

Volume 30

Number 1 *Development in Tibet: Land, Labor and
Social Policy in a Context of Rapid Transition No. 1 &
2*

Article 24

October 2011

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Archaeological Research and Ethno-Historical
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with Judith Pettigrew, Yarjung Kromcha Tamu and
Mark Turin; Reviewed by Don Messerschmidt

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Recommended Citation

Messerschmidt, Don (2011) "Grounded Knowledge/Walking Land: Archaeological Research and Ethno-Historical Identity in Central Nepal by Christopher Evans with Judith Pettigrew, Yarjung Kromcha Tamu and Mark Turin; Reviewed by Don Messerschmidt," *Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 30: No. 1, Article 24. Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol30/iss1/24>

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recent occurrences into their manuscript.

In sum, Riaz and Basu have written a clear and engaging book. As a political history of modern Nepal, the book is remarkable in that it is compact while also offering considerable detail in its review of key trends. The book would work well in undergraduate classes on the politics of developing countries or South Asia, and will also serve as a convenient reference work for scholars.

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GROUNDING KNOWLEDGE/ WALKING LAND: ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH AND ETHNO-HISTORICAL IDENTITY IN CENTRAL NEPAL

BY CHRISTOPHER EVANS WITH JUDITH
PETTIGREW, YARJUNG KROMCHA TAMU
AND MARK TURIN

University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK: McDonald
Institute Monograph, McDonald Institute for Archaeological
Research, 2009. xii + 211pp., illustrated. ISBN: 978-1-
902937-50-2.

REVIEWED BY DON MESSERSCHMIDT

Until recently, knowledge and understanding of the archaeology and anthropology of ancient central Nepal has been shrouded in mystery as dense as the clouds that cover the high hills during the monsoon. Virtually no ethno-archaeological/historical studies have been done on ethnic origins in the hills until recent research conducted at a remote site in the high forest below the Annapurna snow peaks northeast of Pokhara. The result is *Grounding Knowledge/Walking Land*.

The book is remarkable both for what it is, what it isn't, and how it was researched and written. On the one hand, it is a long awaited study in Nepalese pre-history, focused on a set of ruins and storied places of cultural-historic and religious significance in the upper mid-hills. But it is not a fully finished product, for the researchers were seriously constrained by the political circumstances (insurgency)

in Nepal during the decade of their work. It is unique for how it was created, by a multidisciplinary team representing archaeology, ethnography, linguistics, shamanism, and social activism.

The focal point is a set of unique ruins called Kohla, a large ancient site in the high forest. Kohla is over 700 years old and is considered by scientists and ethnic Gurungs to be the earliest known village of the Gurung (or Tamu-mai) ancestors. (Note that many Gurungs prefer to call themselves by their indigenous name *Tamu* (plural *Tamu-mai*), and that both terms are used interchangeably here.)

The study of these ancient Gurung/Tamu ruins was a collaborative venture involving several institutions and individuals, including researchers from the University of Cambridge (UK) led by archaeologist Christopher Evans; members of the Tamu Pye Lhu Sangh, an ethnic religious and socio-cultural organization headquartered in Pokhara, including the indigenous shaman Yarjung Kromchai Tamu¹; the Irish anthropologist and Tamu specialist Judith Pettigrew; and the British linguist and expert on ethnic languages of Nepal Mark Turin. This team was also joined in various tasks by several other scholars.

The study is "concerned with histories and journeys, and with land and identities..." and Evans notes that "it could be a story of high adventure, relating the discovery of Himalayan ruins and particularly the extraordinary site of Kohla..." or it "could equally have a quality of historical inspired myth."

By tradition, Kohla predates Gurung settlements across the Himalayan foothills by hundreds of years. It is "reported to be the last place that the Tamu-mai/Gurung of central Nepal lived collectively together as a people (before dispersing to villages at lower elevations)." Dates of occupation are estimated between 1000 and 1300 AD.

Kohla and vicinity, and routes to and from the site, include several places of great significance in Gurung/Tamu myth and legend, particularly associated with the spirit journey of traditional Gurung shamans known as *pajyu*. This journey is related and recited by the shaman in the form of sacred oral texts called *pye*. *Grounding Knowledge/Walking Land* includes a translation of the lengthy *Lemakō Rōh Pye*, recited from memory by the shamans during the death ritual (*pye laba*). The traditional death rites are among Tamu society's most richly significant social events. The oral text speaks of many ancient places, linking past with present, myth with reality, and the spirit world with the living.

The *Lemakō Rōh Pye* is also significant for relating the origins of both humans and animals, as well as the names of places associated with Kohla, which figures prominently in stories about the arrival of the Tamu ancestors centuries ago out of Tibet and into Nepal's central highlands. It also tells of a series of events that occurred in and around Kohla in that early time.

While the study concentrates on Kohla, the researchers also investigated several other sites revealed in the oral texts. Some of them appear to be most closely associated with the

contemporary village of Yangjakot southwest of Kohla, and others are closer to Kohla.

The large Kohla site itself is located at an elevation of 3200 m. (10,500 ft) above sea level, consists of 55 buildings and extends over 6.5 ha. (16 acres or 0.03 sq. mi.). The structures are described in some detail. The site is known (from the ritual text) as *Kohla Sō Pre*, or “Kohla of the Three Parts” and, indeed, it was found to have three distinct “quarters”— east, central and west, with nine, forty, and six structures, respectively. Of these three parts, “The central is by far the most dense and village-like, and there is evidence of formalized public space. By comparison, the eastern and western sectors can only be considered to be “hamlet-like” in scale. The central and eastern portions are separated by a stream, whose channel flows down through a deep erosion gully; the eastern portion lies on a slight scarp overlooking the central settlement.”¹

Two of the largest and best preserved of the edifices, identified as Structures 5 and 6, are located in the western “hamlet” and are described by the archaeologist as “quite extraordinary” though “relatively small.” Their sizes are 130.3 square meters (1,402.5 sq.ft) and 39 square meters (420 sq.ft), respectively. Structure 5, attributed as being “the palace of the Ghale Raja, is among the largest in the settlement and certainly has the most elaborate architectural details.” (Ghale is a clan of the Gurung/Tamu-mai.) Structure 6 is described as “the highest building on the site, and was definitely two-storied.”

The so-called “palace” is of special significance to the Tamu, for whom part of the Kohla study involved a search for evidence of ancient ethnic Tamu “kingdoms” or “chiefdoms.” A locally popular story is told in the book about an incident of legendary trickery that led to the demise of the last Ghale Raja or “king” some centuries ago.²

Among other findings at Kohla are a number of ritual features including several cists (capstones), numerous pottery shards, and some worked stone implements.

1. This reviewer was the first Westerner and first anthropologist to have visited the site of Kohla, in 1972. My Gurung informants called it “Khhoh.” I published a brief description of the site in my 1976 article, “Ecological change and adaptation among the Gurungs of the Nepal Himalaya” (*Human Ecology* v.4, pp.167-85, esp. p.172, fn.10). While at the site, my companions from two villages east of Kohla and representing clans from both of the Gurung’s endogamous moieties, Sōgi and Kugi (Nep. Charjat and Sohrajat), informed me that the small hamlet on the east side of Khhol/Kohla was known by them and their elders as home to the village blacksmiths (Gurung clansmen?). Reacting to this, Christopher Evans, in *Grounding Knowledge* (page 96), writes that this observation has resulted in “raising the spectre of caste-based distinctions”—a sensitive issue among the Tamu-mai. This is an unfortunate misinterpretation of what I wrote, especially in light of contentiousness about alleged status (i.e., “caste”-like) distinctions within Gurung society. Had Evans inquired directly with me about it earlier, I would have set the record straight immediately—that there was no mention, implied or otherwise, of “caste” distinctions high or low by my informants, nor in my brief description of the site. I have responded to his misrepresentation of my observations directly to Evans subsequent to the publication of the book.

2. The legend is discussed in D. Messerschmidt, *The Gurungs of Nepal: Conflict and Change in a Village Society* (Warminster, UK: Aris & Phillips, 1976).

The entire site of Kohla is a natural amphitheater, a bowl-like space backed by a forested ridge and fronted (to the south) by a steep open slope dropping down into the valleys below. High up on the ridge about a kilometer north of Kohla is an interesting site identified (in legend) as a horse racing ground. Another site known as a “cave of nuns” is located about two kilometers northeast of Kohla. It is probably of more recent origin, and may have served as a small meditation site for female Gurung mendicants, or “nuns.” Strangely missing, or at least not discovered even after extensive searching, is any evidence of a funeral grounds associated with Kohla.

Kohla was apparently abandoned sometime in the 14th century, around the time of disruptive historic events leading up to the so-called “Gorkha Conquest” across the Himalayan foothills. Now, only herdsman visit the site each monsoon with their cattle herds. That the Gurung/Tamu ancestors once lived in a compact community in the high Himalayan forest has great significance to their descendants. Today’s Tamu tend to evoke the “specialness” of Kohla that “relates to the quality of the ruins themselves and their setting . . . [The] site has a unique status in the Tamu-mai cultural narrative, but its density and the height to which its buildings survive also make it a “classic” ruin in the archaeological sense. “There is a genuine and obvious sense of many people having lived there in the past and, conjuring up the ethos of other great “lost cities,” nothing else seen in the [Himalayan] uplands comes close to having its qualities.” It is considered an especially sacred site to the modern Tamu-mai, as the shaman on the research team continually reminded and demonstrated to the researchers during the field studies and analyses.

The “histories and journeys . . . land and identities” aspects of the book, from which it takes its title, refer as much to the process of conducting the research as they do to what is learned about the people, their history, social organization, mythology, and sacred heritage. The fieldwork was conducted in several parts and required the researchers to engage in physically taxing expeditions to Kohla for in-depth investigation of the long abandoned site. They also conducted treks of discovery along the ancient north-south migration route, as delineated in the shaman’s oral texts.³ Thus, “Spanning deep valleys, jungles and high Himalayan snow capped passes, the fieldwork conditions were variously tough and exquisitely beautiful.”

The researchers kept detailed journals, and because it was landscape-based research, walking and writing intermeshed.

3. See J. Pettigrew, “Parallel landscapes: Ritual and political values of a shamanic soul journey,” in B. Bickel and M. Gaenzle, eds., *Himalayan Space: Cultural Horizons and Practices* (Zurich: Völkerkundemuseum, 1999). There are two other important publications about Kohla: J. Pettigrew and Y. Tamu, “The Kohla Project: Studying the past with the Tamu-mai,” *Studies in Nepali History and Society* 4: 327-364 (1999); and M. Temple, “The ruins of an early Gurung settlement,” *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* 7: 43-48 (1993). And on Gurung/Tamu ethno-history, identity, and shamanism see J. Pettigrew, *Shamanic Dialogue: History, Representation and Landscape in Nepal*, unpublished PhD Dissertation (University of Cambridge, UK, 1995).

The archaeologist Evans was concerned, however, that “It [was] difficult to know how, or even whether, to incorporate such raw observations” in the formal analysis. This difficulty gave rise to discomfort between the researchers in their individual professional roles, both while collecting raw data and in the interpretation of those data.

Pettigrew, the ethnographer, has described the great significance of involving several Western professionals (along with the local shaman) on site in the research. “The Kohla Project is an example of a successful multi-disciplinary collaboration between [Tamu] community activists, foreign and Nepali archaeologists, a social anthropologist, and a linguistic anthropologist. Multi-agency and professional-activist collaborations along these lines are relatively rare and have not previously taken place in Nepal.”

Pettigrew has also pointed out that the research findings have a lot to do with who the Tamu are, for it prompted an intense re-examination of their history and social order on many levels, and has also allowed them to come to terms with a rich ancestral past. These aspects of the study were combined with ambitions to rejuvenate their language, reclaim their culture, deal with the disturbing historical effects of Hinduization—especially issues of “caste”-like social status discrimination between the two sets of clans. Because there are few documentary sources, this study of Kohla and of the shamanic and legendary evidence that it reveals helps the Tamu/Gurung reexamine and confirm their identity as a group.

“The project has undoubtedly made a unique contribution to the study of Tamu ethno-history as the detailed archaeological findings of this book clearly attest,” says Pettigrew. She goes on to allude to the difficulties of such collaborative work, to “tensions both in the fieldwork and in the production of the text [the book], as the project was overwhelmingly archaeological oriented, which at times diminished the more implicit achievements of ethnographic enquiry.” She concludes that “anthropology was intrinsic to

the development success of the work as it was dependent on the networks, linkages, cultural understandings, insights and brokerage skills that developed out of in-depth and long-term ethnography.” In short, without the anthropological and linguistic inputs, the archaeological aspects would be far less significant and the historic ethnic Tamu/Gurung identity less meaningful.

The book has five chapters: (1) *Introduction–Journeys and Knowledges* (Evans), (2) *Anthropology and Shamanic Considerations* (Pettigrew, Tamu and Turin), (3) *A Trailside Archaeology–Survey Results* (Evans *et al*), (4) *Approaching Kohla* (Evans *et al*), and (5) *Landscape, Histories and Narrative Trails* (Evans). There are also many photographs, maps, and tables. Unfortunately, the book lacks an index, which is sorely needed in a monograph of this importance, magnitude, and detail. As a result, navigating the book in search of specific topics is difficult.

Grounding Knowledge/Walking Land is a unique and worthy sourcebook for Himalayan area scholars and academics and for interested non-academic readers, alike. It has important historical and ethnographic ramifications not only for the Gurung/Tamu ethnic community, but also for other hill ethnic groups all across Nepal. It is clearly a significant contribution to our understanding of the history and pre-history of the Nepal hills and, more broadly, of the greater Himalayan region.

Don Messerschmidt, PhD, is an applied anthropologist with many years of experience with community forestry and development in the Himalayas. He is also a writer/editor associated with ECS Nepal magazine (Kathmandu), and has published many articles and several books. His latest book is Big Dogs of Tibet and the Himalayas: A Personal Journey (2010). He can be contacted at dmesserschmidt@gmail.com.