

The politics of totemic sporting heroes and the conquest of Everest

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ABSTRACT

This article prepares the conceptual ground for understanding the sporting hero. It focuses upon the totemic logic of the sporting hero; the social, cultural and political conditions that bring the hero into being. This position is elaborated through a review of an interdisciplinary literature and a discussion of the British sporting hero. In particular, the essay focuses upon ideas and legacies of the heroic that have emerged through attempts to conquer Everest, as a heightened symbolic site for the continued generation of British imperial aspirations and heroic masculinities. It culminates with an examination of Sherpa Tenzing Norgay, who in 1953 ascended Everest, but whose case is illustrative of the powerful associations suggested by the totemic approach. However, Norgay's example is also used as a reminder of the assumed relationships and associations between the hero and society. It cautions that we balance continuities and complexities in future studies of the sporting hero, and that we remain sensitive to the constructedness of the sporting hero, experienced through history and by collectives and individuals.

KEYWORDS: sporting hero, masculinity, British imperialism, Everest, mountaineering

Introduction

Along one wall in St. Wilfrid's parish church in Mobberley, Cheshire, England, is a stained-glass window devoted to the memory of George Leigh Mallory—the Englishman who, with Sandy Irvine, made a last effort for the summit of Everest in 1924, but disappeared into the clouds, never to be seen by his comrades again. It is a colourful triptych which depicts the aforementioned in three guises: King Arthur, St. George and Sir Galahad. The images are statuesque and evoke multiple cultural meanings resonant with British efforts to conquer the mountain: the exercise of a chivalric manhood (the gentleman resplendent); a continuing narrative of prestige won in foreign lands; man's defiance in overcoming death-dealing obstacles; and adventure as source and virulent symbol of masculine and sexual power.

However, this image is not part of the cultural lexicon, sporting or otherwise. The one that truly defines Everest is a photo taken on 29 May 1953. It features a seemingly anonymous figure, dressed in protective clothing, breathing apparatus, and darkened goggles, holding aloft the flags of the United Nations, Great Britain, Nepal and India in that order. Yet this is the 5'8" Tenzing Norgay, the first humbly-born Asian to become a global icon. The image evokes wish-fulfilling fantasies and historical imaginings through which Tenzing can be read as an exemplar of Asian athleticism, embodiment of a new internationalist and peaceful world order, or corruptor of British hopes and aspirations to see their own man on top of their mountain. Some of these themes have been explored by historians who have linked the story of the conquest of Everest to British adventure traditions and emergent postcolonial identities in Nepal and India (Stewart 1995, 1997; Hansen 1997, 2000, 2001). The attention given by historians to the study of sport is welcome, for it brings to the surface people, events and processes that might have been forgotten or marginalised by others as history moves on. However, taking the past seriously also requires we consider whether we have the right conceptual tools available for historical reconstruction and interpretation. In the classic Weberian sense, we are called toward conceptual clarification in the understanding of the empirical (Weber, 1949: 90). As Hansen (1997) suggests, there is still plenty of mileage left in the interpretative and political imaginings of the conquest of Everest. This paper heeds that suggestion and takes the analysis forward, not by retracing the historical record, but using it to inform an analysis of the sporting hero, which is sensitive to the complex structures, forms and processes that lead to their existence.

Building upon a previous essay that explored the sporting hero through the lens of anthropological work on 'totemism' (see Gilchrist 2005), I embellish the model of the 'totemic sporting hero' through an interdisciplinary literature review which identifies some significant and constitutive features of heroism as a modern social phenomenon. However, as stated above, this is not conceptualisation for its own sake. The paper adopts Tomlinson's (2005: xvii) (re)assertion that we should 'theorise about' empirical and observable phenomena, and Bryant's (1994: 15) call for a grounded approach to historical social science, 'by comprehending the distinctive and essential properties of its object: human agency as mediated by the constitutive contextual frames of historical time and cultural milieu'. This can only be the case with heroism, for, as is argued below, heroes are constituted by both action and representation. This epistemological position requires us take into account the socio-cultural mechanisms (the media; entertainment industries; capitalist consumerist practices), politico-institutional arrangements (awarding of status and honour) which bring heroes into being, alongside an understanding of their cultural and ideological function, for example, the part they play in establishing hegemonic masculinities (Cubitt 2000). Examples drawn from the conquest of Everest, an event that was bound tightly to imperialist claims, national identity and postcolonial imaginings, explored in the second part of the paper, provides a rich source to analyse these elements.

Totemic sporting heroes

The relationship between the body, physical culture and national identity is at the heart of a totemic understanding of the sporting hero. Totemism is used not so much to denote the representational or memorial practices of tribal societies, but to recognise modernist cultural and political relationships that have established the body—in this case the sporting and athletic body—as a marker of identity and difference. Sport offers a strong pedigree to make this claim. As Carter (2002: 413) writes, it provides a cognitive map ‘for people to embody locality as well as to locate bodies in socially and spatially defined communities’. Individualist sports like boxing offer the clearest metaphorical expression of this relationship. The fights between the Black American Joe Louis and the (Nazi-appropriated) German Max Schmelling in the 1930s symbolised more than a pugilistic contest; they were the spectacle of struggle between two body politics, agents of ideology and defenders of national prestige (Gehrmann 1996; Hoberman 1984). As McDonald (1999) rightly posits, athletes and communities have been united through subtle organic analogies which unites masculine action through sport to political identities and ideologies, giving birth to ‘physiological patriots’.¹

The process did not start and end, however, with the coming of fascist and communist regimes and their appropriations of the athlete. The athlete has, since Ancient times, been part of the affective bonds of association between individuals which has created ‘imagined communities’. The physical performance of bodies in front of an audience, or tales of deeds recollected through stories, has allowed people to share in victory, to experience a ‘fantasy of triumphal ‘active’ citizenship’ (Skillen 1993: 355). The hero is by nature a collective reference point, providing a sense of identity, status and pride for communities, be they cities, regions, nations, supra-nations or diasporas. The totemic logic is not just restricted to ‘the nation’. As Stuart Hall comments, even in our so-called post-heroic age, heroes and heroines continue to raise an ‘unending dialogue with identity and identification’ (Hall 1996: 118).

Questions of association, belonging and loyalty are acutely felt in the age of global sport (Gilchrist 2005). Consider the recent examples of the defection of Kenyan athletes to Qatar, the purchase by the United Arab Emirates of the Bulgarian weight-lifting team, or the shift in allegiance of prominent members of New Zealand America’s Cup sailing team to Switzerland. These are all incidents that have troubled the original host communities of the athletes, demonstrating the endurance of emotional bonds of association and the primacy of the nation in organising this relationship. But this is not a one-way process. Unfortunately, analyses have tended to overlay the significance of heroes in contributing to imagined communities (see, for instance, Jackson 1998, 2004; Wong and Trumper 2004; Nalapat and Parker 2005). Their biographies are seen as key sites for the

¹ We should also remember that the strong masculine sporting body has been linked to national and racial strength, both within fascist and communist regimes, but also in liberal democracies (Hoberman 1984).

observation, interpretation and analysis of cultural change and political process at the collective level, but rarely is the role of the hero explored in articulating their own sense of identity and identification, a point to which I return to below.

The critical analysis of sporting celebrities conducted by Anglo-American sport sociologists has acknowledged the complexities generated by global sport. Giardina's (2001) essay on the tennis player Martina Hingis is a good example. In it he discusses the multiple senses of allegiance that Hingis, as a modern professional athlete must negotiate as she performs her sport on a world circuit. She is required to construct a malleable promotional persona and mediated image which appeals to different social groups, who can buy into different configurations of her identity, whilst also consuming products she is associated with. Though it illuminates some effects of globalisation for the sport star, this type of analysis is not interested in the phenomenon of the hero/ine in and of itself. Instead, it uses the sport star explicitly as part of a political project to deconstruct and challenge 'the constitutive meanings and power relations to the larger world we inhabit' (Birrell and McDonald 2003: 3). Furthermore, the analysis is problematic because it invites scholars to 'read' every public figure or event as an instance of power, leading to analyses which overplay the hero's contemporary cultural significance, prioritising the contingent at the expense of the contextual (see Rojek and Turner 2000; Andrews 2002; Thorpe 2006).

A framework is required that includes within its scope an identification of what produces cultural meanings of the heroic, an analysis of their social impacts, and an understanding of how the idea and presence of the hero feeds into other cultural, social and political processes and relations. The task at hand, therefore, is to situate the study of the sporting hero within a framework that is sensitive to the social, political and historical. This requires moving beyond studies that simply use the hero to understand other aspects of contemporary society, to recognising the importance of the heroic as a social phenomenon in its own right. Whilst this is obviously a large project, and as the political philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1997: 305) commented, 'it is east to do less badly on this subject, but not to do well', this paper makes a modest contribution by extrapolating some enduring and cross-cultural forms, functions and features of the heroic. Although some good efforts exist to provide frameworks for understanding (see Radford 2005; Tomlinson and Young 2007), the model is still underdeveloped. In response, and drawing upon an interdisciplinary literature that has discussed the hero, I set out below four aspects to the *totemic logic* of the sporting hero, which can be used as a heuristic device to identify and extract significant constitutive features of the heroic (see Gilchrist 2005).

Firstly, heroes are objects of reverence. They are endowed with a 'special allocation of imputed meaning and symbolic significance—that not only raises them above others in public esteem but makes them the object of some kind of collective emotional investment' (Cubitt 2000: 3). However, although the process of identification may be reverential, their accomplishments are culturally and historically specific; translated in specific moments through the norms, values and ideologies of the communities and societies in which they are produced (Slotkin 1985: 26-28; Dawson 1996: 146). Lawrence and Jewett

(2002: 6) have identified, for example, an American tradition of heroism that celebrates and reproduces, in written and cinematic narratives, lone and isolated defenders of communities, who intervene to restore tranquillity and rid evil. Strongly influenced by Christianity, the American idea of the hero, they claim, consistently circulates around tales of redemption and the restoration of institutions by masculine action. This differs from British traditions which celebrate both those who have bestowed glory or extended the reputation of the body politic, soldiers and statesmen like Nelson, Wellington, and Churchill (Cannadine 2003; Duffy 2006; Jenks 2000; MacKenzie 1992; Pears 1992), and fallible humans, the 'ordinary men' and 'underdogs', less monumental but nonetheless crucial to the national psyche (Rose 2004). Furthermore, although these particular qualities and virtues embodied by national heroes are enduring, they are contested and challenged by alternative heroes who retain a different appeal. As Hobsbawm (1969) reminds us, many societies uphold a strong counter-tradition of the heroic that reveres and idealises bandits, villains and vigilantes, figures like Robin Hood, Juro Janošik and Louis-Dominique Cartouche, who have challenged wealth, status, power, property and privilege.

Secondly, heroes are part of a quasi-religious social system. More anthropologically-oriented cultural commentators such as Joseph Campbell (1990), building on Jung's pioneering studies of the 'archetypal unconscious', see heroic deeds as contributing to a community's mythopoeic and dramaturgic consciousness, which lifts people out of 'ordinary' time as they come into contact with narratives of heroic deed. Max Weber (1963) similarly noted how charismatic individuals bring magic dimensions to rational Western society (see also Eliade 1971). Within and across political cultures, however rational or progressive they appear, opportunities for charismatic heroes to emerge are persistent (Gundle 1998). This is especially so through sport, which has formalised and institutionalised the conditions necessary for hero production. Sports arenas are described as 'secular cathedrals' and within these spaces the sporting hero is worshipped by adoring fans in passionate and transcendent moments full of song, warm embraces, and community spirit (Mangan and Holt 1996: 171) Heroes thus feed into senses of community and belonging through a series of ritualistic and ceremonial secular practices, which 'exalt the participants to identification with his moral and physical virtues' (MacKenzie 1990: 25).

Thirdly, our notion of what is heroic is not divinely ordained through fleeting spiritual moments but is facilitated through the transformation of action into an abstract, though intelligible, system of recognition. For Tomlinson and Young (2007) the process of 'transformation' involves 'reduction', a simplification of action into a series of easily understood motivations, and 'assimilation', where the meanings of events are coupled and filtered through existing cultural narratives. Whilst the process of mediation is of course intrinsic to the meanings attributed to the deeds of sporting heroes (see Strate 1994; Whannel 1999), we should not overlook the fact that heroic reputations are earned in particular communities of judgement (Yar 2000). Deeds that are deemed to be heroic fall within a web of human relationships, values and norms which provide the basis for understanding their significance. Reputations are created in accordance with historical exemplars and a linguistic framework to interpret the meanings of action and to attribute them

special value. This is a dual process, however. On the one hand, our shared understandings of the heroic are conditioned by a lineage of previous examples. On the other, history develops and with it our understandings of what constitutes the heroic. The constructedness of our shared understandings therefore comes to the fore, and these are determined by public debates and dialogues which unsettle our appreciation of former heroes and build a case for the inclusion of newer ones (Gilchrist 2007).

Lastly, although our notion of what counts as heroic undergoes contest and change, a functional continuity remains: heroes serve to express and idealise social difference. They are the ‘raw materials’ of nations, symbolising a community’s way of life and are actively involved in the social reproduction of its identity. Sporting heroes in particular are present in the spectacle and pageantry of the community and feature prominently in myths, emblems, song, statues, ceremonial practices, and sacred places (Mangan & Holt 1996). Informative here is the work of comparative political scientist Anthony D. Smith which has emphasised the links between a hero, community and territory in terms of a wider symbolism of ethno-nationalist politics (1999; 2004). Smith emphasises the place of heroes as anchors which affirm biological (ethnic) forms of identity and their contribution to cultural (national) senses of belonging, through the (re)telling and remembrance of their deeds and virtues. Ancestry and tradition are intrinsic features and this emerges through origin myths—ideas of how the community was established—and in myths of a ‘golden age’, where their example is necessary to the confidence and direction of the community during periods of intense social change. Both of these myths function within a broader cultural politics of nationalism and nostalgia, situating the hero into a narrative of rise and fall which is crucial to the nation’s understanding of its past, present and future.

The epistemology of the British sporting hero

By emphasising a cultural analysis of the sporting hero I seek to show how the meanings embodied are generated and constrained by particular historical practices, institutions and experiences. These have served to delimit a particular epistemology of the sporting hero. In the British case, the idea of what constitutes a sporting hero, as sports historians have shown, developed in Victorian and Edwardian society through the lived and fictional experience of Empire (see Mangan 1981; 1987). In a wonderfully evocative passage Green writes that tales of adventurous heroes were ‘collectively, the story England told itself as it went to sleep at night’ and encouraged exploration, conquest and political domination (1979: 37). For many, the popular heroes of the day were not sportsmen but other types of active men who embodied chivalrous and Christian virtue, subordinated their personal selves to the furtherance of the state, and sought prestige by journeying far and wide to confront dangerous challenges (Riffenburgh 1994). These were soldiers, sailors and explorers (and to a lesser extent missionaries) who demonstrated and upheld Britain’s moral, racial, and spiritual integrity. Figures like General Havelock, Gordon of Khartoum, Captain Scott and Lord Kitchener provided the models of emulation, suffusing the British idea and experience of heroics to military escapade and a cult of self-sacrifice (Dawson 1994; Jones 2000; MacKenzie 1992; Mangan 1995).

No more so was this expressed than in the attempts to climb Mount Everest in the 1920s. Britain has had a long association with Everest, ever since it came under the gaze of Westerners. Recorded as the world's highest mountain in 1852 under the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India under Sir George Everest, it has been firmly linked to scientific discovery, exploration and adventure. Situated on the border of Nepal and Tibet—but still within the influence of the British Raj in India—it was considered in the imperial metropolis as placed on earth for the pleasure of Britons. In 1905 the most imperial of the Viceroy's, George Curzon, expressed the conviction that it really ought to be first climbed by the British, 'the mountaineers and pioneers par excellence of the universe'. The first seven expeditions to the mountain, between 1921 and 1938, were almost symbolically and culturally British affairs. The climbing parties were largely composed of men of the upper middle classes, a veritable Gentleman's Club, fitted out with the niceties of such an institution. In 1924, for instance, the climbers softened the hardships of the uncompromising high-altitude environment by taking within them sixty tins of quail in *foie gras* and vintage Montebello champagne, together with bow-ties, umbrellas and bowler hats, which completed their image as Englishmen abroad (MacFarlane 2004).

Everest took on a symbolic importance for the British as a space that marked the range of imperial influence and as a site to realise heroic masculinity through adventure. With the carnage of the trenches in the First World War and the death of a generation of England's young men, the conquest of the mountain became paramount to the resurrection of strong associations between the body and national prestige (Bayers 2003). Images of death, dismembered bodies and putrefying corpses troubled a heroic aesthetic of the active (male) physical body, capable of venturing toward danger and returning unharmed. It upset an idealised notion of the embodied hero predicated on an ideological configuration of physicality, adventure and national prestige. The challenge posed by the war, argues Buitenhuis, caused a 'widely shared sense of loss of decency and the diminution of civilized values' in post-war Britain (1989: 179-180). The process of rehabilitation was aided by the celebration of heroes like T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) who emerged victorious and unscathed (Bourke 1999: 29; Dawson 1994), but sporting adventure also took on important functions. Mountaineering in particular offered a social space to restore moral stature and physical integrity. Virtues like courage, endurance and comradeship could be cultivated, new glories won, and the bourgeoisie could display its right to rule and ability to lead through its mastery of a physical and intellectual challenge (Bayers 2003: 2).

Unfortunately, it was not until 1975 that a Briton stood atop Everest. But this did not matter. The example of George Mallory, the English schoolmaster who attempted the ascent in 1921 and 1922 and who famously disappeared in 1924 high on the slopes of Everest with his companion Andrew Irvine, was example enough. Their deaths were important because they 'symbolically conjoined' individual and collective identity (the English male body) with an ideal of heroic masculinity (Bayers 2003: 76). The nature of their deaths, echoing the sacrifices made by other neo-imperialist British heroes, like Generals Havelock, Wolfe, Gordon and Captain Scott (see MacKenzie 1990), displayed a continuity of the finest Christian and chivalric values. Through his sacrifice, Mallory was a signal example of how other Britons should behave.

Such themes were drawn out in his mythic construction during the process of remembrance and commemoration shortly after his death. A tribute written to him by fellow climber Geoffrey Young in the periodical *Nation and Athenaeum* (5 July 1924) described him as ‘the magical and adventurous spirit of youth personified’ with a ‘flame-like vitality’. Others recognised the potency of his example for post-war British society. Captain George Finch, a participant in an earlier expedition, for instance, commented in the *Daily News* ‘such struggles keep alive that rejuvenating spirit of adventure without which any nation must decay’. A.W. Wakefield, President of the Fell and Rock Climbing Club wrote to A.R. Hinks, Secretary of the Mount Everest Committee, to tell him that ‘their heroic example will prove a source of inspiration to the coming generations of our Empire’.²

The *Times* newspaper (27 June 1924) added to this theme of fears of cultural degeneracy overcome by their moral and physical example, which I unapologetically quote at length:

They might have sat quietly at home, watching, let us say, cricket matches and other spectacles beloved of most of the young men of their generation. There are those who sneer at their sacrifice as “fun” and to suggest that they would have been better advised to indulge in safer recreations than climbing. A more perverted view of what makes life worth living could hardly be conceived. In this country especially, which owes its very existence and its vast Empire to the adventurous spirit of its sons, there should be no room for such feeble reflections.

Their example and the values they represented were enough to warrant a national memorial service at St Paul’s Cathedral in London in their honour. This had scarcely been used to celebrate the deaths of commoners, but had witnessed services devoted to the memory of imperial heroes General Gordon and Cecil Rhodes, the victims of the Boer War and First World War and the *Titanic* disaster, and to commemorate the spirit of Captain Scott, who perished in Antarctic in 1912 (Jones 2000: 109). The service was attended by monarchy, aristocracy, family and well-wishers, cementing their heroic reputations.

But Mallory’s death had other uses. He became a political icon, symbolising the marriage of a martial concept of the British hero to a new glorious national cause—the climbing of Everest (Stewart 1995: 182). The romantic associations of Mallory and Irvine’s sacrifice deepened specific national associations with Everest, in an era when other European countries deemed mountaineering as a potent source for the making of ‘physiological patriots’ (Hobusch 2003). In 1931, the reconstituted Mount Everest Committee appealed for a new effort to be made in terms that harnessed the political capital of English bodies lying near the top of the mountain. The presence of Mallory and Irvine somewhere near the summit of Everest, Sir William Goodenough, Chairman of the Committee, told the

² Letter from A.W. Wakefield to A.R. Hinks. 15 July 1924. Royal Geographical Society Everest Expedition Archives. Box 25.

Secretary of State for India, required special dispensation for a British team to climb the summit first (Stewart 1995: 182-83; Unsworth 2000: 158). Images and narratives of Mallory's heroic example were circulated by subsequent climbers and organisations like the Mount Everest Committee, to help to legitimise further projects to climb the mountain (Stewart 1995). This was a common practice for the use of British hero myths, which deployed idealised narratives of heroism to win support for further imperial enterprise (Jones 2000: 105; MacKenzie 1992; Riffenburgh 1994: 6). Heroes are not only powerful archetypes of a society's values, but their example has major instrumental power for governing elites and subsequent generations (Holt and Mangan 1996: 4).

However, there is an important point of interpretation to contend with. We should not lose sight of what Bale has recently termed the 'fractured' nature of heroism. For heroes represent qualities that are 'geographically and socially partial'; they appeal to different constituencies (Bale 2006: 236, 244). What attracts historians and other analysts to the sporting hero is the process of collective identification, the political and instrumental uses of heroes, and the essentially contested nature of the concept of the hero, which recognises the contribution of communal traditions and temporal dynamics to its understanding (Holt & Mangan 1996: 9). Although the example of Mallory was used to shape further expeditions to the Himalaya, by 1953 the picture was more complicated. Britain's cultural hold on Everest weakened as non-Britons became the first to ascend the mountain, inviting rival communities to take advantage of the capital of the ascent and to declare their own totemic heroes.

Tenzing of Everest

In an age of 'simulacra and simulation' (Baudrillard 1984: 257) and an era of visual overproduction of the celebrity, the 'triumphal' photograph of Tenzing on top of Everest retains a magical aura. It has been used as the frontispiece on books, notably on *The Ascent of Everest* (1953), the expedition account written by the leader, John Hunt, and also provided the opening and closing shots for the official film, *The Conquest of Everest*, depicting man's triumph against the odds (Webster 2005: 107-8; Hansen 2000). Though subject to various re-circulations and reproductions, the image is iconic and captures an authentic moment, 'testimony to the history which it has experienced' in the words of Walter Benjamin (2003: 521). The photograph communicates a symbolism of conquest. Tenzing stands on the North-East ridge of Everest, his right arm is held aloft in a gesture of both pleasure and victory. The pose is dynamic, as though he has just reached the top and is still in motion, ready to plant his ice axe (bearing the flags of the United Nations, Britain, Nepal and India) into the snow-covered peak: a symbol of man's triumph over nature.

The photograph has a clear and recognisable political significance and prompts us toward ideological deconstruction of the type undertaken by Roland Barthes in his description of a photo of a 'Negro' Algerian soldier, which appeared on the cover of *Paris-Match* magazine. Barthes writes:

On the cover, a young Negro in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolour [the French flag]. All this is the meaning of the picture. But, whether naively or not, I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors (1972: 116).

Similarly, Tenzing could be read as a faithful servant to British ambition. He adopts, for instance, a particularly Western notion of triumph, a scene repeated throughout British imperial history, of the raising and planting of the flag as gesturing victory and a new sphere of national or imperial influence. Likewise, the clothing he wears and equipment he carries, manufactured in Britain under a scientific investment by the British state, signals his acceptance of British leadership, planning, technological advance and enlightened rationality (Hansen 2001: 63). In the cultural analysis of Everest 1953 offered by Peter Bayers, Tenzing is 'drafted' into an enduring vision of the benevolence of Empire. His success in reaching the top with Hillary demonstrates the progress that can be achieved through acquiescence to the energising and modernist advance of the West. As such, the image is one that celebrates rather than challenges British prestige. 'Hunt and the British climbers return home with the patriotic cachet of conquering Everest and secure the purposeful history of the Empire as a moral necessity', Bayers argues (2003: 111).

The British were always well-equipped for this to occur. During the 1920s and 1930s social differences between native porters and British climbers were glossed over, through the emphasis of common qualities and virtues. The death of seven porters during the 1922 Everest expedition, for instance, was met with eulogies to their natural athleticism, courage, professionalism and preparedness to share an ethic of sacrifice (Somervell 1936: 64; *The Times*, 28 January 1924). Even the left-leaning newspaper the *Manchester Guardian* commented, 'If the relations between European and more primitive races everywhere conformed to the spirit regulating those of General Bruce [the leader of the expedition] with these sturdy hillmen, this would be a happier and safer world' (17 July 1922). Although paternalistic in manner, the relationship between Sahib and Sherpa is not a simple repetition of colonial imaginings of the Orient.³ As Cannadine (2002) reminds us in his book *Ornamentalism*, colonial hierarchies are complex and operate through subtle plays of racial and ethnic distinction alongside class-based systems of stratification based on rank and status. In this case, the emphasis on heroic qualities demonstrated by the Sherpas reveals the extension of the cultural aspects of the British hero, which is used simultaneously to celebrate efforts and to suppress social differences that would threaten the

³ Under the British Raj in South Asia the term 'Sahib' was used as a polite term to denote the white master. The Sherpa are an ethnic group originally from Tibet but which reside in the most mountainous region of Nepal, high in the Himalaya. The modern usage of the term 'Sahib-Sherpa relationship' is to depict operations of power and hierarchy between the colonialist/white man and the 'native Other'.

British ability to lay claim to the conquest of the mountain. The Sherpa is transformed by the British to embody an eminent figure of imperial success: the soldier hero. Sir Francis Younghusband, Chairman of the Mount Everest Committee during the 1924 Everest expedition, described the Sherpa as ‘singularly like a childish edition of the British soldier, many of whose virtues they share’ (1926: 156); whilst for F.S. Smythe, a leading climber of the 1930s, the Sherpa had internalised a sporting ethos. As such, they were:

[...] all hard-bitten ‘Tigers’, as tough, hardy and weather-beaten as the Old Guard of Napoleon. They were not merely porters, but genuine mountaineers and adventurers, who enjoyed a tussle with a great mountain as much as we did, and were as keen as we were to get to the top (Smythe 1930: 97, 341-2).

Problems were generated, however, by Tenzing’s presence on top of the mountain. Having reached 8595m (28,250ft) the previous year with a Swiss party, the highest recorded attempt at the time, Tenzing was arguably the greatest mountaineer of his generation. His achievements unsettled British claims to have conquered the mountain. To rectify this Hunt drew upon a range of elements, implicitly and explicitly, to highlight Tenzing’s social difference and dependence on the British. His expedition account emphasised the importance of logistics, equipment, technology, training and testing, and leadership, all elements contributed by the British (Hunt 1953; Stewart 1995: 187). Further, Hunt deployed a racialised celebration of Tenzing’s achievements, erecting a boundary between whites and the ‘Oriental native’ by claiming that ‘Tenzing [had] established himself not only as the foremost climber of his race but as a mountaineer of world standing’ (Hunt 1953: 61).⁴ Hunt also stressed the importance of teamwork and cooperation, subsuming individual glories for the good of the collective. The first passage in *The Ascent of Everest* states most certainly that the story of the conquest of Everest is ‘[...] a tale of sustained and tenacious endeavour by many, over a long period of time’. The successful climb was ‘fundamentally a matter of teamwork’, and because of the toughness of the challenge of climbing the world’s highest mountain the team ‘needed to be imbued with a sense of unity not only with the past, but also among ourselves’ (ibid.: 3, 7). Hunt’s account deploys a symbolic architecture that links the climb to a continuous narrative of British influence, triumph and heroics. The emphasis is on building on past achievement, showing what can be achieved under British/white heroic leadership, which ties the expedition specifically to established myths and memories of British heroics during a period when this narrative is disturbed (see Smith 2004: 222).

In calling for unity, however, Hunt recognises the contested nature of the climb. It was hoped the conquest would have a unifying influence that transcended national barriers. Tenzing himself expressed this sentiment in his autobiography: ‘our victory was not only for ourselves—not only for our own nations—but for all men everywhere’ (1955:

⁴ Hillary’s achievements were not deconstructed in these terms; it was accepted that he could be a world-leading mountaineer and white.

250). However, like Yuri Gagarin's voyage into space and Neil Armstrong's first footsteps on the moon, the heroism of the climbers was similarly channelled, interpreted and appropriated by distinct political communities. The decline of the British Empire and awakening of powerful nationalist forces in the region, each looking for symbols of identification and markers of difference, hastened this process (Stewart 1995; Hansen 2000; 2001). As the climbers evacuated the mountain and returned to civilization a nationalist hysteria grew. Word spread of their triumph and, as they neared Kathmandu, Tenzing was greeted by locals as a living God. Banners by the side of the road proclaimed 'Tenzing Zindabad!' ('Long live Tenzing!'), 'Hail Tenzing, star of the world!' and he was likened to Nepal's other divine hero, Buddha (Noyce 1954: 270; Unsworth 2000: 341). Tenzing was carried through the streets in a state coach decked with flowers, and sat high and exalted at the front, with Hunt and Hillary in a pit lower down behind him. All were decorated with red powder and given garlands, befitting of their status as heroes.

The Nepalese claimed Tenzing as their own. The country had undergone political upheaval during the early post-war period. The controlling Rana oligarchy was overthrown in 1951 in a 'palace revolution', supported by the Nepali Congress Party, and the monarchy, in the person of King Tribhuvan Bir Bikram Shah, was restored to power. However, the King failed to realise a stable multiparty democracy, leaving Nepal uncertain and unstable as rival political factions manoeuvred for prominence. Nepal had from 1816 been a British dependent 'buffer-state', with its affairs dominated by its relationship to India. Tenzing entered this shifting political landscape when he returned from Everest. He was a potentially unifying and powerful icon to signal the independence of the regime, but also one open to exploitation and appropriation by rival political factions.

For the people of Nepal, however, he was a revelation. He was an ordinary hero and humble man, previously a farmer and yak herder, who had done something special. In Kathmandu, a poem was written by Dhama Raj Thapa entitled 'Our Sherpa Tenzing', which was later recorded to music and sung in the streets (Douglas 2003: 207):

Tenzing, the warm heart of the cold Himalayan peak
Tenzing, the jewel of the world
Tenzing, born in the vast Himalaya
He must have quenched his thirst by the source of Sun Kosi
Must have guided Hillary through the confusing trails

The song accorded with posters that met the climbers as they made their way to Kathmandu. In one famous example, and much to his annoyance, Edmund Hillary was depicted as unconscious and being hauled to the top by Tenzing, who was vigorously waving the Nepali flag at the summit (Hillary 1976: 165) For a largely illiterate population these are important examples of the means used to translate Tenzing's heroism into an easily identifiable narrative for the population to share. That he is tied to a Nepalese ideal—the life-giving Sun Kosi—shows his assimilation to popular and intelligible local narratives (Tomlinson & Young 2007).

The popular enthusiasm for Tenzing soon descended into political infighting. Claims were made which cast doubt as to who got to the top of Everest first, Hillary or Tenzing. The problem was exacerbated by Hillary and Tenzing's refusal to fully acknowl-

edge whose first footsteps were placed directly onto the summit. This was a convention within the sport, as climbers did not really care who made it to the top first because it was a joint effort by partners on a single rope (Hansen 2000: 312). Furthermore, diplomatic relations became strained when it emerged that Tenzing would be awarded the George Medal by the British Government, the highest civilian honour for bravery, instead of a Knighthood, which had been conferred onto both Hunt and Hillary (see Hansen 2001: 64). However, the issue that really caused problems was Tenzing's nationality. There were early forebodings that this debate would flare up. A journalist for the *Daily Mail* who had been covering the ascent from the foothills of the Himalaya recorded an incident on 17 June 1953 when, as the expedition neared Kathmandu, a skirmish broke out between Indian newspaper men and photographers and Nepalese students and extremists, some of whom were on pony-back and many carrying short knives (Izzard 1954: 252). Both factions were vying to politically appropriate the story for their respective countries. Shortly after this incident John Hunt wrote to Larry Kirwan, Secretary of the Mount Everest Committee, and claimed:

[Tenzing] appears to have been 'got at' by local politicians—we are pretty sure the Communist Party is behind it—whose motives were two-fold (a) to make use of the Everest success to enhance Nepalese nationalism, particularly at the expense of India (b) to discredit the British expedition as a whole and stir up trouble between Europeans and Orientals.⁵

It emerged that Tenzing had been dragged away by a group of extreme nationalists, some with Communist connections, and made to sign a piece of paper that indicated he had climbed Everest first and that he was Nepali (Douglas 2003: 213). For the record, Tenzing grew up in Thami, in the Khumbu region of Eastern Nepal, but he had lived and worked for the previous twenty years in Darjeeling, India. By ancestry he was a Sherpa, a people who came from Tibet. He was proud of his achievement, but did not recognise the necessity of a political allegiance. In his autobiography he observed:

About nationality and politics I can only say again what I said then: some people call me Nepali, some Indian. Some of my family lives in Nepal, where I was born, but now I live in India with my wife and daughters. For me Indian and Nepali are the same. I am a Sherpa and a Nepali, but I think I am also Indian. We should all be the same—Hillary, myself, Indian, Nepali, everybody (1955: 10).

His Indian connections were exploited when the returning party flew into Delhi. He was used by the newly-independent Indian regime to signal its commitment to an inclusive national identity that could overcome stubborn sectarian barriers posed by religion, class, race and caste. As an ethnic minority (he was Buddhist and a Sherpa), the incorporation of Tenzing by the regime sent signals that it cared for people at the margins,

⁵ Letter from John Hunt to Larry Kirwan. 23 June 1953. Royal Geographical Society Everest Expedition Archives. Box 67.

extending traditional Indian practices of paternalism and protection for minority populations (Hansen 2000: 319). This was achieved, literally and figuratively, by the draping of Tenzing in the clothes of India's political leader, Pandit Nehru. When Tenzing met Nehru shortly after arriving in Delhi, he complained of his attire (he was always concerned about his material circumstances). He recalled that Nehru generously opened his wardrobe and equipped Tenzing with all the clothing he required. But Nehru stopped short of giving Tenzing the white Congress Party cap because 'that would have had political meaning, and he completely agreed with me that I should stay out of politics' (Norgay 1955: 295).

The deployment of these comments show the presence of subtle forms of resistance which have excited historians interested in developing a postcolonial account of mountaineering (Hansen 1997). In terms of the priority of this essay, which is to delimit the cultural and political relationships expressed between a hero and society through the idea of a totemic relationship, the comments provoke a movement beyond complicity toward complexity. What I mean by this is that we should acknowledge the, at times, static nature of the totemic analogy. Through it we are able to identify systems of meaning in connection with questions of power, politics, history and tradition. But these meanings are themselves interpreted, felt and acted upon by those who become heroic. Tenzing is clearly aware of his political utility and constructedness as a national hero. Sport provides powerful senses of belonging which facilitate subjective understandings and experiences of collective identity. However, and often underwritten in the study of sport is the fact that sometimes this might be unwanted, leading to anxiety for the athlete and the employment of strategies to escape, resist or oppose particular structures of power.

Conclusion

The cases above allow us to identify continuities and problems posed by norms governing systems of cultural meaning and senses of belonging. The metaphorical work done by the concept of totemism in particular captures important constitutive spiritual, communal, and narrative elements. Like the totem, sporting heroes embody a community's distinct way of being; they are markers of identity and difference and are endowed with qualities which foreground unique qualities of collectives. Each line of the carving of the totem inscribes why they are our cultural symbols; they stand solemnly in the heart of our communities as prestigious reminders of past glories, ancestry and tradition. Recognising and working through these relationships and associations is required. Further historical awareness is needed into the idea of the sporting hero and how heroes of the past, and especially from other locations (e.g. war, politics, social reform), have informed particular epistemologies and legacies which have bearing today. But the weight of this legacy need not blind us to enduring and asocial functions and features of the hero. There are complexities to contend with. In one sense, the agenda is to return to conceptions of (heroic) action which forward a duality between the construction of individual and social meaning (Arendt 1998; Skillen 1993). This may mean we return to Classical conceptualisations of the hero, but that is no bad thing. Homer's idea of the heroic man, for instance, stressed the importance of instinctual drives and personal quests for glory. Whereas Plato recognised the operation of civic bonds of association between a hero and society, con-

ditioned by the presence of a *polis*, which set constraints on the actions of the hero as they became ideal citizens and guides to the common good (see Stefanson 2004). These are still useful starting points for academic exploration of the heroic that account for personal, interpersonal and public articulations of action. Furthermore, acknowledging complexities necessitates we adopt frames of analysis capable of juggling these elements without being too reductive. Methodologically, the challenge is to adopt a critical investigation of sport that involves, as Sugden and Tomlinson (1999: 387) suggest, the identification and connection of ‘key institutional developments and critical moments of individual and collective action which underpin the area of social interaction under scrutiny and help to frame its contemporary form and suggest its legacy’—very pertinent advice for further investigation into the totemic sporting hero.

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POVZETEK

Članek vzpostavlja konceptualno podlago za razumevanje športnega junaka. Osredotoča se na totemsko logiko športnega junaka; na družbene, kulturne in politične pogoje, ki vzpostavijo junaka. Ta pozicija je obravnavana skozi pregled interdisciplinarne literature in diskusij o britanskem športnem heroju. Prispevek se še posebej osredotoča na ideje in zapuščine junaškega, ki so zrastle iz poskusov osvojitve Everesta in ki so predstavljale privilegiran kraj simbolov za nadaljnje izvajanje britanskih imperialističnih teženj in herojskih moškosti. Središčni del članka je obravnava primera Šerpe Tenzinga Norgaya, ki je leta 1953 osvojil Everest in predstavlja ilustrativen primer močnih povezav, kakršne predvideva totemski pristop. Seveda pa je primer Norgaya uporabljen tudi kot opomnik na domnevne odnose in povezave med junakom in družbo. Opozarja na to, da je v prihodnjih študijah športnega heroja potrebno uravnotežiti kontinuitete in sestavljenosti in ostati občutljiv na konstruiranost športnega heroja, vzpostavljenega skozi zgodovino med skupnostjo in posamezniki.