

## Kuragraphy

"Many years before," Mheme Lama related, "when people would die, the body would vanish along with the soul, and people would cry and get very upset. It was like this a long time before. My father's grandfather and other people from before told about this. Before, before, at the time of dying, the body would vanish like 'phet'! Then the family of the dead man would cry and search for his body in the sky and in the ground. When it was lost, they would ask, 'Where is he?! Where has he gone?!'"

This eighty-five-year-old man was also known as Ghang Lama, or Hill Lama, by other members of his community, many of whom identify themselves as Yolmo wa, or "Yolmo people," an ethnically Tibetan Buddhist people, now several thousand in number, who have lived for generations in hamlets and villages along the upper ridges of the Yolmo, or Helambu, Valley of north-central Nepal.<sup>1</sup> Mheme (pronounced "mhem-mh") had lived in the village of Thodong, along the southwestern ridge of the Yolmo Valley, until 1975 or so, when, seeking a more comfortable life in the city, he moved with his second wife and youngest daughter into a home in Chabahil, a multiethnic neighborhood about a mile west of the Boudhanath area, in northeast Kathmandu. It was in that home that he spoke of the body's vanishing act, in one of the many lengthy conversations that I had with him in 1998 in an effort to elicit his *jvan kath*, or "life story." I was in Nepal then, trying to record and give thought to the life stories of several Yolmo elders.

"Many years before," he continued, after swallowing a sip of tea, "everything would disappear."

"Before, the body would disappear as well?" asked Nogapu Sherpa, a Yolmo friend who had accompanied me to Mheme's home that day to help me converse in the Yolmo language.

"Yes," Mheme said. "But then the deities said, 'This is no good,' and they decided that the people must be able to see the body. Now they make the body stay. Now the body remains, and the soul departs. When it leaves the body, the body decays. So the body needs to be cremated or buried. Ah, now they need to cremate the body, compose the ashes, perform the funeral rites. The body can't be kept here forever, so they call the lamas [Buddhist priests, to perform those rites]. And the family feels better, thinking, 'Yes, he has died.' Now the body remains, the body is cremated, the funeral rites are performed, and people can understand that the person is dead. 'It's death' [they say]."

Here vision was as much solace as knowledge. Mheme understood that it was important that a corpse not vanish too quickly or too suddenly. A corpse is an absent presence, the vestige of a person no longer alive. Still, its lingering visual

presence provides evidence of the transition from life to death, and so helps people to understand the actuality of any death. If they could not view the corpse, family members would search in despair, bewildered by the person's absence, unsure whether he or she was still alive. Since a lifeless body inevitably decays, it cannot be kept forever. Yet rather than having it vanish "like 'phet,'" as it once did, the gods arranged it so that a corpse would remain as a visible, palpable reminder of a person's death, giving bereaved family members sufficient time and the tangible, ritual means to come to terms with the death.

In Mheme's words I heard themes that often surfaced in my talks with him. He spoke in ways that brought to mind ideas of materiality and immateriality, appearances and disappearances, contact and disconnection, longing and fulfillment, remembrance and forgetting, matter and the decay of matter, the changes that time effects, the fate of sentient bodies, the life and death of things. In most of these conversations vision was the dominant sensory orientation. As was the case with his chronicle of vanishing bodies, motifs of visuality played strongly into how Mheme made sense of the world, how he engaged with others, how he thought of his life, how he envisioned his death.

I first recognized the importance of vision in Mheme's life in the summer of 1997, when I began to work with him to record his life story. Acts and ideas of writing, inscription, visibility, visual engagements, and perceptual clarity often emerged in the matters of which we spoke. But in the winter of 1998 I began to elicit the life narratives of another Yolmo elder, Kisang Omu (pronounced "key-sang o-mu"), an eighty-eight-year-old woman who was living then with her youngest son and his wife in the heart of the Boudhanath area of Kathmandu, about a mile down the road from Mheme's residence. As tape recordings and written transcripts of the two sets of conversations accumulated and I started to compare what the two elders had to say about their lives, I realized that while Mheme's recounting of his life was dominated by motifs of vision and bodiliness, of knowing the world through visual means, and of acting and suffering through the medium of his visible body, Kisang Omu's accounts of her life largely entailed a theater of voices: when narrating significant events in her life, she often invoked, in vivid, morally connotative terms, the voicings of key actors in those events. She also commented frequently on the degree of skillfulness of her own speech and expressed concerns about how others might assess the aesthetic value of that speech.

One saw chiefly, while the other minded most the flow of words. In the pages that follow I want to present a pair of overlapping "sensory biographies" that consider the ways in which certain culturally honed and politically charged sensory modalities have contributed to the making and telling of the two lives.<sup>2</sup> How, for instance, did Kisang's acoustic orientation toward the world tie into the workings of language and memory in her self-narrations? How did Ghang Lama's visualist, text-based orientation play into his take on the presence of death and suffering in

his life? How did the sensory regard of both individuals shape their perceptions of my work with them, including the production of this text? How did gender roles and identities play into all of this? How, in short, do a person's ways of sensing the world contribute to how that person lives and recollects her life?

The inquiry builds on recent work in anthropology that investigates how cultural dynamics pattern the senses in different societies. Although a long neglected domain of inquiry, the anthropology of the senses, which can be defined as the interpretive study of the cultural construction and social dimensions of human perception and sensate experience in different societies, is proving to be an increasingly important and generative field within cultural anthropology. Ethnographic research along these lines ranges from accounts of the workings of gender, sensation, and memory in contemporary Greece to studies of sensuous knowledge among the Songhay of West Africa to analyses of the sensorial features of political surveillance and imprisonment in Northern Ireland.<sup>3</sup> Most of this research aims to show how the dominant sensory orientations of the modern West are historically distinct, and it tends to focus on culturally pervasive themes and dynamics. My goal here is to understand how sensory modalities and dispositions play themselves out in individual lives, how members of a single society live out different sensory biographies.

Yet while a running analytic focus is the place of voice in Kisang's life and recollections and the role of vision in Mheme's, these are by no means the only themes or sensory modalities considered. Such considerations serve as guiding threads throughout the chapters that follow, but they are only two threads among many. For one thing, it was not the case that Mheme engaged with the world only through vision or that Kisang lived solely in a world of voices. Sound was an important sense in Mheme's life, as taste, smell, and touch were, and Kisang saw and was seen by others. The difference, then, is not one of complete opposites but rather one of different emphases, of different patterns, within two lives. At the same time, to focus on a single sensory modality or the senses alone within each life would neglect how the senses relate to other aspects of a life and so would misrepresent the complexity of the lives in general. It would also fail to show the ways in which sensory engagements articulate with broader social, personal, and political dynamics. In a recent assessment of anthropological research on the senses, Michael Herzfeld cautions that the senses "will remain marginal to ethnographic description unless, in some practical fashion, all of anthropology can be recognized as necessarily shot through with alertness to the entire gamut of sensory semiosis."<sup>4</sup> A leading aim of the present inquiry, accordingly, is to help foster such a recognition by showing how diffuse arenas of life within a Himalayan society are shot through with diverse forms of "sensory semiosis."

The book is keyed in particular to questions of selfhood and subjectivity. It inquires into the interrelated sensorial, cultural, and political underpinnings of two

lives in an effort to help us sharpen our understanding of the relation between culture and human subjectivities—how, that is, diverse cultural forces contribute to the makings of subjective experience. It adopts, to use an anthropologist's term, a "person-centered" approach to cultural phenomena.<sup>5</sup> A recurring idea here is that, by attending carefully to how a person or two within a specific social setting live out and make sense of their lives, anthropologists can effectively address the ways personal and interpersonal concerns of individuals relate to social and cultural processes and so develop more precise and more integrative understandings of what it means to be a person, to live a life, to relate to others, to have a body, to be conscious in time. With a few others, I take it that anthropologists should not limit themselves to the study of social or political formations alone; that culture and history are grounded in the lives of individuals; that the drift of narratives often proves to be more illuminating than sweeping statements; and that one can sometimes learn more by tending to particulars within the folds of the general. The Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai says as much in "Tourists," one of his *Poems of Jerusalem*.

Once I sat on the steps by a gate at David's Tower, I placed my two heavy baskets at my side. A group of tourists was standing around their guide and I became their target marker. "You see that man with the baskets? Just right of his head there's an arch from the Roman period. Just right of his head." "But he's moving, he's moving!" I said to myself: redemption will come only if their guide tells them, "You see that arch from the Roman period? It's not important: but next to it, left and down a bit, there sits a man who's bought fruit and vegetables for his family."<sup>6</sup>

One could likewise imagine a situation in which Italian or Japanese tourists visiting the sacred *chhorten*, or *stpa*, in Boudhanath are told, "You see the four pairs of eyes painted on the upper facades of the stpa? Those are quite important. But don't forget that in a house a few streets away, to the right and down a bit, there lives a woman . . ."

. . . who, in the still days when frail legs limited her to sitting alone in her room much of the time, reciting mantras with a set of prayer beads in her hands, happened to be visited now and then by a man from another country, one wealthier and more powerful than her own, who asked her to relate to him her life story, including her recollections of deeds and events of times past, through the voicing of words that, he said, he was going to take and put into a book, one that would be shown to other people, even though she herself could not read such words, while all along the man, much younger than she was, younger than her sons even, was trying, for better or worse, to make sense of her life, its axes of time and effort and selfhood, by attending, among other things, to the forms of speech and action that composed it.

In contrast with many person-centered approaches in anthropology, which have given priority to psychodynamic perspectives, this study foregrounds a phenomenological approach.<sup>7</sup> By "phenomenology" I mean an analytic approach, more a method of inquiry, really, than a theory, that works to understand and describe in words phenomena as they appear to the consciousness of certain peoples. The phenomena most in question here include the workings of time, form, perception, selfhood, bodies, suffering, personal agency, morality, memory, vision, and language as they have taken form, now and then, in several Yolmo lives. As with other phenomenological approaches in philosophy and the human sciences, of particular interest are the ways in which such forces contribute to how humans make sense of and live out significant aspects of their lives, from the ways in which they converse with others to how they recall past events. And as befits an anthropological inquiry, the cultural grounds of such phenomena are always kept in mind.

This is difficult work. You cannot readily tap into the "lived experience" of cultural subjects, be they in Boston or Calcutta. You can only talk with and live among them. So words, really, are the stuff of meaning and evidence here, along with other manifest actions—a look here, a gesture there. In accord with what Yolmo wa themselves hold, that no one can truly know what lies within another's *sem*, or "heartmind," it is important to keep in mind that we are, at best, attending to traces of meaning left in the wake of human action, like echoes resounding in a ravine. All told, the analytic process, this "semology," is interpretive, inferential. As I see it, the phenomenal and the discursive, life as lived and life as talked about, are like the intertwining strands of a braided rope, each complexly involved in the other, in time. The work, accordingly, conjoins a person-centered approach to Yolmo subjectivities with a "discourse-centered" one in detailing how communicative practices, ways of speaking and listening, contribute to how people understand and portray their lives and the lives of others.<sup>8</sup> It attends both to the specifics of the lives in question—she did this, he felt that—and to the flux of cultural, personal, and interpersonal forces that weighed heavily into the dialogic "telling" of those lives.

This is also a book about death and dying. Of the many topics that Kisang and Mheme mulled in my presence, from the best foods to eat to the winter snows that once blanketed the Yolmo region, death and dying were among the more common ones. Both elders understood that, with their life spans coming to an end, they would probably be dying soon. Kisang in particular found herself within the "condition of dying," while Mheme took it that he was on the "verge" of dying. I believe that this had a significant impact on what they told me about their lives as well as on what they thought of my work with them. As spelled out later on, Mheme found in his work with me the possibility of important "echoes" of his life and words remaining after he had passed on, while Kisang was concerned with how her increasing frailty was affecting her ability to "speak well" and,

consequently, with how her recorded talk might be perceived by others.

Kisang Omu died, unfortunately, in November 2001. Ghang Lama is alive as of this writing. In their talks with me both elders often voiced their thoughts on death and dying, and they did not mind my asking about them. In general, while it was clear that certain topics, such as sex and childbirth, were best left unexamined, the two were not "shy" in talking about death in general or their deaths in particular. I have found this to be the case with almost all Yolmo elders. (Most are quite reserved, in contrast, when it comes to sentiments of loss and bereavement.) Many Yolmo wa speak openly about death, in part because they find it important to contemplate the fragile, transient, decay-prone nature of human lives. Tibetan Buddhist teachings, in fact, encourage musings on death and dying, for they are thought to generate insights into the impermanence of all composite forms and the delusive nature of human lives, insights that motivate people to transcend such impermanence and delusions through religious practice.<sup>9</sup> And so Kisang's and Mheme's takes on dying are conveyed here, in a multivoiced prose in which traces of their voices coincide with my own. At times, as well, these words seem to involve a work of mourning, my own muted mourning in anticipation of the losses to come.

Another potential demise was on the minds of Yolmo people in the late 1990s: that of Yolmo society and culture. This too shaped what people said to me and how and why they said it.

Those who identify as Yolmo wa, until recently known as Helambu Sherpa, understand that their ancestors have lived for three centuries or so along the upper, forested ridges of the Yolmo Valley.<sup>10</sup> At least some of these ancestors were Buddhist priests, known as lamas, who migrated from Kyirong, an area in the southwest of present-day Tibet, to the central upland area of Yolmo after receiving land grants for Buddhist temples bestowed to them by Newar and then Gurkha kings.<sup>11</sup> Much less certain is how many others also migrated from the Kyirong region and, relatedly, to what degree the relocated lama families formed marriage alliances with families already living in the Yolmo region. In any event, in time a class of people known as the Lama People emerged in Yolmo, and it is to these people that today's Yolmo wa trace their heritage.

The Yolmo region ranges some fifteen to thirty miles north of Kathmandu in north-central Nepal, with the southernmost villages a long day's hike from the northeastern perimeter of the Kathmandu Valley (see maps 1 and 2). As yet no roads reach directly to any of the villages, and only a few villages have the use of electricity. The majority of Yolmo villages, which range in size from a few households to some forty-odd houses clustered together, are set along the upper slopes of the mountains that ring the Yolmo Valley in a horseshoelike formation. The villages lie on lands ranging from seven thousand to ten thousand feet above

sea level. On the slopes below these lands lie villages inhabited principally by families known today as Tamang. For the most part, Tamang families are poorer than Yolmo ones, and their members often serve as laborers for wealthier Yolmo landowners. At the base of the valley, through which the Malemchi River runs as it drains south into the Indrawati River, lie fertile rice paddies cultivated by Chetri, Brahman, and Tamang communities. In the twentieth century, the successive incarnations of the Kathmandu-based Kingdom of Nepal maintained steadfast political control of the Yolmo region. Only the most recent generations of the region's residents have known themselves to be citizens of an integrated nation-state—as "Nepali," that is. All along, though, families and villages, rich or poor, have been involved in political economies at once regional and international in scope.

For some years now, commerce, land rentals, pastural grazing, and the farming of maize, potatoes, and other high-altitude crops have provided the main sources of food and income for Yolmo families living in the Yolmo region, although recently tourism from trekking expeditions through the region and employment in Kathmandu, India, and elsewhere have brought additional sources of material wealth. In the last three decades an ever-increasing number of Yolmo families have resettled permanently in Kathmandu, primarily in the Tibetan neighborhoods that surround the great chhorten in Boudhanath. While many of their business affairs presently lead them to converse with all sorts of peoples, from Tibetans to "Westerners" to representatives of the Nepali state, Yolmo wa, including those residing in Kathmandu, tend to associate socially mostly with other Yolmo wa, especially members of their extended families. When it comes to kinship, one widely found local preference is for a combination of patrilineal descent and virilocal residence, together with cross-cousin marriage. Yolmo wa live for the most part in households composed of nuclear families, although sometimes parents end up living with their adult sons or daughters. When sons marry, they usually set up their own households, sometimes on lands adjacent to their parents' homes. When daughters marry, they typically must move into their husbands' homes, wherever they might be. Most Yolmo people are devout practitioners of the Nyingma school of Mahyna Buddhism. Religious practices range from solitary meditative practices, to efforts to engage in karmically meritorious deeds, to sincere attempts to live virtuous, beneficial lives, to a family's daily offerings to Buddhist deities, to a community's participation in Buddhist rites. Male religious specialists known as lamas, who maintain village *gompa*, or "temples," inherited through patrilineal descent, conduct most of these rites, which villages and families regularly sponsor. One of their most important responsibilities is to conduct cremation and funeral rites on behalf of recently deceased persons. Hierarchies abound in Yolmo society: lamas, who usually inherit that role patrilineally, call for respectful deference more than laypersons do; wealthy families are generally thought to have better karma than impoverished ones; the young are to pay respect to the elderly; and husbands have higher status than wives.

Those known today as Yolmo wa have always been engaged with other peoples, including various Tamang, Tibetan, and Nepalese peoples, as these groups are known today, with the boundaries drawn between such "ethnic groups" (the term itself speaks to a very recent construct) much less steadfast and much more blurred than they have tended to be since the 1980s. But "Lama" or "Yolmo" communities have also had a sense, especially since the early 1990s, of being a distinct people, with their own customs, traditions, and language. The irony in this social history, however, is that, in the same years when Yolmo wa came to identify themselves effectively as an ethnic group distinct from other communities in Nepal, with a rich cultural heritage of their own, many were also finding that the circumstances of their lives were changing in ways that could, in but a few years, lead to the loss of that heritage and the dissolution of their culture.

I first worked in the Yolmo region in the late 1980s, while I was conducting ethnographic research on patterns of illness and shamanic healing among Yolmo peoples. After concluding my fieldwork in 1989, I returned to the United States, just a few months before the *jan ndolan*, or "people's movement," in Nepal sparked a revolution that led in 1990 to a new constitution predicated on multiparty democracy and the curtailment of the king's once substantial powers. When I returned to Nepal in 1997, after an eight-year absence, I found that much had changed for Yolmo people. Increased engagement with the transcultural world system had something to do with this; in Yolmo homes in Kathmandu, for instance, cable television linkups had become as commonplace as Buddhist altars. But other factors were at play as well. In tandem with a heightened consciousness of their unique cultural heritage, made possible by postrevolution laws that now made it permissible to discuss and promote non-Nepali ethnicities and languages, many Yolmo peoples were now identifying themselves not as Sherpa, as they had in the 1980s, but as Yolmo wa.

As with everything else, there was a history to these names. Residents of the Yolmo region began to identify themselves as Sherpa or Helambu Sherpa in the late 1960s. Previously, they called themselves Lama People to distinguish themselves ethnically from Tamang clans, who neighbored them on the southern and western sides of the Yolmo region and who often served as "sponsors" to Yolmo lamas. But with the increasing international renown of their cultural cousins, the Solu-Khumbu Sherpa of the Mount Everest region, families in Yolmo aligned themselves with this prestigious group and began to refer to themselves as Sherpa to outsiders. By the late 1990s, however, one of the main debates within the Yolmo community was whether to identify as Sherpa or as Yolmo people. Many, particularly elders and families residing solely in the Yolmo region, still subscribed to the former term. But far more, especially educated men and women living in Kathmandu, were now identifying themselves as Yolmo people. Among other reasons, the latter individuals found it necessary to establish an ethnic



identity that signaled that, as a whole, they were distinct from the Sherpa peoples of the Solu-Khumbu region. All this was in tune with the multifaceted, ever-shifting "ethnoscapes" of Nepal in the 1990s, in which numerous communities were attempting to establish or reconstruct the collective identities they took and tried to promote to others as their own.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, the number of Yolmo people living in the Yolmo region had decreased in the years following the revolution, in large part because many Yolmo families and youths had moved to Kathmandu in search of employment, better education for their children, and more "comfort" than could be found in any village. People spoke often of the consequences of these "dispersals": houses in Yolmo were being locked up; mostly elderly people and impoverished farmers remained in the villages; the forests were growing wild again; children studying in Kathmandu were learning Nepali rather than Yolmo as their first language; and many youths were leaving Kathmandu to look for better-paying jobs in places such as New York City. Many I spoke with, young and old, were concerned that traditional Yolmo culture was eroding away, with the histories and lifeways of the "old days" soon to be lost with the passing of the most senior Yolmo wa. And since Yolmo society as a whole was composed of a relatively small number of clans and families, people feared that Yolmo culture as they knew it might soon be a thing of the past.

In response to these concerns, several organizations were created with the aim of cultivating and preserving aspects of Yolmo society.<sup>13</sup> Such projects inevitably led to discussions, arguments at times, of what, precisely, is traditional Yolmo culture as well as who in fact can be considered Yolmo and who cannot. More than a few Yolmo wa, educated youths mostly, also aspired to retain in their society's collective memory aspects of Yolmo culture that they found most significant: folk songs, architectural forms, language idioms, dance steps, styles of dress. "If we don't collect the stories, if we don't know the history, everything will be lost," one member of a Yolmo student association told me in speaking of the work he and other students sought to do in their free time. With such sentiments came the sense, again, of vanishing forms: with the loss of "the old ways," Ghang Lama once observed, "everything will soon be lost."

Given that many Yolmo wa would agree that a death is often "the death of memory,"<sup>14</sup> my plans to record the life histories of elderly Yolmo men and women were well received by acquaintances when I returned to Nepal in 1997. From the start, many Yolmo wa supported my research aims, even though it was never my intention to conduct a "salvage anthropology" of any sort. Some did so in part, I think, because they sensed in my work an opportunity to establish a detailed record of several Yolmo lives and, by implication, the eras they represented, before it proved impossible to do so. Others in Kathmandu seemed to anticipate that any books written about Yolmo people by Westerners could not but help to strengthen

their standing and identity within the Hindu-dominated governmental politics of Nepal; ethnicity-based quotas for educational scholarships, for one, were at stake. A few men residing in Thodong, however, expressed doubts that any books I might write about their community would ever benefit them in any tangible ways. At any rate, I soon found myself engaged in a semicollaborative project in which several acquaintances expressed a willingness to help with the research, and I agreed to give copies of all transcripts and taped interviews not only to the subjects of any life stories but also, with their consent, to the archival library of the Yolmo Foundation, a nonprofit organization, based in Boudhanath, whose mandate is to preserve Yolmo culture and language. Beyond giving their permission and support, though, Yolmo colleagues have been quite active in the development of the ideas found within these pages. Well aware of the potential of words to shape or reshape personal and collective histories, they have paid close attention to what I have been writing about them and their neighbors. In the course of things, friends have asked that I identify them and their neighbors as Yolmo people, not as Sherpa; acquaintances have encouraged me to include the word *Yolmo* in this book's title; the most appropriate spellings of Yolmo words and place-names have been proffered; debates among Yolmo intellectuals have swirled around the meanings of several concepts cited; and just about every line of this text has been reviewed by at least one Yolmo reader.

All this weighs heavily into how I have gone about setting pen to paper. Writing has its effects among both authors and readers, as acts of reading, actual or potential, do. "The culture of a people," Clifford Geertz once proposed, "is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong."<sup>15</sup> While the culture-as-text metaphor might be dated, Geertz was, as usual, onto something: ethnographers are forever trying to make sense of how their informants make sense of things. In terms of the present text, however, another spectral relation is in the mix: I very much have the sense that more than a few Yolmo wa are looking over my shoulders as I write these words. Such native readerships will, I suspect, become much more present and forceful in anthropological circles in the coming years, and anthropologists will have to tend to them in ways they think best. As far as my own efforts go, one consequential effect is that, in attempting to write in terms that make solid sense to Yolmo wa or at the least do not disservice them in any way, I find myself trying to conceive of Yolmo lives in ways that do not veer far from Yolmo forms of thought and knowledge or the philosophic suppositions inherent within them. This is not to claim that the book is written from a Yolmo perspective or that it ventriloquizes Yolmo voices. It is to say, simply, that its self-spun musings are acutely mindful of the voices I have heard.

Several of those voices recur in these pages. While Kisang Omu and Ghang Lama offered the most extensive accounts of their lives, I also spoke in depth with six other Yolmo wa about their personal histories. I did so in part to develop a more

extensive corpus of Yolmo life stories to gain greater perspective on all the lives related. Since slivers of what these individuals had to say resound in the chapters that follow, it's worth noting a word or two about their authors here.

Phur Gyalmu, a Yolmo woman in her early fifties, related aspects of her life to me in March 1998, while I was visiting the village of Thodong in the southwestern corner of the Yolmo Valley. Phur Gyalmu is Ghang Lama's niece; her mother, now deceased, was his younger sister. When I had lived in the 1980s in Gulphubanjang, a village a few minutes' walk north of Thodong, I came to know Phur Gyalmu and her family a bit. Her husband had since died, however, as had one of her daughters, and she was living then with her remaining three children in the same home. In the course of several days, while I was staying in the home of Mheme's second son, Lhatul, two of Mheme's granddaughters, Tashi and Kunsang, accompanied me in several visits to Phur Gyalmu's home in order to talk with her about her life.<sup>16</sup> While she had always struck me as a quick-thinking, straight-talking person, she expressed discomfort with what we were asking of her. Time and again she said she did not "know how to talk."

Sen Zangbu Sherpa, a Yolmo man in his late sixties, had lived for much of his life in Kutumsang, a village that lies just over the ridge north of Thodong. In 1990 or so, however, he decided to move to Boudhanath to stay with his younger sister, Gom Dolma Sherpa, in a house built on property she had purchased some years before. It was there, in the main room of their home, that Gom Dolma's grandson Dorje Sherpa and I spoke with both elders in the course of an afternoon in May 1998, while several of Dorje's siblings passed in and out. First Sen Zangbu voiced a fast-paced narrative of his and his family's history into the tape recorder; then he answered a number of questions. Then Gom Dolma, "already sixty-one" and bedridden because of a nasty fall she had suffered a few years back, did much the same in speaking of the joys and sorrows of her life. Since I was soon on my way back to the United States, I had to postpone the translation of these tapes until I returned to Kathmandu in 2000. By then Dorje was on to other things, and so I enlisted the help of Temba D. Yolmo, a college student then enrolled in anthropology courses in a local college.

Temba, who speaks Yolmo, Nepali, and English fluently, listened to the tapes to help me to understand Gom Dolma's and Sen Zangbu's words. He also accompanied me during several informal visits with Kisang Omu and Ghang Lama, then arranged it so that I could speak with his own grandmother about her life. Karmu Omu Lama, then eighty, had lived in the village of Sermathang until just a few years back, when she and her husband decided to trek down to Kathmandu to live with their first son and his family. Quiet and soft-spoken, a bit unsure of what she should say, she related to Temba and me significant deeds of her life while her husband, her son, and his wife sat by our sides, now and then offering their own thoughts on the topics at hand. When the cassette we were using clicked to its

forty-five-minute end, we agreed that was a good place to stop. When asked what she thought of what we had just done, she said that she was "happy" she had told us about her life but did not elaborate.

Ghaki Lamani, a seventy-three-year-old woman from the village of Ne Nyemba, spoke in less bashful ways about her life around the same time that Karma Omu did. During several visits to her home in Boudhanath, I listened to her talk, with several prompts on my part, about the hard work she did in life, the "kidnap" marriage to which she had to submit, the death of her husband some thirty years back, her subsequent move to Kathmandu, and the relative comfort she encountered in her later years. Ghaki's grandson Chhewang Yolmo and Ghang Lama's granddaughter Tashi Lama joined me in such visits, then helped me to render their senior's words into English.

The one younger person with whom I discussed his life in detail was Karma Gyaltzen Yolmo, the thirty-six-year-old son of a respected Yolmo lama and political leader who had died when Karma was in his early twenties. I first got to know this artist and thinker in 1989, when he helped me to translate some Yolmo folk songs and shamanic ritual texts. Instrumental to the founding and sustained vitality of the Yolmo Foundation, and knowledgeable about Yolmo religious practices, Karma has since helped me in numerous ways to understand Yolmo lives. On several Saturday mornings in 1998 we sat with a tape recorder between us and talked about the events and aspirations of his life. In the spring of 2001, he traveled to the United States and stayed with me for a month in my home in Massachusetts in order to read through and suggest changes to an earlier version of this text. Karma also discussed with me on many other occasions the ideas and questions raised through my inquiries, as did other Yolmo acquaintances, including Nogapu Sherpa; Ghang Lama's son Lhatul and his wife, Mingmar; several of Ghang Lama's grandchildren; Pramod Lama Yolmo, the man who helped me to converse with Kisang; and Pramod's brother Binod Lama Yolmo, who listened to the recordings of several life story conversations, then read through several draft chapters of this text.

Along with these many offhand and scheduled conversations with Yolmo subjects—"ethnography by appointment," a colleague calls the latter endeavor—came the usual sorts of activities that are beneficial to the "deep hanging out" that field researchers so often rely upon when trying to learn something about ways of life uncommon to them.<sup>17</sup> In addition to being present among Yolmo wa as they went about their lives, I found myself drinking tea with them, shuffling cards, exchanging in wordplay, watching television, bemoaning a loss, attending festivals, noting appearances, talking and listening to the talk of others, thinking about that talk, so much talk, it seems, so many words, so much *kur*, to use a Nepali word often wielded by Yolmo speakers that can mean, depending on the context and any verb or modifier that accompanies it, either "talk" or "thing" or "matter" or

"opinion" or "event" or "problem" or "price." There has, in fact, been so much talk heard, so many matters perceived and transcribed, that my mind is prone to thinking, in its more polyglossic, wordplayful moments, that the present text entails nothing more, but also nothing less, than a "kurgraphy" of Yolmo lives and deaths, a written account of the sundry talk and items that sometimes matter most in those lives. The book dabbles in "conversations" (*kur-kahni*) and "hearsay" (*re-ko kur*), "matters of the heart" (*man ko kur*) and "matters of the past" (*bhtklko kur*). It deals with the matter of words and the wordiness of matter and so is ensnared within the intricate, Möbius strip—like interweave of the phenomenal and the discursive, life as lived and life as talked about. The materials from which it draws, and its subject matter to some extent, are the often roundabout, often eventful ways that certain moves and arrangements enable people "to converse with others" (*kur garnu*), or "to tell stories" (*kur batunu*), or, say, "to brood or daydream" (*kur khelnu*), "to reveal a secret" (*kur kholnu*), "to catch on to a trick" (*kur pakranu*), "to introduce a subject" (*kur hunu*), "to interrupt or 'cut' another's speech" (*kur nu*), "to change a story or distort a meaning" (*kur badalnu*), "to talk disparagingly about another" (*kur lagaunu*), "to contradict something" (*kur ulunu*), "to retract a statement" (*kur pharkunu*), "to engage in 'pricking talk'" (*ghocne kur*), "to detect the truth in another's talk" (*kur samtnu*), "to heed or mind something said" (*kur mnnu*), or "to listen to or be convinced by—to 'eat,' literally—someone's talk" (*kur khnu*).<sup>18</sup> The book offers words on such matters and the issues to which they so often relate. It also includes thoughts on the visible, tangible kur of its own form.