

Compte-rendu

Geoff Childs and Namgyal Choedup's *From a Trickle to a Torrent: Education, Migration, and Social Change in a Himalayan Valley of Nepal*, University of California Press, 2019, 230 pages, one map, 16 plates and 9 demographic tables.

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Geoff Childs and Namgyal Choedup's *From a Trickle to a Torrent: Education, Migration, and Social Change in a Himalayan Valley of Nepal* (University of California Press, 2019) analyzes the rural-urban migration from the Buddhist highland valley Nubri from the 1980s until the present. The authors state that while few children from Nubri migrated for educational purposes in the 1980s, such migration increased during the 1990s to become a virtual torrent in the 2000s. Furthermore, they maintain that "a culture of migration" has been established in the valley as it has become a normative expectation. Of a total population of 3,491 people, around a thousand (c. 30 %) have emigrated, leaving 2,452 people living in the valley. While the *de jure* population in the three largest villages in the valley increased by 10.3 % between 1997 and 2012, the *de facto* population living in the villages declined (Childs and Choedup 2019, pp. 65, 140). The authors argue that the large number of migrating children is due to new possibilities for education in exile Tibetan boarding schools and monasteries, mainly in Kathmandu, but also elsewhere in Nepal and India. Due to the drying up of migration from the Tibetan plateau, exile Tibetan institutions in Nepal and India seek to recruit Buddhist highlanders to fill the seats, while many schools and monasteries as well as individual students are supported by transnational sponsorship.

Instead of accepting general demographic rural-urban trends at face value, Childs and Choedup, relying on long-time fieldwork over two decades (since 1995) as well as anthropological demographic theory and network migration theory, analyze the strategic choices Nubri households make. They argue that parents choose new opportunities for their children due to their high evaluation of education, in expectation of future economic benefits and a rise in social status. The authors write that emigration serves to reshape village life, family management strategies, and intergenerational

relations, and they emphasize the agency of male household heads as well as their wives (*ibid.*, pp. 3, 9, 11, 15, 109). While poverty may be a motivation for moving to urban centers, the data shows that emigration reinforces economic differences already existing in Nubri, where the most affluent families are the ones that can afford to send their children to boarding schools and have the most extensive urban networks. Surprisingly, hardly any gender difference is found in the current educational recruitment of children outside the valley, a result supported by our recent collection of data from the Limi Valley in northwestern Nepal (Hovden and Havnevik, forthcoming).

The Nubri household migration strategy has unforeseen disadvantages, however, the most serious being that young adults often do not return to the villages. Although Nubri's population has *de jure* increased in recent years, a dramatic decline is expected in the near future, leading to fallow fields as fewer hands share the agricultural work. Children forget their local dialect, lack the knowledge needed in the agropastoral economy, and become ignorant of local culture and the ritual cycle, feeling on the whole alienated from village life. When farmers produce less, it is difficult to meet local taxation requirements that for centuries have supported the annual ritual cycle in the villages. In high Himalayan cosmology, a precarious balance is perceived to exist between humans and spirits inhabiting the landscape. Nonhuman entities are seen to be responsible for the prosperity and well-being of people and animals and are ritually appeased in order to achieve luck and good health and to avoid climatic calamities such as the droughts, hailstorms, and floods so damaging to high-altitude communities. A general development is a gentrification of the population, making a culturally acceptable aging difficult to attain (*ibid.*, p. 158). Similar developments are found in other highland Himalayan areas, such as in Buddhist villages in the Leh district in Ladakh studied by Karine Gagné in *Caring for Glaciers: Land, Animals, and Humanity in the Himalayas* (2018). In Ladakh, adult labor opportunities are the main cause of rural-urban migration (Gagné 2018, p. 141), but the result is similar. As only old people are left in the villages, they feel abandoned and see their way of life and cultural world disintegrate (*ibid.*, 168-191). Gagné writes that a nostalgia for the past and a belief that life was better before prevails among the elderly.

Although the emphasis of Childs and Choedrup's book is on the disintegration of village life, they also discuss the advantages of migration: young people get an array of new opportunities in the city, they become fluent in Tibetan and Nepali, and some also learn English, making it possible for them to compete in the urban labor market, which again increases the prospect of bringing future benefits to their

families. Being sent to the city for education offers the prospect of leading a life not dominated by heavy agricultural work and the rearing of children. While some girls have returned to Nubri to serve in new occupations such as health workers and teachers, others refuse even to visit their village during school vacations as they are afraid bride capture will force them back to frequent pregnancies and agricultural work.

Not only is the perceived cosmological balance affected by migration patterns and the declining population, so is the status of religious practitioners. Nubri has had age-old traditions of high-status married lamas (*ngagpas*), and since 2000 there has been mass recruitment to urban monasteries and their branches resulting in celibacy and textual Tibetan Buddhism becoming the norm, with around 50% of Nubri males involved. At the same time, the contradictory practice of accepting temporary ordination for boys has become more prevalent, as parents call back their sons to assume responsibility for the household. Currently, 36 % of males aged 15 to 24 have returned to lay life in the village. A gender disparity is seen in that former monks' seasonal work as textual reciters in Kathmandu provides cash, while disrobed nuns are disparaged upon returning and have few prospects for income. Of Nubri's nine nuns, two have been held back in the village, as has been customary, to take part in farming and to care for young and old family members (Childs and Choedup 2019, pp. 89-94).

In 2004 Geoff Childs published another excellent monograph from Nubri, titled *Tibetan Diary: From Birth to Death and Beyond in a Himalayan Valley of Nepal* (University of California Press), devoted to the entire life courses of people living in Nubri villages, while the present volume, co-written with Namgyal Choedup, studies the rapid changes in highland Nepal by documenting Nubri villagers' different life phases. Both monographs describe Nubri from the bottom up and use vignettes or citations from villagers emphasizing the authors' reliance on long-term participant observation and interviews, not only giving vivid portrayals but also offering the readers unique insight into high Himalayan village life. Although containing demographic statistics and analyses, *From a Trickle to a Torrent* is easily accessible for a non-specialist audience. The strength of Childs and Choedup's work is undoubtedly their long-term presence in the Nubri Valley and their combination of ethnographic data with migration statistics, substantiating their findings. In short, they offer "hard data" for comparative studies, as well as "thick descriptions" of villagers' motivations and interpretations. By relying on an emic definition of the household by including non-resident members, the authors tweak and nuance migration theory and give credibility to their analysis.

Nepal is one of the poorest countries in the world, with around 80 % of its 28 million people engaged in the agricultural sector. As Nepal is gradually becoming more integrated into the global post-capitalist economy, leading to increasing tourism, improved infrastructure, and televisions and cell phones becoming more common, Nepal's agropastoral communities undergo rapid change. Nubri, with its small and poor population, is particularly vulnerable to migration, climate change, and the disintegration of centuries-old ways of life. While researching and writing an eminent ethnography based on the primacy of the local, there is a danger—as is evidenced in several ethnographies from highland Nepal—of being too particular, and in *From a Trickle to a Torrent* I miss a stronger emphasis on the shift between local, national, and transnational perspectives that can illuminate processes of change affecting not only localities such as Nubri but other high-altitude communities in the global South. This is perhaps too much to ask from such a thorough, well-researched, and eloquently written book, but Himalayan ethnography in general would profit from multi-scalar analyses connecting local realities with large-scale processes as well as analyzing social change in the Himalayan highlands comparatively. *From a Trickle to a Torrent* targets a wider readership than specialists in Himalayan anthropology and Tibetan Studies, and I would not hesitate to make the volume part of my students' curriculum.

Bibliography

Gagé, Karine 2018, *Caring for Glaciers; Land, Animals, and Humanity in the Himalayas*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

