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## **On Cyber Sherpas and Alpine Ravers**

Living young in the Himalayas and in the Alps

### **0. Introduction**

In the late eighties, when I visited the Khumbu region - homeland of the Sherpa people - for the first time, as a tourist among a few thousand others, a mail runner jogged down to Lukhla airstrip twice a week to deliver letters and parcels to the aircraft and to pick up gossip from the capital and incoming mail for the villagers. Today, more than 20 000 tourists visit Sagarmatha (Mount Everest) National Park annually. 120 telephone lines, some 20 satellite dishes and three cyber cafés are connecting the settlements on the foothills of Mount Everest with the outside world.

Electricity has brought about a technological revolution in the world's highest mountains. The Austrian Development Co-operation has played a decisive role in that by financing the installation of a small hydropower plant in Thame valley. Providing Sherpa villages with electricity helps to reduce firewood consumption, improves local living conditions and allows surfing the internet.<sup>1</sup>

The kingdom of Nepal, with 22 million people one of the poorest countries in the world, has a ethnic composition which is a colourful patchwork of more than 60 different groups. The Sherpas crossed the Himalayan range some 500 years ago and settled on its southern slopes in north-east Nepal (Solu-Khumbu). Their economy was based on agriculture, yak breeding and trans-Himalayan trade. The reduction of this trade, which came with the new political situation in Tibet during the 1950ies, coincided with the rise of tourism, which has become the most important source of income.

Like in Khumbu, agriculture and tourism are the major pillars of the local economy in the Pinzgau region, Province of Salzburg. During the last 50 years, both regions experienced considerable transformation in their social and economic structures and parts of them were designated as national parks. Therefore, the young generation was forced to find alternative life perspectives and new cultural patterns.

The article is based on ethnographic studies conducted among Sherpas in Nepal (Luger 2000) and includes some comparative observations among youngsters in the Province of Salzburg/-Austria (Luger/Tedeschi 1996). The findings provide a snapshot picture of everyday-life strategies, describes how youngsters in remote high mountain areas cope with modernity. In theory, modernity or modernisation is associated with urbanisation, alphabetisation, mass media, mass consumption, high mobility as well as economic and political participation. But what comes along with those innovations, how do the young people in mountain regions utilize new technology, how does better education and tourism affect their lives? Questions like

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<sup>1</sup> From the outset, local Sherpa staff were trained by the Austrian organisation Eco Himal-Society for Ecological Co-operation Alps-Himalaya, to take over the operation, maintenance and management of the power plant, which is majority owned by the operating company Khumbu Bijuli Co. (KBC) with village communities as shareholders. By the end of the year 2000, Eco Himal finally handed this project over to the qualified Sherpa staff. (Inmann/Luger/Rachbauer 1995; Rachbauer 2001)

these have never been put and were never answered, neither in the Himalayas nor in the Alps.<sup>2</sup>

## **1. Tigers of the Snow - Social Transformation in the Sherpa Culture**

Compared to other regions and districts in Nepal, the upper Khumbu belongs to the most prosperous. Thanks to tourism and the entrepreneurship of the Sherpa population the standard of living is much higher than in any other remote region of the Kingdom. Khumbu ranks second in tourist popularity, and visitor figures have rocketed from 20 tourists in 1964 to over 20,000 in 2000. Trekking and expedition tourism developed dynamically and placed a heavy burden on the natural wood, water, food and land resources. (Brower 1992)

A large proportion of the tourism revenue stays in the hands of the agencies in Nepal's capital Kathmandu – many of which (including some of the largest) are in fact owned by Sherpas, resulting in indirect income for Khumbu and relative prosperity in comparison to other parts of the country. However, tourism has upset the region's price and value structures: poorer sectors of the population, above all people living in villages and high pastures off the tourist routes, can hardly afford the prices now being charged for basic foodstuffs such as rice or meat. The overall result of these developments is that an economic monoculture has been established, with revenue concentrated in the hands of a few rich families, while the negative social, cultural and ecological consequences affect the whole population. (Nepal 1999)

Since the scaling of Mount Everest, Sherpas have become a 'celebrated people' and received a great deal of international exposure. The large number of Sherpas on Mount Everest has even been recorded in the Guinness Book of World Records. The Sherpas are very much aware of the foreign fascination with their culture, and have been able to direct this interest towards economic benefits in terms of sponsorships and donations for monasteries as well as for private purposes. Adams (1996) speaks of "virtual Sherpas" whose encounters with tourists have created super-Sherpa virtues and an unmistakable image of Sherpaness centred around mountaineering, tourism, shamanism, Buddhism, development, medicine, exoticism and the dichotomy between tradition and modernisation.

What we call "Sherpa culture" is thus a construct made up of several different aspects: firstly, the life the Sherpas live "backstage", independent of outsiders; secondly, the way they present themselves to outsiders "onstage"; and thirdly, the way travellers, tourists, researchers, development aid workers etc. perceive or want to perceive them. It is a construct created by the perceivers and the perceived, and its existence depends on the interaction between them. It finds concrete expression in an image, which comprises both the noble, invincible, Sahib-devoted mountain hero and the needy women and children in the fields.

This image – like others – captures only one side of the Sherpa personality. "Like all people, Sherpas wear masks. They have a public, onstage, side that they want the rest of the world to see and a private, backstage, side that is more unadornedly true to themselves. Although the qualities that characterise the public side are also present – and are in fact rooted – in the private side, so are other, less praiseworthy, types of behaviour." (Fisher 1990, 125) Successful trekking Sherpas realise that they are, in part, "paid professional actors and entertainers. Their stories and dances and songs are genuine enough, but they are also what clients want. And what clients pay for, they get." (ibid.)

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<sup>2</sup> Only a few studies have been conducted during the last years dealing with the living conditions of young people in the Alps (Luger/Tedeschi 1996; Gautsch/Pfuner 1999; Landesinstitut für Statistik Bozen 1999)

In the course of time, a mutual admiration society has emerged, based on the stereotype pictures, which the two groups – tourists and Sherpas – have of each other. Adams considers the Sherpa-Westerner relationship as an interchange, the spectacular result of which is a reversal of mirroring between Sherpas and Westerners. “Sherpas recruit Western Others to become their sponsors (*jindak*), “lifelong” friends and supporters who provide them with gifts, money, advice, employment, and more, in response to Western desires to become part of “the Sherpa world.” (Adams 1996, 9)

Tourism represents a form of the process of social modernisation which can be interpreted as diffusion or as a form of social change. The structure and function of a social system can be modified through the invention, expansion, and adoption of new ideas, values, norms, behavioural patterns, etc. External factors are usually the main force driving cultural change, renewal, and innovation. Within a society, the process of passing on a culture implies conservation and continuity, while the expansion of a culture into other societies – the intercultural process – brings cultural change and discontinuity. (Larkey 1994)

Cultural change must thus be understood as the result of many structures and mechanisms superimposed on each other, as the entirety of the decisive changes in the structure and internal processes of a society within a given period. Cultural change is highly variable and one cannot expect its dynamics to be uniform because of endogenous as well as exogenous influences. These can either be traced to local relationships with neighbouring cultures (such as the town-country relationship), migration and the extension of the geographical living/working horizon; or they are driven by the engines of modernisation, as in the case of tourism or technology transfer, in which case completely new work profiles and lifestyle concepts emerge, revising time/space concepts and gradually permeating society.

Rogers interprets the process of diffusion as a transfer of innovation, and he categorises the social carriers of innovation according to their speed and degree of adopting new or outside ideas. His categories are: the innovative, the early adopters (the group which often includes the youth), the early majority, the late majority, and the late adopters. The innovation spreads from a local place of origin or from an elite group of innovators to an ever-wider circle of regional or national adopters. The “change agents” act as opinion leaders and are likely to come from the economic, political or cultural sectors. (Rogers 1983)

Culture can be described as “design for living”, as a process and software programme driven by communication. It therefore falls to the media and cultural sector to implant new ideas and fields of interest into a society, to foster the search for sources of meaning, to communicate outside perspectives and thereby to initiate the processes of cultural change (Schmidt 1992). A society’s software, steered by communication, finds its expression in symbols, convictions, values, judgements of taste, norms, etc., which help conserve and perpetuate society and which at the same time can be the agents of change. Culture must thus be understood as a model of behaviour undergoing a constant process of transformation, and not as a fixed, static element of a society. Individual aspects of a culture are used, modified and cast aside, depending on how they contribute to the successful organisation of reality. Cultural manifestations such as customs, creeds, patterns of consumption, lifestyles – the “maps of meaning” (Clarke

et. al. 1979) that make things comprehensible to the members of a culture – change under the influence of the manifestations of the media and tourism.

## **2. Living Young in Sherpa Culture**

In order to structure the scientific interests in Sherpa youth, and in order to be able to draw parallels to the youth in the Alps (Pinzgau study, Province of Salzburg), four research hypotheses were drawn up on the basis of the available literature as well as prior knowledge and experience of Sherpa culture:

1. Whereas in the Alps young people have all multi-media facilities at their disposal, radios and two video cinemas are all that is available in Khumbu. Only a few wealthy households in Namche Bazar, the main village in Khumbu, have access to the press, satellite TV or computers. Nepal has had television since 1986, but terrestrial reception is limited to the Kathmandu Valley; and the capital is the only place in the country with an extensive media spectrum – with Hindi films topping the popularity charts. Forms of Indian commercial culture are therefore more likely to be influential than western cultural models. There is good reason to expect that the modernisation effect initiated by Western media is far weaker among Sherpa youth than among Alpine youngsters.
2. The extent of mobility of young Sherpas is considerably less than the radius of the lives of the young people in the Austrian mountain regions. Holiday trips, etc., are everyday features of the culture of the Alpine young. Not so in Khumbu. Only a very few rich Sherpas can afford to go abroad, although this is one of their highest aspirations. Guides, trekking staff and students on scholarships are sometimes invited to go abroad for a holiday or a study trip, and this gives them considerable social status. Thus most of the young Sherpas have far less personal experience of other places than Alpine youth; and on account of their social customs and norms, there are only very limited areas in their own everyday lives in which such experience could be applied.
3. The addition of tourism as an economic complement to yak breeding has created an integrated and stronger economy. By living together in clans or extended families, the Sherpas have not been forced to give up the one for the sake of the other. The “modern” sector of the economy, tourism, has thus been merged with the “pre-modern” agricultural economy, and expanded through traditional and new forms of barter trade – thus making it possible to sustain pre-modern lifestyles. The Sherpa youth are growing up into this mixed economy, and though tourism is considered a very attractive source of employment, their lives still remain anchored in agriculture.
4. The Sherpas are a Buddhist people, and their religious festivals provide a firm framework around which the year is structured and everyday life is orientated. The religious basis gives Sherpa traditions their validity and permanence, and Sherpa youth look to religion for the meaning of life to a far greater extent than do their Alpine counterparts.

## 2.1. Youth Culture and Media Seduction

*Since we have electricity, Khumbu is not boring anymore.*

Khunde Sherpa, 22

Young people's expectations, the level of comfort they think they have a right to, and their ideas of what life could/should offer are very different from those of the older generation. Borders have opened within the last ten years as the democratisation process has got under way. Liberalisation in the field of the media and TV, the latter introduced in 1986, have brought western civilisation and consumer culture to this Himalayan country. The "westernisation process" applies to a far greater extent to the Sherpas in Kathmandu than to the Solu-Khumbu population, where the generation gap is much less evident.

But this is not only a problem for the Sherpa minority, it is a problem for the entire country. As 65 percent of the entire population are below 29, it is not surprising that mass unemployment leads to social tension and observers consider the generation gap and the communication conflict as one of the central problems. The big daily newspapers often contain comments about the problems of young people and the conflict between Nepal's young and old generation. In newspaper articles American mass culture is perceived as an evil influence seducing the young, and held responsible for negative social development and every deviation from accepted norms.

"The attitude and behaviour of our youth are being influenced by western culture in every way. We observe many youth taking active participation in western dance and music whereas very few in number are found interested in Nepali cultural dance. It shows that the attitude of today's youth towards our cultural norms and values are getting more passive day by day. (...) Participation in recreational activities, like parties, cinema, dating and dancing in restaurants are growing rapidly. But feeling of devotion, spirit and eagerness towards hard labour are becoming very limited. This has been one of the reasons why incidences of violence, murder and different sorts of mob-activities are frequently reported over the recent years." (The Kathmandu Post, May 3, 1998)

The results of this study do not provide any evidence for the thesis that the media are a massive threat to the young Sherpas and their culture. It is possible that the media, above all the cinema, have considerably greater importance for the Hindu youth than for the young Sherpas, who generally experience relatively little media exposure.<sup>3</sup> TV is certainly not an integral part of the Sherpa youngsters' daily lives – not even of the Kathmanduites – and cinema does not seem to be a very popular pastime. Apart from a few youth magazines which dictate or document the latest trends, the print media do not have a wide reach. Publications such as *Wave* and other youth magazines in Nepali

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<sup>3</sup> US-American social scientist Mark Liechty confirms this observation that the large majority of those who attend Hindi film shows in Kathmandu are lower-class teenage males. Labour migrants from the remote hills, the southern plains and even from India come to Kathmandu in search of permanent or seasonal employment. They fill the swelling squatter settlements and tenement houses around the capital as they seek work as day labourers, construction, garment, or carpet-industry workers, office peons, and street vendors. Along with a large student population from rural Nepal, this is the group – mostly young, male, and with little by way of financial resources – that makes up the bulk of those who attend commercial screenings of Hindi films. (Liechty 1998, 199) In Austria, the discourse about media seduction dates back to the fifties, when US-comics and films for the first time found large popularity among the youngsters (Luger 1991).

language do not have much readership outside Kathmandu. All in all, the influence of the media as an agent of rapid modernisation among Sherpa youth appears to be over-estimated.

*“In most the Sherpa houses is electricity. The Khumbu people can feel spoiled compared to the rest of the country, where only 15 % of households have electric light. Major social changes are taking place, and telephone lines and electricity have been highly influential in reshaping Sherpa culture,”* says 27-year old Pemba Nuru of Namche. But only ten minutes off the main trail life is rather different, still very traditional and far away from western amenities.

At the gateway to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Kids of Khumbu are plugging into the modern world of sophisticated technology. A few lodges in Namche already have internet access and provide these comparatively cheap facilities not only to western tourists but also to the locals. If the line is working, calling friends and family in Kathmandu or abroad has become as easy as logging onto the Internet chat. Like millions of youngsters in all parts of the world attracted by this new technology, the young Sherpas most probably will become members of the Dotcom-generation in the near future.<sup>4</sup>

## **2.2. Education and Migration – Passports to Modernity**

*Shangri la lies in the far west, for most of the youngsters, in the United States.*  
Khumjung Sherpa, 29

„Our children have eyes, but still they are blind,” wrote one of the older Sherpa headmen of Khumjung village to the Himalayan Trust in the early 60ies, in order to convince the trustees of the Sherpas’ desire for Western-style schools. (Hillary, 1964) So the history of schooling and formal education in Sherpa county begins with development activities set up by the person who for the first time scaled Mount Everest, Sir Edmund Hillary. His objective was to thank the Sherpas for the indispensable role they had played in several mountaineering expeditions in which he had participated. His development activities began with the foundation of the Himalayan Trust, a charity organisation to build and run schools, hospitals and health posts, and tree nurseries, and to fulfil other developmental tasks in Solu-Khumbu. The first school was built in Khumjung in 1961 and till now the Trust has remained a leading player in the efforts to improve the living conditions of the local people. Almost 30 schools have been sponsored and 4,000 students – a third of them girls – benefit from this education. These schools are inherent agents of change, and while it was not Edmund Hillary’s intention to spoil the villagers or to create a dependence on welfare, this young educated generation has initiated a remarkable process of Khumbu modernisation. (Hillary 1999)

Ang Rita Sherpa was one of the first students who got a Himalayan Trust scholarship for higher education. For a few years he has been the managing director of this institution. He himself went to the Khumjung school and felt pressurised by his father to do his regular duties or to leave school. *“After two years my father said that two years of school are enough, it is not necessary to learn everything. This attitude towards education has changed, and parents no longer force their children to work in the fields instead of going to school.”* Ang Rita thinks that it is the obligation of his generation, those in their forties and fifties, to bridge the gap between old and young, because they are the first educated generation and – to a certain

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<sup>4</sup> International Telecommunication Union: The Internet from the top of the world. Nepal case study. (download from <http://www.itu.int/ti/casestudies>)

extent – pioneers of modernisation. He also complains that Sherpa culture is degenerating because the young generation has little interest in it, chasing instead after modernisation and quick profit - “*no patience, no cultural ethics, money is spent for commodities*”. (Personal communication)

Since establishing the first “schoolhouse in the clouds”, the Trust has developed a very critical attitude towards modernisation and social changes. Material gains do not necessarily make people happier or lower crime rates, whereas social values and religious beliefs can. Therefore they are convinced that education is the most important thing for the survival of Sherpa culture. Having successfully met the modern world on its own ground, these educated Sherpas have the cultural self-confidence to safeguard and to intensify their ethnic identity despite very strong influences from the outside world. (Fisher 1990, 172)

Almost all Sherpas with higher education and every Sherpa pilot went through the Khumjung school. When the school was built, nobody imagined that so many people would leave the area as soon as they had attained the SLC (school leaving certificate attained after ten years of attendance). At present, the Sherpa community consists of approx. 3,000 people in upper Khumbu and 13,000 people in lower Solu. A fairly low birth rate, high mortality rate (mountain accidents etc.) and migration out of Khumbu have led to a population decline. The biggest problem is the loss of well-educated people through the brain drain to other regions or abroad. Usually only the youngest son stays at home and takes care of his parents: all the others go away and only a few of them return and resettle. The Trust tries to encourage well-educated Sherpas to return for recruitment as teachers in Khumbu, but the attraction of trekking jobs has made it impossible to lure them back.

Among the young Sherpas there is a headrace for scholarships for the famous Indian schools or other places of higher education in Western countries. Only wealthy parents can afford to send their children there. Besides winning one of the scholarships offered to those who come top in the selective examinations held in the schools there might also be a chance to find a sponsor, the so-called *jindak*, who takes care of the school fees.<sup>5</sup>

Migration for reasons of education and better opportunities is an issue faced by many young Nepalis, and by no means a problem confined to Sherpa youth alone. The deterioration of the quality of higher education has led a large number of middle and upper class families to look for alternative educational institutions abroad for their children.<sup>6</sup> It is worrying to see this deterioration in the quality of education in the government-subsidised institutions. A report on higher education conducted by the National Education Commission complained about the

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<sup>5</sup> *Jindak* is a term used by Sherpas to describe both a person who contributes to monasteries and a person (usually a Westerner) who becomes a personal sponsor for individual Sherpas. When Sherpas or Westerners give money to monasteries, it is interpreted by Sherpas as a means of gaining both religious merit and local prestige. Likewise, when foreigners give money to Sherpas, it is viewed by Sherpas as a way for foreigners to achieve merit through an act of compassion and to form local friendships of a reciprocal nature. (Adams 1996, 164)

<sup>6</sup> The United States Education Foundation provided counselling services to more than 17,000 Nepalese students in 1997 alone. Nepalese parents invest over 10 million USD annually in education for their children abroad - about half the budget for Nepal's pioneer institution of higher education, Tribhuvan University. 134,000 students were enrolled at the country's biggest university in the year 1997/98 but the figure is declining. Students and teachers work under extremely difficult conditions and do not enjoy any of the features that make a campus intellectually and academically inspiring. Richer families find places for their children in India and abroad or at Kathmandu University, the nation's only private university, but these alternatives are financially out of reach for the normal citizen.

failure to channel education towards the requirements of the job market: higher education is itself creating unemployed youth. (Spotlight, August 14, 1998)

This high degree of mobility observed in the Sherpa culture - a mobility which the Sherpa young are unable to avoid – is by no means a recent development. Barter trade with Tibet to the north and the lowlands to the south was always an important feature of the Sherpa subsistence economy. Labour migration is also not a new pattern in Sherpa culture. During the 60ies, young men abandoned Khumbu and moved to Kathmandu or to Darjeeling where they tried their luck at road contracting and other ventures. The rise of trekking tourism during the 70ies and 80ies slowed this emigration but was not able to halt the steady flow outward of the best-educated Sherpas. The mobility among Sherpas is far greater than among any other ethnic group in the Himalaya, due on the one hand to their relative prosperity and on the other hand to their *jindak* relationships and invitations from tourists. And it is much higher than among the youngsters questioned in the Pinzgau study – contrary to the theses drawn up above.

In earlier days, younger people abandoned Khumbu in search of better prospects in Darjeeling, where menial jobs and cash-earning opportunities were available. This short-time migration during the time of tea harvests etc. is still prevalent among illiterate young Nepalis. During the 50ies and 60ies, more and more Sherpas started carrying loads for expeditions and the expanding trekking business in Khumbu, and the name “Sherpa” became synonymous with mountain porter. With the growing tourism business and increasing wealth among the Sherpa communities, the number of Sherpa porters is declining fast. The majority of long distance head-loading (*namlo*) porters come from the adjacent districts. Other reasons for the decline of portering jobs are the increase of plane and helicopter flights, changing trekking and expedition styles, and the establishment of local markets providing basic commodities. (Sherpa 1996)

Migratory employment in Nepal is very high to the cities, to the south and abroad. More than one half of all households are involved in this social pattern. (Nepal South Asia Centre 1998, 104) Currently, Nepal earns some 69 billion NRS (1 billion USD) annually as remittance from foreign employment, a figure that matches the country's annual budget. Due to the lack of well-paid jobs in the kingdom, youths are very eager to go abroad for jobs, preferably to the Gulf states, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and the United States. The migration of young people with school education from Khumbu to Kathmandu or other cities will lead in the long term to a brain drain and the need to find intelligent people to replace them.

The elderly like Mingma Tenzing Sherpa, a retired police trainer, father of five children and grandfather of four grand-children, complain about the loss of values due to the migration experiences. *“Some young people tend to forget their own religion and culture after they return from a foreign country. The young Sherpas remain without religion because unlike their parents, they don't believe in God any more. They lose the feeling of belonging to a particular culture. Later they realise their own culture and religion are important aspects of life besides material progress, and they slowly return to their indigenous culture and religion.”* (Personal communication)

There is a considerable difference between Sherpas from Khumbu and Sherpas from Kathmandu. While Khumbu is less remote than many other mountain regions in Nepal, youngsters who grow up in the valley are markedly different from their city-bred peers. City-born Sherpa youth are less rooted in traditional culture. They are city dwellers not

only in the way they think but also in the way they behave. The longer people live in mountain villages, the more they are considered backward, unfashionable and in general, less adapted to modernity. Khumbu kids who attend school or college in Kathmandu rarely go back to Khumbu. The lack of industry and acceptable jobs suited to their training or academic qualifications ensure that many of them remain in Kathmandu despite the worsening environmental pollution in the city.

As far as the young are concerned, tourism does not open up any new perspectives for trained professionals apart from a small number of services (in the fields of health care, safety, national park administration, etc.). A trend is emerging that young Sherpas who have left Solu-Khumbu for Kathmandu or to go abroad only return to their original homes if they take over their parents' lodges. The Khumbu villages offer no options for the young Sherpas who have grown up in Kathmandu: there are no professional opportunities for them there, and, moreover, these young people are used to the comforts of city life and have no desire to go and settle in a rural area without any urban amenities. Some with wealthy Sherpa parents who own hotels and lodges in Khumbu or trekking or other businesses may live somewhere else, but still regard Khumbu as their second or third home.

This problem poses itself less for the Khumbu girls, because not so many of them move away to the city. They are altogether less caught up in the overall modernisation process than the boys, since they are generally brought up more traditionally, have less contact with foreigners, work in the households or in the fields, move about less and are less likely to have had a school education.

“Every Sherpa family in Khumbu today farms. No matter how well-to-do many Khumbu Sherpa families have become from tourism, they continue to produce as much of their household food supplies as they can. This is as true of households that have just been established as of those that have farmed for decades. Finally, in Khumbu a generational gap in farming means above all a change in attitudes and lifestyles between mothers and their daughters, for it is women who grow crops. (...) Some may take advantage of their relative affluence to hire more assistance than their parents could afford to. And some certainly aspire to other careers, such as shop keeping and running their own lodge. But for Khumbu women today as in the past, non-farm occupations supplement rather than replace crop production.” (Stevens 1996, 387-388)

Another big difference is fashion. Sherpa women are more likely to dress in traditional costume and are more concerned about preserving culture. While the men dress in more or less western gear - in the villages, the ‘jeaning’ of Sherpas is almost complete - the women still dress in the traditional *bakhu*. It is a general assumption that Sherpa girls are brought up in the same way as the boys – but only in the boys’ opinion. Compared to girls from more conservative Hindu castes, women enjoy more freedom and opportunities in Sherpa society. In reality, however, the young Sherpani’s daily life differs considerably from that of boys.

“*Women are more committed to keeping the culture alive*”, says Phinjo Sherpa, director of an developmental INGO . As men are more exposed to the modern world, they have a sloppy understanding of their cultural background. “*Wives keep the culture alive. Because Sherpa men are away from home half of the year, the wives have to look after everything, house, kids, run the lodges, etc. Only lodge owners stay at home.*” (Personal communication)

Probably the cultural and generation gap is wider among young and older women, between daughters and mothers. Educated in the leading boarding schools of Kathmandu, Almora or Kalimpong, young Sherpa women today have different expectations. The adherence to certain values or conventions, such as the prohibition of sexual contact before marriage, is increasingly being questioned by young and well-educated women.

### **2.3. Tourism and the Monetarisisation of Life**

*“If there is no tourism we would still be digging potatoes.”*  
Khumbu Sherpa, 22

A number of anthropological studies conducted among the Sherpas in recent years have investigated the effects of tourism on the traditional culture of the Sherpas. Adams' study of a village in which 80% of the houses derived revenue from tourism observed that traditional economic and social patterns had changed but not been destroyed. Traditional ceremonies, religious festivals and specific social structures such as reciprocal work have retained their significance. Adams (1992) and Stevens (1996) observed a growing generation gap and recorded that parents and their children had increasingly diverging attitudes to lifestyle, customs, religious faith and value systems, although he attributed this less to tourism than to the increasing migration of young people to Kathmandu. Here a parallel can be drawn to the Alps, where the pressure to gravitate towards the city and its values is far more acute than in the Himalaya.

Stevens observed a growing commercialisation and increasing monetarisisation of village life, a deepening regional differentiation in wealth and price increases as indirect effects of tourism. There is less impact on pastoral agriculture and farming and no significant influence in crop growing. Most families integrated tourism in their economy as a second pillar of income. What attracted his attention most was a wider generation gap caused by higher education for a bigger proportion of Sherpas.

“Considerable differences in relative affluence exist within Khumbu itself. Some villages are getting steadily richer while others share more modestly in the new wealth from tourism. Nauje (Namche, K.L.), Khunde and Khumjung have far higher standards of living than the other villages. A half day's walk in other directions leads to villages where rice is still only eaten on very special occasions and polyester dresses, stereos, and corrugated metal house roofs are only seen on market day trips to Nauje. And even within villages, the contrast in lifestyles is tremendous between sirdar and lodgekeeping families and the quarter of Khumbu's Sherpa families who have little or no tourism income.” (Stevens 1996, 376)

The main negative aspect that tourism has brought about in the Khumbu region is the inflation in the markets of Namche and Lukla. Many lodges and teashops have been built because of tourism. The lodge owners can charge any price in the market since the demand for commodities is high during the trekking season. As a result prices have shot up. Lifestyle has also changed. Jeans and T-shirts are ubiquitous and the Sherpa dress, once worn daily, is only visible at festivals. Family life has been considerably affected by tourism. During the trekking season, the villages are bereft of young Sherpa boys. Families are split up as individual members and sometimes whole families migrate to other villages to run lodges. It is not unusual for people from Khumjung and Khunde to own lodges and teashops in other places like Gokyo, Dole, Tyangboche, Dingboche, Lobuche, etc.

*“Transportation and inflation are major problems in Khumbu”, says Thame native Pemba Nuru Sherpa. “Tourism has resulted in high inflation in the Namche market during the season. I come from a remote place and we don’t have incomes as high as the Namche people. Nor are we successful lodge owners. However, we have to pay the same price for things in the market. That makes our life quite difficult. The second problem I face is with the flight tickets! Regarding domestic flights to Lukla, priority is given to the tourists because they pay their fare in dollars and we obviously can’t afford the same fare. Unlike in the old days, now there will be no flights for the locals till at least ten foreigners are flying with them. The airlines survive on the ticket fares of foreigners.”*

Lhapka Nuru, 22, son of the Khumjung primary school’s headmaster, was brought up in Khunde. He is presently studying in Kathmandu. *“I think one of the bad impacts of tourism on our society is that most of the young people join the trekking industry and they are diverted from getting a school education. The problem is that no definite pre-qualification is needed to be a guide. As soon as one can speak a little English, one joins a trekking tour and earns money. The parents then think that their children just need a few years of school in order to make their career and they don’t support or force their children to continue with their school or further education. So I’d say people become narrow-minded and society in general thinks education is not important.”*

Tourists generally have a good image among the young people because they provide jobs and income to the local people. Those youngsters who have not yet been overseas do not know anything about life in Europe or the USA. For many, America means “no hard work and a pleasant life” and for poor young Sherpas it is the Shangri la in the west.

*“Tourism in the past ten years has done a great deal of good to Namche”, says Ang Tenzing Sherpa, 20, the son of a lodge owner from Namche. “Ten years ago there was nothing in Namche, only problems. Since tourism developed in the area, our entire lifestyle has changed. Tourism has brought in a lot of money and numerous foreign-assistance programs like the KBC project, the Hillary Schools and the Volunteers Clinic in Khunde. Every Sherpa is in business because of tourism. Even the animals like yaks and zopkios (crossbreed of cattle, K.L.) are used as a means of transportation in the tourism business. We earned a lot of money and were able to build big houses,”* acknowledges Ang Tenzing.

But with the big houses and increasing number of tourists came tons of garbage. Supplies brought from Kathmandu to cater to tourist needs have resulted in discarded coke and beer bottles, chocolate wrappings, and plastic. Some of the garbage is burned causing air pollution. *“Because of the increasing number of tourists, many lodges are built, many people have to be fed and because wood is the main source of energy here, deforestation has increased. Buying other sources of fuel, like kerosene, is expensive. People have no alternative. Deforestation is increasing day by day.”* Ang Tenzing feels very sad about that.

*“If we think about what is happening to our culture and to our identity, one can’t deny that tourism has brought multicultural and multifarious influences to Khumbu. It is definitely interesting to learn and to adopt the good aspects of other cultures, but it is not healthy for us to let other cultures and other lifestyles replace ours totally. This is what tourism is doing to Khumbu. I don’t blame the foreigners for such negative impacts but mass tourism, indirectly, has become the cause and the source of a cultural decline. We*

*need to observe the present reality and compare it with the past. This process has resulted in the decline of Sherpa language and Sherpa cultural heritage. People trust each other less, people treat each other more rudely and the core value of Sherpa culture, namely to respect and welcome any guest as Gods, is becoming extinct.”*

## **2.4. Values under Pressure**

*Modernisation in Khumbu area serves people and life has become easier (now). Modernisation doesn't change people's mind as a whole. It doesn't affect the local culture and Khumbu people can cope with it.*  
Thame Sherpa, 16

Due to the high altitude, environmental stress and rough climate, living conditions are very hard in the north of the district, which is almost entirely populated by the Sherpa people. Being adjusted to this climate, the Sherpas have developed their own distinct culture and land-use strategies. Subsistence farming and transhumance, supplemented by trading activities, originally formed the basis of their economy. The Chinese take-over of Tibet in the 1950ies brought an end to trading activities with Tibet. Fortunately enough this coincided with the expeditions to explore and conquer the highest summits. During the following years, tourism – the trekking and expedition business – was developed and became the third pillar of the Sherpa economy. Despite the restructuring of the traditional economy, livestock transhumance and crop production continue and help provide for the demands of tourism. (Rogers/-Aitchison 1998)

Besides traditional agricultural patterns, tourism is the only source of income for most Sherpa households. Of course there are tremendous local inequalities in the status of wealth between those involved in tourism and those who live at subsistence level because they lack access to tourism profits. It is widely reported that tourism in this area contributes a great deal to the health and social well-being of the local communities, offering employment and income opportunities. There is also evidence of tourism's negative impact on traditional culture, such as the erosion of religious norms and the effects on family life, but the changes are considered less dramatic than in other tourist destinations. Observations suggest that Sherpas have managed to adapt to tourism and modernisation successfully without significant loss of core culture values. (Stevens 1996)

But there is also clear evidence of intergenerational dispute. While young people adopt foreign lifestyles and cultural patterns without great reservations, adults are more aware of the tensions brought up “progress”. A 46 years old Khumjung-Kathmandu Sherpa complains:

*“In former days people knew how to pray, nowadays it is necessary to teach religious texts. The biggest problem nowadays is the mentality of modernisation – to earn money quickly. They follow the Namche model, no patience, no cultural ethics, money is spent for other things. In former days it was used in three parts – one part of one's income was used for religious purposes (monastery renovation etc.), one for private use and one for the community. Money is the reason why they run all over the world. It is not a lack of education, but a lack of discipline by their parents. Everybody competes, in clothes, in homes, in whiskey, they drink coke and beer instead of chang – everything is a big show, the regular standards for festivals are gone. They compete over who organises the most expensive festival for drinking.”*

Given that migration, education, tourism and other external influences are the most important factors in affecting cultural change among the Sherpas, it is surprising that the changes in everyday life over the last forty years have not been more drastic. Since the 60ies, the effects of modernisation have considerably influenced and changed the way that the Sherpa communities function, permeating but not completely eliminating almost all the Sherpa cultural patterns.

As in other regions of the world, technological backwardness leads to drastic and hasty steps towards change. At the same time people lack orientation, as their cultural backbone is hardly able to stand up to the pressure to modernise, i.e. their system of cultural codes is no longer strong enough. (Luger 1995) The Sherpa traditions and long-observed codes of behaviour and value systems have undoubtedly lost a significant amount of their force. *“Buddhism is no longer followed as strictly as it used to be; smoking is not officially permitted but is generally tolerated and alcohol is likewise condoned; the dress code is increasingly loosely observed. Some of the customs and annual rituals are losing their meaning, the religious calendar is no longer taken so seriously, and many other features are adopted from the outside world without anybody thinking too much about what is really happening,”* says Mingma Nurbu Sherpa, 29. Mingma lived in Austria for 10 years and now views his own culture with a certain critical eye. A few core values, wedding rituals, funeral rites, certain hierarchies and patterns of social status within the clan system are notable exceptions to the general trend.

Anthropological studies have found that since the 1960ies a considerable change has taken place in Khumbu. But in spite of the various transitions from traditional life to modernity, there are more signs of positive adoptions of foreign lifestyle patterns than of the elimination of traditional values. Since the advent of tourism and with a higher level of mobility as well as education, there is great evidence of wide-ranging societal development. But in Khumbu a strong faith still prevails. In addition to religious bonds and the agriculture circle the tourism seasons rule the Sherpa's rhythm of life. (Adams 1992)

Through the different education system, above all through the introduction of compulsory schooling, the generation gap runs along the formal education divide. In “post-figurative” cultures where the young learn everything from the older generation, they hold their elders in due respect. On account of the change in the education structures, one can describe Khumbu as undergoing a transformation to a “pre-figurative” culture in which the old have to learn from the young – and thereby lose some of the respect they formerly enjoyed. This classification, established by Margaret Mead, can also be observed in Ladakhi culture, as described by Helena Norberg-Hodge (Norberg-Hodge 1991). In the eyes of the young Sherpas, this is one of the most marked features of the generation gap.

### **3. Mountain Youth Adapting to the Global World**

There are few similarities between the structural data of the two regions. The Pinzgau district is divided by a major east-west traffic route, and has a highly-developed transport network. Business activity is flourishing, and tourism - with approx. 1 million arrivals a year - is the most important economic sector. This region at the foot of the Hohe Tauern mountains, part of which is a nature protection area that became Austria's largest national park in 1981, has a population of 80,000 – about one sixth of the population of the province of Salzburg. The number of young people between 15 and 24 years of age is approx. 13,000. Children and

young people under 25, 29,000 of them in all, represent over a third of the population. In contrast, the population of Upper Khumbu totals only 3,000, the same as the population of Austria's winter sport resort Saalbach/Hinterglemm (a Pinzgau village which has almost two million tourist overnight stays a year).

Both youth cultures are characterised by a high degree of mobility and a variety of forms of migration. From childhood on, the Pinzgau youth are accustomed to long journeys to school by car, train or bus, and to commuting to the towns if they go on to higher education. The Khumbu youngsters also cover long distances every day – on foot. Only a few places have primary schools, and the Khumjung school is the only school in the region that takes pupils up to school leaving certificate level. Unlike Khumbu, Pinzgau has plenty of secondary schools. Thus while the Pinzgau children spend their youth in Pinzgau, the Sherpas have to go to Kathmandu or some other town and live far away from their parents and peers. One major feature of the Pinzgau youth is the fact that even as adults they want to stay in the region, where they expect to find an adequate job. The Sherpas do not have this prospect. Neither those born in Khumbu nor Kathmandu want to settle in Khumbu later on. At most they think of the Sagarmatha National Park as a place where they might spend their holidays enjoying the good air and the fun of the festivals and visiting their grandparents, or where they might consider settling down when they are old. But young people of both areas have a strong feeling of regional identity, which in the case of the Sherpas is underlined by a strong ethnic component – “above all I am a Sherpa”.

Unexpectedly, the Sherpas go abroad more often than the Pinzgau youth. Kathmandu Sherpas, who are considerably better off than the Khumbu Sherpas, have far more opportunities to go abroad and take advantage of these chances; but it has been estimated that one Khumbu boy in three uses his contacts to tourists or other sponsors and manages to spend a period of time abroad, either to work or to study. In contrast, the Pinzgau youth are very home-based and only a small number of them has any experience of other countries, apart from summer holidays in Italy or Spain. This is partly due to the fact that their parents are often in the tourism business themselves and therefore cannot go abroad during the school summer holidays.

The Sherpas' experiences abroad have greatly opened of their eyes and widened their horizons, and turned innocent, playful children into serious-minded adults. The shyness so often evident in the interviews and the gestures of humble respect shown to foreigners or to people of a higher social status are rarely seen among those returning from abroad. The short-time migrants do not share the distorted and idealised picture of the western world that dominates the ideas even of those schoolchildren who have not seen anything of the world beyond Kathmandu; they no longer believe that Shangri-la can be found in the West.

Neither region offers much in the way of professional perspectives for those with higher education. College and university graduates are no more likely to find a position that corresponds to their qualifications in Khumbu than in Pinzgau, where the number of qualified people far exceeds the capacity of the local employment market. Both regions suffer from a significant brain drain, with the educated moving away to the cities where – at least in Austria – the opportunities are infinitely greater. In the Khumbu villages there is a shortage of well educated permanent residents who could take or share responsibility for some of the political decisions and local development processes.

The only young people whose lives are truly tied to their home regions are those who work in their parents' businesses in the tourist industry. Their life perspectives are in tourism, and on the whole they have a very positive although at the same time critical attitude to the industry.

The children of the Khumbu lodge owners, like the children of the Pinzgau hotel owners, usually have more money than people employed in tourism and are therefore able to indulge in leisure activities. The children of lodge-owners in Namche are particularly proud of their experiences in the USA, which form one of their central status symbols.

In Pinzgau the main status symbols are fashionable clothes, sports cars, exotic holiday destinations, trendy sports, media equipment and media consumption. While this applies to a limited extent to the Kathmandu based Sherpa children, there is hardly any of this in Khumbu. Wearing a DKNY T-shirt does not mean anything in Khumbu because designer brands are virtually unknown there. Several Sherpa households have now installed satellite TV and are therefore linked to the global culture industry. Whereas in Pinzgau this link to music and images dictates to the young people what is "cool" and "in", the influence of the media in Khumbu still appears to be very limited. With the exception of popular cultural phenomena such as jeans, which are worn by young people the world over and which came to Khumbu a decade or two ago, Khumbu is not subject to American influence to the same extent as Pinzgau.

Attitudes to education and other topics which represent the polarity between tradition and modernity are the lines of conflict between the generations. Sherpa youth regard the older generation as backward because they are superstitious and sceptical of new technology, underestimate the value of good education and reject any ideas of a new understanding of the roles of the sexes, above all the position of women. Young women are critical of the fact that they are brought up more conservatively than the boys and tied to the home, while the boys are allowed more free time and are given the chance to go abroad. In the Sherpa culture it is the Sherpanis who are the preserving force and who guarantee continuity and stability while the men are away. The girls' upbringing stems from this perception of the women's role as caretakers and perpetuators of their culture. For this reason the generation conflict in Khumbu between mothers and daughters is more marked than was observed in Pinzgau.

Both societies are strongly male dominated, with the women often hidden behind the scenes but thanks to their work nonetheless the pillars of the family. Village life in Pinzgau is strongly influenced by clubs and associations, predominantly sports clubs, dominated by men. Likewise in Khumbu the youth clubs are mainly for boys. While in Pinzgau a lively leisure scene has developed alongside the clubs and youth organisations of the church and other associations, in Khumbu the village community plays a more important role. Festivals organised by the young people are an opportunity for them to meet and make their first contacts with the opposite sex. These can be compared to the discotheques in the Pinzgau as places outside the control of the older generation and thus free of the strict application of social norms and values.

The main engines of cultural and social change in Khumbu are the schools, expatriates as development aid staff, advisors, sponsors and tourists, migration (because those who return bring new products and ideas into the society and try to integrate these into their previous lifestyles), and technology, above all electricity, because it changes everyday habits and makes it possible to improve the standard of living. The media only have indirect influence in the villages, and the extent of media influence is by no means undisputed. Together these

factors determine the adaptation mechanisms that the youth develop in order to be able to keep pace with the perceived modernity of the global world.

Most of the inhabitants of the Pinzgau region are members of the Roman Catholic Church, but the young people no longer adhere to the full set of values and norms that the Church demands, and its authority is increasingly questioned. In contrast, language and religion are undisputed core values for the Sherpas and myths and religious rituals structure the pattern of their year, and this is a feature that not even the most modern young people would like to change. Buddhism and its values are unquestioningly upheld. This cannot be said for the Sherpa language, however, which is increasingly losing its importance as the most marked sign of ethnic identity. Many Sherpas speak better Nepali than Sherpa, a large number of those who grew up in Kathmandu no longer speak their mother tongue at all; at most they understand it, although they can no longer express themselves properly in it. This is interpreted by some of the young as a deficit and cultural loss, and many young Sherpas are altogether pessimistic about their culture. Some of the educated young are aware of the danger that Sherpa culture could disappear altogether if core values such as the language are not upheld, and they demand protective measures to save such traditional features. At the same time they are an integral part of a process of change which weakens or replaces traditional aspects, while easing daily hardship and making life less remote and dull. Tourism without doubt plays an important role in this process, not because the tourists live out a desirable lifestyle while they are on holiday, but because the Sherpas have become employees in the service sector, their religious and agricultural patterns have been disrupted, and their everyday life has adapted to the new economic forms.

The effects of tourism are more evident in Khumbu than in Pinzgau. In the Sagarmatha National Park and also in the more southerly Pharak area (whose farmers are the suppliers for the tourists and who sell their products in the market at Namche the whole year round), people are economically largely dependent - directly or indirectly - on tourism. In Pinzgau approx. one fifth of the workforce is in tourism, and a further fifth involved indirectly as suppliers. If the tourists stopped coming it would be a hard blow for the region; if they stopped coming to Khumbu it would be a catastrophe, as the dependence on this one economic sector is so much greater.

Transformation processes are taking place in both regions, partly driven by the young, who at the same time are subject to the uncertainties they bring. The old and familiar order gave people security but is felt to be outdated; the new situation that has replaced it does not yet give any security, and it challenges the flexibility of the individual and demands quicker reaction to changes. A standard old-style life pattern with the young following in the footsteps of the old is not possible on the threshold to the third millennium, neither in Pinzgau nor in Khumbu. In both regions these uncertainties are countered with escape, with excesses of alcohol (an everyday occurrence in rural areas both in Austria and in Nepal), with silent protest and with open opposition. In their minds the Pinzgau youth are city dwellers, and the majority of young Sherpas also think that real life goes on in the cities.

Today, young people in remote mountain areas are forced to design their life planning in a more flexible way since changes take place so much faster. Some phases of technological development are even skipped. Breathlessly, they try to shape their identities, to integrate whatever seems to fit them. Modern mountain dwellers they want to be and thus they give rise to life styles within larger hybrid cultures that can never be static entities.

The traditional life styles in the valleys of the Alps and the Himalayas, which today sometimes resemble bastions of a divine and natural order, have always undergone modifications, they were permeable and had to integrate aspects that were foreign to them. What is new about the present development is the immense speed at which changes occur - forcing the mountain youth to adapt to them if they want to create an identity for themselves.

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