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Making Himalayan Herders

By John & Naomi Bishop

“Melemchi is a place; a cluster of houses on a Himalayan mountainside, a temple village at the northern end of the Yolmo Valley, a network of pastures scattered over the Thare massif.

“Melemchi is a history, the story of people making a life -- herder-farmers who work as wage laborers in India, peasants who are also landlords, Tibetan Buddhists who depend on shamans.

“This is a portrait of a Himalayan village.”

Opening Narration for **Himalayan Herders** film.

It took 25 years to realize **Himalayan Herders**. For us, making the film is inseparable from the research and the experience of living in the village. And although it was not until almost the end of editing that we wrote the opening narration, it reflects the way our understanding grew. Our view of Melemchi expanded in space, time, and complexity as we came to know it.

We first lived in Melemchi in 1971-72 when Naomi was studying the socio-ecology of langur monkeys. The monkeys shared the forest with herds of *zomo*, hybrids of a cow mother and yak father. These animals are rich milk producers and ideally suited to the middle altitudes of the Himalaya between 7000 and 13,000 feet, a range too high for cows and too low for yaks. *Zomo* herding is a unique cultural and ecological adaptation, and we wanted to make a film about it.

In the summer of 1986 we returned to Melemchi with our children, intending to do a short research project and film about *zomo* herding and its relation to the village. However, by then it was clear that many young people were disinterested in maintaining their family's herds. While nearly every villager alive in 1971 had lived with *zomo* herds, by 1986, some families were living for periods of time in India, while they worked on high altitude road building projects. The village was re-negotiating the balance between tradition and change, and *zomo* herding was beginning to disappear.

Our goals were modest for that summer field season. Although the research was funded

through small grants, the film was not. As a documentary cinematographer, John owns an Aaton 16mm camera; but we could only afford five hours of film stock. This is a very small amount by the standards of ethnographic film set by practitioners like Robert Gardner, John Marshall, and the MacDougals. So we had to be circumspect in what we shot. John had just spent a year archiving all of John Marshall's Ju/hoa bushman footage for the Human Studies Film Archives at the Smithsonian Institution, and found his records of process the most archivally interesting and useful; they transcend time and do not require extensive commentary. We set out to film sequences of *zomo* herding, making butter, milking, making cheese, and other details of life with the herds. We also photographed harvesting, cultivation, weaving, distilling liquor, and other subsistence activities in the village. We wanted to cover the key festivals of the monsoon season. These were our plans; other opportunities came along unexpectedly. We developed a friendship with the *bombo* shaman and filmed several of his possession rituals. A relative of a friend died and we were allowed to film the funerary rites in some detail.

We wanted this footage to illustrate the research. The desire was to make accurate and detailed records of these activities. But also wanted to photograph them beautifully, and to present them as the activities of vital, active engaged people. We discussed each sequence as it was photographed, and how it might fit into an edited film.

From the very beginning, we thought of the images held together by the sounds we associate with the village -- the chanting and book reading of Tibetan Buddhist rituals, the choral singing of the dances, the damian music, the incantation and shaking bells of the *bombo* shaman, the sounds of *zomo* moving in the forest with their bells, and the strong voices of the people.

It is always a struggle in ethnographic film to find a form that resonates with the data and ethnographic experience. We did not want to present a typical family. That is a Western television construct that places exotic variants into a familiar framework. Nor did we want to present a cycle such as a day, or a year, because we sensed that the crucial time frame was much more extended. The time interval that mattered was measured in the growth of children, the creation of fields and houses, the buying and selling of herds. We wanted a sense of a long time scale in which some things change and others stay the same. Ours was not a romantic look at a vanishing way of life, but a look at a flexible survival strategy that has changed in the past and will continue to do so in the present and future.

Because we did not have a great deal of film, we could not approach it as a film of lengthy interviews in which a story unravels almost by accident. Nor could we take a *verite* approach, in which every promising thread is pursued.

And we decided at the outset that this was not a film about our experience revisiting our previous field site, even though reflexivity was fashionable to the point of being a moral obligation at that time. It was not our story, but a story about the processes of subsistence and adaptation, set in a particular geography, history, and set of ritual beliefs. The film that formed in our minds as we lived through the research and filming was one that conveyed a sense of experiencing the village: first as a place of physical beauty, then as a place of specific activities and skills, and then as a place of real people with all the complexity that implies.

When we returned home, we synched the sound and made an arrangement with the Human Studies Film Archives to transfer the footage to video. This preserved an uncut record of the shoot and made the footage available for scholarly reference. (Later, our field assistant, who is a member of the village, came to Washington DC to annotate the footage on a parallel sound track. We interviewed him as we watched the footage together, providing future researchers with translations and commentary by both the anthropologist and informant as the footage plays.)

By the time we returned to Melemchi in the winter of 1989, the research project had expanded to include circular migration, demographic patterns, and new developments in the village including its presence in a National Park. We brought five more hours of film stock with us. In addition to filming winter subsistence activities and festivals, we wanted to enlarge our coverage of zomo herding in the lower altitude winter pastures. We also were able to film a capture marriage. Even though the captures today are often sham captures, it gives viewers a sense of this unusual type of marriage, which until the mid-1980s was the only form of marriage in Melemchi.

We needed voices from the villagers to give a better sense of who they are. Based on the research interviews, we re-interviewed people on film – short discussions of topics we had already talked over with them. It wasn't a fishing expedition; we didn't have enough film stock for that, though there were surprise moments. An interview with a husband and wife in their sixties about a variety of topics (their capture marriage, her experiences travelling to Tibet as a young girl, their hopes for their children) produced a relaxed and humorous exchange that always brings a smile to the audience, as well as a glimpse of gender relations that no amount of narration could ever convey. Interviews also provided the film with coverage of topics which we couldn't film. In 1989, the village was faced with major external threats and opportunities: the National Park, new places and types of work in India, and political changes in the country, to name a few. Since we were limited to filming in and around Melemchi, we used interviews with residents to introduce these topics, anchoring the film in the present and speculating about the future.

The real shaping of the film came in the editing. We had many sequences, each of which made sense in its own right. There was no linear story to tell, but many threads of information to be woven into a film that would evoke the village. There was factual information about processes, history of the village, background on the religious rituals, all of which had to be incorporated. We began editing by building short sequences, so that the editing room had dozens of short rolls each of which told a small story, such as making butter at Thare Pati, making *zhero* for the Nara festival, distilling liquor...

The first few assemblages tried to tell the story without narration, but narration is a very compact way to deliver background. We resigned ourselves to narration and began to work with a minimal script, using the villagers' interviews as much as possible. Interviews pose a different problem than narration in that they require either voice-over or subtitles. Subtitles draw the eye away from the images in the frame, and must be concise and easily readable. On small video screens, they are often difficult to see and tire the viewer. We ultimately used a mix of narration, subtitled interviews, and long stretches of untranslated local speech to provide the viewer of this 75 minute film a variety of sensory input and a shifting point of view.

The editing process involved grouping and regrouping the short reels. We tried a chronological assembly, going in the approximate order things were shot from 1986 to 1989. An alternative attempt was by seasons, trying to give a sense of the yearly cycle. But with both edits, the film seemed to jump around from topic to topic without building an understanding of the village. It was late in the editing that we regrouped so three themes emerged – first subsistence activity, then ritual and social organization, and finally culture change. Once the film was structured around these three themes, it was easier to evaluate both the narration and the spoken parts as they formed the structure for understanding the complexity of this village over a 25 year period.

A few holes remained; while the editing process dragged on, continued in Melemchi at a rapid pace. We didn't have film of electric light bulbs, television, or air-tight stoves – all of which were there by 1993. The narration included a discussion of tourism and the National Park. We had been so concerned to keep the film focused on local people that we had no film images of tourists. A third filming trip in summer 1993 with a wind-up Bolex and no sound provided the final footage for the film. Of course, no tourists came to Melemchi that month, so Naomi's sister filled the part for the camera! We sold stock footage to raise the money for post-production and the film was completed in fall 1996. It was edited on a flatbed editing machine, finished on film (including the sound mix) and then transferred to video.

HIMALAYAN HERDERS exemplifies minimalist filmmaking. It is a major ethnographic film produced without external funding for under \$50,000. It is made from ten hours of footage, shot over nine months under difficult conditions in the Himalaya. (We had no electricity; batteries were sent out by runner to Kathmandu to be recharged, three days each way.) It was an adjunct to a research project, shot while the research was being carried out. The filmmaker was also the research assistant. Sound for the film was taken by various members of our household - a veterinary immunologist, an undergraduate anthropology major and a Sherpa cook. On any one day, a decision was made as to what would be documented, how, and by whom. Any particular activity could only be documented in one form: film, still photographs, or interviews/notes. Time in the field was limited, so the film competed with the research upon which it was dependent for the attention of the anthropologist. Furthermore, we were working among friends and the impulse for aggressive research and filming was always tempered by the rules of sociability and hospitality. Its success is in many ways attributable to these constraints and limitations.

[The book, *Himalayan Herders*, is an ethnographic account of Melemchi and a companion to the film. Additional information, including an annotated transcript of the film is available on the Internet at [WWW.CDA.UCLA.EDU/faculty/bishop.](http://WWW.CDA.UCLA.EDU/faculty/bishop/)]