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Sherpa Nyima's Story about his Occupation and the Environment

युवा शेर्पा निमा को वातावरण मा निरर्ार
आफ्िो र्ेशा बारे कथा



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Abstract

This fictional essay based on scientific research deals with the environmental and social challenges the indigenous minority in Tibet and Nepal, the Sherpas, are confronted with through their occupation as porters. Increasing tourist numbers in the Khumbu Valley have led to severe deforestation in the valley and pollution on the mountains which also has had an impact on Sherpa identity. The story is told from a man called Nyima’s point of view, who compares his own experience as a porter with his father’s stories to him as a little boy.

Keywords

Himalaya, Sherpa, Mass Tourism, Deforestation, Pollution

My past and father's narratives, around 1985

Let me introduce myself. My *hama* and *hawa* named me Nyima because I was born on the day of the sun. When I was still small, my *hama* used to call me Ang Nyima, which means little sun. She saved this special name only for me. My two little sisters were named Phurba and Pemba, the children of Jupiter and Saturn. I was born in 1980 and grew up in Kumbu Valley in the Himalaya in a small village called Pangboche. It is inhabited by indigenous Tibetians, the Sherpas. Our ethnic group is well known for our skill in high altitude carrying and therefore the name Sherpa is synonymously used for this profession. Our region has become very popular for climbers and trekkers all around the world in the last fifty years. They want to take up the competition to conquer the world's highest peaks and are attracted by the natural beauty of the mountains. I want to use this small diary entry to collect memories on what my father told me about being a porter and compare it to my own experience today.

One night, soon after my grandfather's death, when I was still very small, my *hawa* pointed above himself, into the pitch-black night sky, sparkled with thousands of little lights. Only the majestic shape of Mount Ama Dablam limited our view of the firmament. I remember *hawa* narrating mystic tales about our ancestors, the stars, and the planets and constellations. He told me that my *pagaga*'s spirit was still somewhere here amongst us until he found a new body to be reincarnated in. They called my *pagaga* Gyaltzen, a name which he had earned throughout his life. It translates to "courage". Indeed, my *pagaga*, as I remember him from my childhood, was the bravest man I knew. He was the first of his family to become a porter. The first of his family to see the majesty of Mount Tawache, Nuptse, Lhotse, Thamserku and Ama Dablam not only from the valley below, but to gain deep respect and admiration for the icy giants from their peaks. He was the closest to the stars in our family and died in old age with the wisdom that the Mountains had taught him and the ancestors had whispered to him.

That cold night, looking up to the night sky, I understood, even though I was still small, that I would never be able to reach the stars, as they were so far away and so beautiful, that they were almost unreal. But it was clear to me that my aim was to pursue what my *pagaga* Gyaltzen had achieved: being as close to the stars as possible, being courageous, and learning from the Mountains as a Sherpa.

My *hawa*, working as a Sherpa himself, was satisfied when I told him about my choice. He was proud to pass the dynasty on to his son. My *hama* was very concerned though, as she knew better than I did about the risks my *hawa* and *pagaga* had taken. She had seen and taken care

of the injuries the men brought back from Nuptse, Ama Dablam, and Tawache. She had cleaned grazes on their legs and arms, patched up their frozen toes and had cooked her special herbal tea against the dizziness that comes with being in snowstorms at high altitude for too long. She wanted her son, her little sun, to help her, Pemba, and Phurba in the house and on the fields and, above all, to be safe.

Our settlement in Pangboche had a school where I was sent by my *hawa*, because he wanted me to learn the language of the *sahibs*, as he used to call the white visitors, who came to our valley. As a child, I used to think all they wanted was to be as close to the stars as possible.

My *hawa* started as a porter at the age of 13, carrying miscellaneous goods up to the tea houses on Thamserku, Ama Dablam, and Lhotse. He didn't mind the work, as he admired being amongst his best friends, the mountains. But carrying wood, rice, or water didn't bring much money, as the owners of the tea houses were poor themselves. When my *hawa* and *hama* had us, he had to make a living for five people and he had extra charges for my education. That made him seek out the help of a friend who worked for an Indian Touring Company at Tengboche, a settlement about an hour's hike away from Pangboche. Being closer to Thamserku, this is used by visitors as a base camp for trekking and hiking. There, his knowledge about the icy majesty was welcomed with open arms and he was given the task to carry visitors' backpacks up to Camp 1, Camp 2, and even the summit of Thamserku. In the meantime, my *hama* was always in the village, herding our yaks, selling milk or trading it for grain, and looking after my sisters and me.

When I grew older, my *hawa* told me everything he had experienced as a Sherpa himself. He told me, that Sherpas were proud people, strong and always loyal to the *sahibs*. Sometimes, my *hama*, Pemba, and Phurba would sit with us by the fire at night-time, eat *chapati*, and all listen to his tales, after my *hawa* was back from some expedition with *sahibs*.

He stressed often that the most important thing when climbing was generosity. He had many stories about staying behind the group to help a slower climber when all the other *sahibs* had left. Once, he gave up his oxygen for a young climber from Italy. Another time he spent an hour rubbing an older American man's hands in order to prevent a frostbite. More than once, he had to sleep outside of the tea house or tent, when all the space was already taken up by *sahibs*. He had done all this without being asked; he had offered it. I knew my *hawa* didn't want to appear as a hero, as he did to me, but he wanted to teach me not only how to be a good Sherpa, but a good person.

At that time, I was going to Pangboche school and learning the language of the *sahibs* in which I am now writing. We were also taught the basics of Sherpa agriculture and herding, and reading and writing in our language in order to understand the sacred writings of the *Nyingmapa* tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. The teachers told us tales about *Yullah*, the mountain gods and *Lu*, the serpent divinity. We learned which rituals would grant their help and benevolence, so they would protect anyone who dared to climb the mountains around Khumbu Valley.

After school, I would help my sisters and my *hama* weeding our potato fields, tending our five yaks or milking them. Our yaks were grazing on a little terrace field behind our little home. I remember the valley of my childhood as being green and healthy. I had a favourite little place between a stream coming from Sapta Kosi River and the terrace fields. I would go there after school, to play with rocks I had collected. The stream was fresh and when I was thirsty, I drank from it. I loved feeling the clear, ice-cold water running down my throat. It was my own little sanctuary; not even my sisters knew about it. I loved the big green trees that were like a sheltering roof hiding the sky. It was quiet when I lay under the trees, as if they absorbed the winds blowing down and around the mountains.

My own experience, 1995 to 2020

When I was around 14 years old, my *hawa* took me to work for tea houses on Ama Dablam carrying up firewood and timber. The demands grew and grew over the years and I saw many trees in our valley being cut down. Whole forests were disappearing, in fact, and more and more Sherpas were needed for bringing the firewood up to the tea houses and Base Camps in the mountains.

I remember my first expedition with my *hawa* so clearly, because we ascended the day after the annual ritual of *Dumji*, a festival in the middle of May which marks the beginning of spring, the climbing season, and the yearly agricultural cycle. Part of the rituals were dedicated to *Khumbu Yullah* and *Shorong Yullah*, our two protective regional deities. My *hawa* believed that we would have especially good fortune if the blessings to the gods were very recent. Other fathers would also use the occasion to receive blessings and benevolence for their sons who would accompany them in the mountains for the first time.

The day of the festival, our family and neighbours and all of the locals in Pangboche were focused on the preparations. Food offerings were brought to the *gompa*, the *lamas* and monks of Pangboche village temple gathered around, traditional *chubas* were put on by everyone and tied by the waist. Soon, the festivities began. I remember that the *thukpa*, *shapka*, and *dildro*, that were distributed were delicious. My sisters and I reached out for a second round of the manifold and rich food. I made sure to collect strength for the following day. Soon, the offerings for the deities were brought into the *gompa* while the *lamas* were chanting *mantras*. My *hawa* took the spot by my side when it was time for the prayers. He held my hand firmly, then we both asked *Khumbu Yullah* and *Shorong Yullah* for assistance and support during our challenging first climb as father and son. In that moment, I was sure that my *pagaga* was present somehow. His spirit would be with us the same way as the mountain gods.

I left the village temple earlier than my sisters and parents. Walking back to our house, I heard the chatting and chanting getting quieter. I needed rest, I wanted to be prepared for my first climb as a Sherpa, I wanted to make my *hawa* and *pagaga* proud. I checked my little pack again. Earlier, I had put enough water and some *dildro* with *chapati* bread aside that I had taken from the ceremony. Finally, I lay down on the mat, and fell into a short but deep sleep.

The next morning, after saying farewell to my sisters and my *hama*, whom I had to promise to look after myself repeatedly, my *hawa* and I started walking. When the path became steeper,

we sent one last chant and prayer to *Khumbu Yullah* and *Shorong Yullah*. We quickly reached the house where the firewood had been stacked and packed to bundles already. The owner and friend of my father's, Pasang, had prepared it for us. My *hawa* took the bigger bundle and attached it to his pack, then he helped me to lift my bundle. It was heavy, yet lighter than I expected it to be. We thanked Pasang and continued our hike. Carrying all this wood, the journey now was a lot harder of course. I struggled at the beginning but said nothing—I didn't want my *hawa* to think that I wasn't ready for this task. After a while, I got used to it and following stoically, watching every step I made, I could lift my head and enjoy the hike. I could see our village in the distance, and from above, I could even make out the roof of our house, and see our yaks grazing nearby. I felt the cold fresh air, the wind caressing the skin of my face. We continued and a steeper passage followed where I had to draw my attention back to my steps again.

After around eight hours of hiking, with some breaks for *chapati* and yak milk in between, we had reached the tea house. There we delivered our wood to the thankful owner. We were offered hot tea and a mat to spend the night on. The next day we descended, bringing down a stack of rubbish that would be dealt with down in the valley. We carried four big plastic bags each, which looked light but were very heavy. Where did this all come from? The porters always kept their waste in their backpacks, the tea houses relied on mostly natural resources. I didn't understand how this much waste could have accumulated in the tea house but I decided not to ask my *hawa*. I was afraid to ask a stupid question.

The days and weeks passed by like this, my *hawa* and I would bring up firewood or water in return for a cup of tea, a place to sleep, and 80 rupees per kilo brought up. We weren't paid for the waste that we brought back down so my *hawa* encouraged me to carry more wood or water every single time we ascended. I didn't want to contradict him so I did so. I gradually grew stronger.

One day, I couldn't hold in my curiosity about where the rubbish came from anymore. My *hawa* silently took me to a wooden hut nearby. It had been tilted slightly by the wind. But the most striking feature of the hut was its smell. He opened the squeaky door and I could not believe my eyes: dozens and dozens of giant green and yellow plastic bags, like the ones we took back into the valley, were stacked here. The smell was overwhelming. I took a closer look and saw packages, bottles, cans, and cardboard. Most labels were not written in Nepali. I recognized the language of the white visitors. I started reading: "whole grain power bar," it said. I had no idea what it meant. I started reading the other labels and tried to understand:

“Disposable camera” it said on a little cardboard box. At least here I knew the word camera. “High altitude sickness medicine” it said on lots of little plastic wrappers. There I knew all words individually, but put together, they made no sense to me. “Lip balm,” “Tampax Tampons,” “Coca Cola,” “first aid,” “dried meat,” “energy drink,” or “hand sanitizer” were all complete riddles to me. My father had left the shed but in a confused, slightly disgusted way, I was curious to find out more. I had spent another half hour, maybe hour in there, reading plastic labels that were wrapped in more plastic, green and yellow everywhere. And the smell... I felt a little faint when my *hawa* returned to get me. He shook his head and barely looked at the stack of plastic bags. My *hawa* told me that the locals from the tea houses and the other huts around had spent months and months collecting the rubbish from all over the mountain. I could tell that he was emotional about it.

After this experience I tried to understand more of what had happened. I decided to observe my environment more. I understood that being a Sherpa was so much more than walking closer to the stars or being generous.

Around that time I left school. One day, my *hawa* claimed that I was finally ready and experienced enough to go on a proper expedition, carrying goods for the *sahibs*. I was excited as I wanted to find out more about the profession which my *pagaga* Gyaltzen had already performed.

The Chinese Touring Company my *hawa* had worked for prior to accompanying me had a shortage of porters that spring. It was the peak of hiking season and a lot more visitors were expected than the years before. My *hawa* was content with the progress I had made during the last weeks and of course the extra money would be very much needed at home for our family. So we made our way from Pangboche to Tengboche soon after the announcement that more porters were needed. My *hawa* praised my endurance and said my ability to speak the language of the *sahibs* would help. I was quite nervous, as I could make out that the stacks of plastic bags must have something to do with the visitors from far away countries who came here to hike the mountains.

I had been in Tengboche a few times before—for ceremonies, a school excursion to the *gompa* of Tengboche... I remember Thamserku Mountain dominating the town from above, creating a dramatic scenery and a breathtakingly close look at its icy fields and sharp mountain crests. We would climb this giant. The owner of the Chinese Touring Company, whose name I cannot recall, nodded in our direction when we arrived. “110 rupees per kilo, not more. You break something, you pay. Goods need to arrive on time, otherwise you pay.”

That's all he said. My *hawa* knew the procedure, he gave him a tired nod back.

I learned to understand a lot during that first hike. I carried a "heavy duty gore tex light weight" backpack up to Camp 1 of Thamserku. The *sahibs* did this just for fun and seemed to not respect the mountain, nor its deities, nor the porters enough who were there just for their relief. I saw many other Sherpas carrying barrels of water, cans of beer, rice, wood, and even mattresses up the mountain. However, most of them brought the expensive backpacks of the *sahibs* up to the Camps. It was more crowded than during *Dumji* festival, hundreds of people seemed to be rushing to Base Camp or Camp 1.

My father and I worked together on Thamserku for about ten years. It taught me so much. My favourite part of the work were the evenings: Arriving at the tea houses after a long day we would have some time away from the *sahibs*. While they slept in separate rooms, lying in their warm blankets which looked like colourful tubes, all the Sherpas were gathered around the fire, sitting or lying on the floor of the kitchen.

I remember one night in particular, when we sat together. Some of the Sherpas that had gathered had worked for visitors of different Touring Companies for years, others, like me, had just started. They all agreed that amongst the *sahibs* it had become something like a race. A race about who climbed the highest, with the newest hiking gear, at the cheapest price... "and with the heaviest backpack, it seems," I added in my head. Soon after, my *hawa* started sharing our story of the dozens and dozens of yellow and green plastic bags we carried down into the valley. "At least all they left behind was rubbish", one older Sherpa said, sitting in the corner of the kitchen. He had set up his camp for the night on two big bags of rice. "At Everest and Manaslu, Sherpas are challenged with bringing down the bodies..." My *hawa* was startled by this sentence and made me go to sleep.

Today

Today, I am 40 years old and for over half my life, about 25 years, I have been porting backpacks up to the Camps of Mount Thamskerku, sometimes up to Lhotse or Ama Dablam Base Camp, Camp 1, or Camp 2, depending on the tourism trends and weather conditions each trekking season. In the off-season, which I spent down in Pangboche, my home town, I witnessed the gradual decay of the environment and people's spirits.

Earlier in my story, I spoke about my childhood's secret little sanctuary down by the stream underneath the roof made of trees. It is long gone. A few years ago, a building company from Kathmandu chopped down the trees. The stream, which had turned from crystal clear to muddy brown over the years, had dried out. Today, the formerly secret hidden spot hosts a Hotel with five floors. It blocks the inhabitants of Pangboche's view of Ama Dablam. The people staying here go in and out because they can't get a hotel bed in Tengboche, which is a still more popular base to stark trekking. Giant tour buses commute between the two towns during trekking season. For the big paved street which was built for the tourist buses, yet again a lot of trees were cut down and a few Sherpa families had to move their old, traditional houses.

My *hama* transformed our little hut into a guest house about ten years ago. Pemba does the cooking while Purba cleans the place. *Hama* was one of the first in Pangboche to sell the yaks and, with the financial and physical help of my *hawa*, extended our house on the fields and opened it up to *sahibs*. She makes good money like that today. My sisters and her sleep in a small room next to the kitchen, where I also stay when I am not working as a porter in the off-season. I provide the last remaining tea houses on the mountains with firewood or I stay in Pangboche to support my *hama* and sisters in the guest house. A lot of families followed my *hama's* idea and today the face of Pangboche as a little Sherpa village has changed: forests and traditional houses, even the garden of the sacred *gompa*, have made way to hotels, guest houses and a giant paved road to Tengboche.

On the mountain, you also come across some effects of the mass tourism. Over the years carrying for the *sahibs*, I have picked up countless colourful plastic wrappers in the wild. At some of the most remote places of Lhotse, Ama Dablam, and Thamskerku, I found rubbish. I very quickly stopped wondering how it even got there. I also noticed over the years how the number of people increased, and today it is very common to set up big tents at the Camps, because the tea houses quickly became too small. The *sahibs* trekking in the mountains have changed as well. I remember when I started porting with my *hawa*, most *sahibs* were very

experienced trekkers who packed light and knew the value of a Sherpa accompanying him, knowing his way around the mountains. My *hawa*, being less shy than me, often had a kind of friendship with some of the *sahibs* he worked for. Some returned to the Himalaya and Khumbu Valley over the years and it would be a pleasure seeing them again.

Today, it seems like there is no more time for that. The *sahibs* today, most of whom are friendly and grateful as ever, have less time and raise less attention and awareness to the environment around them. The connection between us as porters and the *sahibs* has become a very impersonal, superficial one. It seems like it is all about a race to the peak of the mountains, pushing yourself to the limits. I often accompany *sahibs* from all over the world who have never really done trekking before. More and more often, the hiking boots they put on their feet are brand new and have never been worn before.

The relationship between Sherpas has transformed a little too. We used to be brothers with each other, sharing stories in the tea house's kitchens by the fire at night. Aside from all the negative environmental impacts the mass tourism in Khumbu Valley has had, it brought one very good thing to the Sherpas in their villages: money and therefore increasing wealth, perspectives. Unfortunately, some are not able to handle the change as well and strive for more and more money. That leads to competition between some porters about who gets to work for which touring company or who gets to carry for the wealthy *sahib* known for giving big tips.

In these moments, I think back to my *pagaga* Gyaltzen, the brave man. And I think back to my *hawa* and me when I was a child starting to work as a Sherpa. Times have changed over these past generations. What once was all about being close to the stars, pleasing the deities of the mountains, being one with the mountains and passing on generosity, is no more, as it seems. Although I have the same profession as my *pagaga* and my *hawa*, it feels like I am doing something else.

Sadly, my *hawa* died a year ago. During his long life, he acted on the values he believed in as a Sherpa. Yet around him, everything was changing. The deforestation of his village, the pollution on the mountains, the increasing demand for resources, the decreasing demand for traditional agriculture as my *hama* practiced it, and of course the mass tourism. Up until his last day of working as a Sherpa, he never lost his generosity towards the *sahibs* he was working for or his family. It seems almost as if the generosity that we Sherpas gave to the world has turned back on us. From all the giving, we lost our healthy environment and made sacrifices concerning our herding and agriculture.

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