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**Sherpas through their rituals**

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# Sherpas through their rituals

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*Associate Professor of Anthropology  
University of Michigan*



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**In gratitude to Samuel Ortner**

**In memory of Gertrude Ortner and Ida Panitch**

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## Preface

The field research upon which this book is based was carried out between September 1966 and February 1968. It was made possible by a National Institutes of Mental Health Predoctoral Fellowship and a National Science Foundation Field Research Grant. To both NIMH and NSF I extend my appreciation and thanks, and my hope that their programs, so valuable to scholarship in anthropology, will soon again attain the scope they had at the time I was fortunate to be in graduate school.

The research was first written up as a dissertation for the Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago. For their encouragement and criticism of my work on the dissertation, I would like to thank the members of the department, particularly Professors Clifford Geertz (now at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, New Jersey), Nur Yalman (now at Harvard University), McKim Marriott, David M. Schneider, and Melford E. Spiro (now at the University of California at San Diego).

But this book is not in any direct sense a revision of the dissertation. Basically, I went back to the field notes and started again from scratch. The dissertation contains important data not included here, and I have indicated some of it in notes to the present text. The overall thrust of the book, as well as most of the specific discussions and analyses, are not in the dissertation.

In Nepal, many people were helpful in facilitating my work. The people of the Foreign Ministry of His Majesty's Government assisted me in securing my original permission to live and work in the Sherpa area, and were able to arrange things so that I was allowed to renew this permission through intermediaries, saving me twenty days of trekking every three months.

The people at the Swiss Association for Technical Assistance (SATA) were also very helpful – they received my mail and conveyed it to me by an incredibly complex method for the entire period of my stay, and extended many other kindnesses as well. I would particularly like to mention Regula Rutishauser (now Regula Roth), who was conducting a school for Tibetan immigrant children at the SATA center at Chialsa, and N. B. Chhetri, who was associated with the SATA agricultural project at Jiri.

Dr. and Mrs. John McKinnon of New Zealand, who were in charge of what was then the only hospital in the Sherpa area, at Kunde, also extended their kind hospitality (including several hot showers) to me. In addition, they supplied medical

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advice and supplies for me to convey to the people of “Dzemu,” as well as information based on their own observations of the Sherpas of their area.

I would also like to mention Mr. and Mrs. Tom Mendies, proprietors of the Snow View Hotel, whose many small favors made my three separate stays in Kathmandu genuinely relaxing and productive.

Of the Sherpas themselves, I must single out my cook, translator (in the initial phases), and all-around assistant, Mingma Tenzing of Thami, for a major citation. (Mingma was sent to me by Col. James Roberts, who thus gets a vote of thanks as well.) Mingma’s unflinching consideration, good humor, and fundamental decency contributed to an extent that I cannot begin to measure to the success of the field project from beginning to end. My debt to him is enormous, and my gratitude in equal measure.

It is impossible for me to mention by name all the other Sherpas (as well as many Tibetans, especially monks) who cooperated with me in what to them must have often appeared strange and useless endeavors, who submitted patiently to my questions and gave serious and thoughtful answers, invited me to their homes and temples, tolerated my intrusion at essentially private events, and in general – needless to say – made the whole undertaking an actuality. To the villagers of “Dzemu,” and of all the other Sherpa villages I visited, and to the lamas and monks of the various Sherpa and (immigrant) Tibetan monasteries where I was so kindly and openly received, I must express my great gratitude.

My close friend and colleague, Robert A. Paul, was with me in the field, doing his own research on Sherpa monasticism. It is impossible to estimate his contribution to the success of the fieldwork and the dissertation, but I wish formally to thank him here in this small way.

The writing of this book has had other support, both financial and personal. It was launched by a grant (# 2680) from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research. And it was sustained in a major way by a year at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey, underwritten by National Science Foundation funds (GS-31730 X 2).

Many friends have read all or parts of this book, and offered extremely useful criticism and encouragement: Robert Brenner, Clifford Geertz, Robert Paul, Paul Rabinow, Michelle Rosaldo, Renato Rosaldo, Terence Turner, and Harriet Whitehead. In addition, the “Chicago Seminar” in New York City discussed parts of the book at some of our meetings. Its members included, in addition to Rabinow, Paul, and myself, Steve Barnett, Karen Blu, Jean-Paul Dumont, Kevin Dwyer, Nancy Foner, Judith Friedlander, and Edward Schieffelin.

Some final notes on the book: I have changed the name of the village in which I worked to “Dzemu,” which means “beautiful” in the Sherpa language. I have also given pseudonyms to all individuals, most monasteries and most other villages mentioned in the text. The Sherpas’ position in Nepal, geographically as well as politically, has certain sensitive aspects. The pseudonyms are by way of protection



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of privacy, between neighbor and neighbor, village and village, and for the Sherpas as a whole vis-à-vis governmental agencies and even foreign political interests. I have tried throughout the book to provide the information necessary to situate sociologically an informant's statement, or to generalize about a village or a monastery. I see no need to specify people and places further, and some potential harm in doing so.

The spelling of native terms is neither phonetic nor based on some standard set of conventions. The terms have been rendered in writing so as to evoke from the English-speaking reader the sounds as I heard them. Probably the major distortion wrought by this tactic is the loss of the distinction between the long *a* (usually transliterated as *ā*, and pronounced as in the English *calm*), and the short *a* (usually transliterated as *a*, and pronounced as in the English *cut*). I have rendered both simply by *a*.

After completing the manuscript and turning it in to the publisher, I revisited the Sherpas for the first time since the original fieldwork. I spent four months among them, in Kathmandu, in "Dzemu," and in a village in Khumbu, making a film for Granada television of England. Restraining my temptation to write an essay on the powerful experience of returning to one's original field area after a long time, I will simply say the following. First, I felt strongly reassured that the overall argument of the book is essentially correct; indeed, I came to wonder what took me so long to see it. And second, the visit provided me with some new data relevant to particular discussions in the book. In some cases I have incorporated them into the text, in others I have put them in notes, indicating that they were obtained in 1976 rather than in the "ethnographic present" of the text, which is 1966–1968. I have also indicated, where relevant, whether they were obtained in Solu or in Khumbu.

Finally, I must say that there is always a sense in which an anthropological analysis (or even a description) does some sort of violence to the people and the culture being discussed. Readers who have had contact with Sherpas, and who have found them to be warm, friendly, hospitable, and generous (as I did), will find it peculiar that I talk about antisocial tendencies in Sherpa society. To this I can only respond, first, that I think the Sherpas often find it easier to be generous to outsiders than to one another, and second, that my discussions of "the closed family," of the difficulties of exchange, and so forth, are *analytical* discussions. Often the Sherpas are successful in achieving solidarity and mutual support, but often too they are not. My argument is that when they are not successful, when sociality fails and relations are strained, this is not a matter of individual "deviance," but arises out of structures that systematically constrain people's behavior in this not-unexpected direction.

Similarly, the discussions about demons and exorcisms may lead the reader to imagine that Sherpa religion is a religion of fear. There is indeed some nervousness about demonic infiltration, as well as about retaliation from guardian gods and spirits who have been offended in some way. But the Sherpas do not walk around

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in a state of religious anxiety, and I wish here to correct any such impression that might be conveyed by my discussion. The Sherpas perform most of their rituals because, although this might sound pedestrian, it is *traditional* to perform those rituals, and because disorder might ensue if they don't. The world is not a continuously threatening place; the point is to insure that it doesn't become so.

S. B. O.

*New York*  
*February 1977*