

Les Bergers du Fort Noir. Nomades du Ladakh (Himalaya occidental)

by Pascale Dollfus.

Nanterre: Société d'ethnologie (collection 'Haute Asie'), 2012, 343 pages, Bibliography, glossary and transliteration of names, ISBN 978-2-901161-99-8, 25 €.

Reviewed by Françoise Pommaret

The shepherds of the Black Fort. Nomads of Ladakh (Western Himalaya) is a fascinating study of a small group of people, the Kharnakpa or 'the people of the Black Fort', who today comprise thirty households and around 150 people. They pursue what can be called a nomadic lifestyle in Ladakh, in the east of the Indian state of Jammu & Kashmir, on a territory of a few hundred square kilometres near the upper reaches of the Tibetan Plateau, at altitudes that vary between 4,200m and 4,700m. Dollfus's fieldwork started in the 1990s, when the community was more numerous, and as her narrative proceeds the slow disappearance of the shepherds of the Black Fort takes shape touch by touch. This monograph, written by one of the foremost anthropologists of Ladakh, complements and enriches the works of Goldstein and Beall on nomads in Western Tibet. It is representative of the French anthropological tradition in the Himalayas, started by Corneille Jest in Dolpo, which is based on lengthy fieldwork on a specific group.

The book opens with a reflection on nomadism, the meaning of the term and its often-archaic connotation. Dollfus demonstrates that sedentary groups have become nomads due to circumstances (p. 24) and argues that 'contrary to a widespread idea, sedentarisation is not the only way to control people, to allow [for] the emergence of a dominating class linked to the hoarding of wealth, and to enable the constitution of powerful political entities' (p. 25). She also defines the word in its Ladakhi context: 'Here nomadism is not erratic, implying the total absence of residence, but seasonal migrations done in a restricted area and according to an identical rotation from one year to the other' (p. 28). Dollfus ironically describes the view of outsiders on the nomads as happily living in a fantasy world, which contradicts their stigmatisation by the sedentary populations of the Indus valley as rough, uncouth fellows. The book then moves to a historical

account of Ladakh and the examination of local stories and myths of the origin of the Kharnakpa community, who in fact seem to have originally been a sedentary people. The other chapters describe Kharnakpa religious life, including the local deities, the different practitioners, the festivals, the alliance patterns and the sense of belonging to a particular territory, which is geographically defined by constant migrations from one specific point to another at well defined periods.

Dollfus writes detailed descriptions of the different animals this community raises (yaks, sheep, goats, and a few horses), of shearing, of their residences (crude houses and black and white tents which are similarly organised), of their trading routes and exchange patterns, and of past hunting customs. These chapters demonstrate Dollfus's great sense of observation and the thoroughness of her enquiries, as well as her extensive specialised vocabulary. The attention Dollfus pays to all of the shepherds' activities and to their material life is truly remarkable; the technical terminologies concerning plants, animal husbandry, milk processing and agricultural activities are exhaustive, but so naturally woven into the narrative that they never make tedious reading. The description of the houses and black tents is down to the last rope and stone. Her matter of fact observations combined with her underlying sense of humour make for great reading, at least in French. Not only is the reader enriched with ethnographic data, but it feels like one is actually living amongst the Khanarkpa, experiencing the hardships of a pass crossing, the bite of the icing cold at dawn, and the cloths and tents being drenched in rain and slush.

One of the most striking features of the study is the constant mobility of the Kharnakpa, either through their pastures or in the course of trade, in which they exchange salt from Tibet for grains from Lahul and Zanskar. It could thus be applied as a template for all nomadic communities traversing the Himalayas and the Tibetan Plateau. Interestingly, as elsewhere, the Kharnakpa combine pastoralism, trade and agriculture at minima, essentially for fodder. The schedule of their activities comes through in the book as gruelling and in extreme climatic conditions, where caravans travel to the northern lakes for salt at -35 degrees Celsius. While men's activities are directed at the outside world, the women work equally hard in maintaining their temporary encampments and the processing of dairy products.

Dollfus consistently relates the Kharnakpa's activities to those of nomads in other parts of Ladakh, in the Tibetan Plateau and even in Iran. She also explores the differences between several groups of nomadic people established in one region and their fights over pastures (the Kharnakpa, the Changpa and the Rupshupa). Therefore, through the study of one community, Dollfus present a whole range of nomadic activities in the region. Further, the perception of territory by the Kharnakpas is described with great insight: 'To the unique, centralised and clearly demarcated territory of the sedentary people, these nomadic shepherds oppose a disjointed territory with mobile boundaries, a combination of hierarchised places and itineraries, which vary according to the seasons, and where only the valleys-providers and the mountains-markers are individualised and named; these allow them to find directions in space and measure time, hours as well as months. Their country is not a fixed space (or perceived as such) but a vast archipelago where certain islands are temporarily left out while others are favoured' (p. 274).

In the final part of the book, Dollfus depicts the drastic changes in the community that were brought on by urban migration, schooling, roads, climate change, and the demands of the new economic market with the advent of pashmina goat-rearing. She shows how the processes of urban migration and development initiated by a centralised state, which recur throughout the Himalaya, totally transform the life of the Kharnakpa, contributing to the disappearance of local knowledge, terminologies and trading habits, and ultimately leading to the disappearance of the community itself. Dollfus writes, 'In less than 15 years, 80% of the population has given up nomadic life to settle in the Indus valley' (p. 16), and that although 'the territory that they know is broadening, it gets atomised and loses its coherence. Because intermediary places are no more resting places, their names and qualities are forgotten. No longer practised on a daily basis, the geographical knowledge of the elders, their way of understanding space and time, the names of places, plants and rocks are lost' (p. 269).

Dollfus's book gives evidence of intensive research work, not only in the field but also in specialised literatures (botanical, zoological, technical) that give the most accurate descriptions. She also provides, to the extent that this is possible, the equivalent of Ladakhi terms in classical Tibetan. The only major shortcoming of this book is, in the eyes of this

reviewer, the lack of a general yet relatively detailed map of the Kharnak region, which would allow the reader to follow the constant migrations of the people. This absence of a proper map is surprising because Dollfus has a keen interest in geography and is very precise when it comes to naming the different camps and places of Kharnak territory. This book goes well beyond the circle of scholars interested in Ladakh, and is much more than a monograph on one group of people and their way of life. It questions the very terminology relating to nomads and questions their position vis-à-vis sedentary people not only in Ladakh, but also in the Tibetan plateau. Apart from its numerous academic qualities, this work, enriched by photos, stands out because it is truly a work of memory for the Kharnakpas, which will keep their way of life alive, even when all the shepherds have left the Black Fort.