

Culture and the Environment in the Himalaya

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Culture and the Environment in the Himalaya

Edited by Arjun Guneratne. London, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2010. 238 pp. UK£ 80.00. ISBN 978-0-415-77883-1.

The essays contained in this volume, together with the introduction, share a commitment to detailed study of ecology and society in Himalayan places—though the title is somewhat misleading. First, of the 10 chapters, 7 deal with Nepal, 1 on the Limbu between Nepal and Sikkim, 2 focus on sites in Uttarakhand, and none are concerned with high Himalayan societies. This gives the book a distinctly Middle-Hills, central Himalayan emphasis: no Tibet, no Ladakh, no Bhutan, let alone sites farther east or west. Second, although Guneratne attempts to frame the volume with a robust assertion of traditional North American cultural anthropology, the more sophisticated chapters critique or rework “culture” as a useful concept from a range of positions: There is a lively theoretical debate going on here, and, by the end of the book, his framework looks outdated. Hence neither culture nor the Himalaya as a whole define this book, but the resulting work is indeed a valuable contribution to ecological anthropology in the Himalaya.

Guneratne is more successful when he invites his contributors to attend to the history of environmental anthropology in the Himalaya, and in particular to the problematic history of the Theory of Himalayan Environmental Degradation (THED; Ives and Messerli 1989; Ives 2004). This refers to the belief, promulgated in the 1970s, that unsustainable growth in central Himalayan populations caused downstream silting and flooding. In the first chapter, Metz situates THED in historical and political contexts, gives a history of its disproof, and then summarizes the

fallacies that underpin it. Linking power, epistemology, and development politics, he suggests some reasons why THED nonetheless continues to serve as a satisfying explanation for certain development actors, and he argues forcefully for critical realism as a unifying theoretical basis for both hard and social scientists in a politically charged, environmentally sensitive domain.

Russell (Chapter 3) and Nightingale (Chapter 4) both use the imposition of THED as a backdrop to evoke and analyze local constructions of the forest. Russell draws on ethnographic fieldwork to ask whether, for the Yakkha, there has been a significant change in “forest”—and what value “forest” has for them. Nightingale, in turn, applies political ecology to expose the layered, contested, and shifting forest in Mugu, where power, skill, gender, and caste intersect community forest user programs.

Subba (Chapter 6) provides a rich inventory of Limbu terms and practices for, and in, the environment but draws back from the challenges to “culture” and to ethnicity that simmer under several of the other chapters.

Cameron (Chapter 2) surveys the attitudes of Āyurvedic practitioners around the Kathmandu Valley toward the environment; this author asserts an emotional bond between Āyurveda students and the environment from which they draw their materials. Rademacher (Chapter 9), also writing about the Kathmandu Valley, draws on the writings, work, and unanticipated audiences of the activist Huta Ram Vaidya to show how his remorseful narrative of the pollution and exploitation of the Bagmati River constructs an ecotopian vision of social and natural harmony.

Both Aggarwal (Chapter 7) and Mawdsley (Chapter 9) examine the intersection of religion and ecology; but where Aggarwal, like Cameron, presumes a constructive relationship, Mawdsley carefully documents the

exploitation of that same presumption between fundamentalist Hindu politicians seeking votes and local villages struggling for survival as the waters rise behind the Narmada Dam.

Fortier (Chapter 5) returns to the question of the contested ecosocial forest, here understood as domestic dwelling space by the Raute who live as foragers and kin with and within it, but as civilizable wilderness by the agriculturalist Nepali speakers outside. Finally Campbell (Chapter 10) argues from Tamang ecological and medical practices that “culture” or “ethnicity” are better taken as secondary categories. Rather than taking the environment as mediated through cultural models, or the converse materialist position, he argues that beginning with a dualist separation of culture and the environment leads eventually to arrogant ideologies such as THED.

The book as a whole does hang together well, though perhaps not for the reasons Guneratne intended. Each chapter carries its weight as a source of distinct ethnographic data. While there is some variation in sophistication, the sharper chapters take advantage of the shared questions of power, misguided planning, and the social perception of the environment to advance our theoretical toolkit well beyond the modest ambitions set out in the introduction.

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