

## Conference panel on 'New Histories of the Himalaya' organised by Catherine Warner and Sara Shneiderman, Philadelphia, 27-31 March 2014

### Arik Moran

The Association for Asian Studies' Annual Convention, held at Philadelphia on 27-31 March 2014, hosted two panels on 'New Histories of the Himalaya', organised by Catherine Warner of Washington State University with the support of Sara Shneiderman from Yale. Thematically divided between the role of the state in mountain polities and questions of belonging and identity, the panels brought together specialists working on both sides of the Atlantic for a series of fruitful discussions. The first panel, 'The State in New Histories of the Himalaya' (28 March), examined the role of state institutions in disparate geographical settings through an even distribution of papers on the mountain chain's impact on relations between India, China and Tibet on the one hand, and its effects on implementations and conceptualisations of sovereignty in the quintessential Himalayan state of Nepal on the other.

Enquiring into the practice and meanings attached to Tibetan scarf (*khatag*) exchanges within and outside of the Tibetan world, Emma Martin surveyed the intricacies of the tradition in the plateau on the basis of Tibetan historical texts, and proceeded to outline its adoption, alteration and sanctioning as a central component in Lhasa-Calcutta relations upon the thirteenth Dalai Lama's flight into exile in British India. The complexity of the different types of *khatags* – which was made palpable through the circulation of actual specimens among panel attendants – and the variances in their usage according to the rank of persons involved in their exchange showed how an established tradition was fused with the Mughal-derived diplomatic protocols of British India to create a new 'diplomatic grammar' along the Anglo-Tibetan frontier. Addressing the consequences of Partition for Himalayan borderlands, Bérénice Guyot-Richard discussed the impact of 'competitive development' by China and India on the Arunachal Pradesh boundary. Beginning with the reconfiguration of political boundaries in 1947 and bolstered by significant state interventions in the wake of the Sino-Indian War (1962), the region became a bone

of contention between Delhi and Beijing, with both parties allocating prodigious budgets to the task of cementing influence along the frontier. For residents of the area, however, the geopolitical interests guiding state policies afforded new ways to improve standards of living in the contested border zone, as Indian initiatives (e.g., road networks, increased military presence) and Chinese countermeasures (improved infrastructure, the establishment of schools along the frontier) were exploited in a markedly eclectic manner. The improved access to commercial and political centres in the subcontinent thus served to empower villagers within India, while the same persons could still send their children to the Chinese schools across the border (which were assessed as being better) on a daily basis. These advantages notwithstanding, the overall conditions along the frontier remain far from ideal, placing Arunachalis in a continually volatile state vis-à-vis the powers along their borders.

This multiplicity of sources of authority was not peculiar to the Sino-Indian border, having persisted throughout the Himalaya. Closely examining the strata of authority and competing notions of sovereignty in nineteenth century-Nepal, Michael Bernardo challenged the claims made for the kingdom's alleged 'exception' as a rare example of an uncolonised country (a claim implicitly enforced by Catherine Warner's presentation, summarised below). Adopting the vantage point of World History, Bernardo examined territorial disputes between Kathmandu and British India to argue for a 'connected history' of the mountain-plains boundary, which was sustained by differing, and often conflicting, conceptions of sovereignty in the autonomous pockets that dotted the Nepali landscape. The tenacity of local political languages, which remained acutely relevant throughout these pockets long after the Shah 'unification', underlined the depth of fragmentation within seemingly robust state structures. These observations are far from parochial, their salience urging further questioning of the as yet insufficiently explored methods, institutions and adaptations of Maithili culture among the Mallas, a substantial lacuna right at the heart of the current, Kathmandu-centred historiography of Nepal. The extent to which the centre actually controlled its remoter dominions notwithstanding, claiming a place at the helm of the Nepali state was persistently conditioned by inter-familial dynamics among the country's elite, a point stressed by Sanjog Rupakheti. Revisiting the 1855 martial alliance that facilitated the transition to the Rana Regime,

Rupakheti presented archival evidence that highlighted tensions between private households and secular officials in the state's transition to a new power regime. In investigating the interplay of dynastic privileges with emergent state institutions, a case was made for the importance of gender and patriarchy as key axes in the socio-political order of early Rana Nepal. The state, according to this analysis, emerges from a renegotiation of gendered power relations as influenced by anterior notions of dynastic privilege, and not from Weberian paradigms of a purely professional secular administration as the foundation of modern nation-states. Taken together, the four papers opened a comparative perspective that was aptly assessed by panel chair Chitrakleha Zutshi, and which paved the way to several important exchanges in the succeeding days of the conference.

Shifting from mechanisms of state to the impact of its institutions on socio-cultural formations, the 'Identities and Belonging in New Histories of the Himalaya' panel (31 March) featured papers with close regional foci, from Assam through Nepal to Kumaon and Himachal Pradesh. In a sensitive exploration of the 'mixed race' progeny of Nepali and Khasi women with British personnel in Assamese tea plantations, *Jayeeta Sharma* delineated shifts in the values associated with ethnic categories. Dexterously combining archival data with contemporary interviews with descendants of these relations, Sharma presented the ways in which the institutions that provided education for 'mixed race' children from the plantations – most pertinently, what is today known as 'Dr. Graham's Homes' – inevitably led to their segregation and inadvertent subsumption under Imperial categories of 'Asian' and 'non-Asian'. What was perceived as shameful during the Raj, however, becomes a matter of pride in today's multi-cultural Britain, where the singular matrilineal heritage of these migrant labourers' descendants emerges as a central element in life story narratives. The lot of women in Himalayan history was subjected to additional scrutiny in Catherine Warner's presentation on a certain 'Hindu woman of the city' in 1830s Kathmandu. Through a close reading of archival sources within the framework of agency, gender and class relations alongside insights from Nepali literature, there emerged a fascinating depiction of the vicissitudes faced by subalterns in the bustling Himalayan metropolis. Tracing debates over a certain 'woman of the bazaar' (whose identity remains unresolved despite numerous references in the archives) and her liaisons, the Kathmandu Durbar's attempts at exerting its authority

while accounting for the reservations (dictates?) of the British Residency revealed a dynamic urban setting in which foreigners, locals and political powers negotiated policies based on competing agendas suggestive of profound connections between the supposedly isolated capital and subaltern groups from India.

Sustaining the emphasis on stories as a means for engaging with the past, Sanjay Joshi explored the different types of 'belonging' (affective, possessive or other) at play in early British Kumaon. Charged with the administration of a 'non-regulated' province for over 30 years, Gordon Ramsay's largely autocratic rule left a legacy that is reflective of the fluctuations of British Indian history. Joshi persuasively proposed that the flow between person and place had more to offer than mere geo-affectivity, the almost unbounded mandate Ramsay held having facilitated a paternalistic rule that efficiently answered immediate concerns among his subjects and that was vastly reduced with the Kumaoni assumption of regulated status after his departure. Despite its unwieldy nature, Ramsay's rule seems to have been permeated with a sense of obligation that derived from affective belonging, the extent of his pioneering successes being paradoxically lost in the legalistically more liberal, yet heavily bureaucratized government of his successors. Farther west, Arik Moran examined the impact of the Anglo-Gorkha War (1814-16) on the formulation of regional identities in today's Himachal Pradesh. Presenting the common version of the war in Himachali historiography, which relies on a juxtaposition of 'barbaric Gorkhas' with 'soil-born' (*bhumika*) rulers personified by the Raja of Kangra, Moran addressed divergences in parallel narratives from local dynastic chronicles and archival records. Although broadly consistent with factual developments in the region, these variant readings of history belied deep affinities between the conquerors from Nepal and their subjects, the differences between the parties being craftily construed by recourse to multiple registers of identity that include imperial (Indo-Persian), North Indian (Rajput) and distinctly local conceptualisations of kingship.

In a lucid discussion of the panel papers, chair Sara Shneiderman (Yale University) outlined the exciting new directions these opened for further research and their importance for substantiating the links between historians and anthropologists of the region. The conversations that ensued addressed both panels and quickly led to a questioning

of core premises underlying Himalayan Studies, such as the validity of the perceived wisdom that recurrently casts the mountains as peripheral, given the abundance of testimonies to unifying denominators in both the (Tibetanised) east and the (Khasa/South Asian) west. The ways in which such cultural unifiers were advanced through state institutions and their concomitant narratives prompted further discussion on their role in constructing, obstructing and mediating divergent notions of identity across the Himalayas. Finally, the broad perspective on diverse Himalayan settings encourages contextualised comparisons of the state's role in creating and reifying difference, an appropriate counterpoint to 'belonging'. Cross-referencing archival sources with András Höfer's study of the *Muluki Ain* (1854), for example, would help to explain the motives for certain legislative measures (e.g., Warner's urban-based woman and Sharma's migrant-labourer workers), adding nuance to understandings of state functions in the Himalaya and opening paths for further comparative research (e.g., with related norms in Tibet and British India). These and related questions are to be addressed in a special issue of *Himalaya: The Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies* that is currently in preparation and due to be published within 18 months.