

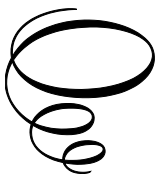
The Sherpas and Their Original Identity

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By

Serku Sherpa and Yana Wengel

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To my parents Pem Chhetar Sherpa, Sarkinee Sherpa
and my Wife Nimlekee Sherpa
who taught me the values of the Sherpa culture

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FOREWORD

DR YANA WENGEL
HAINAN UNIVERSITY, CHINA

“I would like to be remembered for the schools and hospitals and bridges and all the other activities that we did with the Sherpas. Unquestionably, they are the things I feel that were the most worthwhile of everything I was involved in”.

Sir Edmund Hillary

Approximately 600 years ago, nomadic Tibetans traversed the Himalayas and settled in the region known now as Khumbu (Nepal). In the Sherpa language, those people are called Sherpas, which means “people from the East” (ཤར་མཉམ་ “east” and རྒྱ་པ་ “people”). For many centuries, those easterners lived in isolation on the southern slopes of Mount Chomolungma (ཇོ་མོ་གླང་མ་) or Mount Everest as it is known to many. From the 1920s onwards, the Sherpa people developed close relationships with the British. Sherpas served as support crew on early mountaineering expeditions, and for more than 100 years, international climbers have found their help indispensable. Indeed, without their hard work on the slopes, it is likely that no attempt to summit Mount Everest would have succeeded. However, it was only after Sherpa Tenzin Norgay and New Zealander Edmund Hillary’s 1953 legendary summit of the world’s highest mountain that the Sherpa people became famous worldwide.

Sherpa people are associated with honesty, endurance, loyalty, and expertise in high altitude environments as mountain guides and support workers who help their climbing clients reach the top of the world's highest mountain. The relationships formed between Sherpas and international climbers have helped establish many organisations that benefit the Sherpas ecologically and economically and help safeguard their culture. The Sherpas have managed to preserve their culture whilst also benefitting from Western and

technological advances, which have resulted in mutual benefit and prosperity. Nevertheless, the commercialisation of mountaineering and the spread of tourism in the region have also led to the commodification of Sherpa culture and identity. Indeed, many mountaineering support staff who are termed Sherpas are from other Nepalese ethnic groups.

Since the first expedition to Mount Chomolungma in 1921, English climbers have been very impressed with the local Sherpa people's hospitality, skills, and endurance. The century-long relationship between the West and the Sherpa civilisation has grown into a close exchange and understanding between entirely different cultures. As such, various local cultural traditions are very closely intertwined with Western cultures. For example, mutual friendship can be seen in the adaptation of the Texas-style boots and cowboy hats that Sherpas have incorporated into their attire as a replacement for the traditional Sherpa outfit and, in exchange, Buddhist prayer flags adorn the Western climbing camps. Nonetheless, despite outside influences and the commodification of their culture for a Western audience, Sherpas have managed to retain and sustain their identity and culture.

In this book, Serku Sherpa, a Sherpa researcher and trekking tour guide in Nepal and Tibet, collects the pieces that make up the puzzle of the Sherpas and their original identity. This book provides insights into their unique culture and creates an opportunity to understand the Sherpa people's cultural "authenticity" through the depiction of their festivals, rituals, music, art, cuisine, and religion. One of this book's unique features is its inclusion of a collection of Sherpa folk songs written in the Nepali language and translated into English. The undoubted merit of the book is that it is written by a Sherpa researcher who attempts to present the cultural authenticity of the Sherpa people by illustrating their traditions, ethics, and sociocultural system. The book includes extensive research and the author's unique cultural heritage and experience. Everyone, from tourists to researchers, will find that this book offers them a rich and comprehensive understanding of Sherpa culture and the Sherpa identity.

PREFACE

Although Nepal is relatively small in area, it is rich in ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural resources. Nepal has a complex social structure as a multi-lingual, multi-religious, multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural nation. Various communities living in Nepal have their own original cultures, traditions, and practices, including the Sherpa people.

Sherpas inhabit the Himalayan and mountainous regions of Nepal. They have their own lifestyle, history, culture, religion, language, costumes, and traditions. It was only in the year 1950 that domestic and foreign researchers started to take an interest in the Sherpas. Historically, details about the Sherpas' history, cultural practices, and genealogy were written down and studied in the ancient Sambhota script, and so those interested in studying the Sherpas' culture and tradition faced considerable linguistic barriers. This book aims to overcome those barriers and help researchers and scholars interested in studying, conserving, and promoting Sherpa culture, tradition, and history.

I thank everyone who helped me during the preparation of this book, including distinguished scholars from the Sherpa community, religious leaders, intellectuals, and social workers, who gave me valuable time and suggestions and shared crucial information. I extend special thanks to Khenpo Mima Dorji Sherpa, Acharya Karma Rinzin Sherpa, Nepal Sherpa Association President Ang Dorje (AD) Lama Sherpa, Nepal Sherpa Women's Association Chairperson Ngimi Sherpa, Himalayan Sherpa Cultural Centre President Chhiring Sherpa, Sherpa Media Group President Nimlekee Sherpa, Nepal Sherpa Student Association President Sange Mingma Sherpa, Nepali Sherpa Youth Association Chairperson Jangbu Sherpa, Sherpa Service Centre Chairperson Sonam Chhoti Sherpa, Former Central General Secretary of National Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) Ang Kaji Sherpa (Kisan), Nepal Sherpa Association vice president and linguist Kisor Sherpa, former Central General Secretary of Nepal Sherpa Association Ngima Tendup Sherpa, Himalayan Sherpa

Cultural Centre Founder Member Lhakpa Norbu Sherpa, Thamichho Sherpa Kiduk Chairperson Pasang Chhiri Sherpa, Chhring Ongchhu Sherpa, Pasang Rinji Sherpa, Malaysia Sherpa Kiduk's Founder Chairman Tenjing Sherpa, Miss Sherpa 2017 Sonam Dolma Sherpa (Lama), Ngima Yangji Sherpa, Jyasa Gonpa's teacher Phurwa Sherpa, first Sherpa woman writer Lhakpa Phuti Sherpa, Sangak Chholing Kerok Gonpa's chief Lama Ngawang Chhuldim Sherpa, Founder Member of Himalayan Sherpa Society Mingma Sherpa, Nepal Buddhist Service Association Vice-President Nimto Sherpa, Senior Vice-President of Himalayan Sherpa Cultural Center Ang Doma Sherpa and its Secretary Chhoti Sherpa, Nepal Sherpa Journalists Federation Chairman Lakpa G. Sherpa, Sherpa Artists' Association Chairman DJ Ngawng Sherpa, Dharmadanda Sherpa Society Chairperson Lhaki Sherpa, Sernima Foundation Chairman Ang Phurwa Sherpa, Lokhim Sherpa Kiduk's Chairperson Jangbu Sherpa, Gudel Sherpa Kiduk Secretary Nuru Sherpa, and Sherpa Journalist Group in Nepal's Khotang District Chairperson Kitemba Sherpa.

I thank my great uncle (Papchhe) Sarki Sherpa, who lives in the USA and is a patron and member of the Dharma Danda Sherpa Society, and patron and member of the American Sherpa Kiduk, for giving me important suggestions. I am also thankful to my aunt Khangdu Lhamu Sherpa, General Secretary of the US-Nepal Climbers Association in the USA, Pema Namding Gunpa's life member, Mendroling Cyangchhup Chholing Center's life member and Mount Everest summiteer Ang Gyalzen Sherpa, sister Dawa Chahmji Sherpa and niece Ngim Pasi Sherpa and others. In the same way, I thank my wife Nimlekee Sherpa, sisters Tashi Sherpa, Lhamu Diki Sherpa, and Ngaki Lhamu Sherpa, brothers Pem Tenji Sherpa, Pasang Tawa Sherpa, Sona Phurba Sherpa, Gelu Sherpa, Dendi Sherpa, and Acharya Pasang Ngima Sherpa, and my parents Pem Chhetar Sherpa and Sarkinee Sherpa, from the core of my heart. In the same way, I thank my godparent Dr Kathleen D. Gentry from Crested Butte, Colorado, USA, my parents-in-law, Lhakpa Chheki Sherpa and Phuri Sherpa, and the entire family for their help in preparing this book.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BS	Bikram Sambat
CBS	Central Bureau of Statistics
HSCC	Himalayan Sherpa Culture Centre
Mt.	Mount
NEFIN	Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities
NSWA	Nepal Sherpa Women Association
NSSA	Nepal Sherpa Student Association
NSA	Nepal Sherpa Association

CHAPTER ONE

1.1. Introduction

This book offers a cultural and historical perspective on the Sherpa people and the relationship between their traditional lifestyle and the impact of globalisation and tourism. Nepal is a small country with rich ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural resources, and as a multi-lingual, multi-religious, multi-ethnic, and multicultural nation, it has a complex social structure. Various ethnic communities living in Nepal have unique cultures, traditions, and practices; one of those is the Sherpas.

The Sherpas have preserved their distinct lifestyle, history, culture, religion, language, costumes, and traditions despite outside influence. Until the middle of the 20th century, domestic and international researchers predominantly overlooked Sherpas' ethnicity in their research, partly due to linguistic barriers, as the Sherpas' history, cultural practices, and genealogy had been studied and written about in the ancient Sambhota script. Since native Sherpa researchers collaborated to produce this book, it represents a unique work that bridges the gap between researchers speaking other languages and Sherpa culture. This book adopts ethnographic and oral-historical methods and uses key texts in Sambhota, Nepali, English, and German.

1.2. History of the Sherpas

Since ancient times, people have migrated from one place to another. Various push factors motivate people to leave their homeland, while pull factors attract people to new areas (de Blij and Nash, 1999). Many, many years ago, the Sherpas migrated to Nepal in search of better places to live, and since then, Sherpas living in the high Himalayan terrains of Nepal have preserved their own unique language, religion, architecture, systems of social organisation, economy, land-use practices, dress, and ornamentation.

They settled at an altitude above 1,500 metres and became involved in agriculture and husbandry. Their traditional dress, which is made of sheep and yak wool, consists of a black or brown cloak for men and a dark, woollen dress with a striped apron for women. Sherpas place exceptional value on certain types of jewellery, for example, silver amulet boxes and necklaces with coral or turquoise and dzi stones (Berreman, 1963; Karan and Cotton, 1987).

While Sherpas are located mainly in the north-eastern part of Nepal, there are small settlements in the west in the Helambu (Yelmo) region and in eastern Nepal on the border with Sikkim. According to legend, Solukhumbu was the first area settled by the ancestors of the Sherpas after they migrated from Tibet (Stevens, 1993).

Buddhist religious leaders say there is a tradition of writing “Sharpa” or “Sharwa” as the name of this community in Sambhota script. The two are synonyms. When the word was transcribed into Devanagari or English script, it was spelled as “Sherpa”. This is because the Sherpas’ language can seldom be written correctly in any other script except the Sambhota (Tournadre, 2013). To give an example, when a Sherpa receives a Nepali citizenship card, the names are written in the Devanagari script, resulting in the fact that, most often, the Sherpa names are misspelled.

Lhakpa Norbu Sherpa mentions that, although the word Sherpa has been famous worldwide for many years, Sherpas use their ethnic name, “Sharwa”. Scholars agree the Sherpas originated in Tibet, share a common language, and follow Buddhist traditions, but when and how the name came about is still being debated. Oral history and tales state that the word “Sharpa” or “Sharwa” is a combination of two components: “shar” and “pa” or “wa”. “Shar” means east, and “pa” or “wa” means “settler” (Sherpa 2008). The combination implies that Sherpas are the settlers from the east and that the word “Sherpa” is a corrupted version of “Sharwa”. In a similar fashion, those living in the west are called “Nubri-pa”, while those in the south are called “Lho-pa”, and the northerners are called “Chyang-pa” (Sherpa, 2001).

Therefore, the Sherpas are understood to be a tribe living in Nepal's eastern Himalayan highlands. Though there is agreement among scholars that the

community originated from the east, they differ in their views about the Sherpas' original migration and nomenclature (Pradhan, 2002; Brower, 1991). The most recognised and widespread theory suggests that, pushed by political and religious tensions resulting from a Mongol invasion in the 16th century (Oppitz, 1974), the ancestors of today's Sherpa people migrated from Tibet to the Solukhumbu region of modern Nepal. A reconstruction of the Sherpas' clan history suggests that the estimated year of their migration (to modern Nepal) was about 1533 (Oppitz, 1974). Sherpa folklore also provides evidence that the Sherpas' ancestors originated from the Salmo Gang (Zalmosgang) area of Kham, in eastern Tibet; today, the Salmo Gang area is part of the Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Sichuan Province (China) (Brower, 1991).

At the time that the British Empire expanded its hold to India, Nepal was an empire with principalities called Baise and Chaubise, while the Kathmandu Valley and three other small kingdoms were ruled by kings from the same dynasty (Upadhyaya, 2017). King Prithvi Narayan Shah began the unification of Nepal in the year 1743. Before the unification, the word "Nepal" essentially stood for the present-day Kathmandu Valley and consisted of only Kathmandu, Bhaktapur, and Lalitpur. In those days, the seat of the Sherpas was the region that fell along the border between Nepal and modern-day Tibet, there was no international boundary to separate the nation states (which is still the case today). For this reason, the Sherpas' social, cultural, and economic activities are analogous to those of the Tibetans. The Sherpas call Kathmandu "Palwiyul" (village of the Newars), India "Gyakar", China "Gyanak", and the rest of the world "inji-lungba".

Lhakpa Norbu Sherpa mentions that, around the late 1800s, Khumbu became part of the Nepali state when Gorkha forces from the west expanded their influence eastwards. In the early 1960s, at a time of tension between the neighbouring countries of India and China, the Nepali government established its presence in Khumbu by opening government offices and positioning police and army units there (Sherpa 2008).

The division of Nepal was undertaken at different points in time for different reasons. The regional law code with constitutional features, known as the *Mulukī Ain*, was initiated by Prime Minister Janga Bahadura Rana as the

foundational legal text for modern Nepal in 1854. Under this law, the Sherpas were classed alongside “Matwali”—the liquor-drinking community. They were also called “Bhote”, meaning “people who live in the Bhote region” (Khatiwoda et al., 2021). The word “Bhot” is an old name for Tibet, and nowadays, it is used by non-ethnically Tibetan people in India and Nepal to refer to the ethnically Tibetan people living on the Tibetan border (Stevens, 1993). However, there is also an ethnic group called the Bhote, which like the Sherpa, is indigenous to Nepal.

During Prime Minister Bhimsen Thapa’s premiership, Nepal was divided into thirty-nine districts. During the reign of Bir Samsher, this division was revised to thirty-five districts, which were further classified into hills or plains. In the same way, in mid-April 1961 (precisely 1 Baisakh 2018 BS), King Mahendra Shah restructured Nepal into fourteen zones and seventy-five districts. Finally, on 20 September 2015, Nepal was divided into seventy-seven districts and seven provinces. Nepal has been officially known as the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal since 28 May 2008. Prior to that time, the country was recognised as a monarchy.

In the editorial published by the Gorkhapatra on the 17th of June 1953, the district of Solukumbhu (where Tenzing Norgé Sherpa comes from) was called “*Nepalko purvi Pradesh*”, meaning the “eastern province of Nepal”. According to the community’s senior members, they were also given that name when the districts were demarcated. The district where the Sherpas had been living since the days of their ancestors was named “Solukhumbu”, based on its original name “Shyarkhumbu”—which means the land of the Sherpas. Since this time, the Sherpas, who had been identifying their homelands as the high Himalayan region extending from Taplejung to Darchula now started using district names to identify themselves. For example, they started calling themselves the Sherpas from Dolakha, the Sherpas from Ramechhap, the Sherpas from Solukhumbu, the Sherpas from Sindhupalchok, and the Sherpas from Khotang. However, inside the Sherpa community itself, they call one another “Sharwa”.

On 29 May 1953, two men—Tenzing Norgé Sherpa and Sir Edmund Hillary—successfully ascended Mt. Everest for the first time in human history. The news of their conquest spread all over the world. With this,

people began to hear and know the word Sherpa. Dharmaraj Thapa, a Nepali singer, sang a song, “Hamro Tenzing Sherpale, chadhyo Himal chuchura”, meaning “Our own Tenzing Sherpa scaled Mount Everest”. In contemporary society, as well as denoting a member of an ethnic group, the word Sherpa has become synonymous with mountaineering workers (mainly assistance guides and climbing guides).

Before the year 1953, there was scant research on the Sherpa community. Evidence suggests that researchers and scholars gained interest and started studying this community only after the conquering of Mt. Everest. Nevertheless, these studies were fraught with difficulties because, in most cases, the researchers had no knowledge of the Sherpa language. On the other hand, Sherpas, who participate in research, also find it challenging to respond to the questions asked by researchers who speak other languages.

For two months in 1953 and then for seven months in 1957, the anthropologist Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf conducted a comprehensive ethnographic study of the Sherpas. He published his research in 1964 in a book entitled *The Sherpas of Nepal: Buddhist Highlanders*. In his study, von Fürer-Haimendorf mentioned that the Sherpas moved from the high Himalayan regions of Tibet and then settled in the eastern mountains of Nepal. The Buddhist religious gurus nevertheless opine that the Sherpas had been living in the eastern mountains of Nepal since time immemorial. On the basis of this research, it can be ascertained that the Sherpas initially moved from Kham Salmogang in east Tibet, via Lhasa and the Nangpa La Mountains, to the Solukhumbu district of Nepal, where they finally settled. In this process, most scholars believe that the first Sherpa man to come to Solukhumbu and settle there was Meme Phachhen. Since there is no uniformity in the dates the researchers have mentioned, it is not easy to ascertain precisely when the Sherpas migrated from one place to another. Nevertheless, one thing is clear, in ancient times, before the boundaries of the modern nation-states came into being, the Sherpas lived as an animal-herding tribe in the high Himalayan regions of Tibet, Nepal, and India, where they reared domestic animals like *chauri*, *yak*, *nak* and others. Furthermore, the Sherpas were living in the highlands, searching for meadows and grazing grounds for their livestock.

After the various Nepal-Tibetan wars, the Betrawati Treaty was signed in 1788 between Nepal, Tibet, and China. Accordingly, the Chinese authorities demarcated the borders between Nepal and Tibet at Kerung and Kutu. In the same way, in 1960, the then Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai and his Nepalese counterpart Bishweshwar Prasad Koirala signed an agreement according to which the ancestral place of the Sherpas came to fall inside the eastern part of the mountainous territory of Nepal.

In his book *Sabai Jaatko Phulbari—The Garden of All Communities*—Dor Bahadur Bista mentions that, in ancient Nepal, when roads were not yet developed and the nation did not have a shared national tradition, communities did not really care for one another. Nor was there any initiative from the government’s side to bring all Nepali people together. For reasons such as this, the Sherpas had better relations with the Tibetan people and region. In such circumstances, people in the rest of Nepal considered the Sherpas to be relatives of the Tibetans. Accordingly, as available records confirm (Bista, 2017), they started to view them differently. All these things allude to the idea that the Sherpas have been living in the eastern mountainous region of Nepal since ancient times.

The Sherpas’ original settlement is located in the eastern part of Kathmandu and the southern slopes of Zhyomolangma (Mt. Everest), part of the Solukhumbu district. Based on its settlement by the Sherpas, the district of Solukhumbu has been divided into three regions: Khumbu, Pharak, and Syorong. The region above the Namche Bazar is called Khumbu, a word which means: “I know”. The Sherpas living in the Khumbu region are called Khumbok. They also believe that Khumbu is one of the many sacred *beyul* (secluded hidden valleys that are blessed by Guru Rinpoche). The region between Jorsale and Khari Khola is called Pharak. The word “Pharak” means “a land in-between”. The Sherpas living in the region are called Pharak-Pa. The land below the Khari Khola is called Syorong. The word literally means “settlers of the plains”. The Syorong region is also divided into the Koshiwari and Koshipari areas. The Sherpas living here are called Syore. In line with their areas of settlement, the Sherpas are divided among the Khumbok, Pharak-Pa, and Syore. Nevertheless, the Sherpas living in all three regions share family relations.

Though the Sherpas have been living in these three regions in the Solukhumbu district since ancient times, over time, they became scattered from east to the west along the Himalayan highlands of Nepal due to agricultural activities, business relations with Tibet, and the domestication of animals like the chauri, yak, and nak.

Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf and all other foreign and domestic scholars describe the Sherpas as people belonging to the Mongolian race, as descendants of the Mughals. They also mention that the Sherpas are the original settlers of Nepal's Solu, Pharak, and Khumbu regions (von Fürer-Haimendorf, 1984).

In her book *High Religion*, Sherry Ortner (1992) mentions that Penlop Lama Sangwa Dorje, whom the Sherpas still revere as their religious guru to this day, established a monastery at Pangbuche in 1667, as did Ralwa Dorje in Thame between 1667 and 1677, and Khenpa Dorje in Rimijyung in 1720. Based on the genealogy of these lamas, researchers have been able to estimate the time when the Sherpas migrated to Nepal from Salmogang of the Kham province of Tibet in ancient times.

Ortner (1992) mentions that the Sherpas migrated to Nepal from the Kham province of Tibet in approximately the year 1480, settled in Khumbu in 1533, and founded a Sherpa village in Solu two decades later. She further mentions that Pangbuche monastery, one of the world's highest monasteries, was established in 1667. However, Lhakpa Norbu Sherpa, a local from Pangbuche and a founding member of the Himalayan Sherpa Culture Centre, claims that the monastery at Pangbuche was destroyed by an avalanche and reconstructed in the year 1667. Thus, this monastery's date of construction cannot be taken as a date for the Sherpas' migration.

While the settlers of the high Himalayan regions are classified by their different surnames, there is also a practice of identifying them according to the places where they live. Sherpas living in places like Chepuwa, Hatiya, Chemtang, and Kimathanka on the northern side of Sankhuwasabha district are called Lhomi. Those inside Solukhumbu are called Sherpas. Most of these Sherpas are engaged in the mountaineering and tourism businesses because of their physiology and skills in these two professions. Those living

in Manang are called Nhesang, while the settlers of Lorke are called Nhupri-pa (Bista, 2017).

The government of Nepal set up a national commission for the development of ethnic and indigenous communities in 1995 and listed some sixty-one communities in Nepal, including the Sherpa community. The commission's purpose was to study international developments and to address the demands of the communities living in Nepal.

In 1996, the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) was founded. A few years later, the communities listed by the Government of Nepal were defined by the Ethnic and Indigenous Nationalities National Commission Act 2001 which categorically defined an ethnic and indigenous community as one with its own mother tongue and traditional customs, cultural identity, structure, and oral or written history (Sherpa, 2014). Consequently, fifty-nine tribes were legally recognised as Nepal's ethnic and indigenous nationalities, and the movements for their rights began to be noticed. The Sherpas are one of these.

While in ancient times, the Sherpas lived in the higher Himalayan regions, most Sherpa people are currently found living in the hills and plains of Nepal. Many Sherpas have also settled in foreign countries like India, China, America, and some European countries.

From an anthropological perspective, Sherpas have been classified as racially Mongolian; linguistically as Tibeto-Burman; culturally as “Bhotia“, or “Tibetan“, in terms of their general orientation and origins (Stevens, 1993); and religiously as Buddhist, or more specifically, they adhere to Nyingma-pa (the Red Hat lineage) of Tibetan Buddhism. In terms of ethnicity, Sherpas belong to the Mongolian race. They are of medium height with a solid and robust build. Their hair is dark, but they do not usually have body hair. Their eyes are narrow, and they have pug noses. Their beards and moustaches are relatively thin or absent all together, and they are wheatish-white in complexion with broad faces (Sherpa, 2001).

In terms of habitation, Sherpas are mountainous people who live off agriculture and animal husbandry, and since the 1920s, they have been involved in mountaineering and tourism (Sloan and Masali, 1978; Adams,

1996; Stevens, 1993; Ortner, 1992). The Sherpas' Tibetan ancestors resided on the Tibetan plateau for 25,000 to 40,000 years (Adams and Strang, 1975; Zhang et al., 2017). Their prolonged exposure to high altitudes resulted in the Sherpas' physiological adaptation to high-altitude conditions. These attributes are likely to contribute to the superior performance of Sherpas when climbing at extreme altitudes (Horscroft et al., 2017).

1.3. Sherpa Spirituality and Mount Chomolungma

Traditionally, the Sherpas living in the high Himalayan region have worshipped various gods and goddesses. One of their most essential deities is Zyomolangma. Five other goddesses of long life are also worshipped in the Himalayas. They are: Tashi Tseringma, Thingki Syalsangma, Chyopen Disangma, Takar Dosangma, and Zyomo Miyo Langsangma. These goddesses are called Chhering Chenga or the Five Sisters of Long Life, and Sherpas have worshipped them since ancient times (Singh, 2011). The Sherpa community performs Kangso puja to worship them, believing that each goddess will give her blessings to her devotees. The youngest of the five Devis (mother goddesses) is Zyomo Miyo Langsangma. People believe she blesses them with cereal grains. The abode of this goddess is called Zyomolangma (Mu et al., 2019). Zyomolangma is also known as Chomolungma or Mt. Everest. Since ancient times, the Sherpas have called their homeland *beyul* (a sacred, hidden valley), and they believe that its landscapes (for example, its mountains, forests, and lakes) are the abodes of local divinities.



Figure 1-1 Zyomolangma (Mt. Everest 8848.86 m)

Photography by Serku Sherpa.

The first known attempts to measure the height of mountains were made by Dicaearchus, Eratosthenes, and Xenagoras in ancient Greece around 350-290 BC (Cajori, 1929). In the early 19th century, Prussian geographer Alexander von Humboldt used barometric measurement to measure peaks in the Andes relative to sea level (Moret et al., 2019). At the same time, William Lambton and George Everest, the founders of the Survey of India (National Survey and Mapping Organisation), conducted the Great Trigonometric Survey (Gulatee, 1954).

Initially, Mt. Dhaulagiri (8,172 metres) was considered the highest mountain in the world. Then, in 1848, Mt. Kanchenjunga was declared to be the highest mountain, with a height of 8,585 metres. The measuring of the high mountains continued and the Zyomolangma mountain was measured from 15 different locations. Initially, being one of the high peaks spotted from the hill station in India, it was named “Gamma“. By 1847, a team of surveyors had renamed it “Peak B“. After several measurements and calculations, Peak B's great height was confirmed, and it was renamed “Peak XV“. Finally, in 1856 after double-checking the measurements, this mountain was confirmed as the world's highest mountain at 8848 meters (29,028 feet), and following the suggestion of Sir Andrew Waugh, Surveyor

General of India, who worked in the Great Trigonometrical Survey, it was renamed as Mt. Everest to honour George Everest. An interesting fact is that George's surname was pronounced [ˈi:vrist] or [Eev-ris-t], while the mountain name is pronounced [ˈevərɪst] or [Ever-ist/Ev EV-ris-t] (Gillman, 2000; Keay, 2000).

In the same way, eminent Nepali historian Baburam Acharya named the peak "Sagarmatha" (meaning "the Head of the Earth touching the Heaven") in 1956. He had published the Nepali name of the peak in a paper entitled *Sharada*. However, the Sherpas living in the Himalayas have referred to the peak as Zhyomolangma since ancient times. Thus, before its height was measured, the name of the peak was Zhyomolangma. In the West, it is known as Mt. Everest; however, the Chinese call it Zhumulangma Feng (珠穆朗玛), while in Nepal, its name continues to be Sagarmatha. In the 21st century, Nepal and China conducted independent measurements of the mountain and on the 8th of December 2020, Nepal and China jointly announced that the revised height of the world's highest peak, Mt. Everest, was 8,848.86 metres.

According to the climbing history of Mt. Everest, people have attempted to climb the mountain from the Tibet side since the 1920s, but without success. The first Everest expedition started from Darjeeling (India), since Nepal was closed to foreigners. Some Sherpas from Shyarkhumbu (Solukhumbu) went to Darjeeling in search of a job as an expedition support crew. According to Kunwar (1999), Sherpas started their profession as porters in the mountaineering field. The Sherpas' tremendous strength, selflessness, devotion to their job, frankness, and cheerful appearance impressed the climbers.

Kohli (1987) states that in 1920, Sir Francis Younghusband, the president of the Royal Geographical Society, sent Colonel Howard Bury to Lhasa to get permission from the Tibetan Government for a British expedition to Everest. The Dalai Lama gave his decision after great deliberation. Since Bruce was unavailable, Bury was chosen to lead this Everest expedition in 1921. In 1922, Brigadier General Charles Bruce led the next Everest expedition. Mallory, Somervell, and Norton managed to ascend to 8,170 metres without oxygen, while Finch and Bruce reached 8232 metres with oxygen. Bruce was again chosen to lead an expedition in 1924. The fifteen

Sherpas who worked on the expedition and carried loads to the North Col were nicknamed “Tiger”. Since then, the “Tiger” badge has been conferred on those Sherpas who distinguish themselves. Norton climbed up to 8,575 metres in this historical expedition without oxygen, but the expedition’s joy was short-lived because tragedy struck soon when Mallory and Irvine disappeared into the mist. The world does not know what happened to them on the mountain. Hugh Ruttledge wanted to lead another expedition to Everest in 1925, but the Tibetan Government denied him permission. However, the expedition did finally get underway in 1933. In this case, the expedition team could not even reach as high as the climbers reached in 1924 because of bad weather (Kohli, 1987).

The Himalayan peaks were finally conquered during the modern mountaineering period, which started at the beginning of the 20th century and lasted until 1964 (when the last of the fourteen 8,000-metre peaks was climbed) (Apollo and Wengel, 2021). In 1950, the French climbers Maurice Herzog, Louis Lachanel, and Lionel Terray ascended Mt. Annapurna I (8,091 m). On the 29th of May 1953 at 11.15 a.m., two members of the British Everest Expedition—Nepali Tenzing Norgpe Sherpa and New Zealander Edmund Hillary—finally reached the top of Mt. Everest for the first time in human history.

The news of this ascent was first published in the United Kingdom on the 2nd of June and in Nepal on the 3rd of June 1953. The ascent was elaborately discussed all over the world. According to the Himalayan Database statistics, since 1953, there have been 10,656 summits of Everest (by the end of December 2021) on all routes by 6,098 different people. The number of mountaineers' had increased since 1992, when Adventure Consultants (a New Zealand-based adventure company by Rob Hall and Gary Ball) guided four paying customers to the summit of Everest. Since then, the commercialisation of mountaineering has resulted in more paying mountaineers who increasingly rely more on help from climbing Sherpa; as in the 2021 season, each mountaineer was accompanied by 1-2 Sherpa (the rate is 1.5 sherpa to mountaineer). The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the climbing season for the last two years. Experts estimate that in climbing season 2023, the number of mountaineers may increase, and perhaps for the first time in history, the number of summiteers may reach 1000 people.

Over the last century, Sherpas have developed from humble support crew members to professional mountaineers. Two recent achievements of Sherpa teams—the 2019 Project Possible, where Nepalis climbed the fourteen highest mountains in only six months and the 2021 winter ascent to K2—brought the contemporary mountaineering period (1965-2021) to a close. At the same time, the achievements of the Sherpas mark a new period—commercial mass mountaineering—which is expected to develop on a massive scale and provide more opportunities for serviced commercial mass mountaineering expeditions (Apollo and Wengel, 2021).

Before joining a mountaineering troupe as helpers, the Sherpas visit their religious gurus, the lamas, to learn their fortune. After consulting the *datho* horoscope (the lunar calendar), a lama forecasts either something good or bad. Sometimes a lama may also suggest performing certain sacrificial religious rituals, for example a *kurim*, to avert calamity while climbing. Sometimes a lama may suggest that the person does not climb Everest that year because of a bad indication for his life. After learning that, the person will probably not join the expedition group. The Sherpas take risks when climbing after getting positive indicators to climb Everest from a lama. Their main intention is to help their client to fulfil their desire to be on top of the world.

Sherpas invite the lama into their homes and perform acts of worship so that no untoward incident will occur on their way to the top of Zyomolangma. Once they reach the base camp of Mount Everest, all the climbing team members invite lama gurus to perform worship of Zyomo Miyo Langsangma and to dance the traditional Sherpa dance, *Shyapto* (*Syabru*). This is called the Everest expedition *lhapso*. The Sherpas organise such religious activities for all kinds of mountaineering expeditions, not only for those of Everest. Sherpas believe that such acts of worship appease the deities living in the Himalayas and ensure the successful accomplishment of their ascent. The Sherpas have always worshipped the mountains as their gods and goddesses. In a village with a large Sherpa settlement, animal sacrifice is strictly prohibited. The Sherpas living there worship Zyomolangma as a goddess. All this cultural evidence proves that the historical name of Mount Everest is Zyomolangma (Chomolungma) and

that, through their mountaineering activities, the Sherpas have brought great fame to Nepal.

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