

***Ethnic Revival and Religious Turmoil: Identities and representations in the Himalayas*, edited by Marie Lecomte-Tilouine and Pascale Dollfus. New Delhi: Oxford University Press 2003. 341 pages. ISBN 0 19 565592 3.**

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This volume serves as the proceedings of a conference held in France in 1998, entitled *Representation of the Self, Representation of the Other in the Himalayas: Space, history, culture*. With such a widely defined theme, the essays are expectedly diverse in both subject and theoretical approach, and vary equally widely in quality.

Marie Lecomte-Tilouine's introduction positions the volume as a follow-up to the seminal 1997 publication *Nationalism and Ethnicity in a Hindu Kingdom: The politics of culture in contemporary Nepal* (ed. by Gellner, Pfaff-Czarnecka and Whelpton). This was the first thorough compendium of essays to situate multiple aspects of the Nepal-specific debates on ethnicity within contemporary theoretical discussions on these issues in academic anthropology and cultural studies. With many of the same contributors, and the added value of a wider geographical remit that includes Himalayan areas of northern India and Pakistan, the present volume includes several important individual essays. Taken as a whole, however, it does not live up to its introductory promise and is unlikely to become a reference text in the same manner.

Many of the best papers – especially those by Michael Hutt, David Gellner, Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka, Gil Daryn, Ben Campbell, Joanne Moller and Martijn van Beek – present interesting new textual and ethnographic materials that help develop the discussion about identity in the Himalayas in important ways. These authors take up the challenge offered by the original conference title – *Representation of the Self, Representation of the Other* – by exploring issues of self-representation in psychological and performative terms, rather than limiting themselves to the more obvious political aspects of ethnicity. Their essays broaden the definition of identity at the conceptual level by focusing on the multiple layers of identity: semiotic (Hutt on the Sunnima text), symbolic (Pfaff-Czarnecka on Magar ritual), environmental (Campbell on Tamang indigenous knowledge), caste (Gellner on Newar internal caste differences and Moller on Kumaoni high caste discourse), group (Daryn on Nepali Bahuns' lack of group identification) and regional (van Beek on Ladakhi representation) – instead of over-emphasizing ethnic identity alone, as anthropologists often tend to do. The authors' ability to

bring out the complexity of these issues and make the links between ritual, representation and identity politics explicit is one of the strongest features of the book. One wonders then why the original conference title – which noticeably does not even mention the term “ethnicity” – was not kept as the title of the book, since it represents the content therein much more accurately.

The editors' desire to broaden the geographical range of discussion to “the Himalayas” is commendable and necessary. For a variety of historical reasons, all too often Nepal is taken to represent the whole of “the Himalayas” in academic studies. In the contemporary context, ethnicity and identity issues must be addressed within broader regional comparative frameworks, but much scholarly work remains artificially bounded by national borders. By including two articles on northern Indian Himalayan areas and one on Pakistan (Sökefeld on Gilgit), the editors have succeeded in initiating an important cross-border scholarly dialogue. However, the other eight of the eleven contributions still focus exclusively on Nepal, and the introductory remarks by Lecomte-Tilouine and concluding remarks by Steve Brown are crafted in Nepal-specific terms. (Brown speaks of “the uses of cultural nationalism in Nepal” and “the evidently conflictual nature of contemporary Nepalese societies”, p. 340.) Had the editors done more to draw out thematic issues for regional comparison, this would have added a sense of coherence to the volume and made an important step forward at the theoretical level.

One of the most important issues addressed at various points in the book is the role of foreign anthropologists within highly politicized ethnic contexts. Lecomte-Tilouine makes a point of refuting in advance Nepali anthropologist and activist Krishna Bhattachan's expected critique (based upon his critique of earlier works), which she summarizes as follows: “... most of the authors are Europeans; the groups included in the study do not adequately represent the diverse features and aspirations of Nepalese society; the book should be made accessible to the indigenous people, by translating it into Nepali and even into the different mother tongues spoken in Nepal” (p. 11). Anne de Sales also makes a plea for anthropologists to avoid being co-opted by militant ethno-political agendas (p. 240). Lecomte-Tilouine is right that demands to make each scholarly book representative of the whole of Nepali society and to translate such texts into indigenous languages are unrealistic, and de Sales is correct that scholars must carefully consider their relationships with ethno-political activist communities. However, one does wonder why no Himalayan scholars were invited to contribute to the present volume (even if it was difficult to invite them to the original conference in France), and whether it is necessary or even possible to maintain such a strict separation between anthropology and activism.

In an attempt to replicate the back-and-forth debate of the conference, Lecomte-Tilouine and Dollfus have chosen to present the papers in their

original form with little editing, followed by the discussants' comments. This approach meets with mixed success; in some cases the discussants' comments help illuminate the paper at hand, but for the most part they either repeat the ideas already laid out by the author, or read like reviewer's comments for revision. Some of the authors are apparently uncomfortable with this approach; for example Martijn van Beek finds it necessary to mention in a footnote that his contribution can only be considered a working paper due to the restrictions on revision imposed by the editors (p. 295). This reviewer found van Beek's unease justified, since being subjected to a strong critique immediately following the original paper makes for an awkward reading experience. Perhaps the authors could have been given the opportunity to integrate the discussants' comments into their own texts.

One also wonders whether it was only the contributors who were instructed not to edit their pieces, or if the editors also took their own advice to heart, since the text has a surprisingly high number of typographical and grammatical errors. In addition, each article appears to have a different bibliographical system: many have all references contained in the footnotes, while others use parenthetical citation and provide a full list of cited works at the end of the article. These issues may well be the responsibility of Oxford University Press as the publisher, and we can only hope that they might be corrected in a second edition.

All in all, *Ethnic Revival and Religious Turmoil* is a mixed bag. Many of the articles will be valuable to researchers working on related topics or in the same geographical regions, and some offer fresh insights on the theoretical frameworks used to discuss ethnicity in the Himalayas. In this, it is a standard conference proceedings volume that is more likely to be valued for some of its component parts than as a whole.