

2000

Book review of 'Ethnizität und Nationale Integration in Nepal. Eine Untersuchung zur Politisierung der ethnischen Gruppen im modernen Nepal' by Karl Heinz Krämer

Michael Mühlich

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya>

**Recommended Citation**

Mühlich, Michael (2000) "Book review of 'Ethnizität und Nationale Integration in Nepal. Eine Untersuchung zur Politisierung der ethnischen Gruppen im modernen Nepal' by Karl Heinz Krämer," *Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 20: No. 1, Article 11.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol20/iss1/11>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the DigitalCommons@Macalester College at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact [scholarpub@macalester.edu](mailto:scholarpub@macalester.edu).

largely positive ones, theories of the relationship between imperial power and knowledge that claim that dominant knowledge is used to denigrate local knowledge do not apply in the case of Tibet (200). However, positive images are not always perpetuated in the interest of the people flattered by them. McKay acknowledges the political import of images of Tibet to the development of the Tibetan "buffer state," citing an official document as stating that there was little or no difference between propaganda and policy in the case of Tibet. The voice of the cadre became the dominant voice on Tibet, not least because it actively controlled access to Tibet and suppressed alternative perspectives (205). Although members of the cadre occasionally claimed to have observed supernatural phenomena, their accounts appeared the voice of reason, in contrast to the generally fantastic accounts of travelers and religious fanatics.

Although McKay only peripherally addresses the roles British officers played in a larger Tibetan or world history, he does an excellent job of presenting a complex picture of the status of Tibet in relation to China, Russia, the Raj. In his introduction, McKay states clearly that "Younghusband's mission did not encounter a modern nation-state as Europeans understood it" (15). Refusing a simple phrasing of the question of Tibet's independence before 1950, McKay emphasizes instead the reactions of various Tibetan rulers and institutions to Chinese, British, and Russian expressions of interest. The cadre worked hard to project the image of an independent Tibet threatened by outside interests in China and Russia, and in the process came to believe in this image. McKay writes that "Sympathy for Tibetan aspirations left The frontier cadre 'unspeakably sad' when it became obvious that Tibet was unlikely to be accepted as an independent nation-state in the post-war community of nations" (182). Perhaps the strength of McKay's portrayal of the cadre's interests and his refusal to view their actions through the lens of a larger historical or theoretical context have the same source: McKay seems to sympathize with the officers about whom he writes, and to see the failure of Britain to assert its claim on Tibet as an enabling factor in China's later "liberation" of Tibet. McKay's sympathetic portrayal of the cadre officers' lives and views is sure to inspire many more inquiries into the problematic history of colonization and anti-colonial struggle in Tibet.

Melinda Pilling  
University of Chicago

Karl-Heinz Krämer.

**Ethnizität und Nationale Integration in Nepal. Eine Untersuchung zur Politisierung der ethnischen Gruppen im modernen Nepal.** (Beiträge zur Südasiensforschung 174, Südasiens-Institut, Ph.D. thesis, Universität Heidelberg) Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 474 pp., incl. Index, 1996.

This extensive study examines the development of the Nepalese nation and the political and legal efforts and claims of its ethnic groups. Based on his twenty years of research in the history, politics and ethnology of Nepal, Karl-Heinz Krämer presents intriguing details on the historical development and conception of the Nepalese nation state that give this study a hand-book character as far as its German readership is concerned. While incorporating a vast body of literature, the author also proves that many insights and details must be gained by referring to Nepalese sources. For these reasons I would express my personal hope that the author would consider publishing his English summary in that it would probably facilitate the circulation of his book to a wider public.

In the introduction the author draws attention to the problem of self-ascription and external ascription of the status and unity of ethnic groups, referring to the work of F. Barth (*Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, 1969) and G. De Vos and L. Romanucci-Ross (*Ethnic Identity: Cultural Continuities and Change*, 1975). Accordingly, Krämer points out that the problem of nationalism was long excluded from western anthropological research because of its negative value in western societies, leaving it to be considered under the heading of "ethnicity," whereby even though ethnic identity is conceived as continually changing and not as something given or fixed. Krämer supports this view with evidence in the second chapter of his book. This perspective is

contrasted with the external ascription of ethnic groups as castes, based on principles of hierarchy, separation and division of labor according to the Hindu ideal and enforced by the ruling elites. A further external ascription is that of the anthropologist, and here, as a minor critique, Krämer does not seem to be as critical as he is of the caste perspective. The distinction drawn by W. Frank (*Ethnische Grundlagen der Siedlungsstruktur in Mittelnepal unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Tamang*, 1974) between *pahari* and *parbatiya*, referring to the Tibeto-mongolian race and the Indo-aryan race respectively, as well as the classification of the indigenous inhabitants of the Tarai as *awaliya* (from *aval*, 'fever'), on the one hand, and the inhabitants of the high Himalayas as *bhotiya*, on the other hand, to my knowledge has not previously achieved public recognition. Rather, nowadays a popular distinction is drawn between *himali*, *pahari* and *madesi*, that is, inhabitants of the high mountains, the middle mountain areas and the Tarai. Thus, one wonders about the contribution of anthropologists in creating myths of unity.

The book is roughly divided into two parts. The first five chapters show how, after the conquest of the territory of Nepal by the House of Gorkha, its rulers promulgated the *Muluki Ain*, the legal code of 1854, integrating the people into a hierarchical caste order. It proceeds to describe, how, after the downfall of Rana rule in 1951, the nation of Nepal was in search of a new identity, but met an abrupt end, however, with a coup d'état in 1960 and the resurrection of the orthodox Hindu tradition under the panchayat system. Finally the political movement of 1990 and its ongoing struggles into recent times are considered.

Concerning the *Muluki Ain*, Krämer shows that its development was carried out by a process of adaptation and assimilation, keeping in mind the ideal of the Hindu dharma, on the one hand, and the incorporation of local customs, on the other hand. The development of the legal code thus has been carried out only after a long process of consultations, regarding ethnic practices in ritual, marriage rules, and food consumption. However, as the author explains, "the right to act by different standards had to be bought with hard currency. Those peoples who pledged for recognition of their traditions and practices were ascribed a lower status than those who accepted the orthodox Hindu laws, and thus were discriminated against in various respects." (p. 30, [my translation]) The value of tolerance that is assigned to Hindu tradition, thus fell short of its reputed ideal. The strength of the author's contribution lies, however, not in examining the details of the legal code, but in showing how this code was used by the ruling Rana elite to support their monopoly of status and power. Jang Bahadur Rana laid down that the royal family had to intermarry with the Ranas, thus raising their status to that of the king while, at the same time, degrading royal power to representative functions. All high offices were in the hereditary possession of the Ranas, whereby the rule of transmission was governed by the principle of relative age. One might add here that from an orthodox Hindu perspective this principle of *kulasangha* would have been successful if the Rana rulers had not in fact preferred to transmit offices to their sons instead. As Krämer rightly states, first opposition against the regime arose among those Ranas who were excluded from access to higher ranks in the administration and who had emigrated to India (p.38). Threatened by fears of losing control of power, the Ranas never set out to evoke national feelings and instead went on to forbid all kinds of organizations, also those that were seemingly ritual in function, such as the Malami Guthi, founded by oppositional activists in the nineteen twenties. The first newspaper of oppositionals, *The Gorkhali*, was published in 1921 by a group of dissidents in Benares, among them K. P. Koirala and S. B. Devkota (p.49). In Kathmandu, however, the first group that elicited public support against the Rana regime was the Nepal Praja Parishad, founded in 1936. It is said to have held secret contacts with King Tribhuvan, and especially resented the misuse of the state's money and land by the Ranas (p.52). However, even though political opposition increased in the following decade, the Ranas, with few exceptions, kept to their view of regarding the source of rebellion not in political but only in economic terms.

The study then turns to the situation of the ethnic groups under the old order. In reviewing the ethnographic literature, Krämer draws attention to the changing attitude toward ethnic identity. In some cases, when economical benefits were near, it seems that ethnic elites tried to foster their ties with the ruling system. For example, the Thakali, who controlled the salt trade along the Gandaki valley with Tibet, in earlier times were inclined toward Buddhist practices and had patronage relations with Mustang. When they wanted to be incorporated into military service, however, the local elites, the Thakali Subbas, claimed to be of Thakuri status and introduced Hindu customs of marriage and ritual, while even forbidding the adherence to their former Buddhist religion (p. 67). Among the Limbus, cultural identity transformed into a political identity when they unified against the abolition of the *kipat* system (p.68). The unity of the Rai again is only upheld in regard to administrative prerogatives (p.73). Castes from the lower ranks of the Shudra caste-group claimed to

have ties of blood with higher dominant castes, in which sense Krämer is speaking here of “Rajputization” (p.71). Among the Gurung this tendency is equally observable: some lower groups, such as the Humli-Khyampa, claimed to be Gurung by imitating their customs, while the Gurungs themselves tried to enhance their status by imitating the customs of higher castes. One author, cited by Krämer, refers in this context to the egalitarian tendency within the caste system that would in effect be exhibited by the process of Sanskritization (G.M. Gurung, “The Process of Identification and Sanskritization: The Duras of West Nepal”, in: *Kailash* 14). Krämer does not accept this view, but recognizes that the transformation of the “ethnic landscape” through the principles laid down in the *Muluki Ain* has had its effects. On the other hand, agreeing with D.R. Dahal, he avers that in today’s situation no ethnic group in Nepal can possibly be defined as a “tribe” since what is lacking in this situation is the possession of a common territory and a unifying political institution. In sum, says Krämer, “ethnicity can be the effect of the economic and social conditions of a certain people as well as its cause.” (p.76)

I will restrict myself now to pointing out some complementary points made in Krämer’s thesis. This concerns the principle of loyalty to the king. What ever effects the transformation of the ethnic landscape in Nepal by the introduction of hierarchical values may have had, one important theme that will be obvious to the reader of his book is that any opposition against the ruling system, whether it was in Rana times or in post-Rana times, is that its success was and is dependent on respecting the value of kingship (p. 107). Thus King Tribhuvan, who supported the change toward democracy is still considered “the father of the nation” (p. 101). However, neither was B.P. Koirala successful with the first elected government of 1959, when he formerly claimed to “put two things into the Nepalese museum - the crown and the idol of Pasupatinath” (p. 96), nor was any following attempt that opposed the government able to bypass the king. The revolts of 1968, when King Mahendra was unable to govern because of severe illness, were seen as a chance for the Congress party, from its exile in India, to support the government and receive recognition (p. 141). At the height of the manifestations leading to the referendum of 1980 no one claimed to make King Birendra responsible for the defects of the panchayat system, but instead accused his administrators (p. 153). The communist politician M.M. Adhikari said: “As long as there is Pasupatinath, so long will we accept the king.” (p. 154) Finally, on the 6th of April 1990, when an estimated 200,000 people marched on the palace, the military opened fire when the crowd tried to pull down the statue of King Mahendra (p. 181). Even nowadays, when absolute monarchy is now abolished in Nepal, kingship remains strong not only in outward manifestation, but in the minds of the people.

Finally I turn to the second part of the book and its concern with the situation of the ethnic groups and their struggle for equal rights. Comprising the final five chapters, this second part of the book focuses on the development of “ethnic argumentation” in Nepal, its practice, its echoes in politics and law. It finally addresses Nepal-Indian relations and the situation of Nepalese groups in India. I will select several points related to the problem of different variants of “ethnic argumentation.”

According to Krämer, while the first underground ethnic organizations appeared in the 1950s, their number increased after 1979 when permission was given by the government to establish apolitical organizations. At that time, the first conference of Mongol peoples in Nepal was held (p.217). Only in 1990, however, was it possible to establish the Nepal Janajati Mahasangh, the Nepal Federation of Nationalities, whose aim is: “To encourage different cultures to flower since diversity, not unity, is a global fact and [thus] to make a single state of nations.” (p. 219) Further motivation was raised for their quest when the United Nations declared 1993 to be its “official year of indigenous people” (p.220). However, recent improvements, such as the invention of radio news in a diversity of local languages, were attacked by conservative politicians. While the government upholds the Hindu *dharma*, and also allows the formation of political parties on Hindu lines (such as the Sadbhavana Party), such freedom is not granted to ethnic or regional associations. The demands of the Nepal Janajati Mahasangh, says Krämer, “...are not directed toward separatism, as is often claimed by the government and ruling elites, but toward an integration of their nations as full and equal members of the Nepalese state.” (p. 224). The Nepalese government, on the other hand, continually tries to uphold the view that the vast majority of Nepalese citizens are Hindu. According to Krämer, this is a misunderstanding partly resulting from the confusion of language and culture. Most important, thus, is the aim of the organization to support a revival of the diverse local languages (p. 228). Another important aspect is Krämer’s re-evaluation of history. For example, what, from an orthodox Hindu perspective, is considered the golden age of the Licchavi period, is, from the point of view of the indigenous peoples, seen as the beginning of their slavery.

and subjugation (p. 231). In contrast to the view of the Hindu elites, who still regard "Hinduization as a means of a broader socialization for some time to come", Krämer argues that it is necessary for the ethnic groups in such a situation of conflicting claims, "... to abandon the mythical network of ethnic historiography and to reach the bottom of a verifiable approach to time and space in history." (p. 234). Only then will they be able to support their claims for equal rights, since without it the history of the country outside the Kathmandu Valley and before the immigration of Rajputs and their following from the 13th to the 16th century (A.D.) is left, with rare exceptions, unknown and thus indisputable.

One good example of such a deconstruction of Hinduized ethnic history by members of ethnic groups themselves is, according to Krämer, presented by B.P. and Y. K. Tamu (as found in the appendix to B. Pignède, *The Gurungs: A Himalayan Population of Nepal*, 1993). They show how the origin myth of some sub-clans of the Gurung (Tamu) was created in contrast to the mythical views of the majority of the Gurungs, according to which they came long ago from Western Mongolia. The genealogy of some sub-clans, who became the higher ranking clans, was, however, manipulated in the 16th century (A.D.) by a Brahman priest, then serving at the Rajput king's court of Nuwakot, north of Syangja. One possibility, so Krämer believes, is that this genealogy was manipulated by the priest in favor of these sub-clans in order to induce division and conflict into the relatively egalitarian Gurung society. The priest probably would also have transferred his own views of society, according to which there must be some hierarchy in society. In addition, this division of elites from commoners could be helpful to the aims of the Hindu rulers, which is also the view upheld by Gurungs themselves (p. 242). However, examples like this, where documents may prove a manipulation of ethnic history, would still be rare. One might quote in this connection the relatively recent contribution of H. O. Skar focusing on the Tharu ("Myths of Origin: The Janajati Movement, Local Traditions, Nationalism and Identities in Nepal," in *Contributions to Nepalese Studies* 1995 Vol. 22,1). Also worth mentioning would be the work on the history of the Sherpa, the Rai and the Mustang area.

A further example that Krämer draws attention to is the work of P. Tamang (*The Tamangs: A Face in Nepal*, 1992), who is also a representative of the Nepal Tamang Ghedung, the organization of Tamangs in Nepal. This organization was founded in 1956 as a social organization, but then it was outlawed in 1960. Keeping up its work in the underground, it is represented nowadays in 62 of Nepal's 75 districts (p. 247). According to P. Tamang, the Tamangs were probably one of the original populations of the Kirantis, that is, at the turn from the pre-historical to the historical period in Nepal. Similar to the claims of the Nepal Janajati Mahasangh, the Tamangs regard the Licchavi period, that is seen by Nepalese historians as the heyday of art and culture in the Kathmandu Valley, as the time when slavery was introduced. Bonded labor (*kamaiya*) thus subjugated them until the end of the Rana era. In addition, in contrast to other ethnic groups, the Tamangs were for a long time not allowed to participate in the military, which kept them from having this additional source of income (p.249-251). Their demands thus include: stop Hinduization, introduce programs for backward groups, and receive a proportional political and administrative representation.

Other examples of ethnic argumentation introduced by Krämer are that of the relatively aggressive Gopal Gurungs, and such groups of the Limbus and others who bear the word *mukti* ("salvation") in their names. The problem here is that ethnic argumentation puts itself into conflict with law, as is shown by such demands as the replacement of the military by paramilitary forces and demands for a "Mongol ministry." Their view of history thus seems as obscure as those of orthodox Hindus, since when the latter claim that 90 % of Nepal's population are Hindu, the former contradict them and assert that 80 % are of Tibeto-mongolian races. When such statements are accompanied by claims that "originally all these people were Buddhists," they even bring Buddhism into the conflict. What must, however, be recognized is that, according to Krämer, other ethnic groups, like the Tharu of the Tarai, would also increasingly identify with the ethnic groups of the mountain areas, distinguishing themselves in that way from the Hindu caste populations (p. 339).

To conclude this review, let me summarize the tenor of this book. Politics in Nepal have not yet proven capable of allowing for an improvement of the backward and underprivileged ethnic groups. Rather, defects in the political and economic system are absorbed by party politics, whereby, once again, the leading and ruling elites remain the high Hindu castes. Their dominating position is partly the result of their better access to education and other resources, but it is also a cause of the hierarchical system itself. While there are moderate claims to improve the status of the backward groups, it is, given the nepotistic and Hindu-dominated reality of the political system, no wonder also that ethnic argumentation takes on an increasingly aggressive

tone. Though sometimes one misses in this volume a critical assessment of the different attitudes within the ethnic groups themselves in this volume — such as the fact that Rana rule also enabled the rise of local ethnic elites — on the whole, Krämer's arguments are very well established. In the higher echelons of the political system, the high castes, as usual, predominate. In order to achieve a trend toward equality in society it will not be sufficient merely to incorporate "ethnic candidates;" in the long run, instead, following the insights from Krämer's study, we can rest assured that the true demands of those moderate and faithful ethnic organizations should be respected.

Michael Mühlich

### **Life and Death on Mt. Everest: Sherpa and Himalayan Mountaineering.**

By Sherry B. Ortner. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 1999.

I picked up Sherry Ortner's book because as a mountaineer and historian, I tend to pick up everything written on the subject. Her evocative title conjured up images of the 1996 tragedy on Everest where eight people lost their lives. A brief read through the preface suggested that this book, published in 1999, offers much more than a sensational description of events. Sherry Ortner offers the reader a deep examination of place and space where cultures, economies, and agendas merge in dependent, and perhaps precarious ways. I settled down for a good read, imagining that her commitment to deconstruct stereotypes of Sherpa guides and porters would allow me to briefly enter the Nepalese culture I enthusiastically embraced during my two visits in 1979 and 1999.

I was not disappointed. Ortner delivers a complex and comprehensive look at the mingling of cultures high up in the death zone. How does she do this? Ortner writes "In order to get any depth of insight into the dynamics of the relationship between Sherpas and sahibs, we must situate both groups very carefully in their own contexts, both within a given historical period and across time." In utilizing a historical framework that emphasizes changes over time, Ortner manages to avoid presenting the reader with a simplistic snapshot image of pre-modern Sherpa culture and the evolution of the mountaineering game. And, in placing equal emphasis on the historical and cultural contexts of those who climb and those who support the climbers, Ortner gives the reader the means to follow her through subsequent chapters that deconstruct stereotypes of sahibs and sherpas alike.

To understand the Sherpa culture Ortner looks at the meaning of mountaineering to the local culture and economy, and in so doing, provides unique insights into the meaning of Sherpa cheerfulness. Subsequent chapters examine the role of an evolving religion that influences Sherpa behavior-- especially views of compassion and fatalism, the meaning of death on the high peaks, and how mountaineering may shape the Sherpa definition of "masculine." Sahib-Sherpa relationships take on new definition with the rise of the 1970's counter-culture and with the increasing participation of Sherpas and of women sahibs with a feminist agenda. Finally, Ortner leads the reader to consider "has success spoiled the Sherpas?" as she examines the difficult changes and dilemmas accompanying the rise of commercial mountaineering expeditions.

I found myself both frustrated and grateful as I read this book. The mountaineer in me wanted to see more of the climbing focus, yet the historian in me was pleased to be educated with regard to Sherpa culture and religion. At times I resented the necessary structuralism in Ortner's organization. However, Ortner's periodic use of first person voice, drawn from her own fieldwork and from a wide range of quotes from familiar mountaineering books, served to illustrate analytical points and recapture my interest.

I especially appreciated Ortner's use of photographs. I couldn't help feeling that the picture of a frost-bitten Maurice Herzog, carried by a Sherpa over a precarious pole bridge spanning a raging torrent, while guided in front and in back by other Sherpas, represented the essence of Ortner's book. In this book of sahibs, mountains and Sherpas, the focus is on the mountaineer and Sherpa agendas with the summit standing as a metaphor for the synapse between the two. In this dynamic, people-oriented analysis of the processual rela-