AN EMPTY NEST

Tsering Lhamo labored up the steep incline leading to her village. A taut sling pressing against her forehead bore the weight of a sack filled with grain she had just roasted and ground into flour at a water mill down by the river. Her slow, methodical steps contrasted with strenuous breathing and rivulets of sweat running down her cheeks. The hint of a smile crossed Tsering Lhamo’s face when she encountered us on the trail. We helped steady her load as she slipped the sling over her head, lowered the sack onto a rock, and exhaled loudly in relief. Friction marks across her forehead bore witness to the arduous labor that embodies her daily subsistence. As we would learn, such a mark epitomizes the contrast parents foresee between their lives and the potential lives their children can achieve through education, a disparity captured by the oft-recited expression “Better a pen in hand than a rope across the forehead.”

“We are well, elder sister?” we asked. “I’m fine,” she murmured without much conviction. Tsering Lhamo was widowed at a relatively young age. Now she lives alone in the village because years ago she sent her only daughter to a boarding school and her only son to a monastery in Kathmandu, the nation’s capital that takes days to reach on precarious footpaths. Neither of her children envisions returning to the village, yet Tsering Lhamo never complains about the substantial workload she
now shoulders. Her suffering is a direct result of the decision she made to create pathways for her children toward more comfortable and less physically demanding lives.

Tsering Lhamo is both an anomaly and a harbinger in her village. Her status as an elderly person who lives alone is not unprecedented. Some couples have no children; others endure the tragedy of witnessing all their children die before reaching maturity. Some men and women, born into poverty, remain single their entire lives because they lack the requisite assets or social status to marry. Tsering Lhamo’s case is unusual today because she is a mother, yet neither of her children lives nearby. Most people her age live with, or near, adult sons or daughters who can be counted on for support. Given today’s outmigration trend, it is reasonable to predict that more parents will end up like her.

We later met Tsering Lhamo’s son, Dzamling Dorje, who is a monk living in a large, well-endowed monastery in Kathmandu. Slight of frame and sporting a wispy beard, he bears a striking resemblance to Nubri’s lamas of yore whose images are carved on stones marking auspicious sites along mountain trails. In fact, some of those images are his ancestors, for he comes from a lineage of lamas that first migrated to Nubri five generations ago. Unlike his father, who resided in the village as a ngagpa (householder lama), Dzamling Dorje took a vow of celibacy and now lives in a community of monks pursuing the study of Buddhism at its highest level. It was not his choice to become a monk, for he was sent to the monastery by his mother right after his father died. Dzamling Dorje explained to us,

It was very difficult in the beginning. I came down here a few months after my father passed away and I was sad about the loss of my father. The journey from the village in those days was very difficult because the trail was very bad so it took ten to twelve days. Then there was the problem of language since I spoke only Nubri dialect. My mother returned to the village a few days after I became a monk. I had to part with my mother not long after I lost my father, and I was in a totally new place. I had a very hard time. It was very hard for about a year, so I could not focus too much on my education. But as I became used to the new environment, it became less difficult. Eventually the thought of returning home was not that strong, but I missed my mother very much.

Dzamling Dorje adjusted to his new environment and now thrives as a teacher of younger students. When we visited him, he invited us inside and offered us tea with the grace and refinement of a man who devotes his life to learning. His spartan room contained a mattress on the floor
flanked by a low table supporting rosary beads, an open scripture book, and his personal tea cup covered by a silver lid to keep flies at bay. We removed our shoes and sat on the mattress as he placed a small, square carpet on the ground, where he then sat cross-legged. After exchanging small talk, we began the interview with our usual questions regarding his pathway to religion. Eventually we came to the matter of household succession and asked if he was concerned about his mother being alone in the village. Dzamling Dorje replied,

Yes, I am definitely concerned about this. On the one hand, I am a monk and have my own monastic obligations, while on the other hand I am the only son of my mother. Therefore, it is like one person having to fulfill two different responsibilities in life. It is a difficult situation. I can’t stay in the village because my place is in the monastery and my responsibility is to teach the younger monks. Living in the monastery, I am reminded often about my filial duties to my mother. I try to help her in whatever way I can. It becomes especially problematic when she gets sick. For instance, one time my mother suddenly fell ill. It was a serious health situation requiring medical rescue by helicopter. She ended up staying at the hospital for one month, and only returned to the village after resting in Kathmandu for another three months. It was very difficult under such circumstances. She is alone in the village and must take care of the large landholding that my late father left behind. She complains sometimes about the difficulties she is facing. But I can’t be of much help since I am a monk.

My mother sometimes asks me to visit her in the village and says it is okay if I don’t want to come back for good. So, I try to visit her in the village whenever I find time. When I do visit, my mother does not mention marriage to me. But most of the elders raise this issue because, in our village tradition, the continuation of the lineage is highly stressed. Since I belong to a lama’s lineage, if I don’t marry, our lineage will come to an end. Although I have a sister, we only count paternal descent when it comes to the continuation of the lineage. That is why people in the village are highly concerned. I have taken a religious vow of celibacy and would very much like to continue this religious life. So, there is a clash of interest between religious and worldly life.

Dzamling Dorje’s reluctance to take on the leadership of his household, the customary duty of an eldest son, has left his mother to preside over an empty nest. Tsering Lhamo does not press the matter; like other parents in Nubri she is inured to the hardships of life in an alpine environment and is determined that her children not face a similar fate. Taking advantage of new opportunities to attain religious and secular education, parents nowadays send most of their children out of the valley. By making sacrifices to ensure better futures for their offspring, they
increase the precariousness of their own lives, drastically reducing the household labor force and unleashing the prospect of fending for themselves in old age. Meanwhile, young migrants are confronted with a dilemma. On the one hand, educational migration is a conduit for upward mobility. On the other hand, moving away at a young age can sever the roots of a cultural identity that is embedded within Nubri’s distinctive landscape and society.

The outmigration of youths for educational purposes started as a trickle in the 1980s, slowly gained momentum in the 1990s, and has since evolved into a full-scale torrent. This study documents a complex and evolving situation involving transnational flows of philanthropic capital, demographic disparities, and household-based migration decisions that have highly uncertain outcomes. It builds upon previous research by one of the coauthors (GC) at a time, the mid-1990s, when the migration phenomenon was just showing signs of gaining traction. A product of that research, *Tibetan Diary*, centered on the life course of individuals who spent the majority of their existence in Nubri; hence the subtitle *From Birth to Death and Beyond in a Himalayan Valley of Nepal*. Since then, migration for education has become a normative step in the life course and a defining feature of Nubri society. Borrowing Knight and Traphagan’s terminology (2003:13), the village has transformed from a *lifecourse* space where individuals are born, mature, and die, to a *lifephase* space where they spend only a portion of their lives.

Our purpose is not to lament a disappearing way of life or engage in a commentary on how indigenous cultures suffer under the relentless encroachment of capitalism, neoliberalism, or other manifestations of the world system. Rather, we aim to explore—through the eyes of Nubri residents themselves—the relationship between a changing landscape of educational possibilities, the emergence of a family management strategy that relies on outmigration, and the social and cultural ramifications of educational migration. The questions we seek to answer are the following: What motivates parents to send most of their children to faraway institutions for education? How do parents adapt their family management strategies in response to the new opportunities? How do social networks facilitate the movement of children from the village to specific destinations? In what ways do migration and education influence marital norms and the process of household succession? How does the quest for social and economic mobility simultaneously connect and detach young people from the social fabric of their natal villages? What are the social, cultural, economic, and demographic consequences of a
migration pattern that depletes a valley of its younger generation? In brief, what is happening, why is it happening, and what is at stake?

Although this book centers on the process of rural to urban migration, our perspective is firmly rooted in the village. We acknowledge that a turn toward problem-oriented research has led anthropologists away from village-based studies, yet agree with Herzfeld that “the role of the village has never been fully displaced from the discipline,” and that “the village itself was also never the conceptual as well as geographic isolate that so many anthropologists, too burdened to read back into the older literature, now imagine it to have been” (2015:338). As Sara Shneiderman argues, the village remains an important point of orientation even for those who move away. Therefore, it is more productive to view the village as “a flexible set of social relations . . . rather than as a fixed point on a map” (2015b:319). Throughout this book we demonstrate how the village continues to shape the lives of educational migrants despite dwindling prospects that they will return as full-time residents.

**THE ENDURING YET EPHEMERAL VILLAGE**

Nubri, a Buddhist enclave populated by roughly thirty-five hundred individuals in the upper stretch of the Buri Gandaki River in Gorkha District, Nepal, is composed of villages ranging in elevation from 6,900 to 12,500 feet. The lower section of the valley, called Kutang, is inhabited by descendants of people who migrated from neighboring areas and formed a unique society that bears many accoutrements of Tibetan culture such as the clothing style, written language, and form of Buddhism. What sets residents of Kutang apart is their distinct dialect, called *kukay*, or “language of Kutang,” which some playfully suggest means “stolen language” because of lexical borrowings from several neighboring vernaculars.

Across the river from Kutang lies Trok (elev. 7,500 ft.), the first Tibetan-speaking village in Nubri and a major focus of this book. Trok is situated on a gently sloping tableland that is parcelled into verdant fields of barley, maize, and potatoes. Houses are clustered into distinct neighborhoods surrounded by small groves of apple trees. Above Trok rises a cliff split by zigzagging ravines that look like they were cleaved by hand. In fact, Trok’s residents believe that a previous settlement had been buried under debris that a demoness scratched down from this rock face.
Moving up valley from Trok, one ascends through a narrow gorge and enters an environment where species of pine, birch, and rhododendron populate the lush forests. High summits dominate the landscape, most of which tower to 20,000 feet and above. At Rö, a large village in the shadow of Gang Pungyen (Mount Manaslu), the valley widens into a flat plain and takes a sharp turn to the north. Samdo, the highest village in the valley, lies just above tree line. Beyond Samdo the high passes cross into Tibet to the north and Manang District to the west.

To an outsider, a cursory glimpse of village life in Nubri can spawn visions of a bucolic past. Tourists on the lookout for “unspoiled” destinations are increasingly setting their sights on Nubri. In line with utopian conceptions of Tibetan Buddhist societies (Lopez 1998; Dodin and Räther 2001; Brauen 2013), trekking agencies depict Nubri as a place that has somehow eluded all vestiges of external intrusions. For example one agency proclaims, “Hidden behind Manaslu are some of the unexplored and unknown Tibetan villages that have seen little change since medieval times,” while another promises, “This fascinating trek [through Nubri] explores areas and the way of life unchanged for decades and maybe, even centuries.” These and other advertisements lure visitors with the prospect that a trek through the valley offers vicarious glimpses
of “primitive villages” filled with “primitive inhabitants” who maintain “primitive Tibetan influenced culture and tradition.” Visiting Nubri is an opportunity to venture back in time to a place where “all traces of modern civilization fade” in “villages where the harmonious agricultural life has remained unchanged for hundreds of years.”

Granted, tourism agencies disseminate romantic images of destinations as a means to pry money from potential clients. Such imaginative descriptions play upon people’s desire to witness the unpretentious lifestyle of a bygone era. What the depictions mask, however, is the adaptable nature of a society that has been in continuous flux for generations. One hundred sixty years ago the people of Nubri came to terms with a border realignment that shifted their political allegiance from Tibet, headed by a Buddhist cleric, to the Kingdom of Nepal, ruled by members of a Hindu warrior caste. Since then they have adjusted to several major political shake-ups, all the while coping with their subordinate status as Buddhist highlanders in a predominantly Hindu nation. For more than a century their subsistence has been highly dependent on farming potatoes and maize, two New World crops which entailed major adaptations in agriculture techniques, not to mention cultural perceptions of what constitutes a proper diet. The residents of Nubri saw their position as middlemen in the lucrative trans-Himalayan trade network erode with China’s assertion of power over Tibet in the 1950s, but then found equally profitable markets for their abundant timber in the 1980s and medicinal herbs at the turn of this century. Their religious affiliations have vacillated between, and combined elements of, several major Buddhist sects. Their religious institutions based on temples headed by married lamas are conceding power and influence to newly consecrated celibate monasteries. In the meantime, Nubri’s residents are now centered in the cross-hairs of evangelical Christian missionaries’ sights as they target Nepal’s highlanders for conversion (Coburn 2017).

Social, economic, and cultural practices in Nubri have never been stagnant, a point that is obvious to the valley’s residents who are versed in the Buddhist philosophy that every material object and immaterial phenomenon is characterized by impermanence (mitagpa nyid); the only inevitability is change itself. Today’s driver of social transformation is a quest for education—both secular and religious—that motivates parents to send their children outside of the valley. Unlike other drivers of social change such as political makeovers or the adoption of new crops, educational migration has resulted in the geographic dispersion of Nubri’s population, simultaneously opening new opportunities while
reshaping village life, family management strategies, and intergenerational relations.

MANAGING THE FAMILY THROUGH MIGRATION

The [reproductive history] surveys thus far had been typical: eight born, five died; ten born, three died; five born, one died. They did not prepare Tashi and me for the last survey of the day. We entered Karma’s home, which seemed poorer than most. She is in her early 60s, dignified yet disheveled. After completing the first part of the survey we noted that, unlike most households with residents her age, Karma and her husband do not co-reside with a married son. Rather, they live with a 42-year-old unmarried daughter. She was the first born, as we established when we began the reproductive history survey. Karma then listed eleven subsequent births, four sons and seven daughters. She clearly recalled the birth year of each, and the fate of each. With the exception of her third born, who died at age 23, all the others passed away in infancy or childhood. At the end of the interview Karma lamented, “I gave birth to twelve children. All but one of them died, but even she cannot help us much. She is lenba [deaf and mute]. We are very unfortunate. We have no children to help us in old age.” Tashi and I left feeling depressed. We hardly spoke the rest of the day. (GC field notes, February 1997)

In the spring of 1997 Tashi Döndrup and I (GC) conducted the first demographic study of Nubri, which revealed high infant and childhood mortality. We rarely encountered a woman who had not lost at least one child to a premature death. Our research also documented a high level of fertility, and no evidence that Nubri residents rely on herbal concoctions or coitus interruptus to avert pregnancy, emmenagogues and abortifacients to thwart gestation and parturition, or infanticide, abandonment, and “aggressive neglect” to cull unwanted children. People seemed more concerned with keeping children alive than preventing them from being born, perhaps because cases like Karma’s were a stark reminder that high mortality can jeopardize the future of every family. The absence of family planning methods and motivations, coupled with precarious survival odds, resulted in parents having from zero to ten surviving children.

For children who did reach maturity a combination of social customs and demographic outcomes circumscribed parents’ options in deciding who stayed home and who went elsewhere. Girls would generally leave through marriage to other households. It was also common to ask a local lama to ordain one daughter as a nun. She would keep her hair cropped short and don red clothing to indicate her status as a religious practitioner, but usually resided at home to help raise younger siblings and eventually
assist her parents in old age. A laywoman who remained at home was usually either somehow incapacitated, like the child of Karma, or the lone surviving child capable of running a household, in which case parents would arrange for her husband to join the household. Generally, when they retired, parents preferred that a male take over the household, a duty that conventionally fell to the eldest son. Younger sons could form an independent household if they inherited sufficient land or join their elder brother in a polyandrous union (the marital practice whereby one woman has more than one husband). It was uncommon for parents to send a child to a distant monastery; the majority of male religious practitioners married and lived in the village. In fact, most people born in Nubri remained in close proximity to their natal homes and kin.

The same cannot be said today due to the high rate of educational migration, a process that disperses children across Nepal and India. To understand what is happening, and why, we use the lens of anthropological demography because it provides a robust toolkit for analyzing the magnitude, motivations, and impacts of educational migration (Greenhalgh 1995; Kertzer and Fricke 1997). Following Greenhalgh’s call to “situate fertility,” we treat outmigration as a complex phenomenon that must account for historical, political, economic, and cultural factors that influence how people adapt when presented with new constraints and opportunities. Caroline Bledsoe, a practitioner of the interdisciplinary approach, notes the importance of highlighting “people’s active efforts to achieve demographic outcomes by restructuring household compositions and influencing children’s obligations, rather than acting strictly within the biological bounds or cultural norms that seem to be imposed upon them” (1990:97–98). In line with Bledsoe’s suggestion, our analysis centers on family management strategies, the idea that parents make decisions that affect the size and gender composition of the household. Sometimes decisions are calculated with long-term objectives in mind, other times they are spontaneous responses to immediate circumstances and short-term needs. In either case the decisions are made in order to fulfill social and economic objectives that include balancing a household’s resources and population, marriage, income diversification, inheritance, household succession, and other matters pertaining to cultural reproduction and the domestic economy. We do not posit a uniform and predictable strategy for all families in Nubri because different decisions emerge in relation to a range of variables such as child survivorship, socioeconomic status, household tragedies, happenstance, and idiosyncratic preferences. Furthermore, exogenous
factors at the national and international levels continually reshape the social, economic, and political landscapes within which parents make decisions that affect their children’s futures. The family management strategy is neither static nor predetermined by social and cultural norms. To the contrary, it is dynamic and responsive to emerging opportunities.

As Greenhalgh (1995) and Skinner (1997) point out, people can manipulate their household’s composition by regulating fertility (birth control), influencing survivorship (child control), and sending children out or bringing others in (child transfer). Regarding child transfer, very little scholarly attention has been focused on the role that migration can play in a family management strategy. Perhaps this is because adults are the primary focus of migration studies for well-founded reasons: they constitute the majority of migrants and are typically the ones who decide whether to move or stay put. Dobson notes that children tend to show up in the migration literature as something akin to “luggage,” tagging along with parents as they move from one place to another (2009:356). When children are the focus, research tends to center on exploitative practices associated with human trafficking and child labor (Kielland and Sanogo 2002; de Lange 2007), issues migrant children face in schooling (Adams and Kirova 2006), or migrant children as transnational actors who negotiate complex ethnic and gender identities (Parreñas 2005).

Nubri’s contemporary pattern of sending children for education certainly resembles a form of internal (within-country) migration. Children move from a village to a city, thereby joining a global rural-to-urban migration stream driven by asymmetrical development that leaves people in villages with limited opportunities. Their movement resembles “temporary, nonseasonal” migration that is usually undertaken by young, unmarried individuals who leave a place of origin to gain skills or education (Gonzalez 1961). More specifically, Nubri’s educational migration phenomenon resembles fosterage and other means of circulating children (Goody 1982; Bledsoe 1994; Leinaweaver 2008) because it involves moving young people with an eye toward providing them with better opportunities than their parents can provide (Isiugo-Abanihe 1985).

Beyond typology, Nubri’s educational migration phenomenon does not fit easily with some of the main theoretical perspectives on migration. For one, when viewed through the economist’s lens, migration is driven by rational decision makers seeking employment. In the case of Nubri, jobs may be a distant prospect, but the movers are children and the immediate goal is education. Second, most theoretical perspectives assume that migrants exercise varying degrees of agency (Brettell 2003),
yet many of Nubri’s child migrants are not even consulted about a potential move. But unlike the forced removal of indigenous children from their families so they could be educated and “civilized” (Trennert 1988; Adams 1995; van Krieken 1999), nobody is coercively separating Nubri’s children from their families. Rather, parents are willingly transferring children from the familiar village society to urban dormitories packed with strangers. Finally, the literature connecting school and migration centers mainly on the effect education has on people’s propensity to move after they graduate from a local institution (Baláz et al. 2004; Corbett 2007; Choy 2010; Dustmann and Glitz 2011). In the case of Nubri we are dealing not with youths who are moving after acquiring education, but with children whose parents send them outside the valley so they can become educated.

Some migration theories are helpful for analyzing Nubri’s educational migration phenomenon. Specifically, we use migration network theory to understand the social basis for the geographical patterning of movements. The theory starts with the premise that migrants rely on kinship, friendship, and place of origin to form ties with other migrants and maintain relationships with nonmigrants back home (Fawcett 1989; Massey 1990; Massey et al. 1993; Brettell 2000:106–13; Castles, de Haas, and Miller 2014:39–41). The connection between people in migration destinations and sending communities is a form of social capital that facilitates movement by reducing costs and risks. Case studies show how networks create nonrandom streams of migration that result in the growth of ethnic clusters in destination communities (Grey and Woodrick 2002; Brettell 2003).

Migration network theory is helpful for analyzing Nubri’s migration trend in several ways. For one, it encourages historical inquiry to unveil how social relationships between people in migration sending and destination areas evolved in the first place. In Nubri’s case, a longitudinal perspective is essential for understanding how religious networks, developed decades if not centuries ago, influence the preference for today’s parents to enroll their children in specific schools and monasteries. Furthermore, migration network theory allows us to examine the ways in which earlier migrants reduce costs and risks for subsequent migrants. For example in chapter 7 we explore how monks, once established in Kathmandu, play a key role in facilitating the admission of younger relatives into urban institutions.

To probe the momentum and magnitude of outmigration we employ the concept of cumulative causation, a process whereby “each act of
migration alters the social context within which subsequent migration
decisions are made” (Massey et al. 1993:451). “Contextual feedback”
mechanisms associated with migrant ideologies and behaviors help
increase the intensity of migration. For example, remittances to migrants’
households alter the socioeconomic balance in a sending community by
creating a sense of relative poverty among nonmigrants (de Haas 2010).
Through cumulative causation migration becomes “deeply ingrained into
the repertoire of people’s behavior, and values associated with migration
become part of the community’s values” (Massey et al. 1998:47). A “cul-
ture of migration” arises when migration becomes a normative expecta-
tion (Massey et al. 1993) that is not just economically motivated but also
becomes closely associated with social status (Kandel and Massey 2002;
Cohen 2004; Horváth 2008; de Haas 2010:1608). Today the majority of
Nubri’s youths are sent outside of their natal villages for education, comp-
pelling evidence that a culture of migration has become a reality.

From a methodological standpoint, the New Economics of Labor
Migration (NELM) takes the household, rather than the individual, as
the decision-making unit of analysis (Stark and Bloom 1985; Taylor
argue that migration decisions are made jointly by people who move
and others who stay put. Migration is therefore part of an overall
household strategy to diversify the allocation of resources, including the
labor force both short- and long-term. The household collectively shares
the costs and risks of migration, as well as the benefits (Massey et al.
1993). We use NELM as a starting point for investigating how educa-
tional migration can be understood as a calculated strategy. Parents in
Nubri are firmly committed to forging pathways so their children can
have better lives while at the same time are hoping for subsequent
returns through remittances and other forms of support. By ignoring
the term labor in NELM’s title, we acknowledge that migration deci-
sions are based on perceived future advantages from educating one’s
children, not on the immediate prospect of employment.

STUDYING LONGITUDINAL CHANGE

As practitioners of anthropological demography, we are well versed in the
advantages of merging quantitative demographic description with qualita-
tive social analysis. In this study we integrate disciplinary approaches to
facilitate “greater contextualization of the brute demographic events”
(Kertzer and Fricke 1997:24). By using population statistics as a starting
point and then summoning ethnographic perspectives to explore rationales and meanings, our explanatory mechanism strives to achieve a “thicker demography” (Fricke 1997) that navigates between statistical inference and people’s own testimonies. We concur with Laura Ahearn that a multimethod research approach can yield “a multifaceted account of social change that acknowledges complexities, contradictions, and indeterminacies” (2001:245). We also concur with Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf that any meaningful understanding of long-term change can only emerge through longitudinal research. In a 1983 interview by anthropologist Alan Mcfarlane, Fürer-Haimendorf reflects on the quandary a novice fieldworker encounters when intending to study long-term processes. He argues that the inexperienced fieldworker

wants to study the change. The change from what? Because he hasn’t seen what there was twenty years ago. If you really want to study social change, you must allow a certain period to elapse so that you can see the stages of change. Now, I think that it is very revealing to go back to the same society, see a different generation, possibly the same people, and see how are they when they are thirty years older or forty years older? Because we don’t remain the same, and so naturally Apatanis or Nagas don’t remain the same either."

Our own credentials for studying change in Nubri extend over the course of two decades. I (GC) began PhD fieldwork in Nubri from 1995 to 1997. As a novice ethnographer, I resided in the home of Tashi Dön-drup, an elderly bachelor who was my host, confidant, and key cultural interlocutor. By living with Tashi, learning the local vernacular, and gaining rapport with Nubri’s residents, I managed to conduct ethnographic research and gather socioeconomic and demographic data as well as reproductive histories of all women aged fifteen and older in six villages. The qualitative observations and interviews combined with the quantitative surveys from this initial fieldwork provide an empirical baseline for assessing subsequent changes.

After research stints in India, Kathmandu, and China’s Tibet Autonomous Region, I returned to Nubri for a reconnaissance trip in 2010 and was struck by the paucity of school-aged children, which led to our investigation of education and migration. The two of us traveled to Nubri in 2011 to interview parents about their family management strategies and economic conditions. During that trip we conducted participant observation and completed in-depth interviews with forty-three parents in two villages. Our purposive sample included parents who had sent at least one child to a school or a religious institution, as
well as the rare parents who had retained all of their children in the village. We selected single parents and married couples; some poor, others relatively wealthy. We used a semistructured interview schedule with core questions centering on rationales for sending children out of the village, networks people rely on to place children in specific schools or religious institutions, and strategies for ensuring household succession. We also photographed administrative documents and interviewed local leaders about village governance and history.

In 2012 Sienna Craig and I (GC) were co–principal investigators on a project led by biological anthropologist Cynthia Beall. This multisited project investigating the connection between genetic adaptation to high altitude and reproductive outcomes involved the collection of household surveys and reproductive histories of all women aged forty and above in three Nubri villages—Samdo, Rö, and Lö. In 2013 I returned on another project, led by biological anthropologist E.A. Quinn, to investigate associations between adaptation to a high-altitude environment, mother’s milk, and infant growth. The project’s demographic component allowed us to fill in blanks from the 2012 research by conducting reproductive history surveys with women under age forty in Samdo, Rö, and Lö, as well as household surveys and reproductive histories in two more villages, Li and Trok. We now had longitudinal data covering 1997 to 2013, allowing us to quantify the direction, magnitude, age, and gender components of demographic changes (Childs et al. 2014).

What we lacked, however, was the perspectives of the young migrants. In 2014, we returned to conduct interviews with migrants living in Kathmandu. We used a stratified purposeful sampling strategy to interview twenty-two people who had been sent to boarding schools, passed tenth grade, and are still living in the city, sixteen monks living in four different monasteries, and eight nuns in two nunneries. We also interviewed six older people who were some of the first to move to the city from Nubri. Our semistructured interview schedule was designed to elicit personal histories of migration and to probe migrants’ relationships with natal villages and family members, including experiences of visiting the village, career aspirations, thoughts about marriage, and plans for future migration. During subsequent visits to Nubri we completed the picture by interviewing former monks who had returned to lay life, and individuals who had completed secular education and now work in the valley.

The product of numerous research trips to Nubri is a robust data set that includes quantitative data from demographic surveys and reproductive histories, and qualitative data from participant observation and
in-depth interviews. The quantitative data helps track what is happening in demographic trends. Specifically, the reproductive history survey measures how many children are born, how many survive, and to what extent women are using birth control. The household survey records details on all individuals, including age, sex, education, and where they currently reside. Longitudinal analysis allows us to chart a decline in infant mortality, a rise in contraceptive usage, the first hints of a fertility transition, as well as the timing, direction, and magnitude of educational migration. Documenting these trends provides an empirical basis for using ethnographic research to address why they are happening. By examining the intentions and motivations that underlie people’s family management strategies, we can better understand the demographic processes.

THE HOUSEHOLD AS A UNIT OF ANALYSIS

As mentioned above, we adopt the household as a unit of analysis for migration decision making. In ethnographic research this choice can cause confusion and therefore merits an explanation. A unit of analysis is understood in the social sciences as the “who or what” of a study (Long 2004). By focusing on the household, we do not imply that an inanimate entity is determining who goes where. Nor are we suggesting that decisions are made in a democratic manner with equal input from all household members or by a patriarchal dictator who acts with altruistic intentions. Feminist scholars have demonstrated that both scenarios are implausible; gender-based differentials affect who holds more negotiating power in decision making within the household (e.g., Folbre 1986; England 1993), and women play a larger role than previously given credit for in household economic choices (e.g., Clark 1989; Lockwood 1989). Power dynamics among household members no doubt shape decision making, but normative views on who wields power should not be taken as a reliable predictor of how decisions are made, let alone the basis for modeling decision making.

To illustrate the interplay between ideology and agency, we start by recognizing that the Nubri household ethic is similar to the Tibetan corporate family model described by Goldstein (1971); individuals are expected to pursue opportunities that benefit the welfare of their coreresident kin in lieu of personal ambitions. The household head, usually an older male, holds considerable power. As the representative of the household in communal affairs, he is seen by the outside world as the dominant decision maker. From a normative standpoint the household
in Nubri is a collection of individuals who are prodded by the patriarch to collaborate for the sake of common prosperity. Good judgment coupled with selfless cooperation can help a harmonious household thrive, while bad choices and individualistic actions can lead to disgruntlement and poverty. This suggests that altruism is a guiding principle, at least for the economically successful household. Yet we still need to grapple with a question Wilk raised: “Do the members of a household act in their own self-interest, or are they behaving in an altruistic (or dominated) way, acting to further the interest of the group at the expense of their own?” (1989:25).

Chibnik criticizes the continuing tendency for scholars to orient household decision-making models around an altruistic head who other members align with out of self-interest. He asks a pertinent rhetorical question, “Does it not make more sense that most households consist of a number of people whose economic motives are a combination of altruism and self-interest?” (2011:137). We agree, and use Chibnik’s statement as a launching point to the approach we take in this study. We acknowledge that the corporate household—as an ideology—has a durable influence on how parents and children envision their long-term social and economic relationships. Yet we also realize that power is permeable; just because the patriarch represents the household in village councils does not mean he makes all decisions behind closed doors. A household is a social grouping in which multiple actors can influence decisions to varying degrees based on age, gender, willingness to take risks, and other attributes. We also appreciate that individuals are idiosyncratic, which makes households—as collections of individuals—even more so. Some people may fall in line with a patriarch’s decisions, while others pursue actions that do not necessarily support the corporate household ethos. Normative values provide an orientation for behavior, and perhaps some social pressure to follow conventions, but are not always a reliable predictor of actual decisions and actions.

In chapters 5–7 we present cases in which parents dictate migration decisions, especially when the migrant is too young to make a fuss or even comprehend what is happening. In some instances a husband and wife concur on a course of action, in others they disagree and one ends up overruling the other. We also present cases in which children who were not slated for school or a religious vocation pester their parents into sending them away or, in extreme cases, run away to accomplish their aims. To further complicate matters, elder siblings often pave migration pathways for younger siblings by encouraging parents to send
their brothers or sisters to the city. Claiming that one parent or the other wields all the migration decision-making authority in the household can be correct in some cases but totally inaccurate in others. Furthermore, people make migration choices in an environment of uncertainty, which is especially true in the case of educational migration. Parents may hope for or anticipate a certain outcome but must wait more than a decade to see how everything plays out. Therefore, suggesting that they make migration decisions with an altruistic eye toward benefiting the household is problematic because such decisions are based on an array of short- and long-term objectives that are buttressed by a mix of social, cultural, and economic rationales. We will revisit the issue of altruism versus self-interest in chapter 5.

Adopting the household as a unit of analysis does not come at the expense of more fine-grained analysis, for we have followed Bernard’s advice to collect data on the “lowest level unit of analysis possible” (2011:40), in this case the individual. In this study the household and the individual are complementary rather than exclusionary units of analysis. For example, each data entry sheet of our demographic survey covers a single household. We sought to interview the household head, recognizing that he or she is the person with the most detailed knowledge about the household. Although we asked some household-related questions about landholdings and herd sizes, most of our questions generated data on individuals, for example each person’s marital status, educational attainment, and current whereabouts. Our in-depth interviewing strategy then centered on individuals in relation to the household. Specifically, we asked parents their reasons for sending a particular child to a certain institution, the social networks they drew upon to gain admission, and their hopes or plans for how that child will make future contributions to the well-being of other household members. We then asked young migrants to reflect on their own migration experiences and future aspirations, and how they envision their role (or lack thereof) in the future of their natal households. In both the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of the research, we can disaggregate our data to analyze an individual migrant’s experience or aggregate it to assemble a complex picture of how household composition and intergenerational dynamics unfold over time. Scaling upward also allows us to assess the magnitude and direction of the migration stream, and to contrast demographic trends in Nubri with Tibetan exiles living in Nepal and India—a variance that turns out to be crucial for understanding where Nubri fits into the supply-and-demand chain of institutional recruitment.
As a meso-level unit of analysis the household is a link between macro-level processes and the individual life courses of migrants. Focusing on the household allows us to see how it operates over time as a seemingly cohesive yet continually fragmenting unit, while never losing sight of educational migrants who may live elsewhere but are still considered members of the domestic unit. The focus also allows us to analyze socioeconomic and cultural practices that bind households together into communities (chapter 3), and how transnational processes that drive educational migration threaten the viability of communities by depleting households of key members (chapter 10). However, not everyone agrees on what actually constitutes a household, or how it should be defined. In chapter 3 we detail precisely how the household is classified by the people of Nubri, and revisit the household concept from the perspectives of anthropology and demography. The purpose is to stress the advantages of adopting an emic definition of household instead of a standardized classification favored by demographers.

In the following chapters we consider educational migration to be an endogenous response to exogenous forces. Sending children to distant institutions has evolved into a key component of a family management strategy that is driven by the prospect of social and economic rewards but that entails risk, uncertainty, and unforeseen consequences. The book is organized as follows. Chapter 2 situates Nubri historically as a place that gradually became part of the broader Tibetan Buddhist cultural world through the migration of lamas and establishment of temples. Social networks that developed over time and are based on religious affiliation set the stage for the direction of today’s migration. In chapter 3 we discuss Nubri households in the context of a local administrative system that binds people to the village through taxes and communal obligations, but also encourages men to learn liturgical skills that give them seasonal mobility and connects them to the larger Buddhist community in Nepal. Chapter 4 details the resurrection of Tibetan institutions in exiles and documents demographic changes in Nubri by analyzing the interrelated trends of fertility, mortality, and migration. We argue that population trends are key to understanding why Nubri became a recruiting ground for Tibetan schools and monasteries. Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8—the ethnographic core of the study—examine the role educational migration plays in parents’ family management strategies, the social networks that facilitate rural to urban migration, as well as migrants’ perspectives on the relocation experience, connections with family, and future aspirations.
Chapter 9 centers on the ways educational migration is impacting inter-generational relations via marriage and household succession, while chapter 10 explores a range of demographic and social changes that are occurring in the wake of outmigration. Through the approach of anthropological demography, our objective is to employ quantitative and qualitative data in a mutually reinforcing manner to investigate the causes and consequences of a migration pattern that is rapidly transforming every aspect of Nubri society.