

Introduction: Monograph, Memoir, Confession

This book is neither an anthropological monograph in the technical sense, nor a memoir with literary pretensions, nor a picture book in the coffee-table tradition. I have tried instead to devise a multivocal format that incorporates elements of all these genres, one that will interest anthropologists, mountaineers, and trekkers to the Mt. Everest region of Nepal and development planners and others interested in the phenomenon of sudden change in this once remote, still stunningly beautiful area. Neither a traditional ethnography nor a history of the Sherpas nor a psychological portrait of them,¹ this book traces the impact on contemporary Sherpa society of modern education and mass tourism and assesses the Sherpas' views of their collective future. It is a story of many things happening in a very short time.

The account covers three periods when I lived in Solu-Khumbu, the first in 1964 when, as a member of the Himalayan Schoolhouse Expedition, I participated in building many of the facilities and institutions whose impact I returned to observe in 1974 and 1978. Final research and writing were done in Kathmandu in 1985–86, with a brief trip to fill in some photographic gaps in 1988. The total time I spent in Solu-Khumbu was a little more than a year.

I suspect I have always been an anthropologist at heart, even before I understood what the word meant. But I began studying anthropology as a graduate student at the University of Chicago (having majored in philosophy as an undergraduate) only after my return to the United States in 1965 at the conclusion of the Schoolhouse Expedition. There

is a reflexive sense, then, in which this book is an analysis of my pre-anthropological life in the Everest area, and to that extent it is a book by myself about myself. But if Geertz (1973, 346) is correct in saying that much of what passes as ethnography is merely confession, it is no novel claim to describe this book as part memoir.

In 1974, ten years after the Schoolhouse Expedition, I returned to study the impact of the elementary schools we had built in the Sherpa villages. The Sherpa villages of Solu-Khumbu are perhaps unique in Nepal in being situated near indigenous pedagogical institutions—Buddhist monasteries. In 1964 Dor Bahadur Bista, who had observed the mindless destruction of Buddhist temples in Thakkhola by educated Thakalis in the early 1960s, alerted me to the potentially destructive sociological implications of such ostensibly benign institutions as village schools (see Bista 1971). In 1964 I observed not only that the village schools and the monasteries were teaching different subjects—science, mathematics, English, and so forth as opposed to religious subjects—but also that they were doing so in unrelated languages written in different scripts—Nepali in the schools and Tibetan in the monasteries. Would the two institutions, I wondered abstractly, compete as the locus of literacy?

When I looked at the situation “on the ground” in 1974, whatever apparent impact the schools had had seemed swamped by the flood of tourists that had overrun Khumbu. The anthropologist Ralph Beals once wrote that as an effective agent of change, one road is worth a thousand schools. The same might be said for one STOL (short-take-off-and-landing) airstrip. For in 1964 we had also leveled some jungle and a few potato fields at a deservedly obscure Sherpa hamlet called Lukla to make a ten-degree slope long enough to accommodate a small single-engine aircraft. Our hardheaded intention—to provide more direct access to Khumbu so that Sir Edmund Hillary could more effectively get supplies to the hospital he intended to build in the village of Khunde—seems naive in retrospect. Neither he nor I had the remotest inkling that the airstrip would soon become a major conduit for tourists and would spark a burgeoning, radically new industry in Khumbu.

Lukla airstrip stands today as a monument to the distinction between manifest (or intended) and latent functions. Tourists cared little for the manifest function we had in mind and supplanted it with a latent function that has become the airstrip’s only function. The first Westerners to see Khumbu were the Houston-Tilman party in 1950; in 1964 only twenty outsiders visited the area, which was then a fourteen-day

walk from Banepa, sixteen miles east of Kathmandu. In 1974, however, with Kathmandu–Khumbu travel time reduced to forty minutes, about 3,500 outsiders, I was astonished to discover, visited Khumbu (by 1986 that number had almost doubled). I therefore returned in the fall of 1978 to examine in more detail what tourism had done for, or to, the Sherpas.

The problems were evident enough, but gradually it occurred to me that foreigners' worries about impending doom in Khumbu did not adequately take into account Sherpa perceptions of either their own interests or their major problems in the middle-range future. So in 1986 I returned once again to study the Sherpas' concerns about the future and the resolutions they envisioned for these problems.

The book begins where I began with Sherpas: the Himalayan Schoolhouse Expedition of 1964. Chapter 1 gives an impressionistic and idiosyncratic picture of Sherpa society as I saw it, in all my callow naïveté, in those pretourist days. It also provides some of the flavor and fervor of the nonmountaineering side of what developed into an institution in its own right: the multifaceted Hillary expedition of the 1960s and 1970s. It has no pretensions to being a "base-line study," and I leave it to contemporary visitors to compare their own experiences of Khumbu with my archival account of that vanished world.

Chapter 2 backtracks, giving a brief history of Sherpa society as it had developed by the early 1960s, and then outlines the major periods of recent change and contact with the outside world. Chapter 3 deals with the impact on Sherpa life of the schools that were built in the 1960s. Chapter 4 discusses the unintended result of the airstrip we built at Lukla: the advent of tourism. I chart its consequences for Sherpas and for tourists. Chapter 5 is an attempt to project the ethnographic future—that is, to describe the problems of the medium-range future as seen by a cross section of Sherpas. Chapter 6 briefly concludes and summarizes the discussion with an updated account of life in Khumbu today.

The photographs scattered throughout the text themselves constitute a dismembered chapter. Their purpose is to document many of the before-and-after phenomena described in the book. Some of the pictures may be pretty, but if they are, it is because the people and places of Solu-Khumbu are so visually arresting that it is difficult to take unappealing pictures of them. My aim is not to add to the already copious supply of books filled with glossy prints of Himalayan places and people. Rather, my photographs have a point: to show with an imme-

diacy that prose (my prose, at least) cannot capture how some of the substantive changes I describe look with the words torn off them.

Most of the book is based on my own research and experiences in Solu-Khumbu, especially Khumbu proper (Namche Bazaar and the villages above it), but I have borrowed freely, especially in chapter 2, from the work of other observers of the Sherpas. Chief among them are the scholarly books and articles of my friends Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, Michael Oppitz, Sherry Ortner, and Robert Paul. Individually and, even more, collectively, their work is so estimable that I should explain why yet another book is even necessary. (Not without reason has Sir Edmund Hillary described Khumbu as “the most surveyed, examined, blood-taken, anthropologically dissected area in the world” [Rowell 1980].)² Fürer-Haimendorf’s recent book *The Sherpas Transformed*, for example, covers much of the same ground that I cover here, but from a more nostalgic point of view, in which current developments compare unfavorably with the good old days of the 1950s described in his original, pioneering, ethnography *The Sherpas of Nepal*, on which all subsequent scholarship has depended. (Westerners do not have a monopoly on romanticizing the past: Sherpas consider Khumbu to have been a *beyul*, “hidden valley,” a sanctuary from the troubled outside world.) At the opposite literary pole, Ortner’s and Paul’s stimulating books (*Sherpas Through Their Rituals* and *The Tibetan Symbolic World: Psychoanalytic Explorations*, respectively) present Sherpa culture at such a remote level that few, if any, Sherpas would be able to recognize them as grounded in their own experience of life. (Ortner’s *High Religion: A Cultural and Political History of Sherpa Buddhism*, which I read only after this book was essentially finished, will provide readers hungry for knowledge of Sherpa history and religion a delicious feast.)³

On the “development” side I have waded through the many reports, surveys, and memoranda written in connection with such projects as Sagarmatha National Park, hydroelectric dams, and conservation efforts of all sorts. Running through this literature (and through the conversation of its authors) is an “expert” attitude with occasional pretensions to omniscience. A succession of visiting foreigners (Americans, New Zealanders, British, and Germans, among others, and now, increasingly, Nepalese officials) has concluded characteristically brief Khumbu visits with definitive pronouncements, delivered with unnerving aplomb, outlining solutions to problems in the area. That the advice of these experts often either perpetuates the questionable assumptions

of previous visitors or is mutually contradictory does not deter them from giving it.

The more I sifted through all this well-intentioned literature, the more I thought that it was time to hear directly from the Sherpas themselves. Faced with lacunae on both the academic and development sides, I intend here to describe change as the Sherpas see and experience it. Of course at one level such a goal is sheer illusion: this study, like all others, is only one more foreigner's attempt to penetrate the ostensibly open Khumbu world. Certainly my own analysis and judgments inform the entire book—after all, I wrote it. But I attempt throughout to let the Sherpas speak for themselves whenever possible. While investigating education, for example, I asked children to write essays, which I read to assess the attitudes and values they were forming. And as a complement to unilateral pronouncements (my own included) on the various ecological and other difficulties the area faces, I asked adult Sherpas to tell me what they thought would be the main problems they would have to face in twenty-five years. I should add that the problems inherent in studying education and the future in this way were much greater than I had anticipated; nobody really knows how to do it yet.

A final note of clarification: When I refer to the influence of tourism, I usually include in that term the phenomenon of mountaineering. Only 2 percent of Khumbu visitors are members of mountaineering expeditions, but such expeditions usually employ a disproportionately large number of Sherpas. An exception to this rule is the recent trend among climbers to dispense with Sherpas entirely and climb the mountain under their own steam. Over the years I have come to think of mountaineering and tourism as not just related but the same, the differences between them being increasingly in degree rather than in kind. Although this view will undoubtedly horrify many of my mountaineering friends (but not, I think, the Sherpas), the enormous increase in the popularity of mountaineering and of trekking in the last few years means that there is frequently no longer any useful way to distinguish them. Tourists cross high passes and climb peaks that a few years ago only a party of experienced mountaineers would have attempted. One of the foremost American climbers, Mike Covington, once told me that the only difference between the expeditions he joins and those he guides is that on the latter he is paid and on the former he is not. He predicted that it was just a matter of time before Everest would be a guided peak.

A Tradition of Change

Nepal packs more geographical and ecological diversity into fewer square miles than any other country in the world, and the people who inhabit this much-too-heavily populated land mirror that diversity. The country exhibits an unusually broad spectrum not only of geography but also of social, economic, religious, and linguistic types: from the flat-as-a-pancake rich farmland of the Tarai just above sea level along the Indian border in the south, with its full panoply of Hindu castes, its indigenous tribal groups, and its substantial Muslim minority, speaking Hindi, Urdu, Bhojpuri, and Maithili; through the terrace-laced middle hills, populated by farmers and herders ranging from Nepali-speaking high-caste Hindus—Brahmans and Chhetris—to such Mongoloid groups as Rais, Limbus, Gurungs, Magars, and Tamangs, all speaking Tibeto-Burman languages; to the high Himalayan valleys with their Buddhist, Tibetan-speaking nomads and settled farmers and traders. In the middle of all these is the Kathmandu Valley and its Newars—an ethnic universe unto itself. Nepal is, in anthropological jargon, a multiple society with plural cultures. The Sherpas who live in the high valleys in the southern shadow of Mt. Everest, in the Solu-Khumbu region of northeastern Nepal, are merely the most famous minority in a country where there is no majority.

Unlike most Nepalese, who are either Hindus by caste or tribes more or less Hinduized after centuries of prolonged contact and occasional intermarriage with Hindus, the Sherpas are unalloyed Buddhists. Indeed in religion, dress, language, kinship, marriage, and social life gen-

erally, they resemble the other people who live along either side of the five-hundred-mile northern border with Tibet. At the same time, however, the Sherpas are unique in all these dimensions, as they and outsiders readily agree.

The populations on the Nepal side of the frontier—which are culturally Tibetan but politically Nepalese—occupy about one-quarter of the total land area of Nepal, but they represent a numerically insignificant portion of the population. The Sherpas of Khumbu itself number fewer than 3,000; the total population of Nepal is more than 16 million. Another 17,000 Sherpas inhabit the area that fans south, east, and west of Khumbu, including the Sherpa strongholds of Solu and Pharak (the area below Namche Bazaar along the Dudh Koshi); they also live in Kathmandu and—a rather different strain of Sherpas—in the Helambu Valley just north of Kathmandu. Still other Sherpas—7,000 or so—live in Darjeeling, India, emigrants (or the descendants of emigrants) from Solu-Khumbu.¹

The literal meaning of the word *Sherpa* is “easterner” (the Sherpa pronunciation is Sherwa, from *shar*, “east” and *wa*, “people”), and indeed some evidence indicates that Sherpas migrated to Solu-Khumbu some 450 years ago from the eastern Tibetan province of Kham, 1,250 miles away.² No one knows why they left Kham (perhaps to escape political upheavals or religious persecution), but it is not hard to imagine why they settled in Solu-Khumbu, where the topography, altitude, and climate were ideally suited to small-scale farming and the Sherpas’ traditional pastoral nomadism.³ Best of all, in those days it was empty, or at least nearly empty, and theirs for the taking.

Khumbu refers to the high-altitude area north of the confluence of the Bhote Koshi and Imja Khola; Solu, with its subregion Pharak, constitutes the southern, low-altitude portion of the region (see the map on p. xviii). Its six or so major villages and many smaller hamlets are perched high above the banks of these rivers or, in the case of Namche Bazaar, Khumjung, and Khunde, on the elevated land between them. Namche Bazaar is a little above 11,000 feet, and the other villages are all closer to 13,000 feet. Most of Khumbu consists of high-altitude rock, ice, and snow, and less than a fifth of 1 percent of it can be farmed (Figs. 37–40), but other land is suitable for pasture, water is plentiful, and wood is—or at least would have been 450 years ago—plentiful.

In Khumbu these Sherpa newcomers eventually established a routine of transhumance—farming the fields around their sturdy permanent houses and seasonally following their yak herds—to less substantial



Figs. 37 and 38. Agriculture has always formed the backbone of the Sherpa economy. As late as the 1950s teams of four men still occasionally pulled the ploughs that tilled the fields, but now animals do the work of pulling. The earlier photograph (*top of page*) is by Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf.



Figs. 39 and 40. Other aspects of agriculture remain the same, as Khumjung women use hoes to break up clods of dirt. The peak in the lower picture is Ama Dablam. The earlier photograph (*top of page*) is by Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf.

shelters in higher pastures in summer and to lower ones in winter. In the high-altitude cold climate they could grow only bitter buckwheat, barley (but only in Dingboche, where there is adequate water), turnips, and coarse greens, relying on meat and dairy products (milk, yogurt, and cheese) from their cattle to supplement their vegetable diet. The yak and *nak* were crossed with lowland cattle and Tibetan cattle to produce the half-breed known as the *dzom* (which gives more milk than the *nak*) and its male counterpart, the *zopkio* (a more docile and tractable animal for plowing than the yak).

Many Sherpas made periodic trips via the almost-19,000-foot Nangpa La to barter grain for salt (and, to a lesser extent, wool). Namche Sherpas acquired a monopoly on this trade in 1828 (Ortner 1989) when the government in Kathmandu prohibited Solu and Pharak Sherpas from trading further north than Namche Bazaar and Tibetan traders from trading further south. Hence commerce was more important in Namche Bazaar than in any other Khumbu village, and agriculture and animal husbandry played minor roles there. This difference is instantly noticeable in the settlement pattern: Namche houses are closely clustered, with few fields around or among them; the houses in a village like Phortse, however, are separated from one another by large potato fields.

In the area of skilled labor and crafts Sherpas have operated largely at a low-technology, familial, do-it-yourself level. Weaving woolen cloth, building houses, repairing rope-sole boots—all these jobs the Sherpas either have done themselves or have hired others to do, depending on the level of their own skills, the size of the job, and competing demands on their time. Even the esoteric work of painting religious frescoes on the walls of monasteries or private chapels has not been a full-time profession. Before the development in the twentieth century of monasteries with full-time resident monks (see Ortner 1989), virtually everyone in Khumbu—including lamas, healers, and shamans in addition to skilled craftsmen—must have either worked the land, or herded yak, or engaged in trade, or worked for those who practiced these traditional occupations.

The small initial population (by 1836 there were still only 169 households in Khumbu, compared with 596 in 1957; see Fürer-Haimendorf 1964) probably grew at a barely perceptible rate for the first three hundred or so years. This demographic calm was upset by the introduction of the potato (not to be confused with an indigenous tuber called *tho* by the Sherpas, which was used to make noodles)

around the middle of the nineteenth century. The potato's high productivity signaled a quantum leap in crop yields on the .19 percent of Khumbu land that is arable. It is now the dominant crop, accounting for 90 percent of all planted fields, with buckwheat (5 percent), vegetables (4 percent), and barley (1 percent) making up the balance.

The new food source appears to have attracted a second wave of Tibetan immigration and an accelerated flow of poor Tibetan migrants in the following decades. By the turn of the century Khumbu had begun to fill up. Even before then, beginning about the 1850s, Sherpas had begun traveling to Darjeeling to seek their fortunes after the British began building roads and tea plantations there. Thus Sherpas were both "pushed" and "pulled" to emigrate. When a doctor from Glasgow named Kellas began climbing in the Sikkimese Himalaya in 1907, he was able to draw on a pool of Sherpa porters in Darjeeling who had moved there from Solu-Khumbu (Mason [1955] gives the history of Himalayan mountaineering). By 1922 there were some fifty Sherpas employed by the British in their first attempt on Mt. Everest.⁴ The most famous of these Khumbu immigrants to Darjeeling (though he was born in Tibet) was Tenzing Norgay, who with Edmund Hillary made the first ascent of Mt. Everest in 1953.

Not only agriculture and animal husbandry but also religious observances such as Mani-Rimdu; communal rituals such as *Osho*, which protects village fields from malignant forces; and community celebrations such as the village feast *Dumje*, with different residents serving as hosts in turn, follow a pattern set largely by the passage of the seasons. In recent years such changes as employment in mountaineering and trekking have adapted themselves to this annual cycle, as shown in Figure 41.

In most respects life after the introduction of the potato and the availability of new employment opportunities in Darjeeling must have gone on much as before, but these economic shifts allowed Khumbu to support a larger population, some of whom could be spared the burden of pursuing traditional means of livelihood. Strong village political organization (see pp. 62–63) combined with an equally strong Buddhist ideology allowed the Sherpas to collect and concentrate their wealth in religious activities in a more substantial and visible way than previously. The Sherpas had been Buddhists at least since the middle of the seventeenth century and supported temples (*gompas*) attended by local married lamas in most villages. Only in the twentieth century did they begin to build and staff substantial monasteries like those in Tengboche

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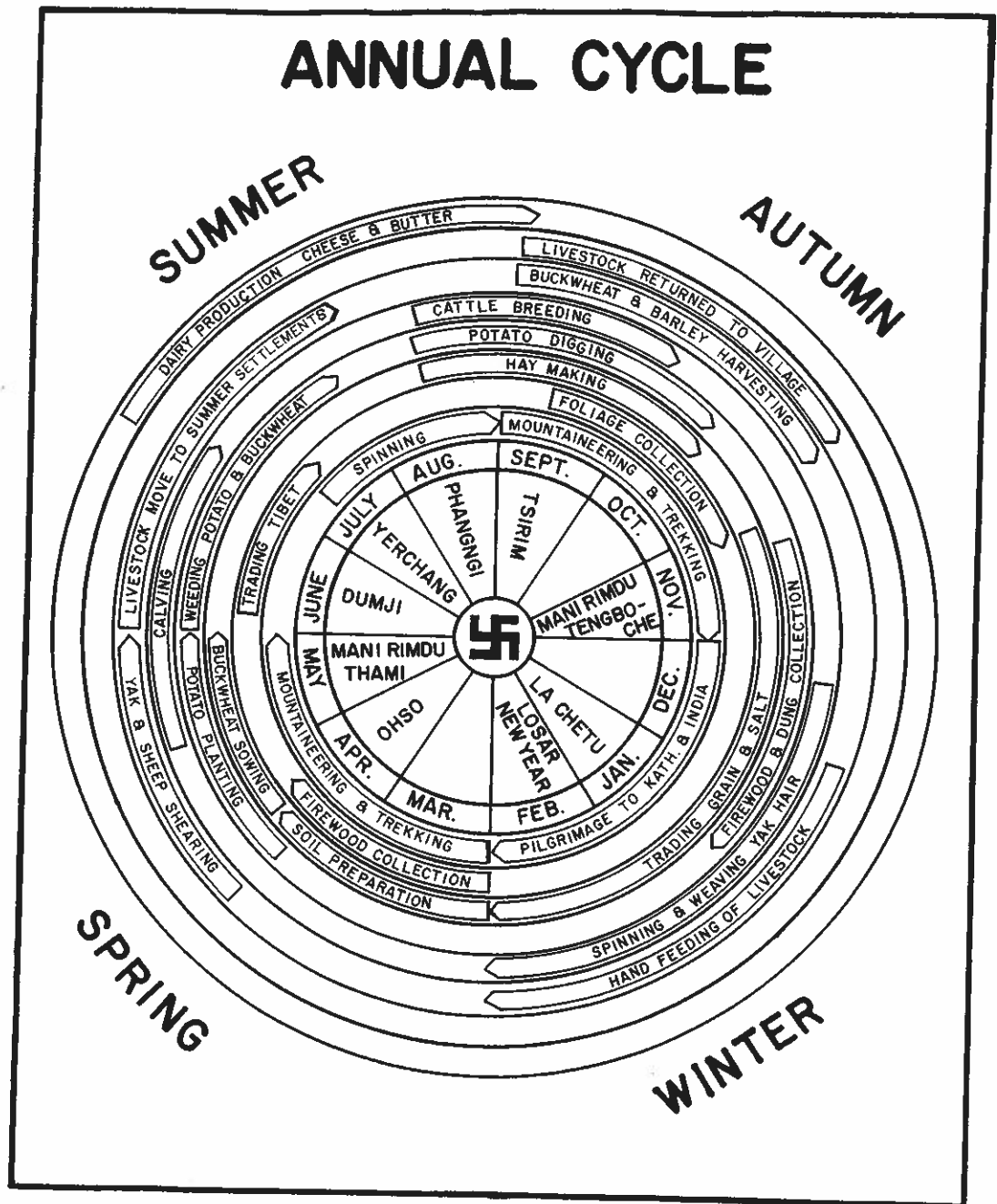


Fig. 41. The Sherpa annual cycle. Adapted from Mingma Norbu Sherpa 1985.

and Thame (which belong to the unreformed, "red-hat," Nyingmapa sect),⁵ with full-time, celibate monks. (Tengboche was constructed in 1916 and rebuilt after the 1933 earthquake.) Subsequently many Sherpa men spent a few years learning to read Tibetan in a monastery, even if they eventually left it to marry and lead secular lives. As a result, Sherpa literacy rates—estimated at one-third of the adult male population (Fürer-Haimendorf 1960)—have been uncharacteristically high for such a remote Nepalese area.

Prior to this twentieth-century religious surge, the practice of Buddhism was limited to services conducted in the village temple by village lamas and the life-cycle rituals conducted at home—those associated with such events as birth, marriage, and death. According to Ortner, all such local religious services “have a broadly common structure, centering on offerings and petitions to the gods, and offerings and threats to the demons, and closing with a distribution of ritual foods to all present” (1978, 32). These rituals reflect the significance of hospitality and reciprocity generally in Sherpa social relations. Another dimension of village religion is the communication with spirits by shamans (called *lhawa* by the Sherpas) under trance. The shaman’s goal is more to determine the cause of illness than to cure it. One of several possible treatments is to feed whatever spirit has caused the illness, thereby equalizing or at least stabilizing relations between the human and supernatural worlds.

To be a “true” Sherpa nowadays is to belong to one of about eighteen (depending on how you count them) patrilineal, exogamous clans. (The original migrants, according to Oppitz [1968, 144], belonged to only four “protoclans,” which have since divided into additional units.) The Sherpa population in the Khumbu villages has been augmented by a trickle of clanless Tibetans (locally called Khamba, although they do not pretend to come from Kham) who have crossed over into Khumbu over the centuries. Those who have settled into Khumbu villages, acquired wealth, and become generally absorbed into Sherpa society (often intermarrying with someone from a Sherpa clan) are also loosely referred to as Sherpas, as are those who are descendants of alliances between Sherpas or Khambas and other ethnic groups, such as Newars, Tamangs, or Chhetris. In addition to restricting the range of potential marriage partners, these clans have only a few small and relatively unimportant ritual functions, including occasional group worship of clan deities. They are not now political or economic corporate groups, though Ortner (1978, 19) speculates that in Solu, at least, they might originally have been.

Since Khumbu villages are multiclan units, individuals can often find a suitable marriage partner from within their own village. Marriage itself is not an event as we normally think of it in the West but rather an economic process, with little religious significance, that takes several years to consummate. Some marriages are arranged by the parents, but even these arranged marriages are often merely *de facto* approvals of unions initiated by the open courtship of the principals. Indeed, a girl may even be courted in her own house by a boy who climbs through

the window in the dark of night and leaves before the parents discover him in the morning.

A formal engagement is called *sodhne* ("to ask" in Nepali), but even at this stage exclusive sexual rights cannot be demanded, and such engagements are frequently broken off before the commencement of the next stage, *dem-chang* ("beer of mixing" in Sherpa). *Dem-chang* signals a more serious legal commitment: any children born after *dem-chang* are legitimate, and the dissolution of the relationship after this point requires the same payments that must be made in divorce after the final wedding rites, known as *zendi* (the spelling reflects the Sherpa pronunciation of the Nepali term *janti*). Parents help Sherpa couples to establish their own separate households if they can, the parental house going to the youngest son by the rule of ultimogeniture.

Young children are indulged their every whim and, as elsewhere in Nepal, older ones take care of younger ones. As soon as they are able, children begin helping with the chores of the house, boys looking after cattle and girls helping their mothers around the house and in the fields, though girls help with cattle too if they have no brothers. As they contribute more and more to the running of the household, they are treated increasingly as adults. Unlike children in the West, Sherpa children are always participants in parties and festivities. Thus no aspect of adult life is strange to them by the time they are grown. Sherpa children are not "raised" so much as merely lived with.

Tied together by clan, kin, and marriage, Khumbu Sherpas as of the 1950s were also part of a community bound together by civic institutions designed to deal with many of the collective wants and needs of the village. In each village a small number of men (two in Khumjung) called *nawas* were responsible for controlling the use of village land for agriculture and cattle. This task involved enforcing village-wide bans on cattle, sheep, and goats from cultivated land until the crops had been harvested. New *nawas* were elected each year, ostensibly by a village assembly but in reality by a few village leaders in informal consultation. In addition to the *nawas* who controlled the movement of cattle and coordinated work in the fields, there was another type of *nawa*, called *shing* (wood) *nawa*, in charge of protecting forests near the village. Each village elected three or four *shing nawas* to protect its forests from unauthorized woodcutters. These *nawas* could give permission to fell trees for special purposes such as house building, but they guarded against unnecessary deforestation. Finally, the *chorumba* and *chorpen*

were responsible for the upkeep of the *gompa*, the performance of religious rites, the organization and discipline of village festivals such as *Dumje*, and the administration of village funds earmarked for *gompa* purposes. Basically these civic roles were filled by rotation among established village families, but other, less important, positions were rotated among all villagers. The rotation of leadership is important in that it provides the potential for frequent innovation.

Regardless of the importance of the particular office, the guiding principle for the governing of a Sherpa village was essentially democratic:

Authority is vested in the totality of its inhabitants. This authority is then delegated to officials elected for limited periods, and during the term of their office they may be guided by decisions on policy made by a public gathering but are not responsible to any superior body for the day to day administration of agreed rules. They have power to inflict fines and collect them as well as to grant exemption from general rules in case of individual hardship. The village community as a whole cannot correct the actions of such an official, but can only express disapproval by withholding re-election or any future appointment. (Fürer-Haimendorf 1964, 104)

Two other events of the 1950s further affected life in Khumbu. When mountaineering expeditions inside Nepal began, Khumbu Sherpas seeking work as high-altitude porters no longer had to go to Darjeeling, for most of the expeditions were organized in Kathmandu, and porters and Sherpas were hired there. Employment with these expeditions, which attempted peaks all over Nepal, reduced the economic pressure to go to Darjeeling and presumably helped stanch the flow of migrants from Khumbu to India. It also eventually forced the recognition that Khumbu Sherpas were divided from their Darjeeling cousins by citizenship: the former were Nepalese, the latter Indian. No one had ever thought this an issue, let alone a problem, until 1953, when both India and Nepal bitterly tried to claim Tenzing Norgay as their own.

The second event of the 1950s that altered life in Khumbu was the incursion and the vastly expanded power of the Chinese in Tibet. Two consequences followed from the increased Chinese control. First, the flow of trade over the Nangpa La was drastically curtailed. Some of the small-scale bartering of grain for salt was allowed to continue in central depots under Chinese control. With trade by weight instead of volume, however, and with bargaining outlawed, there was less profit. The Chinese authorities also largely brought a halt to big-time trading in hides,

sugar, wool, jewelry, butter, and cattle. This curtailment threatened to severely dislocate the Namche Bazaar economy, where fortunes had been routinely made on the Nangpa La monopoly.

The second result of the Chinese occupation of Tibet was the enormous influx of refugees into Khumbu following the flight of the Dalai Lama from Lhasa in 1959 (Fig. 42). At one point in the early 1960s over 6,000 Tibetan refugees—far more than the total number of tourists in a single year in the 1980s—lived in Khumbu, along with the normal Sherpa population of that time of just over 2,200. Many of the yak and sheep died, and most of the refugees moved on to other locations in Nepal and India or eventually returned to Tibet. Only about ten refugee families settled in Khumbu, where they have gradually become integrated into established Sherpa society.

Although they were absorbed into Sherpa society, these Tibetans also affected Khumbu life. For example, the traditional Sherpa stove consisted of an open fire with three stones (later an iron tripod) supporting the cooking vessel. The Tibetan refugees of 1959 and after brought with them the technological innovation of an enclosed multiburner hearth of stone and mud. The traditional Sherpa stove, only 6–8 percent efficient, has been largely replaced in Khumbu houses by the enclosed stove, which is 30–80 percent efficient (Mingma Norbu Sherpa 1985, 180).

Sherpa history thus has not been static. Ever since the forebears' departure from eastern Tibet at the end of the fifteenth century, Sherpa society has been changing—with the arrival and settlement in Khumbu, the increase in number of clans, the adoption of Buddhism, the building of village temples, the introduction of the potato, the large growth in population, the emigration to Darjeeling, the establishment of celibate monasteries, and employment in mountaineering. The customary commonsense distinction between “tradition” and “change” is therefore ultimately untenable. Rather there is, and always has been in Sherpa society, a “tradition of change.”

There is a distinction, however, between the cumulative, compounding change I have described and the changes that began in the 1960s. Before then changes were primarily those of scale and elaboration: more clans, more food, more people, more trade (until it was curtailed in 1959), more lamas, more rituals (and more elaborate rituals), more differentiation (as traders and tax collectors accumulated wealth), more emigration. These changes, however fundamental, were also of a piece with the Tibetan cultural cloth from which Sherpa culture had been cut. The intensified religious activity in the twentieth century, for example,

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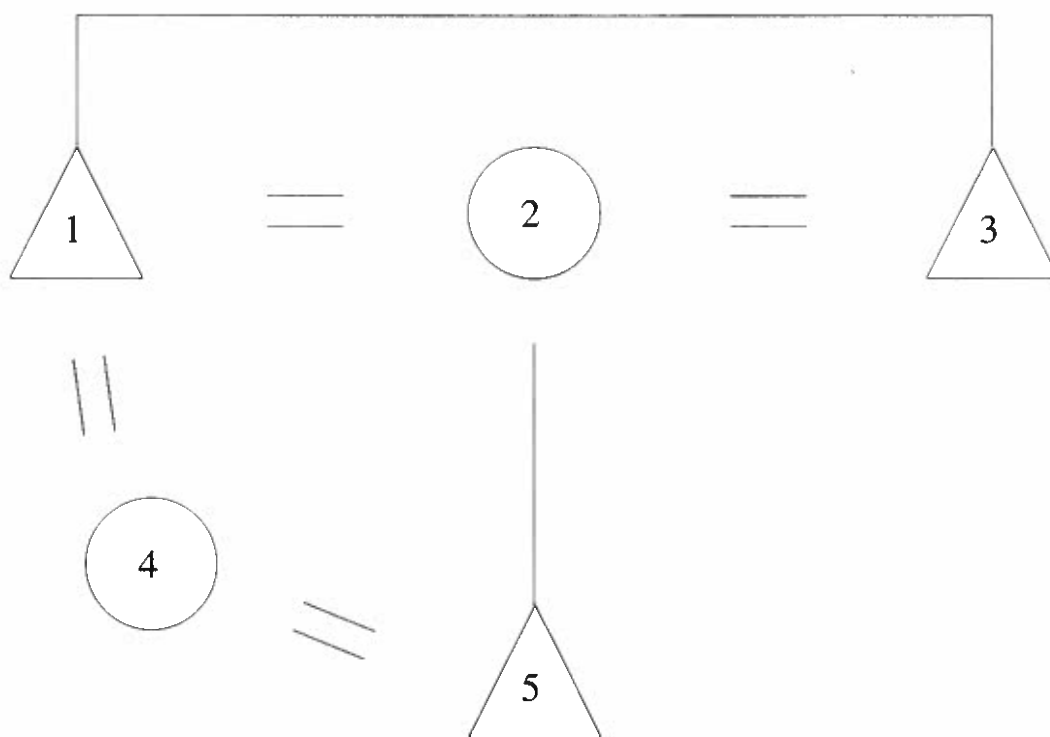


Fig. 42. The polyandry practiced by these Tibetans, one of the few refugee families that settled in Khumbu, differs from the fraternal polyandry of the Sherpas. The polyandrous marriage of two brothers (1 and 3) to the woman (2) produced a child (5) who acknowledges both men equally as his fathers. Subsequently 1 took 4 as a second wife, and later 5 also married 4. The kinship diagram describes these relationships. The numbers, beginning at left with 1, correspond to the individuals in the photograph.

in a way simply enabled the Sherpas to “catch up” with the level of religiosity achieved long before in the Tibetan homeland: the monasteries at Tengboche and Thame, for example, were established as branches of Rongbuk Monastery on the other side of Mt. Everest.

It is true that by the end of the eighteenth century Khumbu had also come under the control of the state of Nepal, which appointed some Sherpas as *pembu*, “tax collectors,” to represent state interests. But day-to-day life must have been little changed. For example, when a group of “judges” was sent to Solu-Khumbu in 1805 to enforce the Hindu ban on cow slaughter (yak and yak crossbreeds counted as cattle for this purpose), the Sherpas readily confessed their crime and were fined. The Hindu judges reported back to the government that if the penalty of death or enslavement were imposed, many people would be executed or enslaved (Stiller 1973; Regmi 1979; Ortner 1989). The Sherpa diet remained unaffected.

The changes since 1961 have been different. The construction and operation of elementary schools in all Khumbu villages by the end of the 1960s brought literacy not in Tibetan but in Nepali and English; the establishment of a hospital in Khunde in 1966 had such wide-ranging effects as the virtual elimination of such thyroid deficiency diseases as cretinism and goiter (the latter had had an incidence of 92 percent) and a reduction in population growth through contraceptive measures; an airstrip constructed in 1964 at Lukla shortened the travel time from Kathmandu to Khumbu from two weeks to forty minutes, and eventually funneled into Khumbu more than six thousand tourists per year; and establishment of the panchayat system in the 1960s and of Sagarmatha National Park in 1975 effectively ended several centuries of regional political autonomy.

Although these post-1961 changes have in some ways fundamentally realigned the ecological, economic, and political pillars of Sherpa society, in other respects they have had little effect on “traditional” Sherpa institutions, some of which have continued much as before. In some cases the changes have actually intensified Sherpa life and made it “more Sherpa” than ever. The remaining chapters attempt to sort out, describe, interrelate, and explain these changes and their myriad effects on Sherpa life.

Summary and Conclusion

When I first made the long trek to Khumbu in 1964, I hoped, like many Westerners, to find Shangri-La at the end of the trail. One night en route I dreamed that I arrived in Namche Bazaar to find a gas station that serviced the cars there. It was a nightmare: Shangri-La defiled. When I did reach Namche, I found neither gas station nor Shangri-La. Like Lévi-Strauss, looking for bare-bones humanity in Brazil, all I found were people.

We adjust to new circumstances very quickly. I was sitting in Namche one evening in April 1985 when, precisely at six o'clock, the lights (powered by the recently installed hydroelectric turbine) suddenly came on.¹ I was reading a book at the time, and several minutes passed before the revelation dawned that a light bulb was burning over my head in a village that when I first visited it was a two-week walk from the nearest electricity. Even that realization did not prepare me for the discovery a little later that evening that the faint hum I had heard during dinner was the portable generator providing electricity for the video movies (some in English, some in Hindi) that were being shown in the hotel next door.²

The transformation of the economy from one of mixed farming, animal husbandry, and trading to one with a heavy dependence on tourism has already been accomplished. The younger generation does not remember a time when the biannual tourist invasion did not take place. To learn what life in Khumbu was like in those days they have to ask their parents or grandparents. What they are learning in the schools

will enable them to exploit the change, control it, and confront it on their own terms rather than be exploited and victimized by it. At least they will be in a far stronger position to effect their destiny with education than without it.

The link between trade and tourism was embedded in the cultural implications of trade itself, which was a centrifugal force, pulling the Sherpas out of their small communities and into a wider world. Those who became successful at trade gained substantial wealth without exploiting their fellow Sherpas. Not only was that wealth evidence of good karma, but it also provided the critical economic base that permitted investment in the opportunities presented by tourism. Thus tourism arrived fortuitously to take up the economic slack left when the Chinese shut down trade in Tibet. The Sherpas had a long tradition of dealing with and profiting from foreigners; tourists and mountaineers are only the latest variety of outsider to do business with. Sherpas do not admire greed, but they acknowledge it as a universal human trait. Tourism was a novel means to attain a traditional end.

The traditional economy persists alongside the modern but is also modified by it. In 1959 overgrazing was caused by the great influx of yak brought by Tibetan refugees. Owning yak herds is still highly esteemed, but in the absence of significant trading, people recognize their reduced economic value. The total number of animals has not declined, but their type and distribution and the problems they generate have changed. Employment in tourism means fewer herders to take yak to high pastures, so the number of yak has decreased while the number of *dzom* and *zopkio* has increased. These crossbreeds are distributed among more, but smaller, herds that graze, or rather overgraze, the land closer to the villages. Thus the highly specialized transhumance of pre-Lukla days has evolved into a more settled pastoral nomadism (see Bjonness 1979 and 1980).

Because of different grazing and climatic requirements, herders tend to specialize either in crossbreeds or yak, but tourism modifies this pattern too. Some of the rich and successful sardars now own herds of both animals, which they deploy to carry tourist loads in different ecological zones (Fig. 90). They use *zopkio* to carry loads from Lukla as far as Namche or Tengboche (almost half of Namche's 102 households own *zopkio*, which can carry the loads of two humans) and then switch to yak for the higher, final leg of the trip to the Everest base camp area, thus capitalizing on the divergent capacities of the animals in different climates and at contrasting altitudes. The investment in a *zopkio* can



Fig. 90. Pasang Sona of Khumjung, father of Pertemba, follows his yak, which carries gear for a group of tourists.

be recouped in ten round-trips between Lukla and Namche, and the only food the animal requires is the hay that it can carry itself on top of its load.

The national park, meanwhile, banished goats from Khumbu in 1983 because they were thought to close-crop the land they graze. This measure may have protected the land, but not the low-caste Hindu blacksmith (Kāmi) owners of the goats in Namche and other people too poor to own cattle.³

The animals that overgraze pastures near the villages also eat field crops growing near villages (see Mingma Norbu Sherpa 1985). These losses, connected to a loosening of the logic requiring that animals be kept away from villages during the growing season, are offset by the new strain of potatoes that produces three times the yield of the old variety. The cultivation of carrots as well as cabbages and other green vegetables and the purchase of rice, sugar, and eggs from the Saturday morning bazaar in Namche have combined to provide a more varied diet. So has the distribution of candy to children by tourists, resulting in an increase of dental problems (Pawson et al. 1984). The peculiar dietary twist of the Sherpa who drinks only imported beer (Heinekens is a favorite) instead of the traditional homemade chang may be ex-

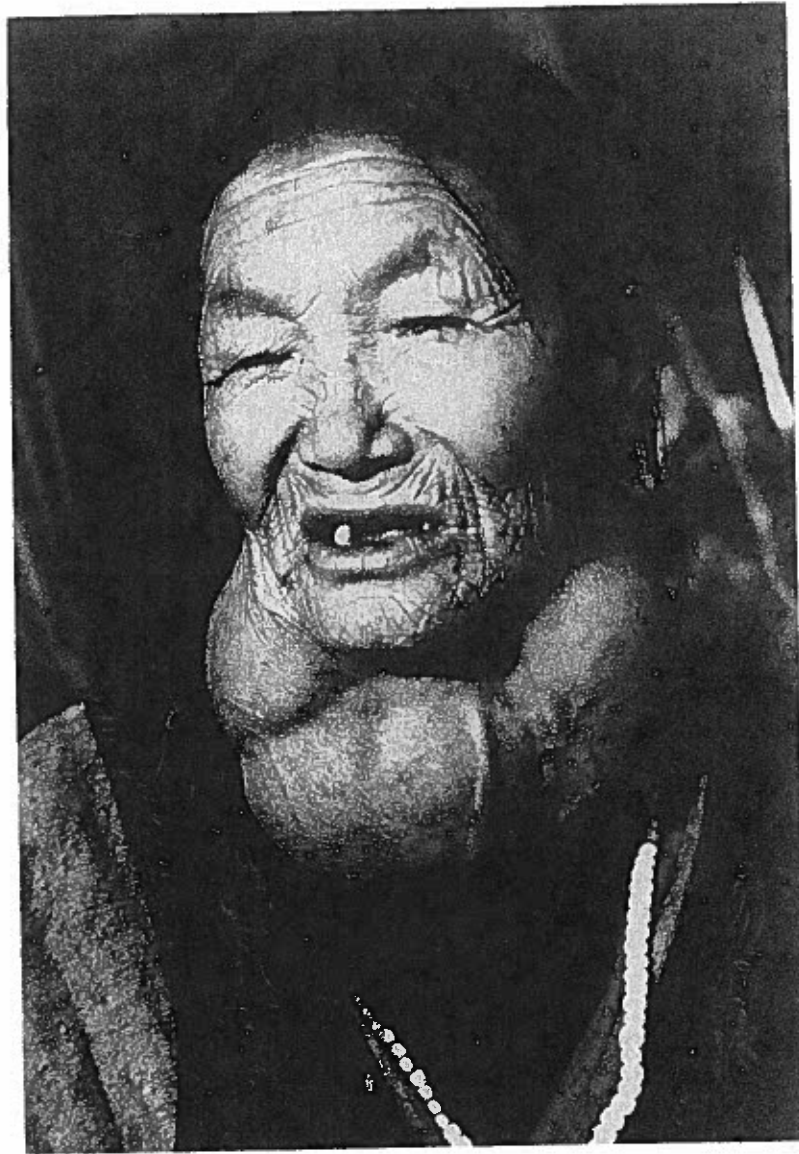


Fig. 91. The lack of iodine in the diet causes several thyroid-deficiency conditions, including goiter, among Sherpas and other Himalayan peoples. Although goiters are considered unattractive, they constitute a class of phenomena (which includes cretinism) to which good luck is sometimes attributed ex post facto. Iodine pills and injections administered in the school through the Khunde Hospital have almost eliminated these problems.

plained as an adaptation to avoid social and chang-drinking responsibilities and the alcoholism and ulcers that go with them.

The distribution of iodine has drastically cut the incidence of thyroid-deficiency conditions, including cretinism and goiter, which once had an incidence in Khumbu of 92 percent (Fig. 91). In recent years, how-



Fig. 92. The hut in the background lies a few yards from Syangboche airstrip. It is run by a Sherpa woman (*left*) and Seti Maya, a Kāmi from Namche. Seti Maya was born and raised in Namche, speaks fluent Sherpa, and wears Sherpa dress.

ever, the Khunde Hospital has seen an increase in such stress-related conditions as mental illness, ulcers, alcoholism, and depression.⁴ Dissemination of contraceptive devices has led to a lower fertility rate, and at least in some villages births are now slightly outnumbered by the combination of deaths (including mountaineering deaths) and out-migration.⁵

The economic shift to tourism has produced an incipient class of “tourist Sherpas” who nevertheless largely remain as culturally rooted in Khumbu as the plain dirt potato farmer. The new breed of Sherpa no longer wears sheepskin pants, but he knows who he is. Change occurs in the circumvention or shortcutting of tradition, not its elimination or transformation. Because of the time and trouble and expense involved, *dem-chang* (along with *ti-chang* and *pe-chang*, which have always been optional) is now frequently omitted from the sequence of marriage process stages. Instead couples go directly from *sodhne* to *zendi* at younger ages—and they marry even more frequently than before on a “love” rather than “arranged” basis. The frequency of Sherpa marriages to



Fig. 93. Although Seti Maya seems to be treated equally in everyday matters by the Sherpas and is included in bantering and casual horseplay, privately she admitted great resentment at being treated as an inferior. Traditionally Kāmis were not allowed in Sherpa houses, although that rule is now more honored in the breach. Intermarriage with Sherpas was also traditionally unthinkable. Having no marriage prospects in Khumbu, Seti Maya eventually settled in Japan with a Japanese husband, as did her older sister.

Westerners mentioned in chapter 4 is only a variant of this tendency. A far more dramatic and daring example is the recent marriage of a Sherpa woman to a Kāmi man, both from Namche, an event unimaginable as late as the 1970s and even now exceedingly controversial (Figs. 92–94).⁶ None of this secularizes, Hinduizes, or Westernizes marriage; it merely widens its scope, initiates it earlier, and truncates its rituals.

Although Sherpas rarely commission the carving of prayer stones now (Figs. 95 and 96), they donate considerable sums of money for other religious projects, such as building a new *gompa* in Kathmandu that Sherpa *thawas* can attend. When Tengboche burned to the ground on January 19, 1989, Sherpas quickly organized an executive committee to oversee its reconstruction (Fig. 97). The rimpoche petitioned the king to remove bureaucratic obstacles to rebuilding it. New options, such as a larger, solar-heated *gompa* and the removal of tourist lodges from the monastery grounds, were being enthusiastically discussed. The



Fig. 94. Having lost several children, a Sherpa couple (the husband is a son of the artist Kappa Kalden) dress their son in Kāmi jewelry (anklets and wristlets) and give him a Kāmi name so that the god of death will not bother to take him. His status in Sherpa society is not affected.

Tengboche rimpoche has become such an activist for development (he sits on advisory committees to the national park, attends village meetings, raises funds for his cultural center) that the dividing line between religion and politics is less clear than it once was. More conservative Sherpas (including conservative monks) criticize him for these forays from the otherworldly pursuit of pure religion into the workaday, polluted village world. But he also cut a larger swath religiously when he



Fig. 95. A prayer is being carved in this stone beside a trail.

became vice-chairman of the All Nepal Himalayan Buddhist Association in 1980.

The "tourist Sherpas" are conspicuous not only by their down jackets but also by the renovations to their houses. For instance, they have partitioned off from the large central room a smaller, warmer room around the hearth, using the remaining space for large gatherings and the display of large copper vessels (the traditional method for storing wealth) that line the shelves of Sherpa houses. This conserves increasingly scarce energy, as does the use of the few wetback water heater units (which heat water any time the stove is hot) that have been installed (Fig. 98); one-quarter of the firewood used on a traditional stove goes for heating water. The Tengboche rimpoche put forth an even more radical architectural proposal: to begin building smaller houses as a way of conserving heat.

Nor are the innovations only technological. In 1982 the *Dumje lawas* (i.e., organizers and hosts of the annual *Dumje* festival) of Khumjung proposed distributing uncooked (rather than cooked) rice to each village house, arguing that to cook such massive quantities of rice that must be reheated again later before it is eaten is a wasteful and inefficient use of energy. The notion was so controversial that it was not



Fig. 96. Tibetan Buddhism persists in Kathmandu, but this windvane-driven prayer wheel mounted on a Toyota is no guarantor of religiosity: the car's owner, Ang Nima of Namche Bazaar, was arrested and jailed for stealing an idol.

accepted, but the idea was broached and might be adopted in the future.

The efflorescence of monastic Buddhism in the last seventy years and the economic and political diversification of the last fifteen years have contributed to the declining influence of village lamas, civic institutions, and common village economic concerns and a corresponding rise of atomized self-interest. Those with cash—mostly younger Sherpas—have risen in stature and authority at the expense of the traditionally esteemed village elders (but not the very old, who were traditionally and still are concerned with otherworldly matters).

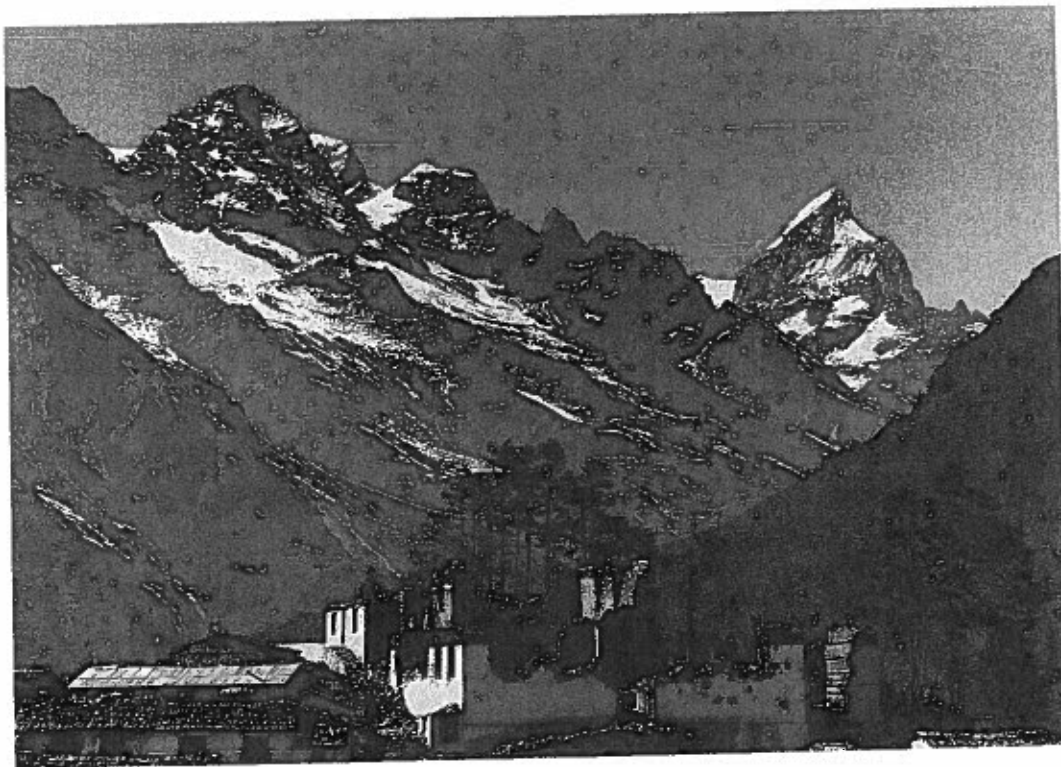


Fig. 97. Tengboche Monastery ruins after the fire of January 1989. Photograph by Bill Kite/Tengboche Trust.

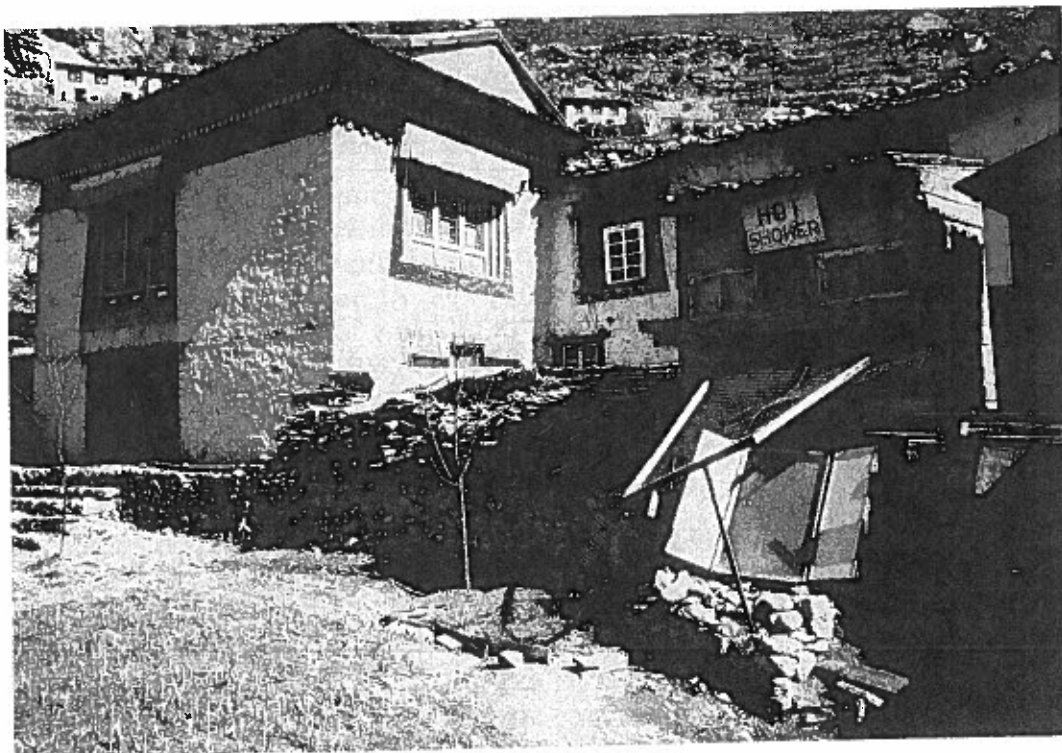
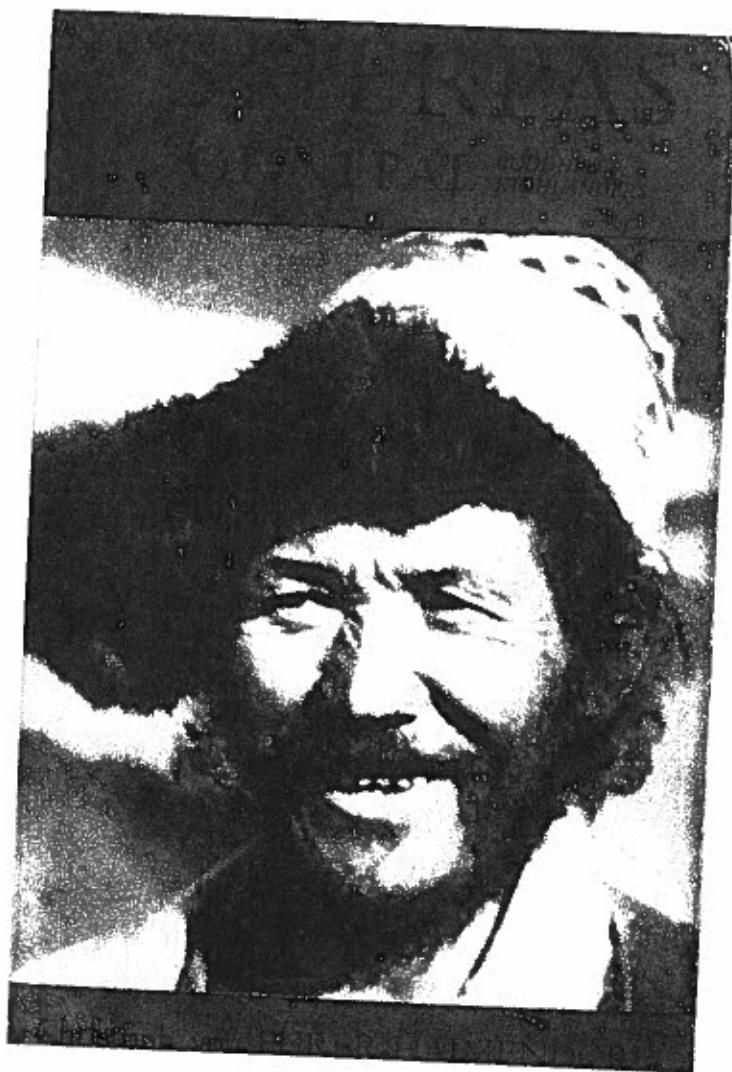
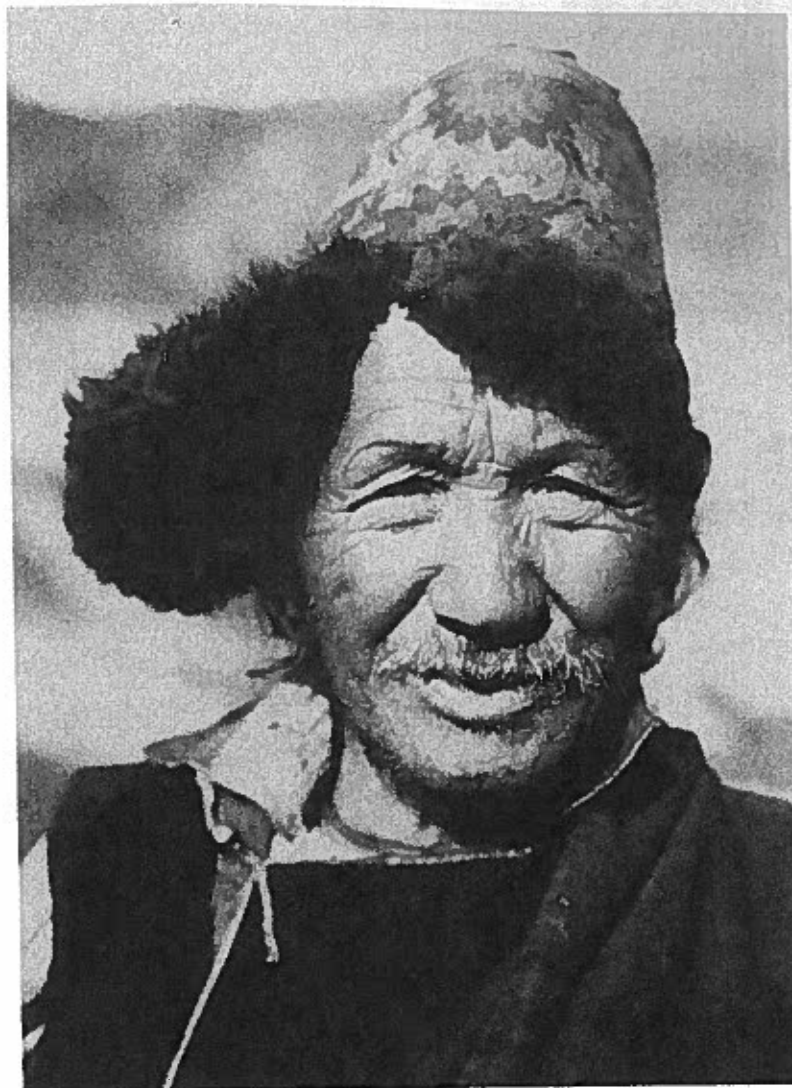


Fig. 98. In addition to wetback stoves, solar hot showers, like this one in Namche, have been built.



Figs. 99 and 100. Pemba Kitar of Khumjung in 1957 (*above*) and 1974 (*opposite*). The earlier photograph was taken by Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, who used it on the dust jacket of his book. Although tourism and education affected the lives of many in Khumjung, Pemba Kitar's life as a farmer did not change appreciably over the seventeen-year period. He died about 1976.

My original hypothesis was that the effects of the schools on Sherpa life were minimal compared with the massive restructuring of the economy by tourism. But further reflection leads me to believe that it is the schools that are the crucial link between tradition and modernity because they have enabled Sherpas to exploit the forces of change (Figs. 99–104). Having successfully met the modern world on its own ground, these educated Sherpas have the cultural self-confidence to intensify their ethnic identity. The case studies of educated Sherpas (see



chapter 3) show that while tourism knocked the Sherpa economy off center, the schools brought change but also gave Sherpa society the tools to maintain its cultural equilibrium. Coming before tourism, the schools bought the Sherpas time.

There is, however, an Achilles' heel in this reinforced cultural identity. The Sherpas who live most of the year with their families in Kathmandu still observe, in modified form, some of the social rituals they observed in Khumbu. For example, rather than stretching Lhosar (Tibetan New Year) celebrations over several weeks, which would interfere with workaday business and government routine, a group of, say, fifteen families together rents a hotel dining room for a more or less nonstop three-day party. Similar arrangements are made for Phakning which, like Lhosar, is basically a social rather than a religious occasion. Both of these observances are innovative urban adaptations, which, as



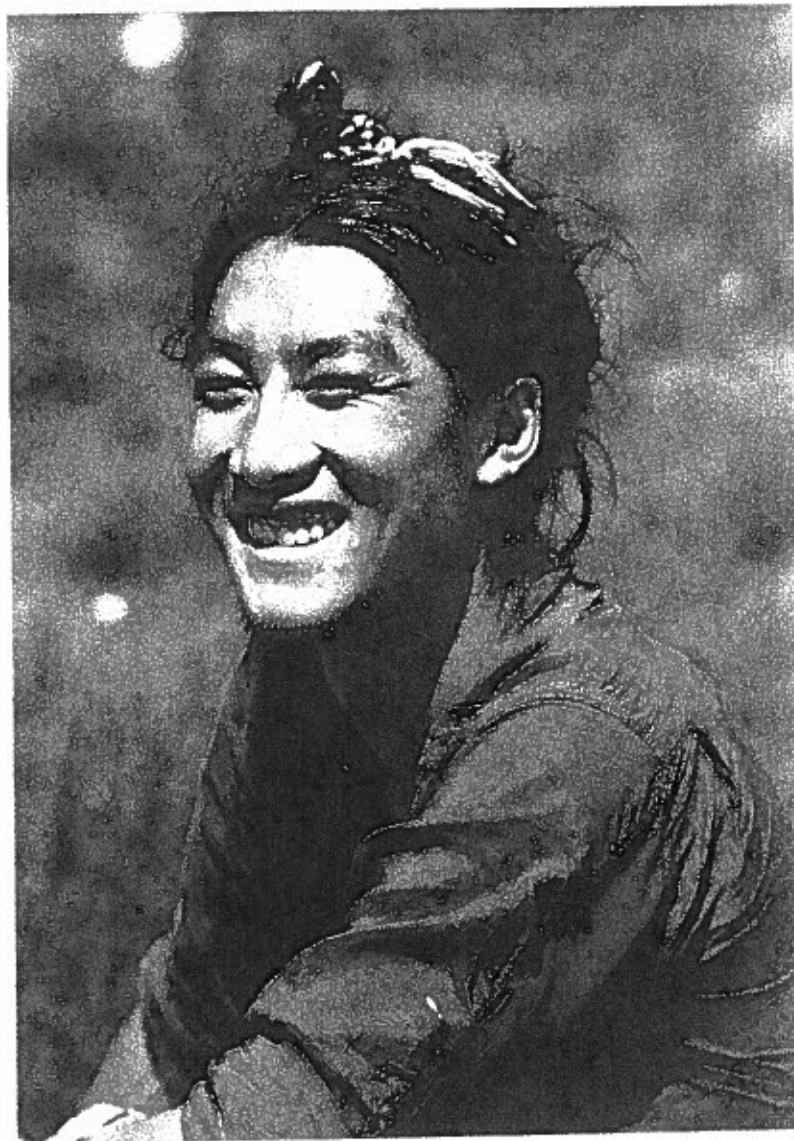
Fig. 101. Lama Sarki, on the porch of the Khumjung school. He is the son of Chotari, the Namche climber who was the second Khumbu Sherpa to reach the summit of Mt. Everest and who later taught mountaineering to the Nepalese police. When I first met Lama Sarki, he was a student in the second grade of Khumjung School, to which he commuted every day from his home in Namche. He was also a reincarnate lama (*tulku*). He had spent a short time at his monastery, but, complaining that he missed his friends, he asked for and was given permission to attend school. He said he still preferred to study religion but for the time being would continue his studies in Khumjung. He graduated from Khumjung high school and worked for mountaineering expeditions (including one to Annapurna III) and tourists for a while.



Fig. 102. By 1988 Lama Sarki had married and opened a lodge in Phakding (coincidentally, close to his old *gompa*), a few hours' walk up the valley from Lukla. He and his wife stand in front of it. Although he has not followed his religious calling, he is still regarded as a reincarnate lama (as indicated by his name).

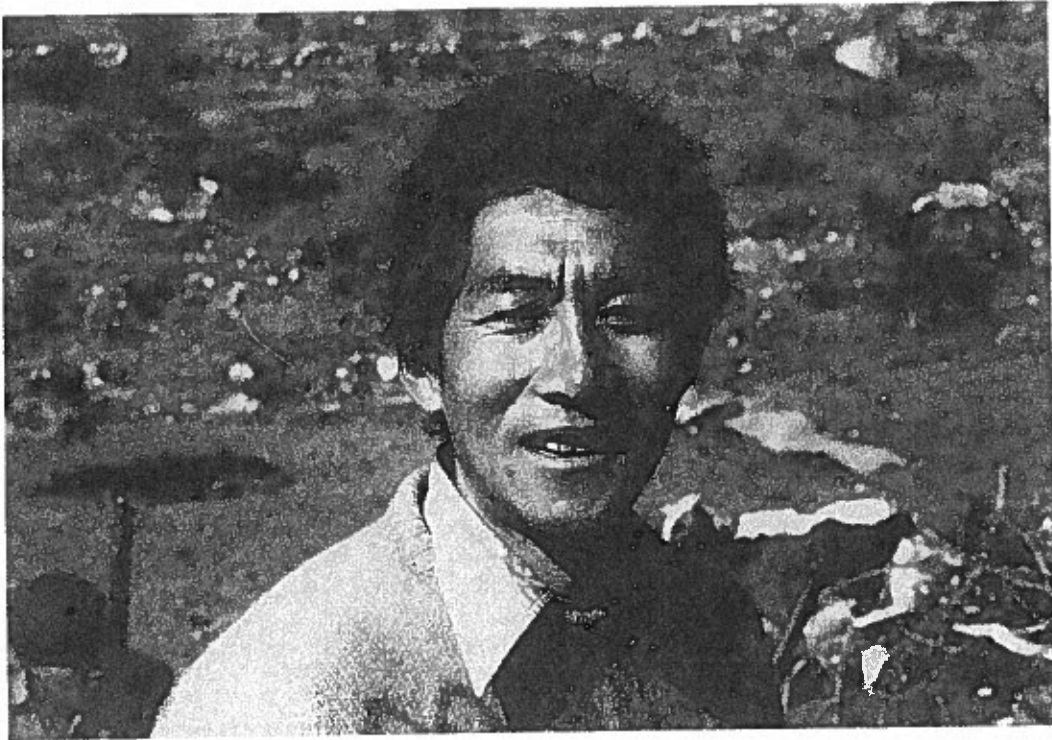
Ang Rita put it, “do not have as much life and charm” as their Khumbu equivalents. An organization called the Sherpa Sewa Kendra (Sherpa service club), a self-help group that assists Sherpas at critical periods—providing, for example, a proper funeral when a death occurs—also helps to preserve the Sherpa community while it adapts to urban life.

Sherpa children in Kathmandu, like their counterparts in Khumbu, are included at whatever parties, rituals, and celebrations occur, but without exception those who grow up in Kathmandu do not learn (or at least refuse to speak) the Sherpa language. Many of them were born in Kathmandu and have never been to Khumbu. Sherpas with school-



age children now choose a life in Kathmandu, if they have the option, because of the superior education available there. Their reasoning is that the curriculum and teachers have very recently begun to deteriorate in the Khumbu schools. English, once begun in third grade, is now started only in sixth, and the only teachers willing to come to Khumbu are those from other parts of Nepal who cannot find jobs elsewhere.

If a loss of Sherpa identity occurs, it will be among this new generation of Kathmandu children. Understanding Sherpa when they hear it but speaking only Nepali (and perhaps Newari) and going to Kathmandu schools, they are unlikely ever to return to Khumbu except for the occasional visit. They will instead become the Nepalese equivalent of the second- and third-generation Sherpas who live in Darjeeling—



Figs. 103 and 104. Ang Tsering (not to be confused with the three other Ang Tserings mentioned or pictured elsewhere in the book) in 1964 (*opposite*) and 1978 (*above*). In 1964 he worked frequently as a high-altitude porter and retained the traditional long pigtails tied on top of his head. By 1978 he was working for tourists and had cut his pigtails. He died in 1985, in his early fifties.

still ethnically Sherpa but so far removed from the social and religious traditions of their homeland that they have become marginal to them. The roots of this new generation of Sherpas will no longer be planted in the potato fields and pastures and peaks of Khumbu, but in the cement and brick and asphalt of Kathmandu.