

December 2016

Review of "Kings of the Forest: The Cultural Resilience of Himalayan Hunter- Gatherers" by Jana Fortier, "Culture and the Environment in the Himalaya" edited by Arjun Guneratne, "Nature, Culture, and Religion at the Crossroads of Asia" edited by Marie Lecomte-Tilouine

Nayna Jhaveri

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

Recommended Citation

Jhaveri, Nayna (2016) "Review of "Kings of the Forest: The Cultural Resilience of Himalayan Hunter- Gatherers" by Jana Fortier, "Culture and the Environment in the Himalaya" edited by Arjun Guneratne, "Nature, Culture, and Religion at the Crossroads of Asia" edited by Marie Lecomte-Tilouine," *HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 36 : No. 2 , Article 22.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol36/iss2/22>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the [DigitalCommons@Macalester College](mailto:DigitalCommons@Macalester College) at [DigitalCommons@Macalester](https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu)



***Kings of the Forest: The Cultural Resilience of Himalayan Hunter-Gatherers.***

**Jana Fortier.** Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009. 232 pages. ISBN 0824833565.

***Culture and the Environment in the Himalaya.***

**Edited by Arjun Guneratne.** New York: Routledge, 2010. 256 pages. ISBN 0415533147.

***Nature, Culture, and Religion at the Crossroads of Asia.***

**Edited by Marie Lecomte-Tilouine.** New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2010. 382 pages. ISBN 8187358466.

**A Review Essay by Nayna Jhaveri**

There is a movement afoot within Himalayan studies that is working towards examining the bidirectional relationship between the cultural perceptions and practices of communities and their environment. Two distinctly different approaches are explored among the three books being reviewed here. One approach (Fortier and Guneratne) is focused on how cultural modes affect environmental perceptions, interactions, and outcomes, be they about conservation, forests, endangered animals, or watershed management. Another approach (Lecomte-Tilouine) pursues a related but different track of inquiry: it

focuses on how the boundaries between nature and culture are culturally constituted and influence not only social hierarchical formations, conceptions of statehood, and divisive and contested access to power and influence, but also how perceptions of ecology and species are multifariously framed. Importantly, both approaches seek to dislodge the romantic presumptions that minority ethnic or indigenous communities are inevitably predisposed towards protecting nature and have an inherently deep understanding of their eco-region.

It is useful to review these books in one turn because they potentially offer reflections that throw empirical and theoretical light on the more general theme of environment-culture intersectionality. Within Himalayan studies, it has been clear that much of the analysis of humans' relationship to nature has, for quite some time now, paid insufficient attention to the cultural domain. Similarly, much of the inquiry into cultural formations and transitions has relegated the environment to a largely static backdrop. This is a rather peculiar state of affairs given the immensity of nature's force and vitality within the Himalayas, and its designation as a global "biocultural diversity hot spot."

It is often said that much of the environmental storytelling about the Himalayas has been closely tied to one primary narrative that revolves

around its forests. Originating in the 1970s, this neo-Malthusian storyline about the negative effect of expanding populations on forests in Nepal is believed to still reverberate in the public sphere despite the fact that the empirical reality provided little supportive basis. In practice, a blossoming literature on the achievements of community forestry in Nepal is now slowly displacing this tired storyline. Intriguingly, however, this now extensive community forestry literature has also largely depended on a rather simplistic, acultural depiction of how subsistence communities have engaged in forest management. The question, therefore, that has risen in prominence is how to tackle this anemic interpretation of any community's interactions with their forests and, more broadly, the environment.

We begin with Jana Fortier's book on the Raute, a hunter-gatherer nomadic ethnic group, who call themselves the "kings of the forest," the title of the book. This is a deeply self-reflective book on societies who flourish within very particular types of ecological interstices in western Nepal, subsisting on langur and macaque monkeys, wild yams, and rice (traded from local farmers). They are very few in number: a total of about 6,200 when including linguistic and culturally related groups. Over the course of a year, the Raute traverse across a range of different ecological zones: from river valleys



at 1000 feet to Middle Hill ridges up to 9000 feet. Fortier's central interest is in understanding how and why they have resisted assimilation into mainstream societies who engage in farming as well as by those promoting "social upliftment," and instead have maintained a sturdy fidelity to their nomadic existence within forests, thus presenting themselves as a "radical other." Fortier emphasizes that the purpose of her book is not to support development activities but rather to inform readers about the Rautes' cultural resilience in the face of modernizing pressures.

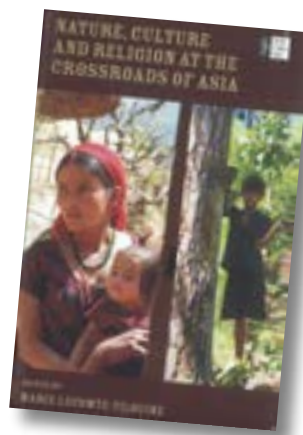
The Raute continue to think of themselves as a unique society even though they clearly have to regularly engage with the wider political economy of power brokers and natural resource users. This ethnographic study, based on fieldwork in Jajarkot District, illuminates how the Raute community is not some type of primitive social order but rather is a dynamic social formation that has been significantly affected by the mobile and dynamic set of interactions they have to engage in. This involves a carefully tuned knowledge of their environment both in terms of the ecological landscape as well as political power differentials with settled farmers. As such, their art of flourishing as an independent community is always contingent on maintaining balance and minimal conflict. Moreover, rather than outright absorb external cultural practices, they have attempted to

maintain a core fidelity to traditional technologies and knowledge.

At the forefront of Fortier's approach is an interest in illuminating how the vitalistic elements of Raute worldview operate. She provides a very detailed exploration of the Rautes' own topophilia where they indwell among a "crowded and varied world" (p. 73) inhabited by deities, spirits, humans, and animals-as-relatives. Maintaining the cosmo-ecological balance is of utmost concern through living morally as "foragers" or "livestock" within the forest kingdom as "god's children." She takes us through the complexities of the journey that the cycles of monkey-hunting entail, as well as their wide-ranging micro-ecology foraging of fruits, vegetables, and tubers. She makes clear that the particular niche interests of Raute in their environment has been molded by the types of agricultural and food practices of dominant communities they encounter. Their form of indwelling is evident in the way in which the stars, moon, animals, and vegetables/tubers are designated with names, indicating their familial relationship. In this way, names clearly set out their subjective and intimate connections within the multiple ecologies they inhabit. She underscores the intricacies of their knowledge about species by emphasizing how the categorization of varieties of subspecies among hunter-gatherers is more detailed than the documented science of

botany provides. While the richness of Fortier's approach cannot be attributed to one theoretical approach, the book would have benefitted from how her work elaborates particular analytical themes in political or cultural ecology.

Arjun Gunderman's edited book, *Culture and the Environment in the Himalaya*, was borne out of a recognition that relatively little attention has been given to how people who reside in the Himalayas have conceptualized the environment and, moreover, how those conceptualizations impact policy-making within development programming. It has become perplexingly clear, to this day, that a large chasm exists between work that focuses on cultural issues and those that examine environmental concerns. Within rich and wide-ranging cultural studies of kinship, ethnicity, caste structure, religion, and shamanism, the environment has largely been bracketed out. Similarly, in the now ever-expanding body of work on community-based forestry or watershed management, villagers are simplistically portrayed as members of subsistence-based rural communities whose cultural perceptions are primarily shaped by the high levels of dependencies they have on key natural resources without really unpacking the specificities of how history and culture has affected the particularities of their livelihood and environmental practices.



The book seeks to understand how conceptualizations of the environment among Himalayan communities vary across differentials such as gender, class, age, status, ethnicity, as well as level of and kind of education. After setting out the three main prevailing approaches to understanding human-environment relations (i.e., “Theory of Himalayan Environmental Degradation” (THED), human adaptation to the environment, and conceptualization of landscapes, particularly sacred ones), Guneratne lays out the book’s interpretive framework for studying the nature-culture relationship, emphasizing how cultures are not unitary and coherent, but rather are relational and positional with “varying degrees of discursive unity” (p. 5). Going one step further, he argues against a strictly material perception of interactions with the environment, where use patterns are governed by the extent to which certain natural resources provide particular positive gains. Instead, he calls for paying closer attention to the symbolic coding associated with how the very notion of “practical” is constituted. A range of analytical themes are pursued by the book’s chapters, including scientific discourse and local knowledge, culture and social difference, the synthesized environment, and the environment as social critique. The central geographical focus is largely on Nepal, with two chapters covering the Indian Himalayas.

At its core, this book provides us with a multi-dimensional critique of modernist and scientific perspectives underpinning the prevailing ideology of economic development. The book tackles not only the typical environmental issues that come to mind when one thinks of the Himalayas such as climate change and its impact on watersheds, deforestation, and large dams, but it also ventures into new territories such as Ayurvedic medicine and Bagmati restoration. In addition, it probes more deeply into the cultural perceptions of the environment among a range of different ethnic groups such as the Limbu, Raute, or Yakkha. Importantly, the final chapter takes us into a more strictly theoretical terrain by moving us even beyond cultural models of the environment.

John Metz’s opening chapter focuses on the “downward spiral” that sits at the center of THED put forward in the 1970s by Erik Eckholm of the Worldwatch Institute. Metz’s analysis demonstrates why it is that academic, development, and donor communities wholeheartedly accepted Eckholm’s postulation that population growth leads to less forests and therefore the loss of topsoil downhill even as scholars increasingly asserted that its assumptions were unreliable. Although his analysis is a very necessary and insightful one, it would have benefitted from situating it in juxtaposition with the new emergent narratives (based on

empirical research) of environmental transformation stemming from the experience of community forestry starting in the late 1980s that show forests in specific mid-Hills districts have improved despite population growth as well as new road infrastructure. As the shadow of THED recedes into the distance, it is important to identify which theories help explain the macro-level emergence of this community-based institutional formation and its impacts energized by the 1990s democracy movement.

A number of chapters examine how culturally varied perceptions and knowledge of forests manifest within specific geographical or ethnic contexts. Andrea Nightingale examines how different knowledges, methodologies, and theoretical constructs employed by various actors in the community forestry context produce different knowledges of community forestry and the forests themselves. Her geographical research within one user-group in Mugu District of north-western Nepal illustrates the heavy dependency of community forestry, as an “ideal type,” on scientific forestry ideas and expert knowledge dissemination rather than on local knowledges. In light of this, she questions the notion of “community” at the heart of community forestry by highlighting how different types of users such as women or Dalits (*kamis*) evaluate its purpose, operations,

or effectiveness. Andrew Russell's chapter on perceptions of forests among the Yakkha of eastern Nepal asserts that "Yakkha perceptions of their forests are shaped by a range of shifting biological, socio-political, economic, and spiritual influences" (pp. 61-2). Most importantly, forests did not play a prominent role in their daily cultural world except that riverine and ridge-crest forests were considered wild and jungly places where ghosts, spirits and wild animals roamed. Russell rightly emphasizes both that people's lives and worldviews encompass a wider frame of reference than simply a subsistence environment, and that there is a danger in naively going along with a romantic notion that a protectionist ethos exists among indigenous communities.

T. B. Subba's chapter on Limbu perceptions of the physical world discusses the changing political and economic context that has informed these transformations whereby, despite good knowledge of the environment, environmental degradation has continued to move apace. A number of chapters focus on the complex role of religion in conservation, such as those by Safia Aggarwal on forests in the Kumaon Himalaya, Emma Mawdsley on the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Tehri Dam, and Anne Rademacher on the revival of the Bagmati civilization. Ben Campbell's concluding chapter takes us into new territory beyond cultural models of the environment

calling for a more dexterous approach to understanding subjectivity in environmental relations that takes into consideration how it is molded at the confluence of a range of social and political processes. This edited book is certainly a welcome turn in Himalayan environmental studies, as it throws a new reflective light on indwelling and habitation within local ecological landscapes.

In *Nature, Culture, and Religion at the Crossroads of Asia*, Marie Lecomte-Tilouine's introductory chapter launches us into the wide territory this edited book covers, namely a specifically Himalayan exploration of the considerable rethinking of "the boundary separating the two domains of reality called 'nature' and 'culture'" (p. 3). This rethinking draws from the insight generated through the excavation of the nature-culture opposition that resides within the Christian humanism at the core of "Western thinking," emphasizing in particular that such conceptualizations were never geographically universal. Specifically, it challenges a particular thread within the nature-culture opposition nexus, vigorously adopted by indigenous communities' campaigns for their land and rights around the world: that they are children of nature. How the categories of nature and culture are relationally formulated is firstly explored through the major religions of the Himalayas: Hinduism, Buddhism,

Islam, and Shamanism, and then through a series of case studies. A range of specific dualities that make up the overarching nature-culture opposition are addressed: "the contrast between a cyclical time ruling nature and a linear time ruled by events (history), between the regular and the unforeseen (laws versus contingency), between the spontaneous and the fabricated, the innate and the acquired or transmitted, the raw and the refined, the wild and the domesticated, what can be appropriated and what cannot, what is common to all living beings and what is specific to human beings" (p. 10). The Himalayas as a crossroads where these religions and a multiplicity of shamanist and animist practices proliferate provides a rich context through which to delve into such explorations.

Charles Malamoud's chapter takes us through a Hindu journey into the numinous landscape of a forest hermitage, a common theme in Sanskrit literature, where access to a purer form of one's being is possible. Since "the 'woods of asceticism' are the simple and perfect form of utopia," they offer an ideal locus for creating a "pacifist, pure, and homogenous society" (p. 36). Although normative texts posit the role of a forest retreat for the fourth, radical renouncer stage of an individual's development, Malamoud asserts that the texts offer more complex possibilities at different stages of one's development that may

Across these three books, there is a richness in terms of analytical focus, geographical context, ethnicities, religions, and types of biophysical environments studied.

**Nayna Jhaveri on *Kings of the Forest: The Cultural Resilience of Himalayan Hunter-Gatherers, Culture and the Environment in the Himalaya*, and *Nature, Culture, and Religion at the Crossroads of Asia*.**

or may not involve performing rites. By focusing on the role of rite (as an attenuated form of sacrifice), he explores how both nature and society are constituted simultaneously, rather than society following nature. Stéphane Arguillère, in his chapter on nature and culture in Tibetan philosophy, provides some provocative offerings by explaining that it is the distinction between sentient and non-sentient beings that is the distinguishing hallmark of its overall philosophy. Sentient beings belong to the realm of *karman*, who create their own future situation through their present actions within the flow of karmic processes whereas the non-sentient world is purely a *scenery* or *caput mortuum* of the life of mind. Further, he indicates that it is *samsara* that represents the world of the artificial whereas *nirvana* is imbued with the characteristics of “the natural, the timeless, the primordial” (p. 55) reversing the conventions of nature-culture dualisms.

Marc Gaborieau, after establishing that in Islam it is God who is the main agent in both the natural as well as human world, proceeds to explore how the various currents of Islamic thought postulate nature-culture relations, emphasizing that it is God’s omnipotence that is given centrality across the full spread of agency, be it cosmological events, human actions, or sources of legislation. He provides an analysis of how rational theology and philosophical speculations

contested the “classical apologetic theory (*kalâm*)” of the Sunni orthodoxy. After Muslim thinkers engaged with the Greek conception of nature (as the idea of productive force) from the 10th century, they interpreted Koranic revelation allegorically affirming that the causality and regularity inherent in nature created the order of the cosmos. Roberte Hamayon’s chapter reconsiders the long-standing thread that takes the hunting life to represent the “Nature” inherent in Siberian shamanism. She attempts “to redefine the reference to ‘hunting life’ so as to account for the plurality of existing forms of common principles” (p. 90) by comparing conceptions of “Nature” among the hunter Ewenks and the pastoral Yakut. By focusing on whether their interaction is with wild or domesticated animal targets, she concludes that “what is paramount for the hunter is the life of the wild species, whereas for the herder, it is society’s internal order” (p. 97). They are differentiated by the fact that small human groups left the main social order to venture into forests by becoming hunters to escape social control.

Two chapters, in particular, address central analytical issues. Lecomte-Tilouine’s chapter tackles head-on the important political topic of how the relationship between man and nature is imbricated in the creation of group identity, particularly in Nepal after the 1990 people’s movement.

In this political context, Indigenous Peoples or *janajatis* have, despite considerable diversity, formed a bloc that is distinctly non-Hindu. Against this negation, approximately half of *janajati* groups have declared themselves Buddhist. Given that Prince Siddhartha was born in an area where Tharu and Magar communities live, he is considered an indigenous creation. Among the other half, the idea of “natural religion” (such as animism, shamanism, or Bon) is used to forge their identity. As such, Nepalese *janajatis* differentiate themselves from Hindus by drawing to themselves the higher and more legitimate moral ground, by virtue of an ecological ideology that affirms their non-dominating relationship to nature. In practice, they have attempted to purify their *janajati* practices of Hindu content while characterizing Hindu philosophy as anti-scientific and anti-democratic. Lecomte-Tilouine underscores the difficulty of maintaining such an oppositional stance against Hinduism given the pro-ecological dimensions of Hindu philosophy as well as the intermingled, long history of interaction between Hindus and *janajatis*.

Ben Campbell’s chapter further pursues these ideas based on his fieldwork among Tamang-speaking communities of north-central Nepal by leveraging the “perspectivism” that Eduardo Viveiros de Castro has developed in Amazonian anthropology by asserting that

it is, in fact, many natures that participate in one culture. Campbell seeks to examine the fullness of subjectivities through lived human-environmental relations by *inter alia* interrogating Arun Agrawal's analysis of environmentality in *van panchayats* of Kumaon. Among the Tamang community, he notes that instead of a "oneness" with the environment, there are multiple forms of affinities with place, plants and animals at work. An understanding of the character of these affinities requires, he importantly argues, moving beyond the simplistic language of "integrity" and "interference." An indigenous eco-relational sensibility is expressed through an animated landscape of multiple beings inclusive of humans, spirits, plants, geologies, and more. The making of affinities, as part of the indwelling process, is explored through the lens of a specific myth by a Newar narrator. What is missing in Campbell's interpretive exploration, however, is how the making of affinities changed through political economic and cultural transformations set into motion by neo-liberalization.

In the "case study" chapters, the content ranges across different ethnic groups such as the Mehawang Rai (Martin Gaenzle), Jad pastoralists (Subhadra Mitra Channa), Indus Kohistanis (Claus Peter Zoller), as well as particular types of landscapes such as Tibetan relics (Rachel Guidoni), transhuman agro-pastoral of northwest Yunnan (Andreas

Wilkes), terraces in southern Yunnan (Pascal Bouchery), and *tirthas* in Nepal (Chiara Letizia). This book opens many new conceptual vistas and has thrown open the fixities of the nature-culture dualism that has stealthily occupied analytical territory. Even so, if it had more explicitly engaged with the broader theoretical explorations in nature-culture dualisms across various disciplines, it would have permitted a fuller sense of its novel contributions. On a smaller note, an editor could have helped improve the language of this book that is, at times, rather convoluted.

Across these three books, there is a richness in terms of analytical focus, geographical context, ethnicities, religions, and types of biophysical environments studied. As such, they altogether provide an exploratory oeuvre following analytical and theoretical leads that are not all of a piece. In that sense, they have helped set up the mosaic-like groundwork for future research that wrangles head-on with the emerging and intriguing theoretical debates on the interface between nature/environment and culture as it manifests in the Himalayan context. Even so, all three books could have benefitted from a fuller theoretical engagement with the wider, rich literature from the early 2000s on the bidirectional relationship between nature and culture found in the disciplines of anthropology, geography, political science, and sociology.

*Nayna Jhaveri (Ph.D., Geography, Clark University, 1999) is a geographer focused on the political ecology of the Himalayas. She has worked on community based management of natural resources in the Chinese and Nepali Himalayas for over twenty years. After receiving her Ph.D., she taught political ecology at the University of Washington and Colgate University for nine years. She is currently working with the USAID-supported Tenure and Global Climate Change Program managed by Tetra Tech.*