong, many of the villagers identified themselves as Tibetan rather than Tamang or Nepalese. During the first week of my visit to Briddim, I [Alyssa] was assisting in the preparation of garlic and chili peppers for an upcoming wedding in the village. While seated among a group of women, I noted aloud to myself how fast the women were at peeling the small cloves of garlic with their fingers. To my surprise, a young woman in her mid-twenties jokingly replied in English, “Of course we peel garlic fast. We are Tibetan!”

The woman’s comment draws attention to an ethnic distinction whereby Tibetans and Tamangs have no prohibitions against garlic or other foods that are categorized as tamasic (those that inhibit mental clarity) and thereby shunned by high caste Hindus. While her comment provides insight into the ways people navigate ethnic identities in the Himalayan border region, her command of English highlights the social and economic mobility that now characterizes places like Briddim whose residents are engaging in international labor migration and are welcoming foreign visitors through the development of a homestay industry rooted in ethnic tourism. Briddim is now featured

in many tourism websites that emphasize close encounters with ethnic others<sup>10</sup> as well as publications associated with tourism and development (e.g. Crainer 2012; Dhakal et al. 2007).

In the fall of 2013 I travelled to Briddim to explore the socioeconomic hierarchies in the village, considering any change in regard to the introduction of a new trekking route going through the village designed to promote cultural heritage and alleviate poverty.<sup>11</sup> Before 2000, Briddim was considered a semi-restricted zone because of its proximity to the Tibet border and had limited access to the tourism industry even though the neighboring Langtang valley is one of the more popular trekking destinations in the country.

Briddim is positioned on the Tamang Heritage Trail, an eight-day, culturally-focused trekking trail designed and implemented by the Tourism for Rural Poverty Alleviation Program (TRPAP).<sup>12</sup> Briddim is the only village along the trail primarily promoting homestays, as other trails have a focus on a community lodge, hot springs, and scenic viewpoints. Homestay tourism is a newly emerging model in Nepal which involves a locally run and managed operation where tourists reside in the homes of community members. This model of homestay tourism provides those with a low socioeconomic status, women in particular, greater opportunities to assume more conspicuous marketplace roles as well as make economic and social gains (Acharya and Halpenny 2013). The TRPAP supplied funding for infrastructure, tourism management training, and provided small loans to households to develop their



Figure 4. The couple who owns the house where Alyssa watched the WWE video. They have one child studying in Kathmandu, and another working in a salon in Kuwait.

(Alyssa A. Kaelin 2013)

home as a homestay. I found that within Briddim, tourism has impacted community power dynamics, agricultural production, and migratory flows significantly.

The village has undergone many changes since 1984. Within the last decade, every household gained access to electricity that provides power for lighting, televisions, radios, and stainless-steel blenders, which are quickly replacing the wooden butter churns used in making butter tea. Cell phones are also prevalent in the village. One evening sitting with two women after dinner, we decided to watch a movie. One of the women's daughters had a vast DVD collection, even some in English. As I was flipping through the variety of Chinese and Hindi titles, the women began to watch an American recording of a WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) championship fight, which we continued to watch together for the following two hours. Going into the field in a remote Himalayan location where people primarily practice subsistence agriculture, I did not expect the ladies to be so enthralled with a violent form of entertainment so familiar to my culture back home.

Meanwhile, the family that Geoff had stayed with is thriving. Dawa's husband, whose father migrated to Briddim around 1950, is considered a *thulo maanche* ("big/influential person") by fellow villagers. He is involved in politics, made money through trans-Himalayan trade, and opened the first hotel in the village, which is now run by Dawa and her daughter-in-law (who speaks fluent English). The building, which was completed near the site of their old home, is packed with amenities including a mobile and landline phone, two televisions and a DVD player, a large stereo, an electric blender, a gas stove, a large wood-burning stove to heat the dining room for tourists, and a wooden coffee table imported from Tibet. Dawa's oldest son, the one who continuously squabbled with his sister in 1984, is married and lives in the Netherlands from where he often remits money to the family. Their younger son runs another successful lodge in Langtang. Among the three daughters, one is a nun, one passed 12th grade, and the other is completing her third year in a BA program in Kathmandu. The family's economic improvement and spatial mobility encapsulate many of the broad changes occurring in Briddim today.

### Economic Change and Spatial Mobility

Briddim's location within the boundaries of the Langtang National Park buffer zone hinders the ability of villagers to maintain an agro-pastoralist lifestyle because the park's regulations are somewhat at odds with the needs of the in-

digenous people (Campbell 2005). Crop raiding by protected wildlife in the park leaves those who rely on agriculture at risk and induces people to plant less. For example, one woman said she owns 100 *ropani* of land—a significant amount in this village—but only plants two *ropani* because of low production due to animal damage.<sup>13</sup> Langurs and wild boars feast on crops with little to thwart their destructive actions. Anthropologist Ben Campbell mentions, "the punishment for killing wild animals is physically severe, and standardly involves a period of incarceration at the park headquarters, in a dark room containing all manner of terrifying confiscated traps, release from which entails bargaining against demands for fines that start in the region of 30,000 rupees—roughly an average village household's annual income" (Campbell 2013: 220-221).

Villagers attempt to divert the animals using scarecrows, stone walls, and keeping a constant watch over fields. However, their ability to protect crops is compromised by a heavy flow of out-migration to the city and abroad. Young residents of Briddim's households who in 1984 would have contributed to their household labor forces, are now highly dispersed. As one older resident explained,

Another reason [for change in agriculture] is that children go to school. In the past, children stayed in cow, goat, and yak sheds. Now only the parents are in the home, which makes it difficult to manage cattle, farming, and daily housework.<sup>14</sup>

According to my 2013 household survey, 50% of the youth are working or going to school in Kathmandu, 19% are in nearby Dhunche, 15% are abroad in another country (Australia, Canada, Dubai, France, The Netherlands, Kuwait, Malaysia, and the USA), 11% are in a monastery outside the village, and only 5% remain in Briddim. Similar to migration patterns in other border areas of Nepal (Childs et al. 2014), there is currently a striking lack of people ages five to 24 residing in Briddim.

Some outmigration is directly linked to tourism via school sponsorships from foreign visitors. From the villagers' perspective, inter-household socioeconomic variability is decreasing as a result of more children gaining access to education through outside benefactors, rather than only the children of wealthier households. Villagers see education as an opportunity for the next generation to attain higher status within the community—resulting in less of a divide between the wealthier and poorer households.

Meanwhile, the older generation holds a dichotomous expectation regarding their children's future. Most expressed



a desire for their children to have a good education and to get a good job. However, many also expressed the desire for the children to return to the village to work and carry on the traditions of the family. When commenting on contemporary social changes, Pasang, a successful homestay lodge owner, stated,

Our dress pattern and social life is similar to Tibetan. It is a mixture of Tibetan and Sherpa culture but has an influence of Tamang culture. I am a little concerned about the changing social life and culture because the present generation and my children are not interested in preserving and promoting ancient culture. They do not sing and dance and perhaps it will disappear in the future. I worry about this; it should not vanish.

Adult villagers have become increasingly mobile as well. Approximately 64 individuals (out of 168 total in the village) split their time living or working in Kathmandu and Briddim, and 28 people live abroad. The majority of villagers abroad are young adults between the ages of 18 and 30; the ratio of men to women is nearly equal. The financial ability to work abroad is not easily available to some villagers, as there is a high start-up cost depending on the destination. Therefore, destinations imply varying levels of social and economic capital. A household with one or more people working or going to school in Western countries is considered much more prestigious than those with migrants to Malaysia or the Gulf countries. Among labor migrants, men travel to Malaysia while women travel to Kuwait or the United Arab Emirates. With limited people residing in the village, a larger percentage of those who remain are interested in investing in tourism rather than laboring in the fields.

When discussing what the villagers think Briddim will be like in 30 years, responses varied. Some noted the diminishing number of residents, and the presence of houses left empty as individuals pass away or move out. A few villagers predict that the village will become deserted as children leave and the elderly pass away. Tashi, a middle-aged man who alternates his time working in the tourism industry in Kathmandu and Briddim, stated,

Big change. Maybe it will be empty [laughing]. The old people are going to die, and the young people will move to the city and not come back. They have an education, but where are they going to use their education [in Briddim]? It is a problem. After 30 to 40 years no one will live here. [In Kathmandu's

boarding schools] they do not need to learn the local language or about agriculture. I worry about the future of the village here. Nowadays there are already about five empty houses.

Other villagers are optimistic about changes in Briddim. Many expect to see more trekking lodges constructed in the near future, possibly a road running through the village, and tourism thriving in the region. Thus, according to the perceptions of Briddim's residents, the current development trajectory has positive and negative implications. On the one hand, tourism is associated with new economic opportunities. However, the brand of ethnic tourism marketed in Briddim is linked to the perpetuation of traditional culture, which is being compromised by children's unprecedented access to education and opportunities for spatial mobility. Similar to other communities in the Himalayan borderlands, a combination of depopulation and culture change is not just a future prospect but also a current reality.

### Briddim as a Site of Academic Parturition

Tonight the shit hit the fan in the village. Two guys were screaming at each other while being physically restrained from brawling. Too much *chang* [barley beer] perhaps? Tomorrow I shall endeavor to piece together what happened, an arduous task for a foreigner with a pitiful handle on the language. It is easy to idealize a place, but eventually I hope that the flaws as well as the good points shine through my haze of misunderstanding and confusion.

I know now that the life of an anthropologist is nothing but work while in the field. Complete saturation with little time to be alone. Undoubtedly the best job I could imagine. Time to make a confession: in order to conduct successful fieldwork I must get tougher, more disciplined, and more dedicated. Solitary work in an alien environment can be difficult, so I must toughen up mentally and physically. On the positive side, at least I've found what my occupation should and probably will be: cultural anthropologist. (Geoff Childs' diary, Oct. 13th 1984).

As attested by the above journal entry, my [Geoff] visit to Briddim sparked an ethnographic interest that became a passion, and then a profession. In 1984 I entered a village that had already been entangled for centuries with other places in complex social, political, and economic relationships. Yet I saw it as an unchanging society detached

from the forces of modernization and development. The delusion of entering a place untainted by external influences was the product of a romanticizing imagination, as well as Briddim's relative isolation due to geopolitical circumstances at that moment in time. Nonetheless, the misapprehension served an important purpose: it provided an impetus to pursue a career in anthropology. How many others had similar yearnings to explore the remote and unknown, only to be pleasantly surprised by a dawning realization that complexity and change is far more interesting to study than insularity and stagnation? Although I only returned to Briddim once, for a single day in 2000, the village retains a soft spot in my heart as the place that transformed my ambitions. In 2002, eighteen years after setting foot in Briddim, I became a professor of anthropology thereby fulfilling a vow jotted down by candlelight one evening in a rustic Himalayan village.

Briddim became a second home to me [Alyssa] in the Himalayas. What started as an interest in getting to know the culture on a deeper level as a tourist led to my first project as a primary researcher. Through this experience I learned the value and trials of participant observation, expanded my Tibetan and Nepali vocabulary, and formed lasting friendships. While reading back through a journal from my time in Briddim, I remembered how I felt a whirlwind of emotions, mostly of excitement, confusion, frustration, and questioned acceptance. Though I cannot say exactly how I was perceived in the village, during the beginning of my stay I was commonly regarded as a regular tourist who lingered longer than normal. A few people had the impression that I was a development worker. To some, I was simply referred to as "foreigner," to others I was a potential sponsor for their child to attend boarding school, and to a few I had the ability to voice the villagers' opinions about tourism enterprises to organizations in Kathmandu. I tried to stay neutral, knowing that my positionality as a westerner and as a woman had significance in my research. I was there to observe, collect data, and build upon previous knowledge of homestay tourism in Nepal. Social reciprocity ultimately proved to make a neutral stance nearly impossible. During the past few decades there have been scores of students and researchers passing through Briddim interviewing the residents, including Geoff. During one of my first interviews in the village, a woman, apparently out of boredom, stood up in the middle of my survey and walked out of the room. I wondered how many hours of questions she had to endure about her life, the village, and her thoughts on development, tourism, and cultural change. This forced me to rethink my position and what I had to offer residents for their time and generosity.

I came away from my fieldwork with a lot of basic knowledge about the village. I learned how people identified themselves, how they made income, their thoughts on tourism, their politics, and how they harvest various grains and vegetables. But there are some things I will never completely know. I participated in several ceremonial dances and meditations, but I have yet to fully understand the deep roots of their traditions. I will never understand how it feels to watch one's language slowly disappear. I do not know what it is like to have multiple family members working abroad for years.

With the help of the Internet and international cellular service, I still keep in contact with a few of the villagers who became my friends. Researching in Briddim was a privilege and I will be fortunate if I can return in the near future. In reflection, I see how my time there fed a growing desire to work as a social scientist in South Asia. Specifically, the aspects of village life that are connected to larger global systems continually intrigue me—whether in tourism, labor migration, or environmental studies. I recently earned my master's degree and am exploring opportunities to return to the Himalayan region as soon as I can.

### Final Thoughts

Conducting research in another society is more complex than merely acquiring information that can be disseminated through scholarly publications. A major intent—something that we often conceal behind a discourse of advancing knowledge—is to advance our own careers (Hodge 2013). Both of us benefitted through engagement with the people of one particular Himalayan village. Therefore, without engaging in the reflexive process of evaluating what we have done, and why, we circumvent the uncomfortable realization that our actions of (self) discovery are predicated on inequitable socioeconomic relations. We are grateful to the people of Briddim for hosting us, and for having the patience to provide valuable insights into their culture and lifestyle. We are also grateful to the people of Briddim for imparting valuable lessons about how to interact with other people in a respectful and dignified manner that recognizes their lived realities in a world system where they are, and have long been, deeply enmeshed.

### Postscript: And Then the Earth Shook

On April 25th, 2015, a powerful earthquake struck Nepal. Rasuwa District, where Briddim is situated, sustained some of the heaviest damage. In contrast to the changes documented above that occurred over decades and centuries, the earthquake took only seconds to alter the physical,

social, and economic landscape of the village. All but three houses in Briddim were severely damaged, some beyond repair. One woman died after being trapped inside a collapsed building. The sister of one resident's wife was working in Langtang when she was swept into oblivion by a massive avalanche along with the entire village and scores of foreign visitors.

Tsering, who was pregnant at the time, ran with her six-year-old son into a field and watched as others bounded from their crumbling houses. People congregated on open ground, weeping, praying, and filled with worry for loved ones who were away or unaccounted for. Over the course of the next few days when aftershocks of varying magnitude repeatedly shook the earth, most residents were too scared to enter their unstable houses to collect food and valuables.

Several months later, Briddim's residents continue to suffer the consequences of the natural disaster. As of August 2015 the monsoon has prevented them from commencing the rebuilding process. They continue to dwell under tarps, tents, or makeshift bamboo shelters. Frequent landslides add to their anxiety. Tsering witnessed the "mountains coming down" the other side of the valley and worries that Briddim will soon be wiped out as well. When big storms roll in, fear of landslides induces everyone to move further out into the fields.

Long-term prospects for Briddim's residents are clouded by uncertainty. Because of the recent shift from dependence on agriculture and wage labor to a focus on tourism, many people have nagging concerns about their economic prospects. Tsering, whose lodge sustained heavy damage, is confident that people will start to rebuild when the rainy season ends, but she understands that they face huge logistical challenges including the need to raise large sums of capital and seek out supplies which are now in very high demand. She said that many locals are reluctant to rebuild with stone—which did not fare well during the earthquake—and instead prefer wood which is much more expensive and difficult to obtain. Many are skeptical that the government will be much help. Meanwhile, Sonam built his lodge a few years ago, but has still not cleared the loans he took out to complete the construction. Now his economic aspirations—which are still not fully paid for—lie in ruins. Tourism is Sonam's primary income, so without a lodge his ability to make ends meet is in serious jeopardy.

Even if people like Tsering and Sonam manage to reconstruct their homes and lodges, there is no guarantee that the tourists will return, or that other economic opportunities will make living in the village attractive and viable.

Like so many survivors of Nepal's 2015 earthquakes, the residents of Briddim know that when the monsoon ends this year they will be rebuilding not only their homes, but also any hope of continuing their livelihoods in the rugged mountainous terrain that has constrained and defined their existence since time immemorial when a female yak became one with the soil.



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## Endnotes

1. SIT program, Fall 1984.
2. See Ehrhard 1997 for a thorough account of Migyur Dorje's arguments pertaining to the location of Namgo Dagam. The passage about the opening of the hidden valley is also translated by Ehrhard in that article. The translation presented here is revised from Childs' MA thesis (Indiana University, 1993).
3. Animal sacrifice is common in the region where religious practices are syncretic (see Holmberg 1989).
4. *Glang 'phrang zer ba'i khungs kyang/ sngon 'bri bstim du yon bdag gcig gi gser dngul gyi mchod rten bzhengs pa'i rab ston la glang zhig bsad gyur/ do nub glang des rang gi mngon par shes pa'i stobs kyi gsang ba'i yul 'dir bros/ de'i rjes su bdag po des bsnyegs pa las lud pa rnyed/ rgyu mtshan de la brten nas glang 'phrang du grags/* (Mingyur Dorje 1981).
5. Located upstream from Briddim, Timure is the last village on the Nepal side of the border.
6. Narrative as told by Ngawang Lama, recorded November 20, 2013 by Alyssa Kaelin.
7. For descriptions of Rasuwa in the 1940s and 1950s see Tilman and Forbes 1962. Based on visits in 2006 and 2013, Cowan (2013) provides fascinating details on the past and present of the border crossing and fort at Rasuwa.
8. The following comes from unpublished interviews I [Geoff] conducted while studying Kyirong historical demography. In 2000 I visited the four Tibetan camps in the region, including Briddim, to interview elderly residents.

9. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

10. For example, <<http://www.nepalchallenge.com/package/tamang-heritage-trails-Briddim-rasuwa-trek>>; <[http://www.volunteersnepal.com/briddim\\_village.php](http://www.volunteersnepal.com/briddim_village.php)>. Both sites accessed on 10/09/2014.

11. Anthropologist Erve Chambers predicts a shift in popularity toward tourist experiences that support environmental sustainability, heritage preservation, cultural diversity, and human equality (Chambers 2009). This shift looks not only to economic power and growth through the establishment of tourism, but also social change, and giving rise to the appeal of rural tourism through community-run programs (Higgins-Desbiolles 2006).

12. The TRPAP was developed through the collaboration of the Government of Nepal's Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation (MoCTCA), the Nepal Tourism Board (NTB), the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC), and was also jointly funded by the Department for International Development (UK), Netherlands Development Agency Nepal (SNV-N), and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). The program was primarily managed by the UNDP and was in effect from 2001 through 2006, undertaking a variety of development approaches in six districts of Nepal: Taplejung, Solukhumbu, Rasuwa, Rupandehi, Chitwan and Dolpo.

13. Ropani is a measurement of land equaling 71ft x 71ft. 1 hectare of land equals 19.6 ropani or 0.13 acres.

14. This and subsequent quotes come from interviews conducted in Briddim by Alyssa Kaelin, Alisha Lama, and Tek Bahadur Dong in December 2013.

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