



Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies

Volume 9
Number 3 *Himalayan Research Bulletin*

Article 6

1989

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Recommended Citation

Parker, Anne (1989) "The Meanings of 'Sherpa': An Evolving Social Category," *Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 9: No. 3, Article 6.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol9/iss3/6>



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The Meanings of 'Sherpa': an Evolving Social Category

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To most of the world the idea of Sherpa people is synonymous with the experience of trekking in Nepal. After Tenzing Sherpa, along with Edmund Hilary, became one of the first people to climb Mt. Everest, the Sherpas became widely known as a group of people who not only assisted on major climbs but were also uniquely skilled mountain guides. The most recent five-star hotel to open in Kathmandu chose the name Hotel Sherpa, joining the Annapurna, Yak and Yeti, and Soaltee-Oberoi, as a symbol of fantasy fulfillment for affluent tourists seeking adventure in exotic places.

Indeed, trekking in Nepal became synonymous with trekking in the Solu-Khumbu (Mt. Everest) region, home of the Sherpa people, and because of their experience on early climbs, Sherpas from Solu-Khumbu established or were involved in many of the trekking agencies currently operating in Nepal. Passing through areas of Sherpa culture is considered to be an important and memorable part of the trekking experience in Nepal. Nepal is a cultural mosaic of ethnic groups and languages, a fact only dimly perceived by tourists with little time to spend in Nepal. It seems clear even to those passing through for a short time, however, that Sherpa culture is visibly different from the rest of Nepali culture. A glimpse at the Tibetan origin culture groups of Nepal in contrast to Tibeto-Burman language speaking groups of the middle hills - Tamang, Gurung, Magar, Newar, Rai, and Limbu - and Indian culture origin Brahmin, Chettri and untouchable castes is sufficient to reveal the cultural contrasts which exist in Nepal. The unique character of Nepali culture reflects layers and layers of overlap of cultural and linguistic influences from Tibet and India. In this complex cultural mosaic, what exactly is the meaning of Sherpa?

In eastern Nepal the term Sherpa takes on many shades of meaning. It ranges from a specific job description on organized trekking tours to a generic term for all Tibetan origin peoples of eastern Nepal. The uses of the term Sherpa cover a wide spectrum of meanings, each one very dependent on its context. Initially, Sherpa came to be the designation of the Tibetan-origin people settled in the Solu-Khumbu region of Nepal:

"The name Sherpa is derived from the Tibetan word *Shar-pa*, which means 'easterner'. But it is not clear in what circumstances this term came to be associated with this particular population. From the Tibetan point of view, Sherpas dwelling in the highlands of Nepal are southerners rather than easterners, though there is the tradition that before their migration to their present habitat they had been settled in Eastern Tibet. Three regions of Nepal contain the main concentration of the Sherpas, even though small splinter groups are also found elsewhere. These regions are Solu, Pharak, and Khumbu and the entire area is known under the collective terms Solu-Khumbu or Shar-Khumbu. Although the Sherpa inhabitants of Solu-Khumbu form a single society in the sense of having the same clan structure and freely intermarrying, environmental conditions in Khumbu differ greatly from those in Solu." (Furer-Haimendorf 1984:1-2)

Subsequently, with increased tourism in Nepal and the advent of mountain climbing in the Solu-Khumbu region, the term became synonymous with high elevation Tibetan-origin people in the minds of those who came to trek. In order to join in the economic opportunity and esteem in which Sherpas are held by trekking groups, local Tamangs refer to themselves as Sherpa on occasion (March

1979). Although previously Sherpas held an almost exclusive monopoly on the high-paying trekking jobs of guide and *sirdar* (expedition organizer) while local Tamangs rarely rose above the job of porter (March 1979:50), the term Sherpa has also come to be used as a job description rather than as an ethnic marker as members of other ethnic groups move into these coveted jobs:

Some trekking agencies are already recruiting Tamangs and even Rais and training them to do the same work which Sherpas are doing on treks. Such Tamangs tend to describe themselves as "Sherpas," using the name to define an occupation rather than an ethnic group. (Furer-Haimendorf 1984:78)

Treks often include workers in four categories in addition to porters: *sirdar*, cook, cook boy, and 'sherpas.' This latter job title is used for those whose job is to set up tents and look after other aspects of camp organization. This use of the term as a job description adds further confusion among visitors to Nepal as to who is a Sherpa and who is doing sherpa-type work.

Further to the East, the term Sherpa takes on different shades of meaning. When the Tibetan-origin peoples of the Upper Arun Valley and upper Tamur drainage area of the Kosi and Mecchi zones are asked their *jat* (caste) they refer to themselves as Bhotia. To them, i.e. the people of Kimatanka, Chepuwa, Thudam, Tokpe Gola, and Walungchung Gola villages, the term Sherpa has two meanings: 1) the Tibetan-origin people from Solu-Khumbu and 2) the highly Hindu-acculturated Tibetan-origin peoples who migrated down and who have lived for a number of generations on the interface between lower elevation Nepalese culture and Bhotia areas. Only a few of these acculturated Sherpas cite their origins from Solu-Khumbu, most say that they originally came from higher elevation areas of the Kosi and Mecchi Zones or ultimately directly from Tibet. In contrast, for the inhabitants of lower elevation areas (middle hills) - the Rai, Limbu, Tamang, Gurung, Brahmin, and Chettri (generically referred to as 'Rongpa,' literally: valley people, by the Bhotia) - the term Sherpa has come to be used as a generic term for all Tibetan-origin people. In this sense, the term is all-inclusive and covers everyone from their very acculturated nearest neighbors to those higher up toward the Tibetan border.

Indeed, the government has forced the term upon the Bhotia people. When citizenship papers were given to the inhabitants of Walungchung Gola, those who couldn't read were given the last name Sherpa by government officials. Those who could read could retain clan names (*gyuta*), adding Bhotia after as caste designation in keeping with the dominant Nepali custom of incorporating caste as name. At mid-elevation, in the Khandbari and Chainpur areas of Sankuwasabha District, local 'Rongpa' residents have no other category in which to place Tibetan-origin Nepalis and hence, those who would choose to designate themselves as Bhotia are forced to refer to themselves as Sherpa in order to clarify their caste status. Long-term Bhotia residents of the Mecchi zone have described their experiences of discrimination or discomfort in the Taplejung area, based on the other's perceptions of them as outsiders. There is jealousy of their moderate economic success, and they are described as having just arrived recently with begging bowls in hand, implying that their success in trade must be based on something illegal rather than on hard work by both men and women. In this context, Bhotias who refer to themselves as Bhotias at home use the term 'Sherpa' at lower elevation to make it clear that they are Nepali citizens (of Tibetan culture) rather than Tibetan. Some who are not happy to use the term Sherpa have chosen the name "lama" instead for the same purpose.

While accepting some of the general caste and cultural traits implied by the generic term Sherpa, the people from the higher elevations see the acculturated Sherpas from the lower areas as being different from themselves. A saying among Tibetans and Bhotias highlights this perception: "A Sherpa is not a man, like liver is not meat." This is a saying which is used when they have done some work with Sherpas which produced a bad result or in a case where there has been an intermarriage with a Sherpa that was the cause of trouble. In the past others hesitated to intermarry with Solu-Khumbu Sherpas, but this is no longer true due to their economic success. The Sherpas of the lower elevations are viewed as closer to Brahmin/Chettri culture, and there is still no intermarriage between them and Bhotia. Because these lower-elevation groups are engaged primarily in farming and live in close proximity to 'Rongpa' groups, they need to engage in closer relations with them, and have thus come to celebrate Hindu-origin festivals of the land. Hence, in the eyes of the Bhotia, these lower fringe

Sherpas appear distant from the original Tibetan culture. For this reason they are referred to as 'Ramlok,' an ornament made with gold and silver, meaning that these Sherpas are a mixture of two cultures. Solu-Khumbu Sherpas also think of themselves as different from the Sherpas of the lower fringe, and generally consider themselves superior to them.

There are dramatic differences between the Solu-Khumbu, upper Sankuwasabha District, the upper Mecchi Zone, and the lower layer of acculturated Sherpas. The latter have been *in situ* for quite a few generations, as sampled within Sankuwasabha district, and have been living where they currently reside for as long as many other castes, such as the Brahmin, Tamang, Gurung, and other residents who came from the West to settle eastern Nepal within the last two centuries. Although Bhotias from the Mecchi Zone, by shifting their language more towards central Tibetan can communicate with residents of the upper Kosi Zone, it is easier to use Nepali to facilitate communication. With the exception of Ritak and Thudam dialects, which are essentially the same as those in the upper Mecchi Zone, the dialects are essentially mutually unintelligible. In conversations with speakers of the Solu-Khumbu dialect and with lower acculturated Sherpas, Bhotias of the Mecchi zone usually shift directly into Nepali after limited initial exchanges in Tibetan. Of twelve lower-elevation Sherpa families in Siddha Pokhari and Nundaki Panchayats of Sankuwasabhu District who were asked if their dialect was mutually intelligible with that of Solu-Khumbu, 50% answered yes and 50% no, indicating that the ability of these disparate groups of 'Sherpas' to communicate successfully among themselves may be limited.

Based on self-designation, the term 'Sherpa' most clearly belongs to the people of Solu-Khumbu and only secondly to the Tibetan-origin people inhabiting the interface between those at higher elevation and their 'Rongpa' neighbors. The use of the term is evolving: its additional connotation which includes the Bhotia peoples of eastern Nepal, as used by 'Rongpa' neighbors, has almost entirely supplanted the use of the term 'Bhotia' by those outside the Bhotia community. In Solu-Khumbu the success and economic prosperity of the Sherpa people has encouraged the use of the term as one imparting status and acceptability to Tibetan-origin peoples in general. The success of the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu in improving their lives by tapping the tourist business inspires awe and envy among 'Rongpa' who would in the past have comfortably relegated these Tibetan-origin Nepalis to lower status. Bhotias of eastern Nepal use the term Sherpa to designate themselves in public settings in order to be treated as cultural 'insiders' by other Nepali groups.

The increased status of the term Sherpa associated with the economic success of the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu is partly attributable to their geographic location in a desirable trekking zone, but it also reflects their enterprise and ability to adapt quickly to changing economic opportunities: features which generally characterize the Tibetan-origin peoples of Nepal's northern border. Traditional economies in these areas were based on a combination of farming, pastoral nomadism, and trading. Multiple strategies for resource use and experience in responding to changing markets in trading have well prepared Nepal's Tibetan-origin peoples to adapt quickly to many aspects of modernization and development - more so than their more sedentary and cautious neighbors in the middle hills. The economic success of the Thakali and Manangis, as well as recent efforts by Bhotias of the Mecchi Zone, are playing important roles in maintaining the cultural identity of these groups and in their ability to survive successfully as minority groups vis a vis other groups, eg. Brahmin, Chettri, and Newar, who have long held a monopoly on political power, education, and economic investment in Nepal.

The name recognition and positive image of the Sherpa of Solu-Khumbu reflect positively on other Tibetan-origin groups within Nepal. The expansion of the use of the term by Tamang neighbors and trekking guides and the use of the term 'Sherpa' instead of 'Bhotia' by outsiders indicates the positive connotation that 'Sherpa' now carries. The evolution of the term Sherpa reflects to a large extent the evolution of perception of the status of Tibetan-origin peoples by other groups in Nepal. The term 'Sherpa' takes on significance as a marker of the economic and cultural viability of the people of Nepal's northern border and reflects their contemporary concern that they be perceived as residents of Nepal rather than as cultural outsiders.

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