Ten thousand years ago, all the people in the world lived on wild plants and animal foods. They were hunters and gatherers who collected food rather than produced it. Even though the practice of hunting and gathering was universal, there were many cultural and technological variations in foraging that were determined by differences in the environment, wildlife resources, cultural technology, surrounding polities, and prevailing patterns of trade with others. From the perspective of the human species, this was a highly successful way to live.

Even with the rise of agriculture, hunting and gathering did not simply wither away. Only five hundred years ago, with the beginning of European incursions into other countries, people who relied upon food collecting rather than food production continued to occupy almost half of the world. Hunters and gatherers, also known as foragers, occupied all of Australia, most of North America, and large areas of South America, Africa, and Asia. But by the turn of the twentieth century, while dozens of foraging societies remained viable, most others had been encapsulated into surrounding dominant agrarian regimes. Post-foraging societies, many located in North America and Australia, were subject to intense pressures to assimilate, and many faced the imminent demise of their cultures and languages. They were pressed to settle down, learn the dominant language, attend majority culture schools, and intermarry into other families. These assimilative measures largely succeeded, yet memories of foraging lifestyles have persisted and have even formed the basis of indigenous people’s political movements worldwide as they struggle to preserve their cultural autonomy.

As the twenty-first century or, from an environmental perspective, the eleventh millennium of the Holocene begins, we can see all contemporary foraging societies being assimilated into agrarian state systems on every continent of the world. Will such absorption by agrarian societies bring
about the complete demise of the foraging way of life? In the mid-1960s, participants in the first conference about hunting-and-gathering societies (the “Man the Hunter” Conference) believed they were witnessing the last throes of sovereignty and survival among such groups as the Bushmen of southern Africa. Yet, in the most recent hunter-gatherer studies conferences, contemporary foragers have demonstrated their cultural resiliency. In this book, “cultural resiliency” refers to the ability to hold on to traditional beliefs and practices in the face of constant pressures to assimilate exerted by a dominant society.

Foraging societies are those that base their subsistence upon food collecting. Both historical and contemporary foragers have trade relations with food producers such as farmers or herders, but their societies are based upon hunting, gathering, and/or fishing. In the last generation, we find that foraging peoples may not have sovereignty but are nonetheless surviving the onslaughts of cultural hegemony by agrarian societies. Many contemporary foraging societies may be familiar to readers. Some of these include the Arctic-dwelling Inuits, Aleuts, and Samis; subarctic-dwelling Beaver,
Dogrib, and Carrier Indians; desert-dwelling Bushmen (Ju’hoansi), Mission Indians of California, and Australian aboriginals; temperate forest-dwelling Anishinabe (Chippewa), Coeur d’Alene, and Nez Perce; plains dwellers such as the Dakota, Kiowa, and Crow; and subtropical forest peoples of Asia such as the Batek, Andamanese, and Birhor.

This book is about one of these foraging societies that has managed to survive in the monsoon rainforests of western Nepal. The Rautes, who call themselves “kings of the forest,” represent a society of hunter-gatherers who subsist on langur and macaque monkeys, wild yams, and rice traded from local farmers. They wander in forests where monkeys can be found, and thus they migrate from river valleys of a thousand-foot-high altitude up to

Mayn Bahadur Kalyal has come to trade a large wooden bowl, known as a *koshi*, with the villagers of Khalanga, the capital of Jajarkot District, Nepal.
the middle Himalayan ridges reaching nine thousand feet, wherever they can successfully hunt and gather. To supplement hunting their “little brothers,” as they refer to monkeys, the Rautes gather over ninety edible plants from the Himalayan forests that are untrammeled by roads or airstrips. To maintain this lifestyle, Rautes live in temporary camps that are hidden away from the villagers in the most remote forest glades. In the wet monsoon summers they camp at the highest altitudes, while during the dryer, cooler winters they migrate to the lower subtropical forest zones. Like many foraging societies, Rautes situate themselves in the optimum ecological niche in order to take advantage of the most natural resources.

Like other contemporary foragers worldwide, Rautes face the very real problems of deforestation, population encroachment by majority societies, language domination, and the political hegemony of the surrounding Nepalese society. Rather than dwelling upon these social problems, however, this book focuses upon the foragers’ strategies of cultural resilience. As Nepali villagers continue to denounce Rautes as fearsome ban mānche (forest men), how have the remaining Raute communities survived amidst immense pressures to settle them in villages? In this book, I consider the challenges involved in maintaining cultural resilience from the nomadic Rautes’ point of view and try to illuminate the choices that promote that resiliency. These questions require us to examine in detail the beliefs and practices of people who collect food rather than produce it through agriculture or pastoralism.

The population of Rautes and their cultural and linguistic relatives who live in the Nepal/India border region is estimated to be about 700 Rautes, 2,500 Rajis, and 2–3,000 Banrajis. The name “Raute” derives from a Nepali word, rāut, meaning a person who commands respect, such as a man known for his bravery or a member of nobility. The name “Raut” has been used by high-caste families to infer that they are “princely” or that their ancestors were the sons of princes. Similarly, the name “Raji” means “little king,” and Rajis emphasize that they should be treated fairly by caste Hindus because they bear this name. The name “Banraji” means “little kings of the forest,” and it too has a story associated with it. Regardless of their various favored ethnic names, all of the Rautes, Rajis, and Banrajis share close linguistic and cultural features. They all speak dialects of the Raute language that have 70–90 percent intelligibility among speakers; they are all historically nomadic hunter-gatherers; and they all share other cultural features, such as the same kinship systems. The subject of this book is the easternmost nomadic community, a roving population of about 150 Rautes who travel throughout western Nepal. They live in one band that
occasionally splinters into separate hunting groups as they migrate in search of monkeys to hunt. This group is one of the last that has not been forcibly settled by government officials, and its members take pride in their nomadic existence.

Although the book focuses upon the nomadic Rautes, occasionally I compare them with their Raji and Banraji neighbors. Historically, the Banrajis also were forest-dwelling monkey hunters, but they have been forcibly settled by the Indian government. Today they no longer hunt monkeys, but continue to hunt porcupines, bats, and deer. Despite being settled, the Banrajis display a resolute independence and are unwilling to assimilate into the surrounding lifestyle of local Hindu farmers. The lives of the various foraging communities are similar, yet they also differ. Some of these differences stem from the political impacts of the dominant society. The governments of Nepal and India have inherited diverse colonial histories; they pursue different forest policies, and the contingencies of such varied histories deeply affect contemporary hunter-gatherers. Nepal, for its part, has imposed little colonial pressure upon the nomadic Rautes. The Rajis and Banrajis living in far-western Nepal, however, have experienced more pressure to settle, even receiving land parcels from the government of Nepal. These communities have subsequently lost their lands to elite farmers, and many of their families now survive through tenant farming combined with part-time foraging. The Banrajis living on the Indian side of the border have faced the most forcible government-led settlement drives. Many of their land allotments are leases of forestland rather than arable farmland. Thus the Banrajis, too, inhabit a netherworld between farming and foraging, with highly depleted forest resources and few prospects for successful adoption of farming.

Unlike the Raji and Banraji, the nomadic Rautes who are the subject of this book have managed to avoid forcible assimilation. They have not settled in villages, have not assimilated many Hindu ideas, and continue their full-time nomadic journeys throughout western Nepal, hunting langur and macaque monkeys. This book seeks to understand the resilience of these Rautes and their perception of themselves as a unique society. They are unique not only because of their foraging lifestyle but because they valorize that lifestyle as the “children of God,” a deity who wishes Rautes to be nomadic monkey hunters. Embodied in the sun, their solar deity holds the ultimate responsibility for life. Pointing to the sun, one Raute said: “Berh is our God and you see him as the sun. The stars are his temple. Stones have broken, earth has fallen apart, trees have fallen down, but the sun is always like this.” In our search to understand the cultural autonomy and resilience
of the Rautes, we shall consider how their belief systems form a foundation for their nomadic hunting existence.

Necessarily, Rautes must migrate through a secular world, with farmers’ political intrigues and fights over land, timber, and other resources swirling all around them. Having no word in their own language for “farmer,” Rautes refer to the surrounding sedentary Nepali farmers as maŋa, a term derived from the ancient Tibetan word mang, meaning an elder brother, an elite, a ruler, an official (Benedict 1972, 189; Matisoff 2003, 601). Maŋa captures the essence of how Rautes see farmers in relation to themselves. With the knowledge that maŋa wield an enormous amount of political power over them, Rautes defer to them and ask them for permission to camp in forests controlled by villagers. While Rautes value their foraging lifestyle, they do so knowing that they are but one strand in a larger web of nature and society that is the lower Himalayas.

Finding Importance in Hunter-Gatherer Lives

For many of us who live in a fast-paced postindustrial world, the lives of a few hundred hunter-gatherers might seem irrelevant, simply a cultural curiosity to be noted in passing. What could be important about foragers? What meaning could they have for us living in an era of globalization? For some, there may be nothing compelling about an endangered culture that is teetering on the brink of extinction. Ironically, the fact that animal species such as pandas, leopards, and tigers, as well as many plant species, are endangered is of great concern to most people. The links between species in a system of biodiversity is something many of us readily can grasp. But because human symbiotic relationships are so complex and delicately intertwined, most people have trouble appreciating the importance of human diversity and the role played by food collectors in the web of biodiversity. Raute lives afford us a good example of the meshing of society and nature, for they directly rely on many natural resources, including water, trees, monkeys, forest edibles, and even goods obtained from villagers such as iron, cloth, and grain. In symbiotic fashion, villagers appreciate having monkeys hunted out of their fields, as they are crop predators and can eat a grain harvest down to nearly nothing. Yet farmers also believe that the langur monkey is an incarnation of the Hindu deity Hanuman, and thus loathe hunting monkeys themselves. As a result, when Rautes hunt monkeys, farmers are relieved of this need. Farmers and Rautes are thus linked in a symbiotic web of resource exchange. In other words, the relationship of Raute-monkey-villager is part of a system of biocultural diversity, in that
within it intrinsic ties exist between human and environmental diversity. When these factors change, for example when monkeys have been mostly hunted out of a given forest, Rautes move their camps to another forest locale. The nomadic monkey hunters work in concert with changing environmental conditions. Hunter-gatherer lives such as that of the Rautes thus can provide us with important insights into the biocultural diversity that exists between society and nature in the Himalayas. Unfortunately, just at the very moment in history when we have truly begun to value biocultural diversity on this planet, we are losing it. At the exact time when people in complex societies such as our own desperately need to understand how to promote cultural diversity, few technologically simple societies like that of the Rautes remain to teach us about the nuances of particular environments.

In broad perspective, it can help us to hold up the behaviors of hunter-gatherers as a kind of mirror reflection of our own social lives. For example, hunter-gatherer sociality has formed the foundation of studies of human sharing (Blurton-Jones 1984; Hawkes 1987; Hill et al. 1987). Sharing of meat, material goods, and prestige involves intricate rules of social exchange that can be best studied in small-scale societies. Further, hunter-gatherer studies have contributed to ecological studies of diet choices (Charnov 1976; Hawkes et al. 1982; Winterhalder and Smith 1981). When we want to know if humans need certain kinds of diets rich in protein, carbohydrates, or fat, we can study diet among foragers, as human diets historically were based on foraging rather than farming. Studies of contemporary hunter-gatherers have even contributed to understanding human violence (Kent 1989; Knauft 1990). Study of small-scale societies can help to untangle the complicated conditions that lead to violence, such as sedentism, overcrowding, resource distribution problems, and so on. From such studies, it is clear that contemporary hunter-gatherers can help us understand our more complex selves in addition to simply documenting the range of human and cultural diversity.

**Writing about Raute Lives**

This research began with an innocent enough suggestion made by a Nepali development worker in western Nepal. In 1986, I was doing field research among farmers in Jajarkot District, a rural setting that has now become an area of Maoist political upheaval. In Jajarkot, farmers talked about their recent encounters with Rautes, who had traversed the district in 1985. As I listened, a seed was planted that later grew into a desire to study the people who lived in the forests and how they managed to maintain their unique
lifestyle. For the next ten years I continued to do research on Nepalese farming systems, returned to Jajarkot several times, and wrote about agricultural labor relations as the subject of my Ph.D. dissertation. When that project was completed, I felt ready to explore a new dimension of sociality, one located in the same place but based on hunting and gathering rather than on farming systems.

In 1997 I returned to Jajarkot District, this time to study forager economic systems rather than farming systems. What I found among the band of 140 Rautes was not simply an egalitarian foraging people, but an egalitarian foraging people that was embedded within a larger economic system based on Hindu codes of hierarchy. It became clear to me that, although many researchers had focused on foragers, they had often missed seeing how the broader social and political environment shapes forager sociality. Since I was knowledgeable about the world of Hindu farmers, I decided to use that knowledge to situate Rautes within this broader social environment. In the process of doing so, I found that Raute lives are part of a larger web of Himalayan social life that is similar to the lives of other indigenous peoples and hunter-gatherers worldwide but is also contingent upon Himalayan historical events.

Raute material culture was and is technologically simple, based on the multifunctional use of nets, axes, and a small variety of wooden implements. Yet Raute lives are forged within a historically and geographically contingent Asian context that has made their form of foraging unique. In fact, their social life is based upon a highly complex and delicate balance maintained within the overall social and physical environment.

Unlike most foragers, Rautes have also devised strategies of cultural resilience to help them maintain their autonomy. According to an anthropological definition, “resilience” refers to the ability of a system or society to undergo change while still maintaining its basic elements or relationships. I became intrigued by the ways in which Rautes ingeniously borrowed and transformed elements from the larger society, incorporating them in a unique “Raute” fashion in order to preserve a way of life that was stamped out in most other parts of the world a century ago. While Rautes at first may appear to be “primitive,” much to the contrary their choices are guided by contemporary insights into the larger surrounding complex society. Rautes represent a thread of simplicity woven into the larger social fabric of Nepalese society. Like cultural groups such as the Romany Gypsies in Europe, Rautes choose to live a highly communal and nomadic lifestyle that rejects the accoutrements of a settled agrarian one. Unlike that of the Romany Gypsies, however, the Raute way of life revolves around hunting monkeys and gath-
erating wild yams from the forest. Rautes can thus be viewed in comparative perspective with other nomadic societies, but the essence of their sociality is something wonderfully unique.

Each of the following chapters represents an aspect of Raute sociality that I found particularly important. As I struggled to learn and appreciate what it means to live as a Raute forager, I found several recurring themes. These include a stress on the forest as home and on monkey hunting and yam foraging as fundamental ways of getting food, and a dualistic viewpoint of self versus others, family versus strangers, forest versus village. In Chapter 2 I write in a narrative fashion about some of these themes in order to introduce readers to the Rautes and to local farmers in Jajarkot District. While the surrounding Hindu farmers play a minor role throughout the book, they are not homogeneous characters, and Rautes meet many different kinds of Nepali people during their sojourns. I was impressed by the range of farmers’ opinions about these foragers, and each chapter presents the mixed feelings they have about the Rautes.

In Chapter 3, I explore Raute identity in the light of Nepalese history and politics. Rautes represent a radical “other” amidst millions of Hindu farmers. For Rautes even to assert that they are a unique ethnic group is sometimes a dangerous political gesture. Using Goffmanesque impression management, they claim that they are just like farmers, except that they live in forests rather than in villages. Using this political strategy of claiming to be similar yet different enables Rautes to protect themselves from the daily urgings toward assimilation disguised as “social upliftment” that are proffered by local farmers.

In Chapter 4, I ask a simple question, “Where do Rautes live?” Considering the fact that Rautes are nomads, the answer is complex, for they live everywhere and nowhere. It turns out that not only is the question of place difficult, but the question of Raute ideas of natural and cultural places is also complex, because they conceive of forests as cultural places. For them, forests are a sacred home, while places outside of forests, such as villages, represent the uncivilized wilderness. It is this inversion of nature and culture that is the most difficult for farmers to understand and accept. They are generally upset that Rautes have no interest in settling down in villages to raise livestock or farm.

Chapters 5 and 6 delve into hunting and gathering as the basis of the Raute economy. In Chapter 5, I describe how Rautes hunt “little brother” monkey and how God, who demands that they hunt monkey, blesses this symbolic cannibalism. As Rautes note, “The monkey’s thigh is our shaman’s
meat,” adding that their shamans call the monkeys into their nets and, with the blessings of God, dispatch and consume them as their main source of protein. Chapter 6 explores the other half of Raute economic well-being, which is devoted to collecting wild yams, fruits, and greens in the forests: as Rautes are fond of singing, “Let’s go to the forest and eat wild fruits!” Forest foraging represents an important aspect of subsistence, and the more wild yams, fruits, and greens the Rautes can gather, the less they have to rely on bartering with villagers for grain.

Rautes see hunting as the very heart of their lifestyle, yet they also acknowledge that trade with farmers is essential. Chapter 7 explores Raute subsistence as based upon two spheres of exchange—one symmetrical, the other asymmetrical. Among each other, Rautes share food, clothing, tools, and labor, and this forms the basis of their egalitarian society. But in dealing with farmers, Rautes have developed the wily ways of the stranger/trader and employ patronage, begging, the “hard sell,” pilfering, and fictive kinship as strategies to obtain the maximum amounts of grain and goods. In particular, I was fascinated by the ways in which these asymmetrical exchange strategies indirectly supported their sphere of symmetrical exchange among each other.

Chapter 7 also explores how Rautes manufacture and exchange items for trade. All contemporary hunter-gatherers need to trade for items they cannot produce themselves. Rautes trade wooden bowls for grain, iron, and cloth. Such work takes up roughly one-third of some men’s work time. To better determine the flows of work time and value, I converted food received during trading into calories and labor time. Using this “energy input-output” analysis, I estimated the amount of food calories Rautes need in order to get a better picture of how they survive. For example, their band of about 150 people must consume roughly 300,000 calories per day. For people who have no storage facilities and produce no daily surpluses, this means that Rautes must successfully forage, hunt, and trade nearly every day in order to feed everyone. Is this difficult? The anthropologist Marshall Sahlins described hunter-gatherers as the “original affluent society,” meaning that they had more leisure time than farmers. Rautes may not live in such an “affluent” leisured condition, but nevertheless they do claim that “wild yams are still easy to dig” and they are loath to take up farming. Chapters 5, 6, and 7, then, represent the fundamental aspects of Raute life.

Chapter 8 turns to the ideological aspects of the cultural resilience of the Rautes, which are just as important to maintaining their lifestyle. Their religious cosmology is radically different from that of high-caste Hindus. Rautes worship the sun and moon, as well as spirits of animals and ancestors,
in what can be described as a sacred and sentient ecology. Using a handful of elder men and women to intercede with God, Rautes follow the lead of their shamans, who have mastered the arts of trance, shaking, and reaching out to communicate with deities and spirits. Yet Rautes resist telling Hindu farmers about their beliefs and practices; instead, Rautes refashion Hindu stories in order to entertain—and deceive—inquiring villagers.

In conclusion, I review broader issues that have been important to hunter-gatherer studies and to anthropology in general. Among these, I consider why investigation of biocultural diversity is so important, and why the study of contemporary foragers has moved away from an evolutionary focus on the ideal hunter-gatherer to a renewed interest in hunter-gatherer diversity.

In keeping with the wishes of the Raute people, this book is intended solely to inform, not for other purposes such as to “aid the development” of
Rautes. Rautes abhor the programs devised by international development agencies; they wish to choose their own destiny. Raute elder Man Bahadur understood that ethnographic writing about his people might possibly encourage others to try to acculturate the Rautes. Nevertheless, he told me, “Go and teach your students in America about us.” But he also cautioned me that there are many people who do not understand the Raute lifestyle, and such people pressure Rautes to settle down and take up farming. If there is one development strategy I advocate, it is to leave the Rautes alone. After reading this book, it is my hope that people will relinquish any idea of acculturating Rautes to an agrarian way of life. Rautes do not want to be the object of development, and they have no wish to become farmers. Their cultural resilience consists of continuing to live in forest camps, not in villages. Rautes stress that they wish to live in the same way their ancestors lived.