

HERDING AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHANGE AMONG KHUMBU SHERPAS

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Over the last 15 years Sherpa society has become increasingly dependent on tourism and mountaineering as a source of income. Before this time the Sherpa economy was based on subsistence agriculture, trade and livestock.

The advent of trekking and mountaineering raises important questions on the effects of such work on the Sherpa's traditional economy and culture. This article is concerned with one aspect of this issue; the effect of recent socio-economic changes on livestock husbandry. What role do animals have in the Sherpa economy now as opposed to before tourism and mountaineering had such an impact? What has been the effect of socio-economic change on the social organization of Sherpa herders? To what extent is herding responsible for the perpetuation of certain traditional practices and institutions? What are the ramifications of these for Sherpa ethnography as a whole? These and other questions will be discussed through the course of the article.

Ethnographic Background

This study was conducted on the Sherpa herdsmen of the Imja Khola valley in the Khumbu region of eastern Nepal. The only permanently inhabited village in the valley is Pangboche (there are, however, a few families who live permanently in the summer agricultural settlement of Dingboche). It is the people of this community who comprise the vast majority of herders in the Imja

Khola valley. There are, however, herders who come from other Sherpa villages in the Khumbu.

For the entire winter the Pangboche people's livestock are kept in village sheds. During the late spring the animals are taken to herding camps within one or two miles of the village itself. At this time there is not much pasturage and the animals are fed on stored grass. It is only in mid-June that the herders finally take their livestock to high pastures between 13,500 and 16,000 ft. Here the herders stay until September milking their animals and making butter and cheese. In late September, after the monsoons stop and the grass starts to dry up, the livestock are taken in stages back down the valley. By late fall they are all back in the village sheds. It is in the late fall that the *tseesa* (grass fields) become important. The *tseesa* are located in the high *yorsa* (herding camps). They consist of areas of pasturage from half-an-acre to four acres in size. They are surrounded by a sturdy rock wall to keep livestock out and are fertilized with manure every spring. The grass is harvested in October and stored in the herding huts to feed the livestock through the winter months. *Tseesa* are highly valued pieces of property and are inherited, bought and sold just as agricultural fields and livestock are. The Sherpas have 4 types of livestock, each of which contributes to the economy in its own unique way.

Yak (i.e. male yak) are the biggest of the Sherpa's livestock and are valued as pack animals. When trained properly they can also be used to plow fields, an important service from which a sizable income can be generated.

Nak (i.e. female yak) are smaller than males and are not as useful as pack animals. They are primarily valuable as milk producers. However, even in the grass-rich summer months they produce only 2 liters of milk a day.

The *zom* is the female offspring of a cross between a Tibetan

cow and a yak. These animals can produce up to 5 liters of milk a day, over twice as much as a yak. The *zopkyo* is the male result of a cross between a Tibetan cow and a yak. They are primarily valued as pack animals.

Tibetan cattle are less valuable than other types of livestock. They are small, weak animals who produce little milk and carry only light loads. They are primarily used as breeding stock to produce the valuable hybrids.

*The Traditional Economy And Social Organization of
Sherpa Herders Before Tourism and Mountaineering*

Before fifteen years ago livestock husbandry was absolutely essential to the well-being of the Sherpas. The Khumbu's harsh climate only allows one crop a year of barley, potatoes and buckwheat. As a result the Sherpas who lived before fifteen years ago depended primarily on their animals and trade for income. Livestock produce income in a variety of ways. The butter and cheese they produce can be sold at a good price and the *tseepa* (belly hair of yak) is used to weave blankets. When the Sherpas still had active trade, animals were essential for carrying loads over the high passes between Tibet and Nepal.

Perhaps the livestock's greatest asset to the Sherpas was as a form of wealth which could be increased with comparative ease. If some animals had to be sold to pay a debt, or were killed by a wolf, they could be replaced through breeding of the remaining animals.

Before twenty years ago the Khumbu's human and animal populations were much lower than they are today. As a result, there was abundant pasturage and greater potential for herd growth than in later years.

The low human population and the abundance of grassland which existed in the Imja Khola valley before twenty years ago were accompanied by clan ownership of pasturage. Pangboche's original clans included the *Choo Sherpa*, *Nawa* and *Paldorchey*. The *Choo Sherpa* people owned the pasturage on the eastern side of the Imja Khola valley while the *Nawa* owned that on the western side. The *Paldorchey* people owned some pasturage on both sides of the valley.

As new clans moved into Pangboche and outside Sherpas bought *tseesa* in the Imja Khola valley, clan domination over pasturage began to weaken.

Even though clan ownership over tracts of pasturage ended, clans still controlled many of the *yorsa*. Although alpine grasslands became open to any clan who came, membership in the *yorsa* themselves were still, in many instances, dependent on belonging to a common clan.

Ecological and Socio-Economic Change Over the Last 20 Years

The current ecological problems of the Khumbu began with the exodus of refugees from Tibet to Nepal in 1959 and the early 1960's. At this time people and livestock entered the Khumbu by the thousands. In one winter alone over 20,000 animals died, but not before devastating the Khumbu's pasturage. The Tibetans sold all of their remaining animals and left for refugee camps to the south or in Kathmandu (the capital city of Nepal). But the damage had been done. The refugees had sold all their remaining livestock cheaply and the Sherpas had bought more than the land could support. Although the freezing winters killed off many more of the excess animals, the livestock population of the Khumbu remained high.

After the Tibetan refugees left, new outside forces intensified the Khumbu's ecological problems.

Throughout the 1960's and 1970's the number of tourists and mountaineers visiting the Khumbu gradually increased, until by 1983 there were almost 5,000 coming every year. Ecologically, the mountaineering expeditions are the most destructive, for they always have the most pack animals accompanying them. Most of the many peaks in the Khumbu lie in the upper reaches of the Imja Khola valley. The pack animals going up the valley devastate the Pangboche people's pasturage.

Before the era of tourism Sherpas with lots of *tseesa* played an important role in the community by selling grass to those villagers who had no *tseesa* or could not make enough hay on their own. This service was especially necessary during the snowy winter months when the livestock could not find pasturage on their own. However, since the traffic of *zopkyo* and yak going up the Imja Khola valley has increased, the price of grass has gone up tremendously. Indeed, so much is sold for the livestock of mountaineering expeditions in the spring and fall, that Sherpas with *tseesa* have very little grass left over to sell to other villagers during the winter.

The grass problem has gotten so severe that Sherpas without *tseesa* are unable to support more than 5 to 7 yak.

If it were not for the fact that most Pangboche people have at least some *tseesa*, and that tourism and mountaineering provided them with employment, the ecological situation might have had a drastic effect on the local economy.

As it is, most Sherpa men (between ages 20 and 45) spend at least 6 months a year away from their homes on mountaineering or trekking expeditions. This, in turn, has created another problem for livestock husbandry. Since the Sherpa men are away so much

of the time, there is often nobody to look after the animals. In a family with sons and daughters manpower may not be a problem, for women are not usually involved in long-term trekking or mountaineering work. In many cases the income from trekking and mountaineering is sufficient for a family's needs and, if a problem with manpower arises, they just sell their livestock.

Tourism and mountaineering have, in many ways, had a detrimental effect on livestock husbandry. But in some respects it has actually increased the economic contribution of animals. The Pangboche villagers often rent out their male yak or *zopkyo* as pack animals for mountaineering expeditions. For each animal the Sherpas get up to 90 rupees (almost 6 dollars) a day. While some Sherpas have had to sell their livestock for lack of grass or manpower, a small minority have become wealthy on the income of their animals alone.

The *tseesa*, like the Sherpa's pack animals, have also been used to make money from tourism and mountaineering. Many of the Pangboche people's *tseesa* lie along the main trail to major peaks in the upper Imja Khola valley. There is considerable traffic along this route by mountaineering expeditions and tourists. This, in turn, has created a demand for food and lodging. In response, some Pangboche Sherpas have changed their herding huts on the *tseesa* to tea shops and hotels. This business has been so profitable that many Sherpas from outside the Imja Khola valley have bought the Pangboche people's *tseesa* just so they can open their own shops and lodges. In the summer, even when there are no tourists or mountaineers in the Imja Khola valley, outside Sherpas will often bring their animals to pasture in the area of their purchased *tseesa*. Thus, the quality of *tseesa* as property which can be bought or sold to anyone, has given outside Sherpas access to Pangboche people's pasturage. The advent of tourism has also seen an increase in the value of

tseesa. The *tseesa* along the main trails serve as lodges in the spring and fall. In the summer they are grass field and herding camps. So *tseesa* facilitate two kinds of business: the selling of grass and the placement of hotels.

Economic Transition and Religious Institutions

Tourism, and the value of *tseesa* in the new economy, has benefitted the Sherpa's religious institutions.

The center of religious life in the Khumbu is Tengboche Monastery. It is here that the *lamas* (monks) and *tawas* (students studying to be monks) from villages all over the Khumbu come to stay, studying Tibetan Buddhism and performing religious rituals for the local communities.

Before the economic transitions of the last 15 years, livestock were just as important to Tengboche monastery as to the local people. At this time the monastery had its own *tseesa* and herds of animals. They hired local people to look after the animals, and profits from the sale of dairy products and *tseepa* went towards the support of Tengboche, its monks and religious activities.

With the advent of tourism and manpower shortages, the monastery's livestock became too difficult to take care of and were sold. The *tseesa* however, were kept. Some of them were rented out to Pangboche Sherpas and others had hotels built on them, the profits of which went to the monastery. Still other *tseesa* were used to raise grass. The profit from the grass sale went to the support of the monks and religious activities of Tengboche. Thus, economic transitions have extended to the Sherpa's religious institutions as well as to the populace at large.

The advent of tourism and mountaineering into the Pangboche economy has affected the Sherpa's livestock husbandry in two ways. For those Sherpas without *tseesa* the effects have been primarily negative. The lack of grass severely limits the number of animals they can support. For people with *tseesa* the effects have been positive. Excess grass can be sold to mountaineering expeditions (for their pack animals) for a good profit, and if there are *tseesa* along main routes, they can be used as hotels or shops. The *tseesa* are also important as insurance against starvation of livestock.

Herding and the Continuation of Traditional Life in Sherpa Society

Although economic changes have made animals of limited value to some Sherpas, livestock, and the herding lifestyle, continue to play a vital role in the continuation of traditional life in the Khumbu.

The Pangboche Sherpas have an institution called the *nawa* serving to control the movements of livestock up and down the Imja Khola valley. The *nawa* are instituted to protect agriculture and pastureland in the summer months.

The *nawa* consist of four men who are chosen by the villagers at a special meeting called *nachung*, which is held in April. Two of the *nawa* are responsible for protecting the fields and pastures in the upper alpine areas between 14,000 and 16,000 feet. The other two *nawa* are responsible for the pastures and fields between 13,000 and 14,000 feet.

After the last of the crops are planted in mid-May, livestock are no longer allowed to be kept in Pangboche village. At this time the Sherpas take their animals to herding camps within 1 or 2 miles of the village, but no farther. In mid-June, after the great Sherpa festival of *Dumzi* the *nawa* again order

the herdsman to higher pastures, this time to camps at 14,000 ft. elevation, 2 to 3 hours walk north up the Imja Khola valley. The herders stay here until the *yerchung* festival in mid-July, after which they again have to move up, this time to camps between 14,500 and 16,000 feet in elevation.

At the end of August the Sherpa herdsman gradually start to come down again. In September they may pasture their animals a little above the high-altitude fields of Dingboche and Pheriche, which lie at 14,000 ft.

After the fields have been harvested in the agricultural settlements, the animals are pastured at Dingboche and Pheriche. When the grass and crops (barley, buckwheat and potatoes) in the village are harvested the animals are brought in and housed in sheds.

The responsibilities of the *nawa* are threefold; to protect pasturage and agriculture, to fine people who break the rules, and to control the movements of animals which come from outside the Imja Khola valley.

The *nawa* send the livestock up the valley slowly, in stages, to make sure they reach the pasturage at the optimal time when the grass is the thickest. They do not allow animals in the vicinity of agricultural areas, in order, to prevent crop destruction. When animals are brought down from the highest pastures they are allowed into a grazing area only after all the crops and *reetsa* (grass on the open hillsides) has been harvested. This is done to make sure the Sherpas can cut some grass for winter storage before the animals get to it.

The *nawa's* rules also restrict the movements of outside animals up and down the valley. If a mountaineering expedition brings pack animals onto the Pangboche villager's land, they cannot stop for the night between Tengboche Monastery (12,700

ft. elevation) at the head of the Imja Khola valley and Pheriche, a *yorsa* at 14,000 ft. elevation. If they go higher than this they cannot camp between Pheriche and Pibre, a *yorsa* lying just below 16,000 ft. The reasons for this rule are simple; if pack animals were allowed to stop for extended periods of time in random places along the trail, they would destroy the Pangboche villager's grass. Forcing them to stay in a few specific herding sites concentrates their grazing in one area and damage to pasturage is not widespread.

Penalties for breaking this rule are quite severe. Two years ago one expedition was fined 1100 rupees (80 dollars) for letting their animals graze between Tengboche and Pheriche. The *nawa* unfortunately, only serve from late May through September. Aside from this time pack animals can move and graze at will in the Imja Khola valley. Since mountaineering expeditions usually arrive in the early spring or late fall, their impact on the ecology of the Imja Khola valley continues.

The Pangboche Sherpas are proud of the fact that their tradition of the *nawa* continues. When discussing how good the village reputation is, they often referred to how the weakening of the *nawa* system in one other Sherpa village had led to widespread crop destruction and fights among villagers. In the face of major socio-economic change, the *nawa* system reinforces the identity of the Pangboche villagers as traditional Sherpas. The *nawa* system is remarkable in that it has remained virtually unchanged despite the Khumbu's current ecological problems.

Previous Sherpa ethnographers (Ortner, 1976: 139) (von Fürer Hammendorf, 1964: 104) concluded that Sherpa society was characterized by a lack of institutions for dealing with social unrest or conflict. It was stated further that Sherpas could not "bring litigation.... or in short have any recourse to any socially organized mode through which he and others can get to

objectify, comprehend and systematically restructure disturbing feelings within a culturally sanctioned context" (Ortner, 1976: 139).

The *nawa* are an institution which maintains order and resolves social conflict. As such they provide valuable evidence to the contrary of prior theories that the "inability of the village community....." in settling disputes "is one of the peculiar features of Sherpa social organization" (von Fürer-Hammendorf, 1964: 104). The *nawa* do settle social disputes and they exert considerable authority in doing so, as well as in telling the herders when and where they should pasture their animals. When Sherpas break the rules by letting their livestock ruin crops or graze in the wrong places, they are punished by having to pay large fines.

The Pangboche Sherpas put considerable effort into supporting the *nawa*. There are two meetings, or *nachung*, every year. The first one in the spring is where the *nawa* men are chosen and the rules for the coming summer are established. In the early fall is another meeting where problems and any outstanding disputes are discussed and resolved. At both these meetings all the village members are invited, and usually do attend.

The effort put into the *nawa* system and the public support of the *nawa* demonstrate how much importance is placed on their role in enforcing rules to prevent the destruction of fields and pastures as well as in punishing those who do not obey the regulations.

Ritual and Religious Practice Among Sherpa Herders

There is a wealth of ritual and religious life involved in the Sherpas' livestock husbandry. Perhaps the most elaborate

activity is the summer festival of *yerchung* which is performed to secure the spiritual welfare on the herds. The most important aspect of *yerchung* is that it is a *hlachetu*, a ritual where Sherpas from a common clan get together and worship their patron deity. Thus, *yerchung* not only provides spiritual protection for the animals, but is an important expression of clan solidarity as well. It is partially because of *hlachetus* like *yerchung* that clan solidarity in the Khumbu remains as strong as ever, despite major socio-economic changes.

All of the rituals associated with livestock husbandry are too numerous to be discussed within the context of this one paper. There is one ritual however, which is of particular interest. This is known as the *chetark*. The *chetark* is done by Sherpas to gain religious merit and spiritual protection. For this ritual, an animal (it may be a yak, cow or even a sheep) is chosen by its owner to be dedicated to the gods. First the animal is decorated with *soo* (religious flags with Buddhist prayers printed on them). The *lamas* then perform a final small ritual and the animal is set free to wander wherever it wishes. Other Sherpas are forbidden to capture or disturb this animal in any way. The *chetark* is often done when a family member is sick or there has been some other misfortune. The purpose of it is to gain religious merit and ensure the god's help for the suffering person.

The *soozoo* is another ritual which, in some respects is very similar to the *chetark*. The *soozoo* can only be performed with a yak from a man's own herd. The *soo* are placed on the yak, and after the *lamas* dedicate it to the gods, it is free to wander wherever it wishes. This ritual differs from the *chetark* in that it is not stopped within the lifetime of the person who started it. When the original *soozoo* yak dies a new one of similar coloration must be chosen and dedicated anew. The purpose of the *soozoo* is to provide spiritual protection for the herd and the man who owns it.

One thing which the *soozoo*, *chetark* and some other Sherpa rituals have in common is the way in which livestock, through an act of mercy-- setting an animal free-- are used to gain *sonam*, or religious merit. Thus, clan solidarity, traditional ritual means of merit making and religious activity all find expression through the continued vitality of the herding system in the Imja Khola valley; despite the ecological and socio-economic changes caused by tourism.

One of the most important uses of the herding system is as a retreat where Sherpas can isolate themselves to pursue religious activity or escape from emotional or family problems. It is very common for older Sherpa men to retreat to the *yersa* and spend days or weeks alone, in the herding huts, reading religious texts and praying. The very fact that they stay alone in the *yersa* gives their religious activity all the more validity. This belief has its roots deep in Sherpa culture and is best explained in the following statement; "In orthodox religious contexts--in monasticism, in *nyungne*, and in any act of merit-making--the individual is the locus of this idealized autonomy. Only the individual can save him- or herself and the best way to do so is to isolate oneself as an individual, in order not to be distracted by worldly concerns from one's single-minded quest for salvation" (Ortner, 1976: 29). The *yersa* facilitates isolation of the individual, this optimum condition for making *sonam*. The use of the *yersa* as a religious retreat reinforces the Buddhist ideal of asceticism, isolation and independence and helps to continue it in the face of social change. The Sherpas' values of independence and -- in some contexts -- isolationism are reflected in another way in which the *yersa* are used. For people who are mentally ill or recovering from emotional trauma the isolation of a long stay in the *yersa* is not only a form of therapy, but prevents conflict between "troubled" people and the village populace.

When this investigator was in Pangboche there was one mentally disturbed young man who would occasionally vandalize other villagers' houses. After each incident he would be sent to stay alone in the high *yersa*. After these stays he would return to the village in a more self-controlled, non-violent state. The stays in the *yersa* never actually cured the insane man, but were still important in that they provided him with a refuge where he could stay until the worst of his psychosis passed.

In other cases, a death in the household would cause another family member to retreat to the *yersa* until the worst of his/her grief was over.

The quality of the *yersa* as a place where one can live in isolation has given rise to its use as both a religious and an emotional retreat. This in turn has helped lessen conflict within the village and maintain the mental stability of individuals.

Summary

Livestock husbandry in Sherpa society cannot be seen as a purely economic activity. It is closely connected with the Sherpa's religious, ritual and social life as well.

The Sherpa's ecology and use of livestock has changed in the face of new socio-economic forces. But the traditional cultural institutions and ritual life associated with herding remain as strong as ever. The solidarity of clans, merit-making and religious activity all find expression through the medium of livestock and the herding system. The herding system also helps perpetuate the values of traditional Sherpa society and orthodox Buddhism. The *nawa* institution and the use of the *yorsa* as a refuge for "disturbed people" help maintain order and resolve conflict in Sherpa society. Thus, the continued importance of livestock as load carriers, and the use of *tseesa* and *yorsa* as places of business, in the "new" economy based on tourism, has helped perpetuate the traditional cultural and religious institutions associated with herding, despite major socio-economic change.

Footnotes

1. The only other village in the Khumbu in which the *nawa* are now nonexistent is Namche Bazaar. This is primarily a market town where the inhabitants depend on business for their livelihood. Since there is not extensive agriculture or herding here, the *nawa* have never been a particularly strong institution. But it has just been recently that control over livestock has disappeared altogether, giving rise to fights and destruction of crops by livestock.

References

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