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## Book review of 'Love and Honor in the Himalayas: Coming to Know Another Culture' by Ernestine McHugh

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migration to urban areas and abroad for work. Today I am often asked by rural Nepalis if I could arrange work for them in America — something unheard of twenty years ago. Many families make great sacrifices for the education of their sons. While well-to-do families pay for private education for their children, the poor are at the mercy of the public schools for their sons, and their daughters continue to work at home. Although the well-off are much wealthier than when I first came to Nepal in 1969, the situation of the poor is unchanged and there are many more poor today.

Either of the first two of these volumes could have been written by a *bedeshi* (foreigner), but the third one could not. Basnyat's insights from his many years of work experience cannot be obtained by the practice of rural development tourism, so common among expatriate experts who lack grass-roots experience.

None of these books demonstrate significant benefit from foreign aid as practiced today. As agricultural economist John Mellor argued in a recent talk presented to APROS in Kathmandu, foreign aid has been ineffective in reducing poverty because it has focussed on too many unrelated projects, based on donors' political needs. Experiences of other countries who have reduced poverty suggests emphasizing agricultural inputs throughout the entire country, with necessary infrastructure development. This would allow commercialization of agriculture and stimulate spending in rural areas to retain people there, instead of their fleeing to urban centers. There are many other reasons why foreign aid has been ineffective, which anyone working in economic development knows all too well.

Needs for long term change, as I see it, include: decentralizing the economic development process to reflect the local wisdom and sensibility the second two volumes describes; promoting transparency of actions and resource flows so people are not kept hidden and can respond appropriately; finally, transforming the education system so that publicly funded schools meet the needs of the people and are the showcase of the country.

Some development people like large surveys that produce graphs and tables; Others like to read about small area analyses or about individual ideas and beliefs; fewer want to discover what went wrong with the development interventions. Successful projects need all three perspectives. To guide change, the goal of equitable economic development must be merged with local beliefs and knowledge to create advances that are monitored for progress and modified if necessary. This trilogy: a broad-based survey, an in-depth look at one small area, and an assessment of interventions present an important views of that process. If carried out appropriately to stimulate equitable economic growth, a truly enlightened development will do the most to improve the health of the population.

Stephen Bezruchka, Seattle, Washington

### **Love and Honor in the Himalayas: Coming to Know Another Culture**

Ernestine McHugh, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001 180 pp. 9 black and white illustrations.

Can one understand life by looking at death and death rituals? Ernestine McHugh in this book successfully convinces that yes we can. Ignited by the intellectual passion of Gregory Beteson, and nurtured by the friendship of Bhuvan Lal Joshi in UC Santa Cruz, the author sets out to Nepal to look at death rituals and explore how they reflect social life and personal experience. Well, death actually follows her closely in every step of the way. Her own mother was dead when she was 14. She herself comes to near-death experiences several times in the remote mountain villages. Her best friends die one after another. Gregory and Bhuvan Lal are dead in Santa Cruz when she is in Nepal. One fine morning, the author discovers that her first host in Kathmandu, an American women in her 40s, is found dead in her room. Lalita, the women who adopted her as a daughter in the Gurung village, also dies of cancer at the end. Author also witnesses the death of a young woman in the Gurung village. Dharma Mitra her spiritual companion and the founder of Buddha Vihar in Pokhara also dies of cancer. The author is the witness behind these dead persons and their stories and accepts the inevitable reality of loss.

The book is about pain and hope, confusion and coming to terms. Learning to become a proper daughter of a traditional village chief is another thread of authors' story. Being adapted into a complex network of families, she has to navigate between being a daughter in one minute, a child in another, a sister in another second and a foreigner, in yet another. This is the very familial and warm window from which she observes the trenches of patriarchy lurking in the name of honor, hierarchy, status, and order. All around her, women's position is dangerously unstable. Even when women have wealth and status as her ritual mother Lalita has, that can actually bring them down because she is at odds with patriarchal order. Such are the agonies of women, as if they have more wealth in not having it, they have a better life in not choosing it. Of course, it is an all too familiar a story but to Ernestine's credit, it is written with magnificent prose and poise.

Indeed, it was an honor to read this book which captivated me, a book not about the abominable yeti but about life in a Gurung village, west of Pokhara. This village community somewhere beneath the moist and misty Annapurna, comes to us in its slow motion captured with the lucidity of observation and the power of words. Like the bends in ukali (uphill) and orali (downhill) in Nepali mountains, the story envelopes us up and down in a full swing. Yet it is not a tale about Himalayan romance or adventure but a very soul-searching enterprise for life of an itinerant seeker. The author encounters sorrows and loss more than what others often find the innocent romanticism of Shan-gri-la. More than orientalist happy faces and miracles, she unearths the structures of social relations that are half-soft and half-hard, partly acceptable and partly not. Nor does this book bore you with the banality of kinship-based ethnography, although the book revolves around a very complex network of relations spread across more than half-a-dozen families. The book is about a deeply ambivalent relationship between a motherless and homeless anthropologist and a Nepali Gurung mother who was more than willing to adopt her as a daughter in a ritualized kinship. As they find out both of them certainly did not know what they had bargained for.

Let me also reflect upon this book as a native Nepali. I would say, the book is a *Dukhako ko yatra* (pilgrimage of sorrows). From a Nepali point of view, the book is more about the author and her trail of karma, which follows her all the way to Kathmandu, Pokhara, Muktinath and the Gurung village. To my delight, the book was not another American anthropologist trying to know the Himalayan culture in the most authentic way. Instead, here was an anthropologist who was coming to terms with herself and was being so very present and alive throughout the book. Nepal was a mirror for her to look at herself. It seems to me, she actually found a path at the end, however negotiated, and however fractured. She found life in strange places. She saw the blood dripping out of a sacrificed buffalo. But it was not a purposeless killing. For a supposedly Buddhist Gurungs, "the blood protected households and the body sustained the people." Everywhere there was negotiation between what is supposed to be what really is. She saw innocent girls given away in marriages. As a dutiful daughter, she carried a bag-full of stinky venison, pot-full of water and loads of fodder and firewood. But unlike other women in the village, she occasionally ran away from the family and took shelter in the roadside bazaars. However, as much as she ran away, she kept on coming back.

The author duly ponders, why did she keep on coming back? The book is also an apt commentary on anthropological selves. Can foreign anthropologists find a primary home or at least a second home among families in the do called field-work site? What if the visitor does not really belong to a family or a home, back home? How desperate is the need for a home, a sense of belonging? Even when you thought you got that home, how fragile indeed are its roots? Ernestine brings the agony being in this in-between space. The more she wants it, the farther it slips away from her. "I belonged and I did not. I was home and I was not.... Though I felt withdrawn, I stubbornly clung to the village."

The book is a must read for those who are not only sentimental but compassionate about Nepali lives and cultures. It is a new genre in Nepali ethnography—subtle, self-reflective, clear and not very pretentious to represent anyone. I for one would like to read more of such ethnographic stories.

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