

Journal of
Tourism & Adventure

**The Trans-Himalayan Livelihood: Opportunities
and Challenges in Tourism Development in Upper
Mustang, Nepal**

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Article

Received: 8 May 2023

Revised: 27 July 2023

Accepted: 5 August 2023

Abstract

The people, places, and livelihoods of the Himalayan regions in Nepal are great attractions to tourists for multiple activities. However, mountain livelihood as tourist product has been little attention. This paper aims to present the Loba livelihood of the Upper Mustang, a trans-Himalayan region of Nepal as an intangible heritage, where the Government of Nepal began high-yielding tourism in 1992. Similarly, it focuses on opportunities and challenges of tourism development in the Upper Mustang. The paper is based on anthropological fieldwork conducted for the PhD, at Tribhuvan University, Nepal. The qualitative data were collected by applying observation and interview methods. The quantitative data were collected by Annapurna Conservation Area Project, Lo-manthang, and Jomsom. The important observable tourist goods in the study area include scenic desert-like natural surroundings, sacred sites, Himalayan festivals, rituals, local organic food items, and high altitude agricultural and pastoral practices. Similarly, the visitors are amazed and attracted by these tangible as well as intangible cultural heritages of Loba. The heritage includes the “mud-walled city of Lo-manthang”, medieval monasteries, palaces, and cave dwellings. The Loba livelihood is unique and a great attraction to domestic as well as international tourists for those who have no opportunity to experience a similar livelihood elsewhere. According to the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP), Lo-manthang Unit Office records 52559 (1992-2019) foreign tourists

Keywords

Food preferences, livelihood, local organic food of Upper Mustang, spiritual practices, and Tibetan culture

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Published by: Janapriya Multiple Campus (JMC), Pokhara, Tribhuvan University, Nepal

ISSN 2645-8683

visited Upper Mustang, which is increasing by 144 tourists per year. This study contributes to the local, provincial, and federal governments to plan further development of tourism in the Himalayan region.

Introduction

Tourism is a complex business transaction and a process or set of impacts (Burns, 1999). The Himalayas are high-altitude regions extending from Pamir in the west to the valley of the Brahmaputra in the east. The Himalayan region is one of the most significant geographical structures, which greatly attracts tourists for mountaineering, trekking, spiritual, and other purposes (Nepal, 2003). Tourism study is interdisciplinary. Anthropologists study tourism from a holistic and comparative approach to every dimension of tourist culture which is looked as a local and global nexus (Kunwar, 2017). However, their study on tourism concentrates on cultural and environmental impacts, identifying touristic value items in particular cultural, natural heritage, host, and guest relations. The anthropology of tourism deals mainly with the origin and impact of tourism (Kunwar, 2017). It further supports categorizing tourist goods and seeks possibilities to develop tourism.

The scenic attraction and spiritual value of the Himalayan region in Nepal greatly attract nature lovers, spiritual practitioners, and adventure tourists. However, the people living around the mountains and Himalayas have developed a unique livelihood through adaptation to their local environment (Khattri, 2021; Khattri & Pandey, 2021; Khattri & Pandey, 2023). The natural capital of mountain regions is considered remote or inaccessible, fragile, full of diversity, specific niche of the people and place, and marginality (Khattri, 2021). Along with the rich natural capitals, mountain people's livelihood greatly interests tourists. The Loba culture of Upper Mustang is rich in tangible and intangible cultural heritages of Lo-manthang, the capital city of Lo kingdom. This place was one of the centers of the Himalayan civilization. However, tourism was introduced in this region later than in other Himalayan regions of Nepal.

The history of modern tourism in Nepal is rather short which started in the 1950s (Shakya, 2008). Shakya (2008) has classified the development of tourism in different periods. According to Shakya (2008), the beginning period was characterized as "diplomatic tourism". The tourism of the 1960s is known as "hippie tourism", 1970s "trekking tourism", 1980s "water rafting", and 1990s "wildlife and trekking" (Shakya, 2008). Since the middle of 1990s tourism became much diversified towards different types of rural tourism, eco-tourism, village tourism which was also affected by conflict in the country, by the Gorkha earthquake in 2015, and at last due to COVID 19.

History shows that the Himalayan region was considered one of the most attractive areas for adventure tourists, particularly in mountaineering/trekking, resort, culture, and pilgrimage (Shakya, 2008). In Upper Mustang, tourists attractions includes amazing semi-desert arid wide open landscapes and observe unique Himalayan Buddhist culture and livelihood of the Loba people. Tourism development in the Himalayan regions is challenging as there are

several environmental issues including high altitude sickness, forest degradation, land and water pollution, sewage, and solid waste problems (Banskota & Sharma, 1998). Other issues are inflation and dependency, commercialization of tourist objects, and erosion of social and cultural bases (Sharma, 2000). Tourists prefer to visit unexplored, virgin, and adventurous land; and people and their interesting livelihoods of Upper Mustang. These scholars have not focused on contribution of tourism on livelihood of people not to the contribution of livelihood in tourism development in Upper Mustang.

The Upper Mustang lies on the Northern side of the Mustang District, Gandaki Province of Nepal. Lo-manthang and Lo Ghekar Damodar Kunda Rural Municipalities cover Upper Mustang. Upper Mustang is called *Lo tsho dhun* meaning seven villages viz Lo-manthang, Chhohhup, Chhoser, Tsrang, Surkhang, Ghami, Chuksangsee (Figure 1) divided into thirty-nine settlement clusters (DDC Mustang, 2068 BS) having 3322 total populations with the lowest population density (1.49 per Sqkm) of Nepal (CBS, 2012). Lo-manthang is known as “mud-walled town”. This region resembles what Ojha (1986) has said, “high altitude desert where settlements stand out as oasis” (p. 2). Lo-manthang is one of the centers of the Western Tibetan civilization, where most tourist activities take place.

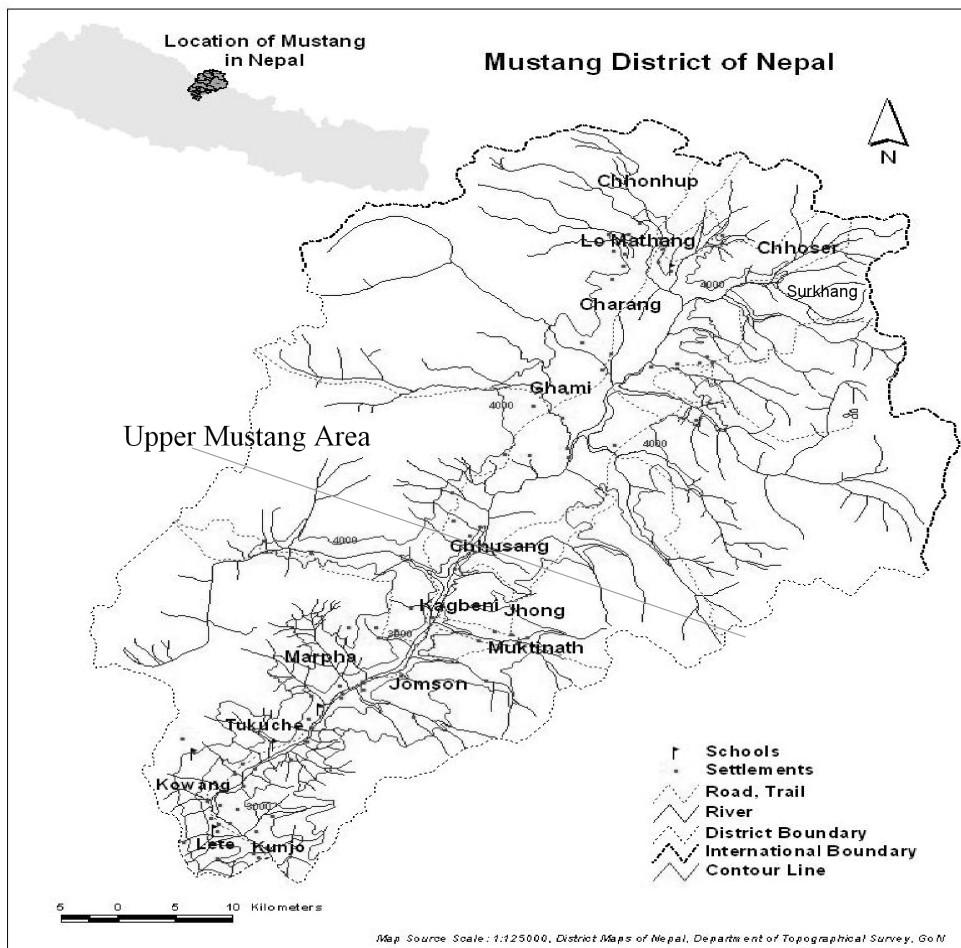
Agriculture is one of the most dominant parts of livelihood which has a long history. Archaeological investigations show that the Loba people settled in the region and cultivated crops for around 3000 years (Knorzer, 2000). Loba livelihood is also shaped by local governance. Historical studies show that the Upper Mustang was an independent state established by King Amepal in 1440 AD. Even after its annexation to modern Nepal, this region enjoyed local autonomy under the title of Raja of Mustang and Colonel of Nepali Army. Until 2008, Lo-manthang was its capital, and Jigme Palbar Bista was the last King who had official recognition of *raja* (King) from the Nepal government. The status of the *raja* ended in 2008. Jigme Palbar Bista is believed to be the 21st descendant of King Ame Pal (Dhungel, 2002), who died in 2017. The son of Jigme Palbar Bista is having cultural kingship and functioning in every aspect of Loba culture. History shows that the Loba of Upper Mustang has historical, cultural, linguistic, and ethnic relations with Western Tibetans and their culture (Fürer-Haimendorf, 1975; Dhungel, 2002). Tibetan culture includes the Tibeto Burman language, adopting Tibetan Buddhism, polyandry marriage practices, a household-based economy, settlement types, and their unique economy. Three middle-aged Gombas and one royal palace in Lo-manthang are among the most attractive tourist goods (Khattri, 2021). The Tiji is performed in May in front of the Royal Palace to attract foreign tourists. The another Tiji is performed in June in front of the Chhoday monastery in Lo-manthang at the time no foreign tourists were observed in 2023. A ritual dance of Lama is performed. The presence of tourists indicates their interest in Loba livelihood and its tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

Livelihood is defined broadly as a function of the interaction between humans and their environment (Shrestha & Devkota, 2019). To understand the relationship between livelihood

and tourism of Upper Mustang, the livelihood definition by Chambers and Conway (1992) supports, which highlights the capabilities, assets, and activities of the people that support coping with stress, and maintaining or providing sustainable livelihood of people.

Livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (stores, resources, claims, and access) and activities required for a means of living: a livelihood is sustainable which can cope with and recover from stress and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation; and which contributes net benefits to other livelihoods at the local and global levels and in the short and long term.

Figure 1: Map of Upper Mustang (credit to Rishikesh Pandey)



There is a general touristic saying among tourists that “heaven is a myth, but Upper Mustang is real”, as it attracts tourists who enjoy natural beauty, vistas and cultural uniqueness.

Tourism has brought changes to Loba’s traditional ways of life as a shift from “one configuration to another” (Spoon, 2013, p. 319). This shift is also known as livelihood diversification (Bires & Raj, 2020; Khattri, 2021). Similarly, tourism has played a vital role in the sustainable livelihood of local people using entrepreneurial innovation (Kokkranikal & Morrison, 2011). Studies have argued that tourism supports poverty reduction or alleviation and rural development to meet the sustainable development goals targeted by the UN (Iorio & Corsale, 2010; Kheiri & Nasihatkon, 2016; Lee & Jan, 2019; Saarinen & Lenao, 2014; Scheyvens & Russell, 2012; Zhao & Xia, 2020).

Regarding opportunities and challenges, there are two approaches to tourism and livelihood. One approach can be termed as economic that argues that tourism supports livelihood (Bessiere, 1998; Chin et al., 2014; Di-Clemente et al., 2020; Giampiccoli & Kalis, 2012; Iorio & Corsale, 2010; Lee, 2008; Movono et al., 2018; Spoon, 2013). Another approach sees tourism brings challenges such as pollution, external influence that has negative influence in the ways of life of locals that includes from food consumption to mentality, poses difficulties in understanding new people, disturbance to their livelihood and social and cultural life (Kheiri & Nasihatkon, 2016; Pramanik & Ingkadijaya, 2018).

Regarding environmental consequences, tourism is considered as a smokeless industry which has low ecological footprint. However, forest conservation and tourism were often criticized as being destructive to the natural, social, and cultural environment of the different regions of Nepal by introducing new lifestyles and wasteful consumption (Gurung, 1996). To avoid tourism harm, the Government of Nepal has adopted a high-valued and low-volume tourism policy to protect the fragile ecosystem and unique cultural heritage of the Upper Mustang. However, there is almost no assessment of how many foreign tourists visit without harming Loba’s natural and cultural heritage. According to the ACAP unit office in Lo-manthang, in 2014, 4146 foreign tourists visited Upper Mustang, which is the highest number of tourists recorded so far. Itinerary of traveling to Upper mustang depends upon the means of travel and the purpose of the visit of the tourist chooses. Usually, foreign tourists are permitted 10 days of trek in the region. Tourists visit during the summer (April-May) and autumn season (October-November) which is short. Those who like fly from Kathmandu-Pokhara; and Pokhara-Jomsom as the same way return the tourists can save time. Usual trekkers use seven days to reach the Upper end of Upper Mustang. These days people can travel in a day by jeep from Jomsom to Upper Mustang within five hours. Foreign tourists travelling by jeep not necessary to organize camping tour as they can stay in hotels, but there is mandatory to travel with a tour guide. The paper, thus, aims to provide a detailed description of tangible and intangible cultural heritage and highlight the role of agriculture and their festivals and rituals in tourism development in Upper Mustang. Most of the tourism related publications have focused on attraction, access, accommodation, amenities (Pandey,

2008); tourist typology (Shrestha, 2008); historical account of tourism in Nepal (Bhandari, 2008), impacts of tourism (Joshi, 2008; Baskota & Sharma, 1998) as their study. These studies lack livelihood perspective in tourism in Nepal.

Methods and data

For this anthropological study, field data were collected multiple times between 2012-2015 in different villages in Upper Mustang. To up-to-date and furnish this paper, a brief fieldwork was carried out during June 19 to 12 July, 2023. Field observation was one of the principal methods to collect the primary information, followed by adopting Key Informant Interviews (KII). Farmers, hotel operators, foreign tourists and Nepali tourists, *lamas* (the religious leaders), *amchi* (traditional healers) were interviewed. The selection of the KII was based on informants' experience and knowledge of the respective theme of the study. Additionally, local scholars and representatives of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) working in tourism promotion, livelihood diversification in Upper-Mustang were interviewed. Ten individuals were informally interviewed. This paper is the product as part of my PhD research. I have also used secondary information to evaluate facts and ideas from published scholarly journals and grey literature on related themes. The collected data and information are interpreted and have done the necessary explanations. The quantitative data were collected from the ACAP office in Lo-manthang and Jomsom. The quantitative data were analyzed by applying trend analysis and regression statistics. The LINEST statistics were used to find the rate of change in tourist flow in Upper Mustang, Nepal. Matters to deal with foreign tourists while selling tourist artifacts were prohibited to observe and ask with the curio shop owners by researchers. People hardly talked about the authenticity of tourist objects and the price they sell to foreign tourists. However, the advertisement were found mostly local products. This part of tourism is lacking in this paper.

Findings

Tourism, tourist flow and its trends in Mustang and Upper Mustang

The major attraction of Upper Mustang is the scenic natural landscape, Himalayan Buddhists culture, cave settlements, festivals, Bon, Buddhists and Hindu spiritual heritage sites. The United Nation Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has classified these attractions into natural and cultural heritage (<https://en.unesco.org/cultnatlaws>). In traditional tourism the concept of authenticity was central of attraction but these days due to modernizing the tourism and new interest of tourists the traditional concept of authenticity has become meaningless (Wang, 1999). The tourism policy of Nepal (2065) has highlighted the importance of tangible and intangible cultural heritages and their promotion through research, documentation and dissemination. Upper Mustang is a famous among tourists, but there are scanty resources that inform the livelihood of the Loba people. The following section highlights the situation of foreign tourists visiting Upper Mustang.

Upper Mustang has an attractive beautiful scenic landscape with spectacular views and vistas for tourists and research scholars. The geographical features are the natural heritage of

the Upper Mustang. Such features lie in the form of rugged colorful rocky cliffs and mountains, having various imaginary shapes like *vihara*, temples and standing in a row, as columns that make tourists amazed and feel privileged to be there. Loba's cultural aspect, which consists of history, religion, and natural resource management, is unique.

For revenue collection, foreign tourists pay 50 \$ per day for a maximum stay of 10 days in Upper Mustang. The collected revenue can be used to develop local infrastructure. Tourists think it is expensive and some cannot afford it. Most foreign tourists come from Europe. According to ACAP, Unit Lo-manthang, French, German, Swiss, American, and Italian tourists are the most dominant visitors to Upper Mustang, respectively. It is a debate that government charges tourists a lot but local people do not get benefits. In a brief conversation with a French tourist on this who said:

We, the tourists, are paying good money to visit this place. We wish that Nepali government support local people and maintain the tangible and intangible cultural heritages of local people but I see very poor condition. No renovation is carried out to maintain the tangible heritages; they are in a situation of collapse. The trekking tracks are also very bad. I like peacefully walking in this wonderful land.

ACAP is responsible for conserving natural and cultural heritage with the participation of the local communities. Only a few Gombas in Lo-manthang are being renovated.

The geographical features are the natural heritage of the Upper Mustang. The dry climate, and low oxygen level are challenging to the tourists. Many tourists take helicopter flights to avoid hypoxia during the Tiji. A short conversation with an American Tourist, who took a helicopter flight, said:

The Tiji had already begun. I really liked participating in the ritual, and I had a very short time for trekking. I feared I might get hypoxia and could not attend the ceremony.

Upper Mustang is regarded as a holy land by Hindu and Buddhist pilgrimage people. Several sacred or pilgrimage sites are located in this region. This area is considered sacred, and therefore great nobles, priests, monks, kings, warriors, and scholars visited and made it popular as a pilgrimage center. The Hindus called this region *Himabatkhand*, where most sacred places lie. It is the region where Kaligandaki originated and the most sacred *Salagrams* are found. *Salagram* is ammonite fossils considered one of the forms of the incarnation of the Hindu God, Vishnu. Damodar Kunda area is the land of *Salagram*. Damodar Kunda, Kagbeni, and Muktinath are worldwide known Hindu and Buddhist religious sites where Buddhists and Hindus visit to take a sacred bath, offer rituals and religious items to their ancestors. Some rich Indians visit Damodar Kunda by helicopters. Nowadays, the Indian Hindu Sadhus are strictly prohibited to visit single individual as local administration faced challenges due to the frequent death of unidentified persons.

There are several monasteries and Gombas which are older than Buddhist monasteries in Tibet. Guru Padmashambhava built the first Ninmapa monastery in the Marang village of Upper Mustang before he built the Samya monastery in Tibet. The footprint and deeds of Guru Padmashambhava or Rimpoche are considered sacred. Many pilgrimage tourists like to follow the footprints of Guru Rinpoche. There are several folklore related to Guru Padmashambhava. Several Gombas are interesting places for spiritual value, arts, and architectural style. This region is also valuable for those interested in the Sakyapa and Ninmapa sect of Tibetan Buddhism. There are several *Chhortens* and Manis. Pilgrimage tourists from Dolpa, the neighboring district, also pay a pilgrimage visit to different Gombas in Mustang, including Chonsi cave near Sayanboche. The Dolpo people visit Mustang on foot, during summer via Jomsom.

This land is the best destination for adventure tourists, even for mountain bicycling. Pilgrimage tourists are a big number in this region. The region attracts both Buddhists and Hindu pilgrimage. Hotel operators prefer foreign tourists as they pay more money with few complains and their behavior is more gentle and peaceful. Important religious sites to visit by pilgrimage tourists are Muktinath, Kagbeni, Damodar Kunda, Chonsi cave, Jhong cave in Chhoser, Shelker cave museum, Lo Garphu monastery, Lo Niphu monastery, Chenpa Kanchholing cave, Ghar Gomba, Chhode Gomba, Thubchen Gomba, and Jhyampa Gomba, Ghamimani wall, the mud wall around the settlements, palaces of Charang, Lo-manthang, and Thinger, which are also touristic attractions. Other most attractive monumental religious sites and natural and cultural heritage are located in Upper Mustang. The majority of attraction lies in the Lo-manthang. The Buddhist sacred areas are associated with myths and mythology of the visit of Guru Rinpoche and other learned Lamas. To study prehistoric cave settlement and the practice of sky burial are interesting subjects for various scholars. The walled town of Lo-manthang, ancient Gombas, palaces, *Chhortens*, *mani*, *dharmo*, and many Buddhist rich cultural heritage of Upper Mustang are also interesting to the tourists. Fraternal polyandry, which still exists among the senior citizen, Tibetan Buddhism, air burial practices followed by Lobas are exotic cultures for many foreign tourists. But this tourist region was closed until 1992 due to political reasons. This region opened for tourists as a controlled and high-yielding tourism only in 1992, whereas Nepal became a popular destination for western tourists in 1960 (Nepal, 2000). The dominant international tourists come from France, the USA, Germany, and Russia. To highlight the importance of cultural heritage as a touristic attraction of Upper Mustang, Lo-manthang has been described by Shackley (1994). Shackley (1994) writes Lo is important region because it is one of the last remnants of untouched Tibetan art, architecture, religion, and culture. The Loba are Buddhists, and the architecture of the area is dominated by *gombas* and *chorten* decorated with traditional grey, white and yellow stripes on red walls. Furthermore, Shackley writes that tourists watch and study wild animals, such as snow leopard, wild ass, argeli sheep, bird viewing, picturesque landscape, high altitude crop cultivation system, artistic costumes, jewelry, unique architectural gombas and Loba crafts (Shackley, 1994, p. 21).

Many tourists who visit Upper Mustang aim to experience Western Tibetan culture. Those tourists who have no opportunity to go to Tibet to experience and observe Tibetan culture can observe the Tibetan culture in Upper Mustang. The common phrases used for the natural landscape and cultural-historical aspects of the region by advertising agencies are the “mystique valley”, the “last forbidden Himalayan kingdom”, “mini Tibet of Nepal”, “mountain desert,” panoramic view of Annapurna, Nilgiri and Dhaulagiri, medieval Buddhist gombas, art, architecture, and ancient caves (Peissel, 1992).

Initially, tourism started with camping tourism, in which big tour companies mobilized the tourism activities in Upper Mustang, with a low partition of locals. At first, only 200 tourists’ visit was restricted (Shackley, 1994); later, more tourists visited the region. The local government and local people are satisfied with their increased income. In the past tourist were sheltering in own camp for the issue of the hygienic behavior of Loba (Shackley, 1994). Many tourists avoided camping tourism as it is highly costly, and the hygienic status has greatly improved among the Loba who are running well furnished hotels at present. The expansion of hotels in Lo-manthang and other areas such as Charang, Chhoser, Yara, and Ghara villages indicates the attraction of locals to tourism activities. There are two expensive hotels running in Lo-manthang. One very expensive one is operated by royal family and another by nephew of king. Total fifty-two normal hotels are serving tourists with attached with bathroom. This change has expanded the tourism business to a broad social class ranging from rich to relatively marginalized. Tourist fee has decreased to attract more tourists. The number of foreign as well as domestic tourists has increased significantly. But the visit to domestic tourists is undocumented.

Due to road construction and transportation services, air and sound pollution has increased and negatively affected to trekking tourists. Some tourists reach Lo-manthang directly using a vehicle that contributes a little to the tea house operators on the way to Lo-manthang. Foreign tourists pay double the local transportation fare compare to Nepali, which is a good source of income for the Loba Jeep owner. Unpredictable changes in weather patterns hampered tourists in 2014, and the fluctuation of rainfall and snowfall damaged the monumental buildings in Charang Palace and the Jhyampa Gomba. Proper care should be taken with the initiation of government to protect all monumental tangible heritage of Upper Mustang.

Tourism in Upper Mustang is prosperous for nature tourism or ecotourism or green, cultural, and ecological tourism. ACAP has been working in this area to promote tourism principles and conservation of local cultural and natural diversity and heritages since 1992. Tourism opened many opportunities as exposure to the outer world, mobilization of their natural and cultural heritages as resources, and opening up for foreign employment. However, it has not equally benefitted everyone. The paradox of the situation lies in Chhoser and Chhonhup, as the local people of this area are only protectors and conservationists of their cultural practices and conserve biodiversity. Still, they do not receive the benefits of

employment and income-generating opportunities directly from tourism. These areas are considered security sensitive as they are bordered to China. As per the trekking rule, foreign tourists can only visit during the day after breakfast and must return to Lo-manthang in the evening. A few houses are running hotels in Chhoser and Chonhup with the hope of income generation. The local people from Chhoser, Chonhup, and other villages do not get the benefits as the Loba of Lo-manthang. A community-level initiative of earning from tourists has begun in Chhoser, where cave settlements are found including Jhong cave. This cave five-stories and located in rocky cliff with several rooms, which was used to settle in ancient times. In Chhoser some houses and monasteries are found attached to caves. This is also interesting to those tourists who are interested in cave dwellings. The Jhong cave management committee is charging 1000 NRs for foreigners and 100 NRs for Nepali tourists as an entrance fee for visiting Jhong cave, Shelker cave museum, Lo Garphu monastery, Lo Niphu monastery, Chenpa Kanchholing cave. The collected money is used for community development.

Until recently, tourists had a well-organized tour carrying all equipment and fuel for cooking and heating and tents for sleeping. Another type of hotel service is a tea house, which is becoming popular among domestic and international tourists. The tea house trekking now constitutes 20% of the tourism activities in the Upper Mustang (ICIMOD, 2011). In tea house trekking, tourists usually live in local guest houses, which provide them with lodging and food facilities. This provides an opportunity to get employment for locals and benefits the low economic class. But the irony is that tourism is becoming mainly the business of the rich, who have a good network in Kathmandu and Pokhara or who run trekking agencies and have good advertisement mechanisms. In Upper Mustang, Lo-manthang, Tchrang, Surkhang, Ghami Dhin, Yara, and Ghara are the main places where tea house operators benefit. I stayed in a hotel Lo-manthang as a paying guest, which many tea house tourists visited; the cook who trekked with tourists cooked the food. The price of food is paid well.

Tourism also benefits the people who own mules and horses, which are rented for riding and transporting goods for tourists. These days' tourists are disturbed by motor noise and dust blowing, and they are also stimulated to take jeeps and motors.

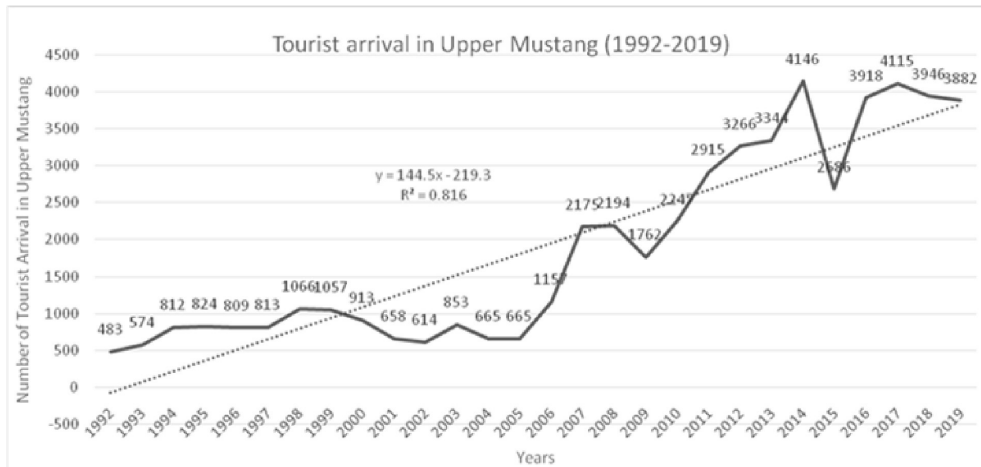
Mustang is one of the most popular destinations for tourists. Data were recorded at the ACAP, Unit office Lo-manthang. Figure 2 shows that a total 52559 number of tourists visited Upper Mustang from 1992-2019. The number of tourists is gradually increasing by 144 tourists per year. The number of tourists might become too high if the trekking permit becomes cheaper and allows longer stay in Upper Mustang.

Figure 3 shows that 715517 tourists visited Mustang from 1995-2019. Annual tourist growth is at the rate of 1702 persons, which is 11 times higher than the tourist growth rate in Upper Mustang. Of tourists who visited Mustang, only 7.08 percent visited Upper Mustang. There is a need to increase the ratio of tourists in Upper Mustang. Statistics published by the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation show that 1197191 tourists visited Nepal in

2019. Out of them, 57831 visited Mustang, constituting only 4.83 percent. From 2007-2019 Indian tourists have increased significantly high number at annual 2183.5 person, who mostly visit Muktinath Temple. In 2019, sixty percent of tourists who visited Mustang constituted Indian tourists. The seasonality of tourists is a significant factor as more than 50 percent of tourists visit during Autumn (September and October) only in Upper Mustang. Widespread information circulation of tourist assets of Upper Mustang is important to increase the volume of tourists. Another important aspect is how we should work to bring tourists of various interests throughout the year to sustain the tourism-based livelihood of people.

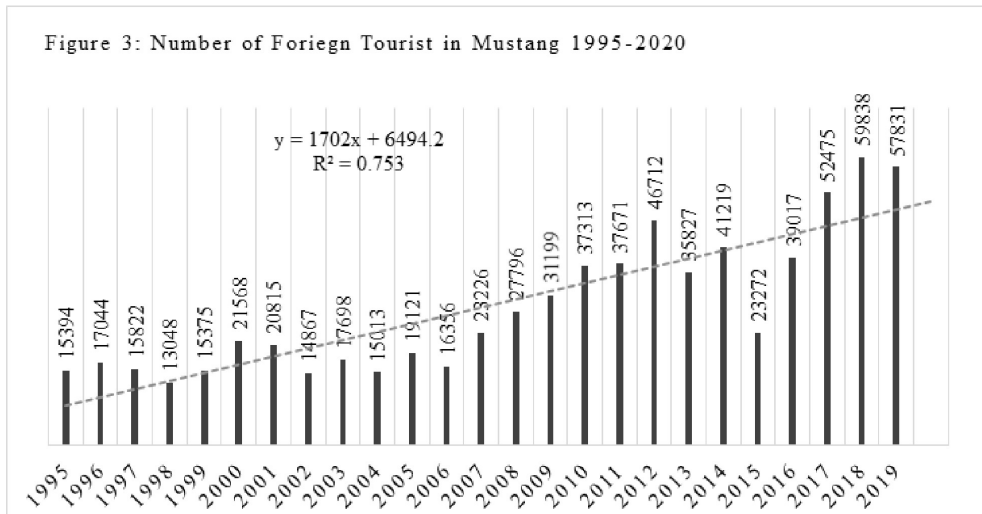
The data (2016) shows that the French tourists occupy more than 20 percent of total visiting tourists in Upper Mustang. Tourists from 60 countries have visited Upper Mustang. The German, Swiss, Americans, Italian are visiting with significant number. The Indian also categorized as foreign tourists and they need special permit to visit Upper Mustang. To travel by single Sadhus are strictly prohibited to Damodar Kunda area as they try to kill themselves for spiritual beliefs that causes legal and administrative trouble to local.

Figure 2: Tourist arrival in Upper Mustang (1992-2019)



Source: ACAP, Unit Conservation Office, Lo-manthang

Figure 3: Number of foreign tourist arrival in Mustang (1995-2020)



Source: ACAP, Unit Conservation Office, Jomsom

Since 2000, tourism in Upper Mustang has been affected by conflict in the country, the earthquake in 2015, and COVID-19. However, data shows that between 2006 and 2007, the number of tourists had doubled. Only 62 tourists visited Upper Mustang in the year 2020. The transportation system has been developed in Lower and Upper Mustang, which has greatly helped pilgrimage tourists and others. In the past, trekking and horse riding were the only means of transportation to and from the Lo region. A road is built from Jomsom, Mustang to Korala, Upper Mustang of Mustang District. This is good from the infrastructure development point of view for the local people as they can travel faster and transport their necessities comfortably, but trekking tourism is challenged by environmental pollution, especially by dust and sound pollution, and higher risk of life. The road has helped the mobility of tourists and the Loba women, children, the old and the sick. Changes in mode of transportation have opened an opportunity for local tourists and the place becomes accessible to them. They could observe the Loba culture and natural environment more conveniently. Due to the development of the modern transportation system, the Loba travel to Kathmandu for pilgrimage in Boudhhanath, Shoyambhunath, Lumbini, Vanarashi, Saranath, and many other places.

Agriculture system as a tourist good in Upper Mustang

Tourism and agriculture have close connectivity as agriculture is the cultural heritage of Lobba. Loba practice agriculture and livestock management uniquely, the most crucial niche for their living. The Loba, the host community, still follows the traditional agricultural system as heritage. Due to the high altitude and extended winter season, the Lobas follow a single

season and a few varieties of crops. The agriculture system mostly depends upon glacier-fed irrigation. The traditional agricultural practice is unique; they must follow community decisions for the crop cycle, especially the beginning of crop plantation and harvest. Due to water and labor shortages during the peak season, *Gempa* routinely manages irrigation (Chhetri, 2008). The agriculture system of Upper Mustang is also archaeologically recorded.

The oldest domesticated crop is known as barley in Upper Mustang. The archaeological study (Knorzer, 2000) indicates that the history of domesticated barley goes back 3000 years. Wheat, true millet, and pea have a history of 2400 years; mustard and at least 34 varieties of fruits have a history of 1200 years. Similarly, salt-grain trade in Upper Mustang dates back to 400 BC-100 AD. In addition to local barley, 5 non-local food items (rice, *hyacinth bean*, *Job tears*, and bamboo) were found in the archaeological sites (Knorzer, 2000). These crops are not grown even today in Upper Mustang. Loba also categorized crops based on color, growth duration and soil nutrition requirements.

The Lobas have systematically chosen certain crops as their main crops. They have categorized crops as *kar* or white (wheat and naked barley) and *nak* or black (mustard, peas, buckwheat). *Nak* crops have characteristics of short-duration growing that require less soil nutrition, whereas *kar* crops take a longer growth period and require more soil nutrition. The major crops are wheat, buckwheat, naked barley, peas, mustard, and potatoes. The households handle agricultural heritage, which is called *Dhongba* in the local language.

The *Dhongba* is one institution created by Loba to protect their resources or property, i.e., house, land, livestock, and ornaments they own and play a role in the community. The Loba community follows the system of the inheritance of parental property by the eldest son. The parental property, *Dhongba* is indivisible among their children. This system was compatible with the polyandry marriage system they had followed in the past and continue at present. The inherited land and other property are the primary basis of social-cultural participation among the Lobas also manage land as a scarce resource in the trans-Himalayan semi-desert natural environment. All rituals, maintenance and management of monasteries by offering monks and nuns, financial contributions, and labor contributions were all carried out based on membership of *Dhongba* community. So, all tourist products are outputs of the management of *Dhongba* in Upper Mustang. The households manage labor from their own members, neighbors and relatives.

Loba agriculture is labor-intensive. Repairing fields and canals, irrigating crops, carrying manure to the field, plowing, digging, sowing, weeding, harvesting, thrashing, sun drying, storing, husking, and grinding cost labor. Due to the high outmigration rate of Loba young males and females, there is an acute labor shortage during peak agricultural seasons. To meet labor requirements, the Loba people organized a *Lakti Chikula*, a labor group of farmworkers to work in rotation on their farm. The locally organized *lakti chikula* does not work on all agricultural activities. They work during the time to haul manure to the field and during

the time of crop harvest. During harvesting season, Lobas work day and night as they are given very limited time by the *Ghenba* institution (Khatttri, 2021; Khatttri & Pandey, 2023). The harvest period is usually two weeks given by *Ghenba*; to do a timely harvest, they even need to hire labor from outside their village. I observed in 2013 in Lo-manthang young male and female wage workers employed in rural villages of Baglung and Rolpa districts. These people were working in Lo-manthang as a non-agricultural laborers. They work from 8 am to 6 pm and get paid Rs. 500 plus 3-4 meals. I found that some boys of 14-15 years of age and some couples with their young children were also working in the farmland. These days, the wages of agricultural labor are rising quite high. With the labor shortage and wages rising, food production has become very expensive in Upper Mustang. While calculating cost, a Loba farmer told me that “buying food in the market is cheaper than producing food on our farmland”. It is a new challenge developing in the Upper Mustang.

Food produced from farmland and livestock has multiple values for the Loba community. In the Loba community, food is produced primarily for nutritional requirements. Food constitutes grain and livestock products, including meat, milk, butter, and dried cheese, that contain a large proportion of the dietary requirements of Loba. Yak meat is a high priority of consumption among the Lobas. Lobas have settled in high-altitude regions (above 3700 masl) facing extended winter. They need to maintain heat in their body by eating soupy and nutritious food. Loba believes that animal meat generates body heat. Similarly, they use animal dung as fuel for cooking and heating the house. These days hotels use LPG gas for cooking food. Dung fuel mainly used during the winter. The Loba use food as medicine of different varieties. Particularly *tsampa*, flour of naked barley, is widely used as medicine. The *tsampa* is consumed daily with milk and butter tea and *chhurpi* (dried cheese), which are nutritious, particularly for the sick, elderly, and children. The local food is also attracted to tourists as a local taste. Pema Bista, a hotel owner in Lo-manthang informed me that Nepali tourists are much more fond of tasting local food and drinks such as yak meat, Tibetan tea, *tsampa*, *thukpa*, items of local potatoes, *chauri* dairy products and local alcohol. Foreign tourists are interested in local potatoes, Mustang coffee, and Tora juice. Tourists are attracted to local food included in the menu in the hotels in Upper Mustang.

Agro-pastoralism is an important niche of the livelihood system in Lo-manthang. The importance of livestock is immense in the Loba community. The Loba raise animals, such as sheep, goats, yaks, horses, mules, and donkeys, in a large number. They provide high-valued nutritious food like meat, milk, yogurt, fat, butter, and cheese and clothes, such as bedding, rugs, carpets, tents, bags, straps, wool, hides, fuel and manure from dung. Livestock are the main sources of draft service and transport as well. Animals in Loba community are used as symbols with social and cultural meaning during the rituals. The link with animals as symbols of the year can be observed in the calendar. The Tibetan calendar contains 12 animals as a cycle of *lho* (year) in which a specific animal is assigned to denote separate *lho*. The Loba performs the Tiji festival in May, one of the great rituals to protect the local environment free

from evil spirits, where the animal-mask dance is also performed. Livestock is used in the tourist business. Some tourists use a horse to travel from Lo-manthang to Chhoser instead of the trek to experience horse riding, and physically weak tourists also take horse rides.

In Upper, Mustang agriculture is a single seasonal. It is always important to produce well and harvest properly. For this reason, Loba performs rituals to protect crops from weather-related disastrous events and bring rain and fertility at the beginning of cultivation is called *Sakaluka*. The duration of cultivation is short. It starts in February/March and ends in September/October. Due to the cold climate, germinating, growing, and ripping these crops takes a long time. The crops are frequently destroyed by bad weather, such as desertification, drought, floods, storms, frost, snow, and hell stone. Loba performs *Sakaluka* ritual in the first month (Feb/March) of the Tibetan calendar year before they start cultivating land for better weather and good harvest. It is a community ritual performed collectively by the households. In this ritual, the snake/serpent God is worshiped, as the Loba believes the snake god brings rain and fertility and also prevents weather-related disasters. In this ritual, women plow the field first to please the snake god. Plowing land by women as part of the ritual is a unique tradition rarely practiced in other societies, which is of great interest to tourists. However, only a few tourists visit Upper Mustang this season as the temperature remains cold.

Agro-tourism is high potential in Upper Mustang. The Loba should continue their agricultural heritage, which produces high-quality, safe food not only for themselves but also to serve all tourists at a high price that can support preserving local heritage, empower women, and strengthen their economy.

Festivals and rituals

The Tourism Policy (2065 BS) and Cultural Heritage Policy (2067 BS) of Nepal have given high emphasis on the role of tangible and intangible heritage such as fairs, festivals, rituals, traditional music, and dances as contributors not only to promote tourism but also preserving cultural heritage maintain identity. The following section describes the festivals and rituals of Upper Mustang which are the most popular among tourists.

Loshar

The Loba celebrate Sonam Loshar as the New Year (end of January or beginning of February) with great enthusiasm. Loshar is celebrated in the household with family and relatives and they also celebrate at public places such as Gomba and community buildings together. They perform rituals for their ancestors at the house, offering food and drinks. They prepare traditional foods for family members, relatives, and guests. They wear traditional costumes; eat traditionally prepared food, especially *Khapsi*. The presence of the king and queen and high-ranking Lama is important during a public celebration of Loshar. These days no formal kingship exist, but Loba gets associated with the king. The Loba celebrate Loshar wherever they are. For public celebrations, Gomba is used. Loba people build a Gomba

on the backside of Shwayambhu where Loba of Lo-tsho dun celebrates public ceremonies. During Loshar, young and old males, females, and children play cards, para, and Bangbung. Traditional singing and dancing are part of the celebration, which tourists enjoy.

Tempa Chirim/Tiji

Tempa Chirim is a community ritual performed for three days in Lo-manthang to ward off the evil deeds of an individual in the community. Tempa Chirim is also called Tiji. It is performed for peace or good for humanity and the surroundings. There are two times in which Tempa Chirim is performed, first in May and second in July. The first is publicly performed in Thubchen Gumba and later in front of the royal palace. Tiji during the end of June is performed in Chhoday monastery in Lo-manthang. To protect people who think bad is *Chhamnenan* in Loba and *Pancha khat* in Nepali. The *Chhamnenan* crime involves killing the father, mother, a wise person who does not believe in the soul of enlightened persons. Lama Phuntchok said these kinds of people go to hell called Newa Thinma, a very difficult hell. Such evil thinking has to be killed as the symbol of *Dagek* during Tiji. People believe that any evil deed that creates anxiety, worry, and danger for the people of Lo-tsho dun is warded off due to the Tempa Chirim ritual. The ritual is performed by praying to Vajrakilaya, the God who wards off evil spirits. Tempa Chirim ritual is collective as the Loba of Lo-tsho dun participate physically and material (food, wood, money, labor) contribution from each household. Monk dance is very popular. In the Tempa Chirim, Phurba Dorje Sebo is the main actor, called *cho* in the Loba language. Tempa Chirim is a ritual that attracts tourists interested in observing the ceremony. During Tiji, tourists outnumber the locals in front of the royal palace. Foreign tourists watch the ritual dance of monks and take photos. They observe the Lama ritual dance and ritual they perform to exterminate the evil spirits. Jhampa Bista, a hotel owner in Lo-manthang said that hotels are completely booked during Tiji. He faced difficulty providing them rooms, which made him frustrated. Finding it hard to get a room in a hotel, tourists set up camps. The hotels, however, provide the necessary materials. Hotel and curio shopkeepers become happy as they can earn money during Tiji. But during earthquake and COVID 19 they could not perform Tiji, and no tourists arrived.

Yartung

Yartung is a great festival performed for three days in Lo-manthang in August to say goodbye to the summer season. The celebration of Yartung is to respect the political, economic and religious power of king, queen and Lama or monk. The first-day Yartung is called Kings' Yartung, the second-day and third day Yartung are the celebration of the queen and Lama respectively. The common people participate in all celebrations. On the first day, the king wears the finest dress. A triple-crested hat is also placed on the back of an *iba rta* or deity horse, which is saddled but not ridden. His close assistants, platoons of soldiers dressed in their finery, parade on horseback behind the king. Then the king takes a special seat. The common people's interests are horse racing and archery competitions held during

the Yartung. Horse racing competition is highly related to the livelihood of the local people and the art of war. After archery competition and horse racing among different *tole* (cluster of settlement) they go for the feast with the king and queen. They celebrate by sharing tea, *chang* (naked barley beer), butter, cheese, cakes, and meats. A bell is sounded three times to indicate the beginning of the ceremony. At that time, people from different tents come to king's tent and offer *chang*, tea to the king and the king also offers something similar to all people gathered. People come together and enjoy the party. After having tea and *chang* they sing melodious songs and make *shapro dance*. On the second day of Yartung, before the King and platoon of soldiers, the queen of Lo and all women of different households put on their traditional costumes and their valuable ornaments and gather at the royal court and the celebration follows the previous day. On the third day in the morning, the patron of Lomanthang's monasteries, representing different schools of Buddhism, offer celebration drinks (*khrom chang*) to their respective lamas and monks. Loba also offer *dan* (generosity) of *khada* or ceremonial silk scarps and money to the monks and lamas. This is early tourist season in Lomanthang as the monsoon remains active in the hill region, which is risky to travel. Only some tourists visit during the Yartung festival. To highlights the touristic value of Yartung, Kunwar (1999) has done extensive study in Muktinath region of Mustang district of Nepal.

Sky Burial

Tibetan Buddhism places a strong emphasis on instructions concerning death called *Rodhip*, which is inevitable (Powers, 2007). Buddhists try to achieve mindfulness of death, however, there are two kinds of death: natural and accidental. They perceive death as a natural event, but its disposal is associated with the people's class, caste, age, and other social, political positions in society (Khattri, 2021). It is the time the family of the deceased understands their social status. The disposal of the dead is also related to the health condition of the deceased as well as nature's physical features. The sky burial of Loba seems to be associated with the dry natural condition. The roles and responsibilities of relatives are recognized, honored, and observed during the death ritual. People who visit the cemetery are responsible for carrying dead bodies and chopping corpses into pieces to feed the vultures.

The Loba practiced four types of burials. If the dead are buried in the cemetery, it is called *Phumbhu salathov*. If the dead are cremated, it is called *Phumbhu melathov*. If the dead body is thrown into the water, it is called *Phambu chhulasalathov*. If the dead body is chopped into pieces and fed to vultures, it is called *Phumbhu jyalathov*. However, a small piece of the flesh should be burnt as required. The sky burial is a common practice among Loba of Lomanthang. Many tourists are attracted to these practices, which are not common to many societies and cultures. This practice is followed to preserve the environment. In the cold and dry region, they lack fire wood to burn the dead body, and also, the vultures living in the area need food to survive. The belief system also exists that if the dead person's flesh reaches high mountains, such as Kailash, the dead person gets salvation.

Feasts, festivals, and rituals are the nontangible heritages that add value to tourist attractions in Upper Mustang. Among others, Tiji is very popular among foreign tourists, in which ritual dance of Lama in public place is observed with high enthusiasm.

Conclusions

The Loba feast, festivals, rituals, and agricultural practices that are interconnected with Tibetan Buddhist norms and values have played a crucial role in developing a unique culture and livelihood in the remote trans-Himalayan region of Nepal. They are interconnected to their livelihood and a great attraction to many national and international tourists. Upper Mustang is not only naturally beautiful and has a distinct scenic semi-desert type of landscape; the land itself is considered holy and several religious sites are located where many Hindus and Buddhists pilgrimage tourists prefer to visit. High trekking fees for foreign tourists and touristic infrastructure are developed, and extending more five-day stays would increase many tourists. That can contribute to enhancing the local economy, but we must be sensitive towards preserving the local environment, social and cultural practices, and the security situation of the region as well. The findings reveal that livelihood as a cultural heritage contributes to tourism and the livelihood of Loba people. On the other hand, the unique livelihood of Loba contributes to attracting more tourists. The conservation of unique cultures and livelihoods is important for advancing tourism. The local, provincial and central governments should pay attention in this regard.

Acknowledgment

This paper is based on my Ph.D. dissertation and I am highly indebted to my supervisor, Late Prof. Dr. Om Gurung, for his guidance and supervision. Similarly, I would like to acknowledge the partial support from UGC Nepal to conduct this research. I am highly grateful to Mr. Tulsi Dahal, and Mr. Santosh Sherchan, then chiefs of ACAP, Unit Lo-manthang and Jomsom. Similarly, Ram Bahadur Gurung and Bhupendra Gurung deserve special thanks for their kind support. I express my heartfelt thanks to Mr. Kanchan Mani Dixit for editing language, indicating unclear writings. Finally, I am grateful to the anonymous peer reviewer for constructive feedback in the earlier version of this paper.

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