

The Sherpas Transformed: Towards A Power-Centred View of Change in the Khumbu

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INTRODUCTION

"Listen, O Lord of the meeting rivers. Things standing shall fall but the moving ever shall stay." ----- Basavanna

The overthrow of the isolationist Rana regime in Kathmandu in 1951 and the Chinese annexation of Tibet in 1959 signalled significant socio-cultural, political and economic changes for communities throughout the high Himalayas of Nepal. For the Sherpas of Khumbu, in N.E. Nepal, such changes were compounded by the advent of mountaineering and subsequent mass tourism in the mid 1960's. In 1984 von Furer-Haimendorf published an account of these changes, based on over 30 years of contact with the Sherpas. In good structural-functionalist tradition, von Furer-Haimendorf focuses attention on what he calls the "transformation" of Sherpa culture and society, from one of harmony and equilibrium to one of conflict and disintegration. It is a personal and sensitive account; but it is also a sad and somewhat simplistic one. The diachronic perspective which such a "re-study" promises is betrayed by the portrayal of an idealised, static past and a future clouded in passivity and pessimism.

In this paper I shall present the case for a more optimistic, power-centred view of change in the Khumbu, based on my recent fieldwork in the village of Thame.¹ In so doing, I also offer a critical review of von Furer-Haimendorf's approach to change. Sherpas are not, I suggest, merely passive victims of change. Far from losing, or rejecting their culture and identity, Sherpas are actively engaged in reconstructing it. A process of "consolidation" is occurring, I suggest, alongside that of "transformation"; is a historically ongoing, perhaps even empowering, and in any case necessary response to the circumstances in which Sherpas find themselves today. Changes cannot be fully understood without reference to continuities, and continuity is often the complement - if not the key ingredient - to a positive experience of and strategy for change. It is this dialectical relationship between change and continuity, between transformation and consolidation, between structure and action which lies, I suggest, at the heart of change in the Khumbu today.

VON FURER-HAIMENDORF'S ACCOUNT OF CHANGE

Von Furer-Haimendorf accepts uncritically the view of early Sherpa history which holds that the Sherpas originally came from the province of Kham in Southeast Tibet some 400 years ago, crossed the high pass of Nangpa La that separates the Tibetan plateau from the mountains and middle hills of Nepal, and settled in the Khumbu region, moving down to

Pharak and Solu only in subsequent migrations (1984: 27). He also suggests that Sherpas themselves know (and care) little about their post-settlement history (1984:26), and refers to the introduction of the potato in the mid-19th century (1984:14), the introduction of monasticism early in the 20th century and the activities of particular religious figures (1984: 84-86) as being the most significant events in Sherpa history prior to 1950.

Among the various events affecting the Sherpas over the last 30 years or so have been the decrease in trade with Tibet as a result of the Chinese takeover; the subsequent influx of Tibetan refugees, the increasing influence of monasticism and need for alternative economic pursuits, the increasing influence of the central Nepalese government in Kathmandu (including the introduction of a panchayat system of local government); the introduction of Western medicine and education, and, perhaps most significant of all, the establishment of lucrative mountaineering and tourist industries. The opportunities in these industries became available at just that time when they were most required, i.e. when trade with Tibet had declined. Unlike the Thakalis and other high Himalayan groups dependent on trade for their survival, the Sherpas were able to stay in the Khumbu and even prosper (see Von Furer-Haimendorf, 1975).

The effects of such economic and political changes on Sherpa social organisation and culture however have been significant. Von Furer-Haimendorf draws particular attention to what he regards as a radical reordering of socioeconomic relations and statuses brought about by tourism and the sudden absence of young men from the Khumbu for extended periods. The result according to von Furer-Haimendorf has been radical changes in marriage patterns, family structures, labor patterns, settlement patterns, distribution of wealth, political structures and even fertility rates. Von Furer-Haimendorf also identifies a deterioration in traditional Sherpa culture and even morality (due in part to prolonged contact with Westerners and their values while on expeditions and treks).

The net result of such changes, according to von Furer-Haimendorf, is a "transformation" so profound that his earlier monograph on the Sherpas (*The Sherpas of Nepal*, 1964).

"must now be regarded as largely outdated and of only historical interest." (1984:x)

He acknowledges a

"feeling of disappointment and sadness to see this seemingly ideal society and life style transformed ...the Sherpas I knew in the 1950's were happier than they or their descendants are in the 1980's." (1984:xi)

CRITIQUE OF VON FURER-HAIMENDORF'S ACCOUNT

Now such a response is perhaps understandable, given von Furer-Haimendorf's unique personal experience of change in the Khumbu. In the early 1950's the Sherpas had only just come into contact with the Western

world. Von Furer-Haimendorf was clearly impressed by their apparent compassion, generosity and cooperativeness. His book is, in part, a personal statement of respect for such values and a plea that they be maintained in the face of what are, without question, real and important changes. As such the book has undoubted value. Furthermore, his account of change in the Khumbu is the only one currently available. (Jim Fisher's provocative personal account is as yet unpublished). Certainly the work of Ortner (1970, 1975, 1978) and Paul (1970, 1977, 1982) does not demonstrate any greater awareness of or sensitivity to the question of change.

But is von Furer-Haimendorf's account of transformation really accurate? And perhaps just as importantly, is it helpful? I would question both the "seemingly ideal" picture that von Furer-Haimendorf's functionalism gives us of Sherpas in the 1950's, and the linear, imposed and essentially negative picture he has given us of changes since then. Change is a far more ambiguous and complex force than von Furer-Haimendorf allows, and I wish to demonstrate this both substantively--in a review of some of the ethnographic material he presents--and more formally in a critique of the theoretical framework of change in which the ethnographic material is presented.

a) Review of the ethnographic material

There is a good deal of evidence for the view that large-scale settlement of the Khumbu may have followed settlement in Solu rather than preceded it as von Furer-Haimendorf and other ethnographers (e.g. Oppitz 1968) suggest. The Khumbu was a *beyul* (sacred hidden valley) for the Tibetans, and a pilgrimage place for the Rais. Sherpa legends tell how the goddess Chomolongma sent the first settlers down to Solu to make their seeds (clans?) strong there first. Many of the "newer" Sherpa clans (see Oppitz, 1968) such as Shenggu are more predominant in the Khumbu than in Solu, and the increasing differentiation between the lama and the *lhawa* (roughly translatable as shaman) roles (encouraged by the expanding politico-religious influence in the 18th and 19th centuries of the relatively "orthodox" Gelugpa sect in central Tibet) is less pronounced in Solu than in Khumbu. Furthermore, there is evidence that the early Khumbu settlers were marginal (socially, economically or both) to Solu Sherpa society, or perhaps motivated by the entrepreneurial opportunities that lay implicit in the interstitial position of Khumbu on the trade route between Tibet and Solu. Why else would people choose to settle in such a harsh environment? The history of the relatively recent settlement of Manidingma in upper Solu, and of the Rolwaling Valley by Sherpas marginal to Thame society provides further support for this theory of settlement. Finally, census figures suggest that the massive increase in population in the Khumbu relative to Solu since the mid 19th century cannot be explained by high fertility rates alone. A more active, socioeconomically motivated history is implied by this evidence. Contrary to von Furer-Haimendorf's assertions, Khumbu Sherpas do possess a number of written genealogies and documents concerning their history, some of which were shown to me in Thame. These suggest that the Khumbu may well have been primarily a pilgrimage place in the past, with only 2 or 3 small communities linked to *gondas* (religious centres) until six or so generations ago.

Von Furer-Haimendorf's portrayal of a static, "seemingly ideal" and more "happy" past is highly problematic. Evidence of serious intrafamilial, intravillage and regional conflicts and intrigues appear frequently in oral histories, and many of the conflicts still smouldering today pre-date contact with the Western world in the 1950s.² Von Furer-Haimendorf talks of the "basic homogeneity of Sherpa society ... all Sherpas are considered of equal status" (1984:26). Status differences however (and the fundamental significance of status in ordering socioeconomic and cultural interactions), gender inequalities, the division of the universe into "high" and "low", rules of commensality, individualism and the emphasis on the nuclear family, greed, jealousy and so on are all long-established facts of life in Sherpa society.³

Von Furer-Haimendorf's suggestion that

"the sudden affluence of successful porters brought to the fore men of a class which used to live in the shadow of the rich families of inherited wealth" (1984:65)

is based on the assumption that it was the landless who benefitted most from the infusion of wealth offered by tourism, since it was they who were most able to leave the village for extended periods on expeditions and treks. It is important to remember however that the wealthy--who, as traders, were used to lengthy absences from home--are in no way denied the opportunities available in tourism. In fact the majority of Sherpa-controlled tourist companies are today owned and managed by Sherpas from traditionally wealthy families. Wealth is perhaps more important to the achievement of status than it was in the past, but it is still not a sufficient condition, and in any case wealth is still measured in terms of traditional gifts/commodities--gold, livestock, and religious objects--as much as by cash or down jackets. The value of the latter of course is more susceptible to inflation. Fisher (1986) reports that the price of potatoes in the Khumbu increased 1150% between 1964 and 1985, while porters' wages rose by only 400% in the same period.⁴

Von Furer-Haimendorf writes that.

"the old values of a society virtually free of competition and rivalry no longer fit an economic system which encourages individuals to consider acquisition of money their first priority." (1984:112)

Much of the trade with Tibet might be, for present purposes, labelled "subsistence" trade. von Furer-Haimendorf himself acknowledges that "the whole structure of Sherpa economics favored the entrepreneur" (1984:65). Certainly my proposed reworking of the history of Sherpa settlement in the Khumbu suggests important entrepreneurial motivations. The traditional economy is best represented, I suggest, not as a static, harmonious gift exchange economy, but as comprised of a balance -- unequal, capricious,

and changing--but a balance nevertheless between a gift exchange economy at the center and a more entrepreneurial one at the periphery. Such entrepreneurship was facilitated in part by the fact that it did not appear to significantly exploit or depend upon fellow Sherpas.⁵ To the extent that entrepreneurship was always possible, the opportunity for active manipulation of the balance between gift exchange and commodity exchange has always been present and is not wholly a product of tourism.

Nevertheless it is important to point out that although Sherpas have a long history of entrepreneurial activity they are perhaps less entrepreneurial today than opportunities might suggest (and which the neo-classical economic approach would predict).⁶ Sherpas themselves do not claim to be good entrepreneurs. An important reason for this is the apparent lack of interest in entrepreneurial cooperation with each other--not because Sherpas don't trust each other, but rather because the threats to such trust inherent in entrepreneurial activity are simply not considered worth it. The maintenance of relations remains fundamentally important. Sherpas continue to behave "economically" in certain contexts and at certain times, but this in no way exhausts their behavior. The formalist notion of the "economic man" is not applicable to the Sherpa, either in the past or the present.

Von Furer-Haimendorf is particularly concerned at the number of young men leaving the Khumbu to seek their fortune in Kathmandu and in trekking, at the expense of their families and traditional socioeconomic and cultural activity (1984:64,68). Many of the young people I have talked with however--far from rejecting traditional Sherpa social and cultural values--are keen to reinforce them.⁷ The economic vulnerability inherent in a dependence on tourism and mountaineering for income is being recognized.⁸ (These include the increasing number of fatalities on expeditions, fluctuations in the number of tourists, dependence on unpredictable environmental and external political factors, the increasing use by tourists of non-Sherpa guides and porters, the increasing pressure on natural resources and so on). There is increasing support for the view that socioeconomic reform and prosperity does not need to proceed at the expense of traditional culture and identity. Many young people (including those whose families had long ago migrated to Darjeeling) are now returning to the Khumbu, marrying and building houses there.

In a survey I conducted of over 50 randomly selected Sherpas currently living and working in Kathmandu (90% of whom were under 40 years of age) 84% had returned to Khumbu at least twice over the last five years and nearly half returned every year. The main reasons given for these visits were visiting family and friends, participating in religious and cultural festivals, and pursuing their responsibilities as participants in a complex and demanding gift exchange network. Only 9% of my sample said they did not intend to live in Solukhumbu permanently in the future. There is in fact considerable evidence for the view that seasonal migration may serve to maintain the traditional sociocultural order rather than "transform" it (a view now emerging from migration studies elsewhere in the Third World).

The onerous but all-important reciprocal obligations inherent in the system of cooperative work groups (e.g. *lamin*) are taken very seriously. (A close friend's family participated in over 20 such groups over a 12 month period.⁹ Similarly, responsibilities as participants in the gift exchange networks (e.g. *larke*) are taken very seriously (A close friend's mother was unable to return to the Khumbu from Kathmandu by plane because of heavy snows and thus a helicopter was chartered--at exorbitant cost--so that she could fulfil the household's *larke* responsibilities at the appropriate time.¹⁰ Rotated villagewide hospitality responsibilities (e.g. *lava*)¹¹ and leadership responsibilities (e.g. *nawa*) are also taken very seriously. Recent village meetings in Thame reestablished the authority of traditional controllers of land and grazing.

Von Furer-Haimendorf asserts that traditional community management systems for the protection of forests (implemented by *shingnaua*) were highly effective, and he implies that the establishment of the National Park, by abolishing these systems, was responsible for the current deforestation crisis (1984:6). In fact the Park, with the support of the Sherpas, is currently actively promoting the reintroduction of the *shingnaua* system.¹² The Sherpas themselves are well aware of the significance of the threats to their environment, from local Sherpas as well as from tourists and "development" projects. The disastrous Austrian-sponsored hydroelectricity project, for example, which was built without permission from the National Park, and without consultation with the local community, effectively destroyed hectares of forest before being washed away in a flood without ever providing electricity.¹³ In fact many Sherpas have commented to me that the longterm environmental impacts of development and tourism may prove to be more serious than the sociocultural impacts.

Religion continues to enjoy considerable support in the Khumbu. Community-wide festivals such as *Bum Tso*, *Dumji*, and *Mani Rimdu*--are attended in large numbers (with nearly a third of the local population attending the 1986 *bum tso* at Tangboche.¹⁴ Donations to the *gondas* (monasteries) for their upkeep, for the performance of festivals, and for the support of individual monks are considerable. Nearly Rs. 200,000 (Aust. \$ 13,000) was collected, for example, to hold the *bum tso* at Tangboche in 1987. In Thame, household expenditure patterns show that nearly 20% of income will be devoted towards monastery-related activities, with a further 18% on domestic religious activities.¹⁵ Many new *Thang* (private chapels) are being built¹⁶ and new *mani* stones and *kani* (entrances to *gondas*) are being constructed. The demand for the services of monks to perform domestic rituals is such that monks complain they have no time to attend to their own religious pursuits.

In addition to a resurgence of interest in "orthodox" Buddhism however, and the (more Gelugpa-influenced) monastic establishment (which von Furer-Haimendorf does acknowledge)¹⁷ there is an important corresponding rise in interest in and use of the more pragmatic "shamanic" components of Sherpa religion (which von Furer-Haimendorf virtually ignores, and which Ortner (1970, 1978) and Paul (1970, 1976, 1977) even deny). Sherpas still

consider themselves loyal followers of the Nyingmapa sect even though many elements of the Gelugpa sect can today be found in monastic rituals and ideas. Of course the division between "orthodox" and "shamanic" traditions of Sherpa religion (reflecting such well-worn theoretical anthropological dichotomies as the Great Tradition/Little Tradition) is itself a heuristic device only and one not known to the Sherpas themselves. The actual day to day practise of religion is far more complex than this division allows. A more accurate, useful--and indigenous--approach is to regard the various beliefs, practitioners and practises as representing strands of a single braid, utilized for different purposes on different occasions. The historical relationship of interdependence between monks, married village-based lamas, (banzin), *lhawa* (shamans), *minung* (diviners) and other religious functionaries persists, albeit in a modified form.¹⁸

While "orthodox" Buddhist deities are accorded a higher existential status (by "orthodox" Buddhism!) than the local *yul lha* (local gods), *lu* (serpent deities), *shrendi* (spirits) of various types, and *dui* (demons), they are no more "real". In fact it is the local gods and spirits who--because of their closer proximity to humanity--are considered to have most interest in and influence on day to day life. The high gods may be less capricious but they are also less interested and thus less manipulable. Even young educated Sherpas who claim to be less affected by the local spirits (because their relations with them are more tenuous as result of Western education and ritual neglect) nevertheless sometimes complain that they are unable to control them and use them when required.

The tantric Nyingma sect followed by the Sherpas stresses the complementarity and, ultimately, the unity of the transcendental/other worldly and pragmatic/this worldly aspects of religion. This interdependence and interpenetration still characterises the actual practise of Sherpa religion.¹⁹ It is therefore misleading, I suggest, to neglect the active pragmatic aspect, to see it as either incidental to or in conflict with a distinct dominant "orthodox" tradition.

Von Furer-Haimendorf (and Ortner 1978:32 and Paul 1970:583, 1976:141)²⁰ has suggested that the number of traditional healers has declined in recent years. However, in 92% of the 400 or so episodes of illness that I collected data on in the Thame valley, at least 1 traditional Sherpa healer was utilised, and in 53% of cases between 2-4 such healers were consulted.²¹ Furthermore, it is important to remember that, according to the Sherpas, the number of healers is determined no so much by demand as by whether individuals are "called" by the gods to the vocation. Such callings are regarded as involuntary and cannot be ignored. Fluctuations in the number of healers do not necessarily correlate therefore with changes in attitudes towards traditional culture. Such fluctuations appear to have occurred throughout Sherpa history.

Von Furer-Haimendorf is correct in identifying the significant and pervasive influence of relations in ordering social and cultural life. According to the Sherpas all things in the world--people, gods, events, even inanimate objects and emotions--are inexorably interconnected within a framework of complex, and powerful relations. The establishment and maintenance of these relations is the prime motivation and standard of

behaviour; the lowest common denominator to order and meaning; the *sina qua non* of existence. But just as existence is problematic and changing, so too are relations.²² In ignoring this fact von Furer-Haimendorf has confused interconnectedness with harmony, and change with exploitation.

In fact it is possible to argue that the emphasis on generosity and hospitality in Sherpa society (and in Mahayana Buddhist communities in general) stems directly from the society-wide recognition of the pervasiveness of jealousy and other forms of negativity in human nature, and the potential for disorder that this implies. Giving need not be altruistic, concerned as it often is with the accumulation of *sonam* (individual merit). Indeed, it is often the wealthy, and those with high social and religious status who benefit from acts of giving rather than the poor.

Hospitality is essential to the maintenance of relations--both between people and with the gods--but it is also highly problematic. Hospitality is all about manipulation and is an important source of *tuk* (poisoning), *pem* (projections of negativity) and so on. Even slight breaches of etiquette by either donor or receiver can cause "bad" relations.

The Buddhist ideal of compassion (*nyingje*) is very important to the Sherpas, but it often comes into play only within the context of the framework of relations on which social existence is dependent. There are many stories of individuals and families suffering because compassion was not shown them, because of their social insensitivities and misdemeanors.²³ In sum, although relations are fundamentally important, they are never static, never given, and they in no way guarantee equality or harmony. Life is not wholly determined by relations; Sherpas are actively engaged in reconstructing and manipulating the complex webs of significance that give life both its meaning and its unpredictability.

There are a number of other difficulties with von Furer-Haimendorf's book. Firstly, he makes little use of the vast amount of other research available on the Sherpas²⁴ (although he refers to the work of other ethnographers in other communities in Nepal).²⁵ This is a serious weakness, I think, for the quality of some of this research is very high and provides an important and necessary complement to von Furer-Haimendorf's own material. Ortner (1978) for example, reacting against von Furer-Haimendorf's (1964), Durkheimian portrayal of harmony, egalitarianism, and communality, has focused attention instead on the individualism, hierarchy and conflict in Sherpa society and religion. However, the point is, I suggest, that Sherpas are both communal (due at least in part to the significance of relations in a harsh natural environment and, perhaps, the importance of agriculture) and individualistic (because of the problematic nature of these relations in a limited social environment. Remember also that the Sherpas are also pastoralists, an activity often coinciding with individualism and social and political atomism). To deny one or the other, or to assert a linear development from one to the other, is to ignore the important dialectic that links communality and individualism, and structure and action more generally.

Secondly, von Furer-Haimendorf is at times unclear about what village or area of Solukhumbu he is referring to. Differences between villages in Khumbu and their individual responses to change are both considerable and important, especially between villages more and less affected by tourism. For example Fisher (1986) says that in 1978, 85% of households in Kunde had at least one member employed in tourism versus only 47% in the village of Phortse. Earnings from tourism amounted to Rs 895,000 for the village of Namche that year versus Rs 185,000 for the village of Phortse. In Thame Valley, on the other hand, while nearly 70% of households were involved in tourism, only 26% of household heads gave tourism as their principal occupation.²⁶ The people of Thame constantly remind me of the sociocultural differences between Thame and other villages in the Khumbu. Differences between Khumbu and Solu are even more pronounced.

Thirdly, while it would have been beyond the means and objectives of von Furer-Haimendorf's book to look at all the factors influencing change, some important ones have been ignored. I was somewhat surprised at the paucity of discussion of individual Sherpas and their role in change (e.g. the influence of individual monks, wealthy traders, employees of Hillary's Himalayan Trust etc.). Little mention was made of the impact of the national and international political economy on the Khumbu, the impact of internationally-sponsored "development" (such as the Austrian's hydro project or Hillary's Hospital and schools), or even of the impact of researchers (and particularly the apparently continuous troupe of anthropologists!).²⁷ Remarkably little attention was given to the role of women (e.g. their increasing role in production and distribution in the absence of men). Similarly, of course, little attention was given to the impact of changes on women, or to women's perceptions of change.

Another criticism which Sherpas themselves raise about von Furer-Haimendorf's book is his use of Sherpas' personal names, particularly when citing potentially embarrassing cases to demonstrate his assertions of change. This practice is surely neither helpful nor necessary.

Von Furer-Haimendorf's treatment of Sherpas resident in Kathmandu requires follow-up. He repeats the oft-cited assertion that the "Sherpas do not have the skill to compete successfully with the Marwaris, Thakalis and Tibetans" (1984:71) and that "the lack of educational qualifications has prevented the Sherpas from attaining influential positions in government service" (1984:72). Sherpa business interests in Kathmandu are today both extensive and successful, and it is perhaps these interests, combined with political factors (rather than the lack of skill or education) that has resulted in the under-representation of Sherpas in government service.

While on this subject, it is important to point out that the influence of Nepalese language, culture and politics in Kathmandu is at least as important as the impact of tourists' culture. This is hardly surprising given the degree of contact with Kathmandu, and the large number (more than 300) of Nepalese army, police, bank and national park personnel stationed in the Khumbu. The experience of government from the center, however, has perhaps helped to forge a stronger sense of Sherpa ethnic solidarity in a national political context.²⁸ The Sherpas have long

recognized that whatever assistance they will receive for the building of a better community, it is not likely to come from the government. Rather it will come from tourists and private aid organizations.

In fact it has been suggested to me that the consolidation of traditional Sherpa culture in the Khumbu is due, in large part, to tourists, offering both moral and material support for the preservation and exhibition of those aspects of traditional Sherpa culture which they find entertaining.²⁹ (Solu on the other hand, with relatively less tourist influence and more government influence, is experiencing rapid social and cultural changes). Conversely, other Sherpas have suggested to me that the very fact that tourism is so socially disruptive means that extra effort is expended to maintain traditions and avoid total sociocultural disintegration. Whatever the case, the impact of tourism is clearly more complex than von Furer-Haimendorf portrays.

A number of other of von Furer-Haimendorf's assertions require clarification. Von Furer-Haimendorf's last visit was in the spring of 1983, at the height of the tourist season, and his tourism-dominated assessment of Sherpa sociocultural life reflects this. At other times however life in the Khumbu changes dramatically (e.g. the well-supported community festivals, of *dumji* and *phangi* in monsoon) and such changes are of great importance to an understanding of Sherpa sociocultural and economic activity as a whole.

One of von Furer-Haimendorf's more disturbing arguments is that traditional marriage patterns and family organization have broken down as a result of the long absences of males in trekking activities. He writes that "the pattern of family life has greatly changed" (1984:35) and "engagements have become even more unstable" (1984:37). There has been a "reduction in the number of polyandrous marriages" (1984:44) but "polygyny on the other hand has become more common" (1984:44).

Firstly, it is important to remember that husbands were separated from wives long before the advent of tourism. Trading expeditions often lasted longer than today's mountaineering expeditions and were certainly further afield. Secondly, the Sherpas themselves--at least in the Thame Valley--do not see marriage patterns as having changed significantly, and I found little evidence for a rise in polygyny.³⁰

Von Furer-Haimendorf cites demographic data collected by Lang (1971) and Pawson et.al. (1984) to assert that fertility, and thus the population of Khumbu, (particularly of those villages not on the main tourist trails) is undergoing considerable change, and declining as a result of the absence of males (1984:83).³¹ My census in the Thame Valley (not a major tourist destination) conflicts with the idea of a declining population. Fertility rates appear to be relatively high for a Himalayan community and infant mortality is on the decline.³²

Von Furer-Haimendorf writes with reference to land that in the past "land disputes were extremely rare" (1984:112); that "there is at present no market for houses in *gunsa* settlements" (1984:12); that "houses and

land are as expensive in Khumbu as they are in Kathmandu (1984:12), and that "there have been no major shifts in the holdings owned by individual Sherpa families" (1984:24). The many sales (and disputes over sales) of land that I recorded in the Thame valley however challenges these assertions. Von Furer-Haimendorf writes that cattlebreeding "plays no longer a central role in the economy of Khumbu" (1984:21). My observations in the Thame valley however and those of Cox (1985) in the Imja Khola Valley suggest a recent rise in the economic significance of cattle and pastures, and point to their continued sociocultural significance. Von Furer-Haimendorf mentions that trade with Tibet has increased slightly since the thaw in Nepalese-Chinese relations. In fact, this trade is now of considerable importance (although the emphasis is on Tibetans coming to Khumbu as much as vice versa). Finally, von Furer-Haimendorf comments that with the introduction of Western commodities "the Sherpa's diet has improved" (1984:80). The emerging problems of dental caries, ulcers, alcoholism, diabetes, cancer and even malnutrition however suggest otherwise.

In sum, much of the evidence von Furer-Haimendorf cites in support of his theme of "transformation" must be regarded as somewhat problematic, even were his theoretical framework useful. We shall now go on to explore this framework.

b) Review of the theoretical framework

Von Furer-Haimendorf's theme of "transformation" relies, of course, on a solidly structural functionalist theoretical framework for describing and analyzing change. What exactly then does von Furer-Haimendorf mean by "transformation"? Clearly he is not referring to Levi-Strauss' (1977) notion of the translatability of a system of signs into the language of other systems with the aid of certain substitutions, nor to Turner's (1968) notion based on the bipolarity and multivocality of symbols, nor Polanyi's (1944) approach to economic change, nor Foucault's (1975) concern with continuities within discontinuities. Given its many and divergent usages his use of the term "transformation" requires at least clarification if not development. Nowhere does he do this however and we are left wondering just what he really means.

What is clear is that he remains preoccupied with how changes in and to the socioeconomic system affect individuals, rather than vice versa; with transformed structures rather than processes and agency. The result is more akin to what Firth (1959) and Barth (1967) described as a "dual synchronic" study rather than a truly diachronic one. That is, it is an attempt to make a synchronic analysis diachronic by performing a second synchronic analysis and extrapolating. In the extrapolation however some important errors and omissions are made. In particular, power--its source, nature, legitimation and means of reproduction--is virtually ignored. The Sherpas appear as passive victims of a sudden externally-imposed catastrophe rather than active participants in an ongoing historical process. In under-

emphasizing power, action, and the role of the individual, von Furer-Haimendorf fails to illuminate the all-important articulation between structure and agency, between culture and society, and therefore how the Sherpa sociocultural formation as a whole reproduces itself over time. Production and consumption are artificially polarised and the nature and impact of ongoing mechanisms of distribution and exchange are ignored. His original emphasis on communality and egalitarianism, founded on "moral" values rather than socioeconomic relations, leaves him unprepared for the individualism which he "discovers" in later years, and how the two might co-exist. The result is a rather simplistic and not particularly helpful equation between external events, individualism, transformation, and lack of "happiness."

TOWARDS A POWER-CENTRED APPROACH TO CHANGE IN THE KHUMBU

Concern with the effects of change and even commitment to strategies of action requires first an adequate theoretical framework for understanding change. In this final section of the paper, I want to review some rather obvious--but nevertheless important--issues concerning the study of change in anthropology, and to offer an alternative approach based on the notion of power as constitutive of and constituted by a dialectical relation between structure and action.

Firstly, change is not necessarily to be deplored. The fact that a community adheres to a particular form of Mahayana Buddhism currently popular (and, I suggest, largely misunderstood) in the West does not, of itself, mean that life in that community has always been ideal. In fact many changes (e.g. the redistribution of wealth, the loosening of the control exercised by the monastic establishment in matters of legal judgement, and the provision of Western medical facilities as a further source of healing) might well be seen to be in the best interests of the majority of Sherpas. Certainly the Sherpa experience of change has been less disruptive than that of other Mahayana Buddhist communities in the Nepal Himalaya.³²

Secondly, change is not new to the Sherpas. Change is what led the Sherpas to the Khumbu in the first place, and a sensitivity to change is what enabled them to survive there and prosper. As traders the Sherpas have long been successful exponents of "impression management", accustomed to dealing with people from other cultures, and adopting those aspects of different lifestyles which they saw as being advantageous to themselves.

Thirdly, change has many forms and dimensions and these must be clearly distinguished. Change is not necessarily linear, or evolutionary, or even irreversible. And as Durkheim himself recognised change is complementary to--perhaps even essential to--continuity (and vice versa).³⁴ What is really remarkable in the Sherpa case is not so much change per se, as the nature and degree of continuity accompanying

it; the degree to which changes have taken place without any fundamental transformation in traditional discourses and relations of power; the degree to which change has signalled an efflorescence of the traditional gift exchange system, the traditional healing system, and so on.

Finally, it is important to distinguish clearly between change that occurs as result of the exercise of power within a community and that exercised outside it, for an understanding of the relationship between these two sources of power is fundamental to an understanding of change in its wider context. By overemphasising external factors, von Furer-Haimendorf is unable to illuminate the internal forces for change. And by ignoring the power dimension, the wider context of these factors and forces--how they themselves have changed over time and why--is ignored.

The model which I wish to propose then is based on the notion of power as constituting a dialectical relation between structural determination (and hegemonic control) on the one hand, and the opportunity for agency (and individual autonomy) on the other. In no situation, I suggest, can the one be found -- at least in its extreme form--without the other. Following on from Foucault (1975), Lukes (1974) and Bourdieu (1977), power is most usefully understood not as a property, something overtly exercised by someone over someone else through the use of force or coercion, but rather as a relation which, although not directly observable, nevertheless serves to achieve social order. The transformation of structures through agency is always "balanced" by an active consolidation of structures, and a community is thus always at least partially the architect of its own destiny. What is important however is that this balance is dynamic, unequal, and capricious. It must be so because it is legitimated and reproduced by relations of power. The challenge then is to explore how and why the balance is reproduced and changes over time.

The concern with the relationship between structure and agency is of course hardly new in anthropology. The demise in the 1950's of the more rigid, homogenising and deterministic formulations of structure (e.g. that of Radcliffe-Brown) led to important -- and diverse--theoretical contributions to the study of agency such as Firth's "principles of social organisation" (1955) and, more recently, Giddens' treatise on "structuration" (1979), Bourdieu's notion of "habitus" (1977), and Foucault's archaeology of the production of discourse. Such contributions are tempered however--some more than others--by the fear that a focus on the possibilities for individual "choice" will suddenly metamorphose into a description of unfettered voluntarism, a formalist decisionism, an apologia for a liberal history of freedom and rationality. They therefore focus firmly on the relationship between structure and agency as the expression of power rather than the use of force.

In Sherpa society the overt exercise of force by individuals is carefully controlled. Nevertheless, the exercise of power is as important to continuity and change as it is anywhere else. It is power which

provides the catalysing spark to the structure of relations on which existence is dependent. To the extent that the structure of relations is (and always has been) a significant and pervasive constraining influence in Sherpa culture and society, certain structures and processes which reflect and reinforce these relations are reproduced (e.g. an internal emphasis on gift exchange, a lack of centralized formal political organization, communality, transcendental approaches to religion, determinate notions of causality, non-medicalized approaches to healing and so on). To the extent however that relations are also problematic and flexible, there is considerable opportunity for individual action, and other complementary structures and processes can be identified (e.g. the possibilities of entrepreneurial activity and commodity exchange, the concentration of power in certain individuals and roles, individualism, pragmatic orientations to religion, less determinate notions of causality, relatively medicalized approaches to healing, and so on.³⁵ The Sherpa sociocultural formation is characterised not by one or the other sets of structures and processes but by both, and what is important is how and why the balance between them is reproduced and changes over time. To sum up, insofar as the potential for agency is constrained by structures; and structures exist only insofar as they are animated by individuals and the changing relations between them, a view based on the recognition of power is fundamental to an understanding of change.

Let me illustrate this by summarising again the changes that have taken place in the Sherpa economy. As far as we know, the Sherpas have always been traders, and commodity exchange at the periphery (where it presented little threat to fellow Sherpas) is a long-established fact of life. At the same time however generosity, hospitality and gift (and labour) exchange lies at the very heart of Sherpa economic, cultural and social organisation. Although the relationship between gifts and commodities is in no sense equal, or equalising, the fact of a balance of some sort remains. Were commodity exchange to be seriously threatened (as with the cessation of trade) the entire fabric of social life would be threatened (as occurred elsewhere in the Nepal Himalaya). Yet the introduction into the Khumbu of wage-labour, markets, and a greater range of commodities--though effecting a change in the balance in favour of entrepreneurship and commoditization--has nevertheless simultaneously signalled an efflorescence of gift exchange at the centre. A commodity continues to serve as a gift (and vice versa) according to the particular social context of exchange, and the greater range and accessibility of commodities has simply widened the scope for gift exchange. Cash and down jackets are as highly valued as more traditional gifts of woven yak wool blankets or salt, and certainly satisfy reciprocal obligations. The notion then that the traditional Sherpa economy was a classic, functional (and harmonious) gift exchange economy with a large pool of surplus labour, and that the penetration of capitalist market forces resulted--in a linear, predictable, step-like fashion--in the transformation of that gift exchange economy into a "modern" economy producing goods for cash, is clearly problematic.

A similar analysis can be developed for changes in Sherpa religion. The institution of monasticism has always been known to the Sherpas, despite the dominance until recently of *banzin* (married, village-based lamas). The introduction of celibate monasticism early this century was due to important external political and economic factors as much as internal social and cultural ones. (Of particular importance here is the expanding political influence of the monastic Gelugpa sect in Tibet, and the sudden concentration of wealth in a few Solu Sherpa families -- as result of political patronage by the Rana regime in Kathmandu--which was devoted to the building of monasteries as a way of acquiring status). At first, monasticism appeared to signal a decline in the relative status of *banzin* lamas. As support for the monastic establishments decreased in the 1950's and 1960's, so did the support for the *banzin*. Now, in the 1970's and 1980's there is renewed support for both, and the temporary separation of religion from politics (see Paul, 1977: 182³⁵ is now less rigidly applied. While significant changes have occurred in the nature of the balance between monasticism and *banzin* lamas, the fact of the balance remains. It would be clearly misleading to talk of an eclipse of a pragmatic "folk" tradition by a new transcendentially-oriented "orthodox" monastic tradition, as ethnographers have tended to do.

A third illustration of the utility of this approach to change is that of the traditional Sherpa healing system.³⁶ The introduction of allopathic medicine into the Khumbu some 20 years ago, and the rising influence of Tibetan medicine (both due to complex external political factors) gave Sherpas access to new and relatively medicalised healing strategies, concentrating power in the hands of a few individual male healers in particular, and encouraging an objectifying, individualising, depoliticising and primarily symptom-oriented approach to healing. Nevertheless these changes have not--contrary to the claims of ethnographers--signalled any long-term decline in the role or use of shamans and diviners (many of whom are women). "Scientific" theories of causation have been successfully integrated into traditional concepts of causation, and multiple-healer consultation, traditional approaches to the management of therapy and care of the patient, socio-spiritual determinants of efficacy and so on remain. In fact these appear to be increasingly invoked as a means of providing the sense of meaning, order and identity sought in the face of a rapidly changing world. A dynamic balance continues between the forces enabling medicalisation and individual choice on the one hand and the traditional concern with causes and relational order on the other.

It is in this sense then that I offer "consolidation" not as a replacement for von Furer-Haimendorf's theme of transformation, but rather as a complement to it, and perhaps even a stimulus for it. Clearly significant changes have occurred, but what is perhaps most remarkable--and theoretically challenging--is why things haven't changed more than they have (and as they did elsewhere in the Nepal Himalaya). Per-

haps there is more than just a sentimental truth to the idea that things standing shall fall but the moving ever shall stay."

CONCLUSION

Von Furer-Haimendorf does not claim to present a wholly objective account of change and I am not suggesting that "objectivity" is either to be valued for its own sake, or even possible. Maintaining an objective response to changes in communities where one has lived and worked (and hopefully grown) must surely be one of the most difficult and elusive tasks facing the anthropologist. This must be particularly so when one's involvement with the community spans more than 30 years, beginning in the early stages of its contact with the Western world. I certainly do not want to suggest that there is anything intrinsically wrong with re-studies which acknowledge a sentimental attachment to the people from whom one has learnt, or which is motivated by the concern for those people's well-being.

But as Read (1986) says in his re-study of the Guhuku-Gama of Highlands PNG:

"It is possible to see continuities beneath even the most seemingly disparate [events] and it is in this sense that the anthropologist returning to the field after more than half a lifetime possesses an inestimable advantage over those entering an entirely unfamiliar situation." (1986:xi)

In overemphasizing transformation and thereby neglecting consolidation, continuity and agency, von Furer-Haimendorf has I suggest insufficiently capitalized on this advantage. Furthermore, Read writes that:

"My regard for the Gahuku-Gama does not include a total acceptance of every aspect of the life I observed in that now-frozen segment of time, and I am reassured that most of those whose lives were not arrested in that period do not look back on it as a golden age." (1986:x)

The Gahuku-Gama are not the Sherpas, but the point is the same. There is no point in casting wistful eyes on some happier past. There is no way of going back, and nothing positive will be achieved by trying. Yet to acknowledge the imperfections of the past, and to be optimistic about the potential benefits of change for the future, does not in my opinion detract from the essential beauty of Sherpa culture and society. There is both room for and benefit in optimism. The Sherpas continue to construct and reconstruct their own cultural, social, economic and political reality, and to interact with the world outside on terms that they can at least influence, if not control. Their underlying pride, and confidence in their culture and identity, will serve them well as they face the problems of the future.

NOTES

1. Fieldwork was carried out between January 1986 and March 1987 with the assistance of a C.P.R.A. award and a grant from the Carlyle Greenwell Bequest. I would like to thank Michael Allen, John Gray and Geoffrey Samuel for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.
2. Von Furer-Haimendorf has not provided details of such conflicts anywhere in his many publications on the Sherpas.
3. See also Ortner's account of Solu Sherpas in Sherpas through their rituals (1978).
4. Many Sherpas deny that they have managed to save or invest earnings derived from tourism.
5. Fisher (1986) however, reports that by 1978 the majority of households in the village of Kunde employed a servant to maintain their fields, leaving household members free to participate in more lucrative tourism-related activities.
6. For a more detailed discussion of this view of entrepreneurship see my forthcoming article with Laurie Zivetz. "From Trade to Tourism and Beyond: A study of entrepreneurship among the Sherpas of Nepal."
7. Sherpas resident in Kathmandu are less optimistic about the future of Sherpa culture than are Khumbu Sherpas. Such views of course may reflect (or serve to justify) longterm absences from home.
8. Sherpas often complain about the association between the term "Sherpa" as an ethnic label and the use of the term to denote the role of porter and servant to wealthy tourists.
9. There is no evidence--at least in Thame--for von Furer-Haimendorf's assertion that the important social and entertainment function of such groups is gone (1984:18).
10. For most Sherpa households, the "social budget" today exceeds the "domestic" budget.
11. A close friend recently spent over Rs. 10,000 (Australian \$750) as a *lawa* for the Dumji festival.
12. In May, 1986 the senior warden of the National Park, Lhakpa Norbu Sherpa, organized a community-wide seminar to discuss problems arising from deforestation and strategies for overcoming some of these problems (involving the community as well as the Park staff).

13. The project nevertheless is being pursued again by the Austrians in the same superior, insensitive manner. Efforts I made to get Austrian project staff to consult more with the local community were ignored completely.
14. In 1987 donations enabled a high reincarnate lama from Kathmandu to be flown in by helicopter for the occasion and nearly 1500 people came to receive his blessing.
15. Expenditure on religion in Khumbu is also significant among Sherpas resident in Kathmandu. In 1981 the Rimpoche of Tengboche raised nearly A\$25,000 in two days for the construction of a for Sherpas resident in Kathmandu.
16. A friend, flushed with wealth from a successful ascent of Everest, has recently built himself a *Thang* (private chapel) and bought the whole 65 volumes of one of the religious texts. At least three other chapels were built during the period of my field work.
17. Compare however Pawson et.al.'s evidence (1984) of a 50% reduction in involvement by Sherpas in religious occupations. This evidence must be viewed problematically at best.
18. See my M.A. Thesis (1985) "Transcendence and Pragmatism: A Study of Sherpa Religion", A.N.U. and forthcoming article "Lama Knows: religion and power in Sherpa society." Samuel (1978) has adopted a similar--though not identical--position on the basis of approaches influenced by structuralism.
19. Note how this contrasts with Paul's assertion that "with the original idea of the *sang ngak* practitioner forgotten, the idea that a man can pursue both worldly interests and his own salvation has lost meaning for the Sherpas." (1970:583) There is certainly no evidence for this assertion in Thame today.
20. Ortner writes "with the recent invigoration of Sherpa Buddhism and the Sherpas' first glimpses of Western medicine [shamanism] seems to have gone into a rather serious decline and may finally be on its way out." (1978:32) Similarly, Paul writes "Given a choice, Sherpa preference is definitely for textual ceremony rather than the shaman." (1976:147) I have no evidence for this in Thame. Where this is so may well reflect the lack of any real effective choice as much as anything substantial about the health seeking process. See my forthcoming paper "Power and Health Seeking Among the Sherpas of Nepal."
21. See my forthcoming PH.D. thesis: "Beyond medicine: the production of sickness and healing in Sherpa society."

22. To the extent that relations are important, and orthodox determinate notions of karma are dominant, Sherpas adhere to the fundamental tenets of Buddhism. To the extent however that relations are also problematic, and karma is indeterminate Sherpas maintain what was once described to me as a thumbprint approach to religion. That is, each individual's karmic load and thus practise of religion is as arbitrary and different as their thumbprints. There is an on-going tension in Sherpa society between a remote but powerful cognitive ideal emphasizing interconnectedness and a culturally disvalued but emotionally powerful and pragmatic interest in exercising individual autonomy.
23. A classic case of this is that of L.P., a 54 year old nun. Several years ago, before becoming a nun, L.P. had angered her affines by unilaterally disposing of her deceased husband's property to people outside of the family. This transgression had led to a total breakdown of relations with her husband's family, one of whom was a highly respected lama, and therefore with her neighbors. When she became ill, no help was forthcoming and no healer would treat her. She was left to her own devices and was later found dead--her death obviously speeded up by social isolation. Even compassion for a nun is subject to appropriate participation in the framework of social relations.
24. Of particular importance here is the work of Funke (1969), Oppitz (1968), Ortner (1970; 1975; 1978), Paul (1970; 1976; 1977; 1982), Samuel (1978). See my M.A. Thesis for a review of this literature. See also more recent research by Presern and Halligan (1984), Bjonness, Brower and Stevens (unpublished). There is also a large number of reports on various environment and energy related issues available at the Park headquarters in Namche Bazaar.
25. For example, Levine's (1981) ethnography on the Nyinbas of North-west Nepal. I personally found such references distracting due to the significant differences between Nyinba and Sherpa history, culture, society, environment and so on.
26. I am very aware of the subjective quality of my census data. More comprehensive and recent data is required to be able to accurately explore regional differences and longterm changes in occupation and income.
27. There is a strong case to be made for the role of the anthropologist in promoting and facilitating community management (and perhaps ownership) of development facilities and projects. Such involvement by the Sherpas themselves is essential to the sustainability of such projects. Moreover, the research and community mobilization enabling such involvement can and should be done by the many educated Sherpas themselves. Implicit here is a change in the role of the anthropologist from "expert" to "co-expert" and catalyst.

28. No Khumbu Sherpa has ever been elected to the national Rastriya Panchayat, despite the economic significance of the Khumbu to Nepal.
29. In a similar vein Fisher writes:

"Sherpa society, or the Western image of it, represents a dramatic realisation of what Westerners would like to be themselves, hence the frequently breathless enthusiasm of the former for the latter" (1986:47). (Or is this perhaps just the altitude?!) Fisher goes on

"Sherpas are so massively reinforced at every point for being Sherpa that there is every reason not only to 'stay' Sherpa, but even to flaunt one's Sherpahood" (1986:51). As a result, a process of 'Sherpatisation' is occurring among other Tibetan Buddhist groups in Nepal, according to Fisher.

30. Certainly some Sherpas were annoyed at von Furer-Haimendorf's numerous references to sexual liaisons between Sherpas and Westerners.
31. The limitations in collection methodology and comprehensiveness of Lang's and Pawson's data are well recognised by residents--Sherpa and Western--in the Khumbu.
32. This is due in particular to the activities of the Hospital. Fear of interference by shrendi (spirits) accompanying those assisting at birth mean that there are no traditional birth attendants in the Sherpa healing system, and birthing is still very much a private affair.
33. Taussig's (1980) approach to change in Southwest Columbia has much in common with the approach I would like to propose for the Sherpas. Taussig writes:

"Underlying the accretion of added elements and transformations, something essential in the pre-colonial structure of ideas continues, not as a mere survival or relic from the irretrievable past, but as an active force mediating history." (1980: 222 my emphasis)

34. Many of the apparent "contradictions" and "anomalies" identified by ethnographers can I suggest be explained by reference to this model of change (e.g. the fact that supernaturals exist but are not "real", the fact that hospitality is so highly valued yet is also a primary source of illness and misfortune, the law of cause and effect coexisting with the ritualized manipulation of karma, the significance of kinship on the one hand and non-kin bases of affiliation on the other, and so on). In particular the discrepancy noted earlier between von Furer-Haimendorf's portrayal of communality, egalitarianism and harmony, and Ortner's emphasis on individualism, hierarchy and conflict can be understood by reference to this

model. Both approaches are of course "correct", within the limits of their particular paradigmatic bias, objectives and focii, but neither approach on its own is capable of giving us the full--and moving--picture. The anthropological penchant for dichotomization is clearly problematic when viewed through the perspective offered by this approach to change.

35. Paul writes "[Sherpa leaders] insist on a separation of church and state and hurl at religion the charge that, while its' truths are really true, they only concern a world other than our own...by thus isolating the domain of religion they ally themselves with what they perceive to be the ascendent reality of power, the Nepalese state" (1977:182).
36. This is the subject of my forthcoming Ph.D. thesis: "Beyond medicine: The production of sickness and healing in Sherpa society."

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Also known as the Khumbu Icefall, this is where most dead bodies have been surfacing in recent years, mountaineers say. Another place that has been seeing dead bodies becoming exposed is the Camp 4 area, also called South Col, which is relatively flat. "Hands and legs of dead bodies have appeared at the base camp as well in the last few years," said an official with a non-government organisation active in the region. Another team of researchers, including members from Leeds and Aberystwyth universities in the UK, last year drilled the Khumbu Glacier and found the ice to be warmer than expected. Sign up for a weekly chat about climate change on Facebook Messenger.