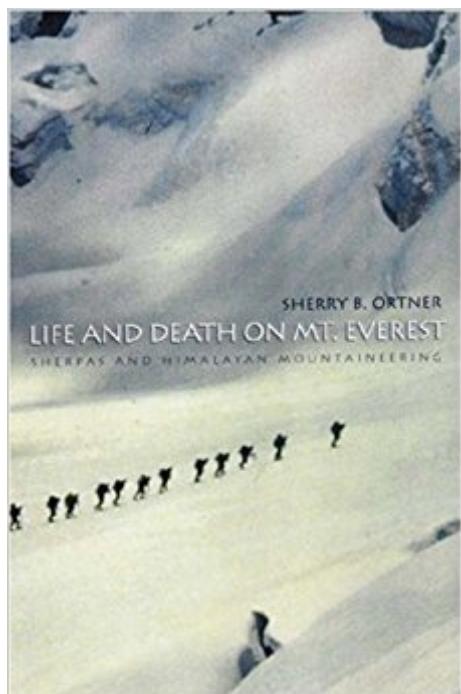


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# Life And Death On Mt. Everest: Sherpas And Himalayan Mountaineering



## Synopsis

The Sherpas were dead, two more victims of an attempt to scale Mt. Everest. Members of a French climbing expedition, sensitive perhaps about leaving the bodies where they could not be recovered, rolled them off a steep mountain face. One body, however, crashed to a stop near Sherpas on a separate expedition far below. They stared at the frozen corpse, stunned. They said nothing, but an American climber observing the scene interpreted their thoughts: Nobody would throw the body of a white climber off Mt. Everest. For more than a century, climbers from around the world have journ-eyed to test themselves on Everest's treacherous slopes, enlisting the expert aid of the Sherpas who live in the area. Drawing on years of field research in the Himalayas, renowned anthropologist Sherry Ortner presents a compelling account of the evolving relationship between the mountaineers and the Sherpas, a relationship of mutual dependence and cultural conflict played out in an environment of mortal risk. Ortner explores this relationship partly through gripping accounts of expeditions--often in the climbers' own words--ranging from nineteenth-century forays by the British through the historic ascent of Hillary and Tenzing to the disasters described in Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air*. She reveals the climbers, or "sahibs," to use the Sherpas' phrase, as countercultural romantics, seeking to transcend the vulgarity and materialism of modernity through the rigor and beauty of mountaineering. She shows how climbers' behavior toward the Sherpas has ranged from kindness to cruelty, from cultural sensitivity to derision. Ortner traces the political and economic factors that led the Sherpas to join expeditions and examines the impact of climbing on their traditional culture, religion, and identity. She examines Sherpas' attitude toward death, the implications of the shared masculinity of Sherpas and sahibs, and the relationship between Sherpas and the increasing number of women climbers. Ortner also tackles debates about whether the Sherpas have been "spoiled" by mountaineering and whether climbing itself has been spoiled by commercialism.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Since the late 19th century, climbing mountains has held a certain allure. Expeditions are now reaching all-time highs, as experienced and inexperienced climbers "reach for the top." These two books examine mountaineering on Mt. Everest through different perspectives. Liberally sprinkled with entertaining anecdotes and significant cultural observations, *Ultimate High* is the story of a determined man with a unique goal. It chronicles both Kropp's ascent of Everest and his 8000 mile journey, on bicycle (with equipment in tow), from Sweden to the Himalayas and back. (To truly conquer the mountain, Kropp believes, one must get there and climb it without artificial assistance.) As it happened, his climb coincided with the much-publicized May 1996 disaster (described in Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air*), so, in addition to detailing his own endeavours, he describes (with riveting clarity) the drama taking place around him. Kropp captures the emotional highs and lows of mountaineering; his astute observations of team dynamics and candid revelations of his mental and physical state provide insight into the climber's world. Taking a more academic and analytic approach, Ortner (anthropology, Columbia Univ.) provides a fascinating examination of the world of the Sherpas. Drawing extensively from autobiographies and her own ethnography, Ortner examines Sherpas both as mountaineers and villagers. In the process, she tackles a variety of subject matter, including sahib/Sherpa relationships and local history, culture, and religion. In doing so, she incorporates quotes from climbers, their chilling tales, and detailed research. Her book is an eye-opening, behind-the-scenes look at mountaineering. Complementary to any work on the Himalayas, it should be compulsory reading for climbers going to this area. Both books are recommended for public and academic libraries.

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Anthropologist Ortner's (Columbia) ethnographic immersion into Sherpa life and how it has been affected by the international climbing culture is a remarkable display of agile fieldwork, sensitive to all the distinctive shadings that compose her subject. In the valleys and foothills of the Everest massif live the Sherpas, who for the last 100 years have had their remote outpost unsettled by the influx of mountaineering expeditions run by sahibs (a Sherpa term Ortner uses both ironically and as

a handy tag). In an effort to gain a sense of how the two groups interrelate how much each groups perceptions of the other have validity and in what context Ortner draws upon a substantial arsenal of ethnographic theory. The work of Clifford Geertz is brought to bear on both camps' intentions and desires; so too Edward Said's notion of orientalism and how it erects ideologically warped imagery. Althusser, Foucault, James Clifford, and Marshall Sahlins help her clear away the fog of colonial complicity and the asymmetries conjured by power and wealth: though she can't slip into the Sherpa perspective like an old pair of shoes for reasons of cultural conditioning, she is ever attentive to it. Ortner is most interested in the nexus of the mountaineers' and Sherpas' values, beliefs, and ideals, and the various relationships that were spawned from their commingling, which often unwittingly reinforced misconceptions. In the records of the mountaineers, she seeks among the representations the allusions within the illusions, measuring the biases and fantasies against the touchstone of the ``cumulative record of high-quality ethnographic work.'' Ortner arrives at a complex but cohesive portrait of the century-long Sherpa association with the mountaineers, an elegant wedding of two distinct cultural strands with all the inherent harmonies and tensions a moving picture that shifts focus and emphasis as new elements, from identity politics to the counterculture, come into play. (30 b&w illustrations, 3 maps, not seen) -- Copyright ©1999, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This book is a critical culture theory treasure. Typically, I would not make an effort to defend a book on , but in this case it seems necessary. Apparently, previous purchasers were expecting this book to be about Sherpa culture, which it clearly is to anyone who studies culture (perhaps say, an anthropologist, which is precisely what Sherry Ortner is). The commodification of culture by individuals in Western nations is unmistakably represented in these remarks. Obviously they were expecting some form of rationalization for the impact of middle class, white, adventure-seekers on the Sherpa culture. Needless to say, a critical reading of this book (in my opinion, what it was intended for) would isolate for these reviewers that the Sherpa culture is more dynamic than the reading of the first sentence might lead one to believe. I would suggest this book to anyone with the patience and intelligence to read it thoroughly and critically while setting their ethnocentric ideas of the world to the side. Sherry Ortner is, if not the most profound anthropologist of contemporary times, one of them. This book is amazing.

very pleased with this delivery, came on time, much cheaper than the bookstore and new!

Very interesting and revealing about the Sherpa culture and man's quest to summit through the gauntlet to the top of Everest!

entertaining

perfect

When a professor of renown for anthropology is dealing 30 years long with the world of the Sherpas you should expect that she knows about what she is talking and that she is qualified to notify anything noteworthy about the topic. Indeed she collected noteworthy and interesting material. Also I think it was high time that somebody made up his mind to report about those who made the summit successes of the Europeans and Americans possible and yet were forgotten too often, though they made mostly the difference between success and failure. There is enough literature on the heroic deeds of the "white" mountaineers of the Himalayas. Almost too much has been written. But the author here is not so much interested in exposing just the mountain performances, rather she wants to find out what the point of view of the Sherpas is. Because for them, as their contributions are imminent, it is much more than just a spare-time work! And there is life besides mountaineering! In fact the society in the Khumbu area has changed due to the advent of the westerner mountaineers. But there is also much tradition. The author reports about the awakening awareness of the Sherpa people, about strikes on expeditions which deal with better payment and equipment, but also to demand for more respect, to express the growing self-consciousness of the Sherpas by giving them a say in it and by giving codetermination! The Sherpas did not only change for the outside world. The author has lived in the inside world and saw changes there as well. There is for the Sherpa men the importance to be competitive among one another, the quest for being the best, which even developed to the endeavour to challenge the western mountaineers. But there is also the cultivation of making friends. The once Sahib became a rope partner. But this is in my opinion not valid for the mass of the Sherpas who are still doing their work as porters. The author is arguing comprising how the expeditions affected the life of the Sherpas. She makes clear that consumption thinking, which is getting notable as soon as the basic requirements are ensured, is not alien to them, but as influential as religious convictions and the gender-specific peculiarities of co-existence in the Sherpa community. While she is amplifying that other side of life in the Sherpa villages, in the Buddhist temples and monasteries, she is as well reporting about the social and economic pressure which is bringing young men to mountaineering. And it is not idealism I most

cases! The author is tracing with commitment how the identity of the Sherpas gradually is going to change. It is not all to their disadvantage! The life before mountaineering was not at all idyllic, for the life in the higher ranges of the Himalayans was always hard and austere and still is. The economic situation is changing dramatically only for some. It is true that some have in comparison a remarkable prosperity from their occupation in the tourism industry, but many have also perished on the mountains. By the way many by acute mountain sickness! But there is also a lot that has not changed at all. The cultivation of the fields is burdensome, there are no streets and the connection to the outside world, to schools and hospitals is scanty. There was also always inequality in the Sherpa community, competition and a heap of conflict potential of also cultural and traditional origin. Hence mountaineering offered a certain escape from the problems, but also the chance to transform the own society. A successful expedition member has not to bother about his fields! New for me was the cultural struggle between the buddhist monks on one side and the tibetan Lamas and the shamans of the Sherpas on the other side. The Sherpas are tibetans by descent. They were confronted in Nepal with another religious culture, which the Nepalese regard as "true" Buddhism in opposition to the Lamaism. This is so because the shamans and lamas are connected with sorcery and black magic, thus with the elements of darkness. The practice to tap those sources for the benefit of the people is not questioned by them. According to my experience western "nirvana-seekers", who travel not as mountaineers into the Himalaya regions, but because of the "spiritual experience" are not aware of the fact that the representatives of the different ideological variations are often inexplicably opposing each other. The Sherpas have so to say the choice between Buddhism with and without necromancy whereby traditionally they are prone to the first. This proves to be true on mountain tours when they show reference to the mountain idols. The description of the world of the monks, especially their spiritual world takes up much space in this book. Many Sherpas give their sons to the monasteries for education. But it can be doubted that there are many of them who are able to outline that stuff with the religion in a structured and elaborate form. The belief is simple. Therefore the whole thing seems to be overvalued by the author. Nevertheless "power" and "discipline", which should be represented by the clergy, is rather more in appearance by the Sherpas: their power for physical performances and their discipline, which make them to reliable companions and mountain comrades. Besides all this one is informed about the development of mountaineering in the Himalayas and also about the deeper meaning in the imagination of Westerners to compare it with the practical, more materialistic drive of the Sherpas. This is for the reader a welcome counterpoint, since dealing on more than a hundred pages with the problems of a people in the remote valleys of the Himalayas, is nothing for what

visitors from the west come to the place. They do not come to see the Sherpas but the mountains! Here the author resorts to the statements of the more known VIPs of mountaineering. They offer under lack of oxygen often enough expendable wisdom, but sometimes there is also knowledge worth mentioning: "One of the main reasons that people of today exercise dangerous, risky sports like mountaineering is to fight boredom. For many to dispel monotony is one of the most important challenges in a world in which it is almost impossible to find a real adventure." For these men the modern era is the problem and mountaineering the solution. Where the modernity is vulgar and materialistic, the mountaineering is sublime and transcendental. The mountaineering, being also a child of the modernity, as a counter-draft to the misconception of the modernity! This seems to be an interesting thought for me! Where the modernity is loud and full of distractions, the mountaineering is peaceful and prone to reflexions. Where modernity is flat and boring, mountaineering is difficult, challenging and full of thrills. Well, I, myself a mountaineer and at the same time opponent to claims of modernity and post-modernity, do not like to contradict too willingly. But often, I subjoin, mountaineering is nothing but silly prestigious addiction, the ideal of the idealess. Be that as it may be, in this context the Sherpas function as a part of the solution. And thence in any case they are no part of modernity, rather a part of secret reclusiveness in the mountains and valleys of the Sherpas to which the seeking spirit of an unsatisfied man is drawn. The author is also trying to trace the characteristics of the Sherpas. Impressing was and is the loyalty and dedication of the Sherpas more for persons than for things and goals, something which is so often missed in our materialistic oriented world. But also for the Sherpas goes to make money matters. Not much space for romantic apotheosis. The author is discussing the thesis that the Sherpas developed gradually to that kind of people whom the white Sahibs wanted to have. If so there must be pragmatic reasons for it as well. The other way around is also fitting for the Sherpas know how to make ends meet: bad humoured guides do not have many clients in the long run. What is apparent to most visitors of the Himalayans is the constant cheerfulness of these people even under strain. This is a social style of interaction having to do less with Buddhism, since all religions have in common how the people should behave among each other. The old fashioned capability to trade is also concerned. The author has spent much time with the Sherpas. Yet she is holding exaggerated testimonies of sympathy cheap. She is reporting of inclination for egoism in village life, desire for dispute, mainly on land issues, controversies which even dwindle into violence. Responsible for this is the unequal distribution of possession. It is about rivalries, reputation, influence and properties especially for the minor holders. There are those who earn a lot with mountaineering and those left behind or the physically weaker who are left with nothing. Sherpas are

famous for being able to work hard physically and mentally. Thereby they still have a smile, even about crude jokes they can be mightily amused. The success of their performance is according to the author caused by their inner drive besides the better biological customization to the environment. But it is not clear from whence it comes. It is apparent, it happened to the author the same that happens to many westerner, who spend the time with Sherpas. They are puzzled in front of the nature of the Sherpas: "the Sherpas have an incredible talent to be most reliable and compliant and do readily what they are asked for and even go beyond without seeming servility or abjectness." Perhaps the riddle is solved when it is recognized that westerner in general cannot discern between humbleness and servility. Humbleness means looking at oneself and others realistic and certainly not inflated. Servility means making differences in valencies. Especially on mountains one is learning how foolish this is. There only life is counting and life supporting qualities. Sherpas do not feel inferior, they want to be treated as equals, but they are too polite to revolt. A Sherpa who participated in the Annapurna expedition of 1950 said once: "As primitive as we are, we are seldom wrong in our judgement of beauty and strength and most of all our intuition as for the qualities of the heart!" Well then, who ever wants to get to know something about himself, go to the Sherpas! What to you the mountain is not mirroring, the Sherpas will provide it!

Note that this author who said this book characterizes the Sherpas as "exploited" said he didn't finish the book -- I doubt he read more than a few sentences b/c there's no way that his claim that the book views Sherpas as "exploited" can be sustained with evidence from the text. Ortner is arguing precisely the opposite point, that the Sherpas were able to resist and transform Himalayan mountaineering, and their role in it, to their advantage. Likewise, it's not a postmodernist book, it's a deliberately realist book, aimed at showing the influences of western climbers, Tibetan monks, and the internal dynamics of Sherpa society on the Sherpa-climber relationships and how they've changed over time.

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