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.