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The Tharu Barka Naach: A Rural Folk Art Version of the Mahabharata.

Kurt Meyer and Pamela Deuel, eds. Los Angeles: Deuel Purposes, 1998. 120 pp.

This book will have two audiences, scholars interested in the Tharu culture of Nepal, and scholars interested in regional variations of the classical Sanskrit epic.

For the first group, the book provides a version of the Mahabharata that was reconstructed from manuscripts collected by an illiterate farmer over several decades and passed on to his son in 1970. The farmer, Rup Lal was also responsible for organizing performances of the Barka Naach ("big dance") on numerous occasions from 1922-1963. One might presume that the tradition of performance had been neglected for some time when Rup Lal undertook his work of reconstruction and preservation, but unfortunately, the present book does not provide any information about whether the text in its current form, or its ritual performance, preserves something quite old, or simply purports to revive the timeless tradition. The editors of this volume, Kurt Meyer and Pamela Deuel, discovered Rup Lal's son in 1994 and worked with him to raise the funds necessary for a complete performance in 1998. That performance, and this book, which translates the ten song cycle that tells the Tharu version of the great epic, are thus part of an effort to preserve a culture which is not, in fact, surviving. Although it deserves more study, this text provides a window on aspects of Tharu culture that are specific to the Dangaura Tharu who inhabit the Dang/Deukhuri district.

For the second group, the epic story is full of distinctive regional variations. In this brief retelling of the epic story, the most striking feature is the central role of Bhima, who is praised throughout as the greatest of heroes. The celebration of Bhima makes the text a truly martial epic rather than an epic modified by brahmanic religious concerns, and consequently, neither Arjuna nor Yudhisthira is given prominence. There are charming twists on the story, for example in the tale of the village of Ekachakra, when Bhima goes to meet the demon who annually demands of the village folk a human sacrifice. (In this telling, the story is blended with the story of the five brothers going to a pond for water where they are accosted by a crane who will grant water only in exchange for answering his riddles, Mahabharata 3.296). In the Tharu version, Bhima allows himself to be swallowed whole before exploding out of the demon. He returns home and is unrecognized by his mother before she performs a ritual of sprinkling her breast milk on his mouth. Other Tharu variations include the assumption that Kunti is the mother of all five Pandavas (rather than mother of only three), and that the secret knowledge which allows the escape from the House of Lac comes from Sahadeva (and not from Vidura).

Dinesh Chamling Rai has provided a fluent translation of the collected manuscripts. Scholars may be put off by small inconsistencies in transliteration (Vidur; Bidur; Shadev; Sahadeva) or the lack of notes which might explain confusing passages (why, for example, is the demon of Ekachakra referred to as Kunti's brother, the Pandavas' uncle? p.26). The value of the book, however, lies not in the scholarly advances it makes, but in the fact that it provides a serviceable translation of a preserved text of a revived tradition.

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Autonomy: Life Cycle, Gender and Status among Himalayan Pastoralists.

By Aparna Rao. New York: Berghahn Books. 1998. Pp. xvii + 350. Figures, Tables, Appendices, Index.

As its title suggests, this book addresses issues of long-standing concern to the discipline of anthropology, namely the relationship between the individual and his/her culture. Through an exceptionally rich and detailed ethnographic account of the Bakkarwal, a Muslim pastoralist community of Kashmir, Aparna Rao sets out to explore the question of to what extent the exercise of individual autonomy or agency is available either in ideology or practice, to Bakkarwal women and men as they progress through successive life stages. From the outset, Rao positions herself theoretically among that growing number of anthropologists of South Asia who in recent years have begun to take issue with the widely accepted Dumontian dichotomy between the