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Book review of 'Himalayan Households: Tamang Demography and Domestic Processes' by Tom Fricke

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Book Reviews

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Himalayan Households: Tamang Demography and Domestic Processes. Tom Fricke. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994. Pp. xiv + 243, 2 Appendices, Glossary, Bibliography, Index.

Himalayan Households represents the outcome of Fricke's 1984 dissertation, entitled "And Another to Plough the Fields...Economy, Demography, and the Household in a Tamang Village of North Central Nepal" (see *Himalayan Research Bulletin* V.2/3:39). The 1986 edition of *Himalayan Households* also has been made available through Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press (see *Himalayan Research Bulletin* V.7/2&3:13-14). The current edition has added an epilogue entitled "Timling & Demographic Theory Revisited." Fricke's primary argument relates to the question of Tamang population expansion in the mountainous environs of the Himalayas. He maintains that several factors affect population adaptation to the environment, including 1) the annual subsistence cycle; 2) Tamang fertility patterns; and 3) how Tamang households grow and splinter over the generations. Generally, Fricke asserts that the fertility, subsistence, and household styles which were adaptive for the last fifteen generations have now become maladaptive given current limited opportunities for territorial expansion.

Fricke's study is based on quantitative surveys conducted from June through December 1981 in the Tamang inhabited village of Timling and in a couple of surrounding hamlets. Given the short fieldwork period, Fricke relied on quantitative data collection, including a Marriage and Fertility History with 150 women, a life history survey with 50 men, and a socioeconomic survey of 30 households. Fricke's elaboration of data collection is helpful, though readers would benefit from an appendix delineating actual questions and a summary

of raw data. For example, it was unclear whether dairy sales played a role in local or long distance trade networks. Also, Fricke mentions that these Tamang were involved in the salt trade (p. 61 and 186) yet does not elaborate on the role of such trade in demographic processes. Is it possible that marital partners experienced less time together because of long distance trade sojourns? In general, presentation of data on land holdings, income, and other socioeconomic benchmarks was helpful for comparative purposes.

The most troubling dimension of the book comes from Fricke's thesis itself. He argues that population increases have reached a saturation point given current technologies and behaviors, and that population pressures will create problems for the Tamang community. While this point is well made, it nevertheless adds little insight to the demographic dilemma since overpopulation occurs throughout Nepal. Another problem is that Tamang population increases (1.2%) fall below that of general population increases in Nepal (2.1%). One might argue that, contrarily, Tamang strategically perpetuate a lower population increase as one adaptation to environmental constraints. Regardless of the direction of the argument, the question of population increase and adaptation is an important one and Fricke's research provides ample discussion of the intricacies of this demographic challenge.

Looking specifically at the main strategies which affect population expansion, he stresses that the economy is geared toward subsistence, not a market. Further, the Tamang in Fricke's study show no signs of

severe malnutrition, landlessness, social asymmetry, or livestock deficits. However, surplus land and leisure time are decreasing and the margins between poverty and subsistence have become increasingly minute. His implication is that although this Tamang population has been able to use their current subsistence strategies without ecological problems, they cannot afford a 1.2% population increase in the future unless there is some concomitant change in subsistence strategies.

While the idea of the "subsistence" economy was prevalent in previous decades, the idea has lost credibility recently. Fricke, in fact, mentions many facets of Tamang economy which are indicators of an exchange-based society. He discusses the existence in Timling of labor gifting, exchange labor, *jajmāni* relations, brideservice, daily labor, wage labor, government Gurkha service, migration, debt labor, and indigenous loan systems, all of which indicate a very complex exchange system rather than a simple subsistence economy (p.165-68). Another problem related to notions of subsistence is the tendency to overgeneralize about economic practices. For example, Fricke's discussion of subsistence activities could benefit from more specific data about women's work. A more detailed analysis of women's work, or time-on-task for various activities, might inform the reader about the potential conflicts between fertility and a woman's labor commitments.

The second issue to which Fricke devotes attention is that of how fertility is expressed in the Tamang demographic profile. He finds fertility rates to be notably low, births to be spaced slightly wider apart in time than is common for Nepalese women, and women's average age of first birth to be somewhat higher than average. To account for this situation, he suggests that since lactation periods are exceptionally long and that men migrate out of the region regularly, these factors slow women's chances of becoming pregnant. While these may be contributing factors, I did not find these alone to be convincing reasons. First, long lactation and periodic migration are characteristic of householders in greater Nepal. Something else must

account for the difference in fertility rates between Timling and greater Nepal. Second, Fricke neglects to consider other factors which might contribute to differential fertility rates. Heavy workloads for women, amenorrhoea, sterilization from previous vaginal infections, endemic parasitic infection, and spirit possession are other factors which commonly reduce the chance of pregnancy of women in Nepal. Although a fuller examination of pregnancy related factors is not central to the analysis, consideration of lactation and migration provides a helpful starting point for understanding the complexity of fertility and demographic trends.

Concluding the study of demographic trends begun during Fricke's graduate school days in the early 1980's, the epilogue assesses current conditions. Fricke revisited Timling in 1987 and conducted another set of interviews on marriage, wage labor, and other subjects. Most salient, Fricke found that Tamang men (66%) and women (46%) had entered into wage labor at least once, a much higher rate than previously noted. Another change in the six years since Fricke had done his original fieldwork was in the education process. More children were attending schools and the literacy rate had increased. A third insight Fricke gained in his 1987 period of field research was that Tamang clan ranking affected marriage choices. Ghale informants, styling themselves as "kings," in Tamang historical imagination, used a matrilineal cross-cousin marriage preference with other Ghale families.

Overall, this book is a very good source of empirical ethnographic information on the demographics of Tamang households. It compliments other more interpretive works on Tamang communities. The book usefully provides sensible generalizations which the area specialist can use for comparative purposes. This book would be most beneficial to graduate students and faculty in anthropology, demography, and geography, and to anyone interested in egalitarian societies subordinated within larger stratified societies.

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