

Cultural Change in Khumbu

Let us next turn to Khumbu in the Everest region and to the Sherpas who inhabit the area to see what process of change has been at work there in the past few decades. This theme has been addressed by the eminent anthropologist, Haimendorf, who has been studying the Sherpas of Khumbu since the 50s. He writes

"...During my early fieldwork among the Sherpas I had succumbed to their charm and had come to regard their society as one of the most harmonious I had ever known. I admired their gaiety and friendliness, their tolerance and kindness towards each other, and the piety which urged them to divert large parts of their scarce resources to the establishment and maintenance of religious institutions, and the creation of architectural monuments which not only served their spiritual needs, but also added to the attraction of a scenery of unparalleled magnificence. In writing about the present situation of Khumbu, I cannot veil the feeling of disappointment and sadness to see this seemingly ideal society and lifestyle transformed by the impact of outside forces which disrupted the delicately balanced social fabric and undermined the traditional ideology that had dominated Sherpa thinking and conduct for countless generations" (Haimendorf 1984: xi).

The Sherpas present an eminent case of the manner in which and the extent to which tourism can affect and change a **Buddhist Tibetan** culture nestling in the eastern Himalayas of **Nepal**. Although its impact has been a deep and pervasive one on them, such an impact has not been without some positive

elements as well. It has a traditional Buddhist highlander society, of pastoralist-cum-subsistence agriculturists and traders who traded in Tibetan salt, wool, and grain across the high passes of the Himalayas between Tibet and Nepal to supplement the meagre income from agriculture, to transform themselves into modern-looking, western-dressed, English-speaking, widely-travelled, intelligent, and highly endowed in the skills not only of mountain climbing but also in the running of tour and trekking businesses in a matter of just three decades. This switch from one lifestyle to another has been facilitated and made possible both by fortuitous circumstances and by the intrinsic merits of the Sherpas. Among the fortuitous circumstances, the foremost, of course, is the attraction of Mt. Everest, the highest mountain in the world, for climbers the world over. The Sherpas have lived at the foot of Everest for about four hundred years now and their adaptations to living at high altitudes in Namche, Khumjung, Kunde, Thame, and other villages of the Khumbu area, as well as their early association with climbing expeditions to Mt. Everest, have turned them into excellent high-altitude porters and, eventually, into mountaineers of great skill themselves. By virtue of this, and because of a number of other personal qualities they possess from the perspective of Western trekkers and climbers (some of these qualities are described by Fisher as egalitarian, peaceful, hardy, honest, polite, industrious, hospitable, cheerful, independent, brave, heroic, and compassionate) (Fisher 1986: 46), they have been in great demand as sirdars, high-altitude porters, cooks, and kitchen helpers for trekking and climbing not only in Khumbu, but also in other parts of Nepal, India, and Pakistan. Precisely because of this, their home in Khumbu has become one of the most popular trekking areas for American, European, and Japanese tourists. Because of their new-found businesses, they have become economically very prosperous too. In the words of Sir Edmund Hillary, it has also made Khumbu "*the most-surveyed, examined, blood-taken, anthropologically dissected area in the world*" (quoted in Fisher 1990: 24).

Tourism came to the rescue of the Sherpas not a day too soon. With the closure of the border trade with Tibet after the events of 1959, the Sherpas needed to find an alternative source of income, and this came to them in the form of tourism. The trickle of tourists in the sixties gradually turned into a torrent. The trekking and touring business in Khumbu and in other regions of the Himalayas went on expanding, and the Sherpas became the most sought-after people because of their real, or imaginary, qualities mentioned above. An increasing number of adult Sherpas in the working age group (20-45 years) were employed by the various trekking and touring agencies, some of which were now owned by the Sherpas themselves. One net result of this was that it kept the Sherpa population of the active age group away from home,

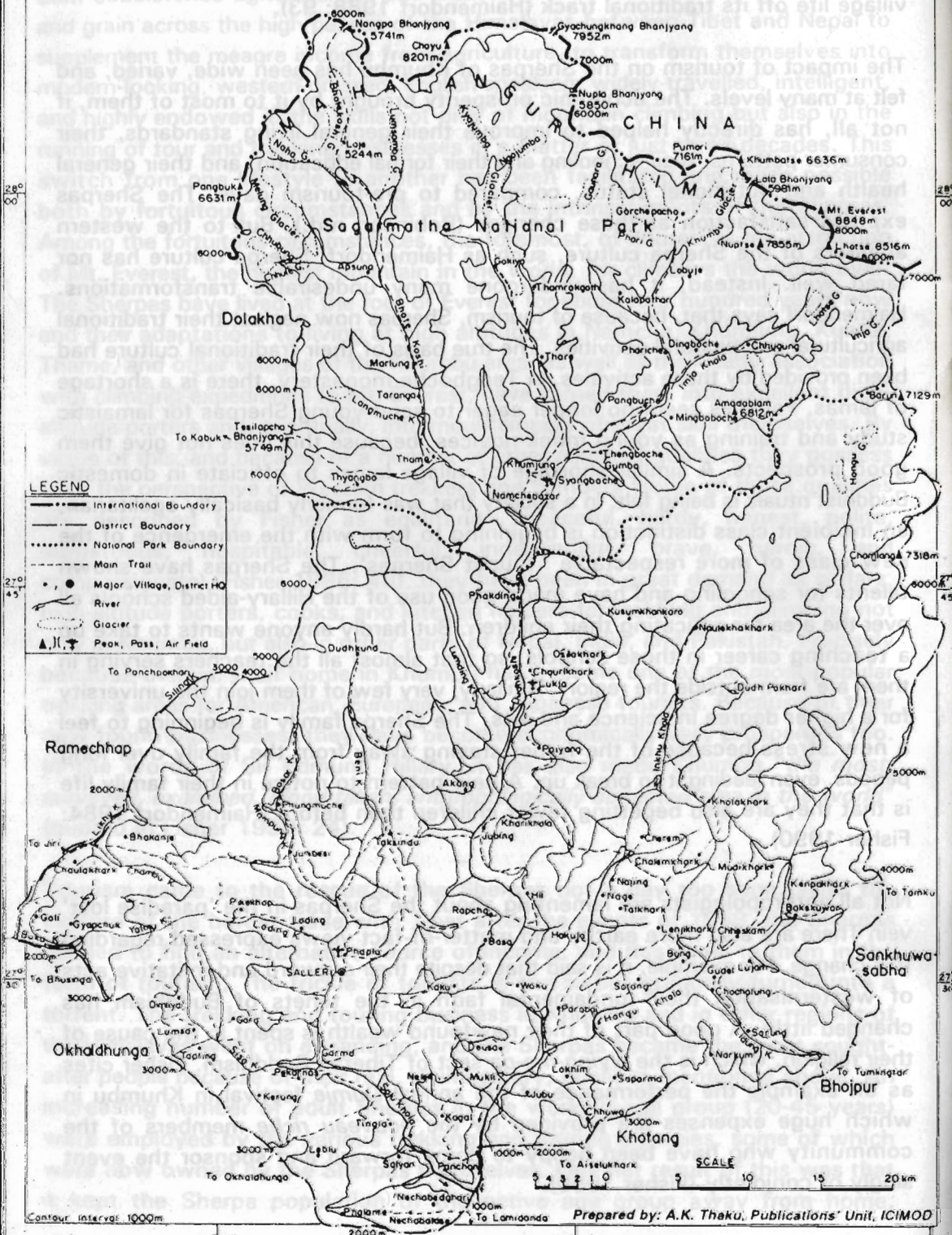
sometimes for as long as 10 months a year. This, according to Haimendorf, has radically affected the composition of Sherpa village society, throwing the village life off its traditional track (Haimendorf 1988: 93).

The impact of tourism on the Sherpas of Khumbu has been wide, varied, and felt at many levels. The economic prosperity brought by it to most of them, if not all, has directly helped to improve their general living standards, their consumer patterns, their schooling and their formal education, and their general health and nutritional status, compared to pre-tourism days. The Sherpas express satisfaction at these changes (Robinson n.d.). But to the western admirers of the Sherpa culture, such as Haimendorf, Sherpa culture has not fared well. Instead, it has undergone many undesirable transformations. Haimendorf says that, because of tourism, Sherpas now neglect their traditional agricultural and pastoral activities. The true basis of their traditional culture had been provided by these activities. In Tengboche monastery, there is a shortage of lamas. Families seem no longer eager to send young Sherpas for lamaistic study and training as young monk-novices, because this does not give them good prospects. A similar shortage of village lamas to officiate in domestic Buddhist rituals is being felt. In a society that was formerly basically egalitarian, an incipient class distinction is beginning to form with the emergence of the new class of more respectable 'tourist Sherpas'. The Sherpas have shown talents for schooling and have made good use of the Hillary-aided schools all over the area for educating their children. But hardly anyone wants to take up a teaching career in those schools, so that almost all the teachers serving in them are from outside the region. Similarly, very few of them join the university for a higher degree in science and arts. The Sherpa family is beginning to feel a new stress because of the father staying away from the family over long periods, even leading it to break up. A new pattern to notice in their family life is that they are also begetting fewer children than before (Haimendorf 1984: Fisher 1990).

Not all anthropologists are lamenting about the Sherpas in the 'paradise lost' vein. There are also more earthy and matter-of-fact views expressed regarding this change. For example, it is said that despite their outward and imitative acts of westernisation their fundamental faith in the tenets of Buddhism has changed little. A good part of their newfound wealth is spent in the cause of their religion, which is the *Nying-ma-pa* sect of Tibetan Buddhism. Fisher cites as an example the performance of the annual *Dumje* festival in Khumbu in which huge expenses are provided by the *nouveau riche* members of the community who have been happy to come forward and sponsor the event singly or conjointly (Fisher 1990).

SOLUKHUMBU DISTRICT

Major Trails and Trekking Routes



From the above, the conclusion to draw seems to be that the Sherpa culture *per se* has not suffered any major set back apart from the normal process of culture change which has been affecting it as with any other culture. What seems at greater risk however, is the environment of Khumbu and the Everest region. The most serious dimension of the environmental degradation there is presented by the rapid depletion of trees and alpine forests. Practically every house on the roadside in Khumbu, along the way to the Everest Base Camp, has been turned into a tourist lodge, and all these houses need to keep a good fire going to keep the tourists warm and well fed. In a study on the sustainable development of tourism, Pitamber Sharma has shown that the ratio of per capita consumption of local resources by tourists, in which fuelwood is one main item, is still favourable along other trekking trails, apart from Khumbu (Sharma 1992a: 115-116). The other major problem contributing to environmental pollution arises from the discarded waste and garbage left by the climbing expeditions and trekkers all over the area, all the way up the slopes of Everest. The recently reported completion of a mini-hydel project in Namche with the help of Austrian aid is not expected to offset the felling of trees, because the amount of electricity generated from it is not sufficient to heat the houses there.