

*Ein Labyrinth von Identitäten in Nordpakistan: Zwischen Landbesitz, Religion und Kaschmir-Konflikt* by Martin Sökefeld.  
Culture Area Karakorum Scientific Studies 8. Köln:  
Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, 1997. 383pp.

Reviewed by H. Herbers

Questions of identity and ethnicity represent a broad field of study in anthropology and other disciplines such as political science and human geography. In the present study, the author focuses on processes of identity formation in Gilgit, the urban centre of the Northern Areas of Pakistan with approximately 40,000 inhabitants. In doing so, he aims to present and analyse a vast body of material gathered during his 15 months of fieldwork in Gilgit. The final aim of his analysis is to contribute to an understanding of social relations in the area, both with respect to characteristics which the acting groups or individuals ascribe to themselves, and in relation to attributes which other groups and individuals ascribe to them.

In his introductory chapter, Sökefeld outlines the aims of his study and gives a broad overview of the colonial and anthropological literature on what is today the Northern Areas of Pakistan. He then goes on to describe his situation in the field and to introduce Gilgit from three different perspectives. These are: (a) the multiple connections between Gilgit and the surrounding areas; (b) the history of Gilgit as the administrative centre of the region; and (c) an account of the town of Gilgit with its hamlets, its economy, etc.

Before presenting the ethnographic material, the author discusses major theoretical concepts (Ch. 2) relating to his analysis, such as ethnicity, plurality, culture and interpretation, culture and discourse, and culture in the making. He argues against the extensive use of analytical concepts such as ethnicity which do not have an equivalent in indigenous contexts. According to Sökefeld, to employ the concept of 'ethnic group' would be effectively to misrepresent the actual relationships and distinctions found in Gilgit and would therefore not contribute to a true understanding of the situation. Following Barth's concept of plural society, as elaborated in his study *Sohar: Culture and Society in an Omani Town* (1983), Sökefeld highlights instead the

different ways in which people may belong to different social categories at different times, and the plurality of perspectives on group membership. He stresses the difference between the social categories used by the local people in their daily lives and theoretical abstractions applied from outside: the step from observations or talks with individuals in the field to a generalization must be reconstructable.

Consequently, the three chapters which follow focus on identity processes and discourses in Gilgit. By meticulously evaluating the ethnographic material collected during his field work, Sökefeld characterizes social categories along the lines of indigenous notions. He divides his material regarding the processes of identity into three parts. In the first part (Ch. 3), he discusses differences between people from Gilgit and people from outside. He starts with accounts of the 'original settlers of Gilgit', who claim to have undertaken the difficult task of first cultivating the barren land; they had the power to integrate newcomers by sharing land and arranging marriages. Due to historical events—i.e. the arrival of the Kashmiri Dogras and the British colonizers—the ownership of land changed and waves of migration into Gilgit took place, turning the 'original people of Gilgit' into a minority. The chapter proceeds to describe various categories, such as descent groups, groups living in the same area, kinship groups, craftspeople of low status (including their noteworthy attempts to improve their social standing), and people migrating into Gilgit from adjacent valleys. In the discussion of all these categories the author convincingly shows the multi-layered process of identity formation, which is both a personal matter—with perspectives depending on the single person narrating and elaborating on the respective subjects—as well as a matter of integration and segregation on a higher level.

In the second part (Ch. 4), he deals with the conflict between religious groups, namely between the Twelver-Shia and the Sunni. After outlining the process of different waves of Islamization, the author discusses accounts of the so-called tensions between the religious groups in the area, which culminated in the massacre of 1988, or, as Sökefeld himself puts it, "the Kerbala of the Shia in Gilgit" (p. 218). These events had a strong impact in that they further polarized the groups in spite of the ties which had existed between them (e.g. through intermarriage) and changed the political environment (elections were fought along religious lines, for example). Identities were re-examined and religion became a dominant factor in the ascription of identity, although individuals from both sides expressed their regret and chose

to act on categories of identity other than those defined by religion.

In the third part (Ch. 5), the author explores the Kashmir conflict with regard to the formation of a political identity. Due to the Kashmir conflict the Northern Areas are under the sole administration of Pakistan. Today its inhabitants are still deprived of fundamental civil rights such as the right to vote in the elections for the National Assembly. This unsatisfactory political situation led repeatedly to insurrections in the area, to reforms in the 1970s, and finally to various demands by different people and political parties. One is for the integration of the area within the state of Pakistan as a fifth province, another is a call for an independent state. In the process of the new political mobilization since the mid 1980s, different categories of identity which are supposed to support the creation of a political entity, such as language and local culture, are being discussed; but one may doubt whether the pluralistic political culture with its differing aims and ideologies can be united into one force against the domination of the Northern Areas by Pakistan.

In the final chapter (Ch. 6), Sökefeld summarizes his central point: Individuals cannot and should not be seen as representatives of a group but rather be taken seriously as those who speak, act, and interpret events on their own account. Citing Giddens, he stresses the mutual influence of actors and structure. Throughout the presentation of his ethnographic material, Sökefeld shows that the positioning of the actors and the practical logic of daily life can only be understood if one takes seriously the flexibility of mutual ascriptions.

*Swasthani* adaptation by Pallav Ranjan. Kathmandu: Spiny Babbler, 1999. 126pp.

Reviewed by Michael Hutt

Pallav Ranjan divides his English adaptation of the *Swasthani Vrat Katha*, the 'Story of the Fast to the Goddess Swasthani', into twenty-two short 'readings'. Two thirds of these deal with characters and myths from the Hindu Puranas. Readings 1 and 2 deal with cosmology and the creation of the world. The main theme of readings 3 to 7 is the story of Shiva's marriage to Satidevi, daughter of Dakshya Prajapati, Dakshya's insulting of Shiva, Satidevi's self-