

Nature, Culture and Religion at the Crossroads of Asia

edited by Marie Lecomte-Tilouine

New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2010, 382 pages, ISBN 9788187358466

reviewed by Nayanika Mathur

This collection of essays sets itself the agenda of revisiting the hoary anthropological debate on nature and culture in a region that it describes as constituting the 'crossroads of Asia': the Himalaya. I was initially intrigued by the additional reference to 'religion' in the title but the preponderance of religious philosophy, thought and rituals in subsequent chapters explained this inclusion. The collection is divided into two parts with the first dealing, in fact, with choice concepts in Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and shamanism.

Charles Malamoud discusses the utopia of a forest hermitage as a stage of life and sacrificial rites as illustrative of the deployment of nature within Sanskrit literature. Stephane Arguillere ruminates on the concepts of nature and culture within Tibetan thought, and concludes that to posit a distinction between the two would constitute a misunderstanding of this philosophical tradition. In an expansive paper, Marc Gaborieau studies Arabic texts and Himalayan and Indian ethnographic material to draw out convergences between Hindu and Muslim conceptions of nature. In an excellent piece, Roberte Hamayon argues that the words 'nature' and 'culture' should not be taken as seriously as their actual operation within native conceptions of Siberian shamanism. Following this classical anthropological move, she concludes 'although "Nature" and "Culture" may help characterise the analytical models drawn from Siberian data, these categories are nonetheless too vague, sometimes even misleading, to account for certain aspects of native conceptions' (p.113). Her conclusion, thus, is similar to the one arrived at by Arguillere, though in a different context.

While the first part of this edited volume deals directly with the theme of the collection, the contributions are (with the exception of Hamayon) restricted to a somewhat schematic debate on nature/culture within the great traditions that they explore. It was thus with a rising sense of anticipation that I turned to the second half of the book, which claims to attend to ethnographic particularities of the Himalayan region.

The first two chapters in this section certainly lived up to expectations. The editor, Lecomte-Tilouine, kicks off with a sketch of the *janajati* movement in Nepal. Her contemporary account of the intimate relationship between claims of indigeneity and biodiversity conservation is an astute illustration of the modes through which 'nature' can be mobilised for purposes of political rights-making. Furthermore, the irony that the same ideology of conservationism that is mobilised to make claims on the state itself poses a strong threat to the traditional lives of *janajatis* is not lost on her. Ben Campbell proposes the concept of 'environmental subjectivity' to explore aspects of human-environmental relatedness. He proceeds to do so in an extremely accomplished manner by engaging with current sets of writings and ethnographic material drawn from Tamang-speaking communities in Nepal. Interpreting and connecting myths to the contemporary cultural politics of conservationism allows for a forceful argument on the limitations of the utilisation of Western concepts of nature.

These two contributions are followed by a somewhat formulaic interpretation of rites among the Mewahang Rai in Nepal by Martin Gaenszle and an undifferentiated account of Jad pastoralists' perceptions of their social world in Garhwal, India by Subhadra Channa. Claus Zoller's short account of love in the Indus Kohistan made for interesting reading but did not quite gel with the mandate of this collection. Similarly, Rachel Guidoni's piece on Tibetan relics and their 'position in nature and culture' appeared a tad forced. The two chapters on different facets of agricultural practices in Yunnan by Wilkes and Bouchery carried with them fresh ethnographic details. The final article by Chiara Letizia mulls on what makes river confluences sacred. She asks if it is the entry of, so to say, culture into nature that endows these spaces with sacredness, but concludes convincingly that this would be a specious analytical framework to adopt.

Overall, this is an enjoyable collection of essays, with each piece acting as a stand-alone contribution to aspects of a region that remain, perplexingly, understudied. I did feel, however, that more theoretically charged arguments could have been made on 'nature, culture and religion' by engaging in a fuller manner with the extant literature. As it stands, this book falls just short of pulling together an ethnographically rooted, distinctly Himalayan perspective on what remains one of the most enduring debates in the social sciences.