

## Visiting the Cloud Dwellers of Nar Phu - a Quarter of a Century Later.

By Wanda Vivequin



photo of Tsering Yangtzen by Wanda Vivequin

Tsering Yangtzen's 10-year old daughter died in the remote village of Nar in 1981. A few days later, her face in mourning was captured in an evocative portrait by American photographer Nik Wheeler in the book *Cloud Dwellers of the Himalayas*.

Twenty-five years later, clutching this book in my arms, I literally bump into Tsering in the streets of Nar. Her head is covered with a shawl and her face looks sad. Gently she points at the portrait and says it is her.

When we meet Tsering in October 2006 tragedy has struck again. Her son had died just a few weeks earlier.

"I did not adorn my hair in that photo as my daughter had just died, and now my son," 68-year-old Tsering says in a quiet voice.

As I photographed Tsering holding the book with her portrait I could not help wondering how much life has changed for this elegant fine featured woman who has lived her life in one of the most remote villages in Nepal.

Just as National Geographic-photographer Steve McCurry went in search of

"Afghan girl, " so too were Nepali journalist Dinesh Wagle and I searching for people portrayed in this now out-of-print book.

This visit to the Nar Phu valleys with a trekking group was my third in less than a year. Opened to trekking in 2003, my curiosity had been piqued by a Windsor Chorlton-authored book that I had bought off the internet.

I was initially reluctant to bring the precious book into these dusty high altitude valleys, but, watching the faces of local people as they poured over its photos, I wondered why I had waited so long.

They delighted in seeing photos of themselves, family members and friends a quarter of a century earlier and were still curious about why people had been so interested in writing a book about their lives.

The book was in fact, the product of a research expedition in 1981 led by Christophe Von Furer Heimendorf. Published in 1984, it captured the stories and lives of Nepali people living in some of the most remote villages in the country. The high altitude valleys of Nar and Phu lie north of Chame, approximately five days walk along the Annapurna Circuit.

Special permission had been granted to the research team by King Birendra to visit, and while many things have changed, the rhythm, pace and routine of life has remained largely intact.

Electricity, the telephone, quality bridges and most importantly the widening and improvement of the trail in 1990 have had a profound influence on contact with the rest of the country.

Until 1990, the valley inhabitants were reliant on a narrow snaking path that climbed through the pine forests lining the Phu Khola before it turned into a chiselled path etched into sheer cliffs. These were the trails used by the book's research team in the pre-monsoon period of 1981.

For locals and my trekking group, getting up and down the valleys is now a lot easier. Thanks to efforts by Nepali Congress politician Paldeng Gurung, people and animals can use a much-improved trail to move goods up and down

the valleys. Overall locals say they feel much more connected with Nepal. They are looking forward to the time when a road eventually reaches Chame.

The quest to find people in the book actually began in earnest in Koto, gateway to Nar and Phu. There, we were quickly surrounded by a gaggle of young men some of who had once seen a copy although it had long since been lost.

Although many were just babies or not even born when the book was published they were quick to point out people in photos and call out names. In Kyang, the winter settlement for the people of Phu we shared our lunch with a lady whose husband was portrayed in the book as a young man.

A day later, showing the book to a group of young men building a new Gompa near Naar Phedi (Mahendra Pul), they point to a tree high above us.

That is where that man jumped from, > they say. We discover then they are talking about the husband of the widow we met in Kyang.

By the time we reach Nar the name Pema Bhutti was etched in my mind. She was our cover girl. Featured on the frontcover wearing a fur hat, Bhutti's crooked half smile has greeted me each time I lifted the book from my bookshelves in Canada.

Now the quest was nearly over. Down a dusty lane past a row of prayer wheels, up a rickety ladder, across two rooftops laden with drying grains and down another ladder into a dark warm room.

And there she was. Now 69-years old and missing a few teeth, Pema Bhutti sat beside the stove surrounded by family. Her husband Sangma Chesang Gurung sits opposite her.

He tells us he loves his wife Pema Bhutti more than ever. Sangma suffers from tuberculosis and when I look more closely recognise him from my trip in October 2005. A quick search of their home reveals the photograph I delivered then of Pema Bhutti getting her eyes examined by a Canadian health team that visited the valleys in 2004.

Pema's daughter wants to be my mitini. Her son, who goes to boarding school in Kathmandu and speaks good english practises as his mother looks on proudly. Times have changed in Nar Phu and I am glad I brought the book to connect with people.

The hands of many have touched it and there are memories to last a lifetime.