

Himalayan Herders. 1997. 76 minutes, color. By John Bishop and Naomi Bishop. For more information contact Documentary Educational Resources, 101 Morse St., Watertown, MA 02172.

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Himalayan Herders is a visually compelling and ethnographically incisive film. It documents the lives of the Sherpas living in what the filmmakers call Yolmo (more popularly, or at least more traditionally, spelled and pronounced Helambu), one of the high valleys north of the Kathmandu valley in Nepal. The filmmakers have field experience and, most impressively, film footage spanning the 1971-89 period, with some information updated into the mid-1990s. The result is an ethnographically well informed (Naomi has conducted research in the area several times since the early 1970s) and technically well executed (John is a professional cinematographer) film. The visual sharpness, sound clarity, and unobtrusive, nicely alternating voiceover and subtitles are all of high quality. The film's occasional background *dramyan* (a kind of Tibetan banjo) music adds to the film's appeal, although neither the instrument nor the musician is identified.

The diachronic dimension is the film's primary focus and its most valuable contribution to anthropological understanding of the area. The film effectively portrays the gradual changeover to subsistence farming from yak/cattle pastoralism -- peasant/landlord relations -- the importance of religious ritual and sociability -- the Buddhism/shamanism contrast daily household life (see Figure 4) and the contribution of women's labor to the rural economy. All these themes are shown as emerging from the confrontation of a variety of both indigenous and outside forces. Traditional life, briefly described going back as far as the 19th century, is shown changing under the influence of such modern, innovations as schools, which have increased literacy in the Nepali language, as opposed to the unrelated Tibetan dialect spoken in Yolmo; creation of a National Park, with its restrictions on cutting grass for cattle fodder, so important to transhumant pastoralists; tourism, which has led to the establishment of many "hotels" and tea houses but has tempted only one man to enter the relatively lucrative profession of tourist guide; the increasing importance of wage labor in India; and the introduction of love marriage, which is replacing marriage by capture at a rapid rate. All these have demographic causes and/or consequences, too: for example, the dramatic increase of houses from 35 in 1971 to three times that number by the early 1990s.

Many of these topics have been documented in film and in print elsewhere in Nepal, as well as in the Himalayas generally. The appeal and advantage of *Himalayan Herders* and Naomi Bishop's separately published ethnographic companion of the same name (Harcourt Brace, 1998) is that they present all these issues in two independent but coordinated, complementary formats.

Himalayan Herders gives a well-rounded picture of Sherpa life, but the viewer is never told what one might think would be essential information, especially in these times of ethnic unrest and contestation in Nepal: the ethnic identity of the people in the film. One has to go to Naomi Bishop's ethnography to find out that the people are Sherpas, an ethnically loaded and opaque term requiring considerable explication. Sometimes thin descriptions in the narration, raise more questions than they answer. For example, we are told that people "get rid of" infertile hybrid cattle, but we are not told how this is done. Telling us the method (by forced starvation would be my guess, in the Tibetan Buddhist community) also would have provided the filmmakers with a segue into the relations between pastoralism and a religion that preaches nonviolence and the sacredness of life (or if Yolmo Buddhism differs in these respects, it would be interesting to know how).

There are now a number of good ethnographic films available on Nepal, but *Himalayan Herders* ranks with the best. It accurately and sympathetically represents people who have lived too long in the shadow of their better-known cousins, the Sherpas of the Mt. Everest region to the east. Shorter versions are available for classroom use, but a video version of any length, paired with the book that complements it so well, would make an excellent teaching tool for introductory anthropology courses, upper level South Asia area courses, and courses dealing with cultural ecology and economics of mountain populations. Timely and relevant both to ethnographic history and to modern forces of change, the film will be welcomed by anyone interested in the changing world of highland Nepal.

Figure 4. DawaYngsin, aged 69 years, in her house in Melemchi. Wife of the oldest villager, she sits at the customary spot for the woman of the household, with her teacup of Tibetan butter tea. Note the mud plaster walls, the plain decor, and the minimal furnishings of this house of a poor elderly couple. Photo by John Bishop, 1993.