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Book Reviews

Coburn, Broughton.

1982 **Nepali Aama: Portrait of a Nepalese Hill Woman.** Santa Barbara, Cal.: Ross-Erikson Publishers. 165 pp., 65 illustrations, $9.95.
ISBSN 0-915520-45-1.

Reviewed by: Barbara Nimri Aziz
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In spite of anthropologists' claim to enjoy a special intimacy with the peoples of distant societies, it is often not they who produce the most sensitive and revealing personal portraits which can contribute so much to intercultural understanding. Film-makers, poets, novelists, historians, and now development officers are in the forefront in bringing individuals of distant cultures into direct contact with our public -- laypeople as well as students and scholars. The work of Camerini in films such as Dadi's Family, of journalist Critchfield in The Golden Bowl Be Broken, as well as novels by R.K. Narayan and short stories by Lu Xun are widely known. Striking images by photographers or vibrant dialogue from a skilled writer can often produce a more refined, convincing cultural portrait than we anthropologists can create with our extensive ethnographies or histories. Rather than being apart from academy, these creative enterprises may be seen as instructive models for our work.

Nepali Aama: Portrait of a Nepalese Hill Woman was authored by neither a writer nor a scholar. Yet it is an attempt at a humanistic portrayal of an individual which may be an effective and legitimate way of interpreting Asian culture. A collection of some 64 black and white, informal but not very revealing photographs of the lady, Vishnu Maya, are interspersed with her own statements to create a sort of vignette of her life. The author, Broughton Coburn, adds an 11-page epilogue with some general observations on Vishu Maya's Gurung culture, but it remains a slight book in every respect -- which may be what Coburn intended. This photographic essay may not justify a serious review, but it is interesting in its style and its goals. It can be a starting point for more substantial work of this kind and for comparisons with similar presentations.

If one of the best ways to project an image of foreign life is through biography, I believe this effort by Coburn is worth our attention. Unfortunately I know of no book yet produced on Asia by anthropologists which matches the biographies by our colleagues working in the Americas and in Africa, so I turn to an example of their writing for a model study against which to compare Nepali Aama. Nisa, a recent biography by M. Shostak (Harvard U. Press, 1981), is also a portrait of a woman, illustrated with a few select photographs. It too is based on the author's intimate contact with her subject. However, the similarities with the Nepalese study end here.

Whereas Vishnu Maya belongs to an agricultural culture with extensive ties to the wider economy, Nisa is a !Kung woman living in a gathering and hunting culture in southern Africa. Nisa's life seems simpler than the Nepali woman's, yet her biography is much more sophisticated and she seems a more complex individual. The richness of Nisa's statements, her contributions to our knowledge of human growth, her interpretation of !Kung culture and the people around her, as well as the account of the friendship between her and her biographer, are of immense value. Part of the strength of Nisa is quantitative; extensive passages on the !Kung woman's memories are supplemented with solid ethnography. Writer Shostak is also an important part of the story. Moreover, much of the force of the African study seems to lie in its careful organization of persona and culture. There is a powerful introductory "birth scene" narrated by Nisa, followed by Shostak's own account of her fieldwork and her history with Nisa. It is a detailed and useful chronicle into which a great deal of thought has gone. Each of the next 15 chapters of Nisa is divided into two sections: first we have the ethnographic review; that is followed by a first person account by Nisa on the same subject (e.g. life in the bush, or man and woman). All this is extremely well written to the point of being absorbing even though Nisa's stories in some ways repeat the ethnography. Nisa's memories of her life include vivid dialogue conveying extraordinary detail of her past, told with candor and conviction. She talks mainly about what happened to her and the people she lives with, impressing on us the issues and the quality of !Kung culture as well as the person, Nisa. One feels nothing is kept from the writer or from us, her readers.

Only when we see the art and teamwork of Shostak and Nisa at work can we imagine the potential of the Nepalese study, for which Vishnu Maya's life theoretically offers greater cultural variety and

historical depth. Nepali Aama has contact with a number of different castes besides her own Gurung people. She visits a distant holy place in India and another towards Tibet. These and many other situations provide ample opportunity for the inclusion of wider cultural influences as well as regional Nepali history and poetry. Nothing is made of the extensive cultural fabric into which this Nepalese life is inextricably woven. According to author Coburn's interpretation here, Vishnu Maya appears as a one-dimensional character: a voice but not a personality, a life but not a culture. Her remarks would be considered fatuous if attributed to one of us. Is a statement meant to become magical when issuing from the mouth of an old Gurung woman? When Aama claims "big people have big problems and little people have little problems," is this meant to be Nepali wisdom or female perspicacity?

From what Coburn portrays of Vishnu Maya, she is certainly talkative and appears to have considerable experience. She may even be wise. I would venture, moreover, that this is too shallow a portrayal, and therefore quite unjust to the woman; certainly it is unfair to her culture. Her excessive references to the magical properties of certain local potions lack insight and fail to enhance our knowledge of indigenous medicine. Nor does the portrayal even hint at the important wider belief system of which her ideas are part. The absence of this cultural context leaves us with highly simplistic phrases; Vishnu Maya claims, for example, that if a woman does not pierce her ears, she will become deaf! It makes one wonder how far beyond colonial anecdotes we have moved.

To move to a more relevant matter, a real issue in Aama's life is her work. Her capacity for heavy work and the pressures on her obviously impressed Coburn who, to his credit, does not romanticize the labors of hill life. Many of his photos show Vishnu Maya at work, and her own remarks repeatedly bespeak her deep concern with her livelihood. Also, in the epilogue, the author elaborates a little on Gurung economy, providing some contextual basis for Vishnu Maya's activity. It remains undeveloped, and we have no feeling of what it is like to be a woman and a laborer in this society. This is unfortunate since today more than ever this is a matter of special concern. Any book which is meant to address an educated lay reader -- tourist or developer or student -- can make a valuable, strong impact. In particular the personal portrait can become an effective means of illustrating and supplementing the more scientific or specialized studies on woman as well as on Himalayan economy. For readers who know nothing about Nepal, the simplistic portrayal of a "peasant lady" is further weakened by an absence of reference to any of several excellent monographs on this region. There is no indication that the author knew of important background readings such as Pokara Valley (Harka B. Gurung, 1965), Les Gurungs (Pignede, 1966), Resources and Population (Macfarlane, 1978), or The Gurungs of Nepal (Messerschmidt, 1978). In addition to these there is an important critical study on economic aid, Nepal in Crisis (Blaikie et al, 1980) which is based on the very region where Vishnu Maya lives. If none of these could be woven into the portrait, at least the publisher could list them as further reading. Nepali Aama can only be recommended along with any of those supplements.

At this point we cannot of course ask Coburn to rewrite his book. But we can acknowledge the potential of its appeal and the general need for more substantial personal portraits. If a Peace Corps volunteer like Coburn can produce Nepali Aama, then a Nepalese writer or a trained anthropologist ought to be able to provide us with something on the scale of Nisa. With so many more resources available to us, combined with our rich personal experience, scholars ought to take Nepali Aama as a starting point. In Asian studies, even with books like Shinohata, A Daughter of Han, or The Twice Born, we have a long way to go to produce something of the quality of Nisa, to show how the reality of an individual's day-to-day life can have scientific merit, great teaching potential, and also reach a wide readership.

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Nepali Aama also reviewed by: Michael C. Tobias*

On day's walk south of Pokhara, in the Gurung middle hills of central Nepal, educator, translator, energy specialist Broughton Coburn spent over a year lodging in the quarters of Vishnu Maya, an elderly sprite called Aama by her peers. "The Gurung were poor and uneducated, but they seemed to possess an uncanny strength grounded in tradition, family, community and self-sufficiency," wrote Coburn, back in 1973 when he first came to Aama. This important autobiography, enhanced by poignant photography and eminently readable commentary, breaks new, invigorating ground in ethnographic studies. Aama's wisdom peaks from page to page, as she passes on anecdotes, cures, and general substance ranging across the breadth of civilization. Her humor and insight encompasses an Asian Ecclesiastes.

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*Reprinted from "Mountain Research and Development" (Vol. 2, No. 2, May 1982) by permission of the International Mountain Society.

Aama rails against over-population, monoculture, and the reduction of fallow cycles resulting in increased aridity. Though she has forgotten the names of the gods, she knows intimately the first rule of health: ". . .in the morning, even if you don't have to crap, you should at least go out to the fields, squat, take a pull on a cigarette fart, and come back." This is idiomatic Aama, all laughs, slapstick, sainthood. Like most of the other half-million Gurung, she is short, stout, her face burnished from the Bronze Age, her neck carcanetted with amber. She describes her mother, her village's marriage rituals (all night queries between boy and girl). When Aama got married she only found out that morning. She was fifteen, cried, fled, finally submitting in terror. "At my husband's home I couldn't even blow my nose when the in-laws were around." Now the young girls refuse, waiting till a riper age when they've had time to see which men will make money.

"Change always comes," says Aama ruefully. "We own land and we say that it is 'our' land, but two and three generations later, who is it that owns our land? In a hundred years none of us will be here. Even the trails of my youth have changed or been moved, and I have seen streams and rivers change their courses." Change is indeed upon the Gurung. Cheap Indian and Chinese textiles have forced a traditionally pastoralist culture into the diminishing returns straight-jacket economy of lowland agriculture.

Aama discourses on earrings, the churning of butter, the Yugas (ages) -- "soon," says she, "we'll all be eating one another prior to the Age of Truth" -- on smallpox, suffering ("better to undergo suffering first, and then experience happiness than the other way around"). She is an expert on the efficacy of dungs (sacred cow dung is better than buffalo). When it comes to funerals, hail, lamas, gold jewelry, corn planting, or lice, there is no one who knows more than she. "The best way to get rid of head lice is to snatch some big buffalo lice . . . and put them in your hair. They eat the hair lice right away, and these buffalo lice are big enough that you don't have to squint so much to see them, and you can pick them out easily. When you get old and your hair turns white, your lice turn white, too."

Aama provides warnings on the nocturnal mischief of yellow-throated martens, on the protein value of termite nests, the geomantic lines of chicken liver: she knows to chew peppercorns and ginger while working with bee hives; to eat cucumbers to help dissolve lumps that might form in the chest; on alcoholic youths moving to cities -- "Buy you can't eat money -- who knows if it will be worth anything tomorrow?" — and on farming, "an honest profession."

Her relaxed opinions span every facet of her culture and Coburn has loosely translated, thereby maximizing the possibilities of meaning. She knowingly prescribes techniques of brewing home stash, preparing lentils; expostulates on the breakdown of biological clocks with the advent of wrist watches; on the nature of Kashmiri electricity ("Water attracts lightning, and they store water in large jugs that are set in an open area . . . they somehow collect the electricity from it . . . If you are struck and killed by lightning, you will go straight to the heaven that we call Baigundanath."). She tells how to find our soul when it is lost (you catch it in a brass urn filled with water); whe warns against seeing movie pictures because "they can wreck your brain if you see yourself in them;" when Aama tries to meditate she cannot help but fall asleep. They say if you work too hard you'll die early and if you sleep too much you'll die early. I do both too much and can't understand why I'm not dead yet . . . It's all written ahead of time by the gods, all that will ever happen. When I die, I won't tell you," giggles old Aama, a great lady in waiting.

There has never been a book quite like this and it conveys something of the publisher's own style. Ross-Erikson seems to specialize in anthropological oddities — first rate material -- which they bring out in attractive and compelling formats. Nepali Aama is germane to the study of mountains and mountain people and is destined to enter the mainstream of anthropological bedside classics.

Dargyay, Eva K.
1982 **Tibetan Village Communities.** Warminster, U.K.: Aris and Phillips. ix, 110 pp.

Reviewed by: Barbara Nimri Aziz
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This small book is one of the few available today which addresses the social organization by which most Tibetans once lived. Eva Dargyay's study is of the life of a small administrative unit, the brgya--tsho referred to throughout the book as "hundred-county," located somewhere in Gyantse district near the Himalayan border.

Some forty families of that brgya-tsho who settled in India and Switzerland after the Chinese occupied their country in 1959 provided the basic information upon which Dargyay's study is based. Although a Tibetologist, she attempted to apply anthropological techniques; she describes the traditional social and economic life of the Tibetan peasantry on the basis of interviews and oral histories.

An introductory chapter which includes some discussion of Dargyay's methodology is followed by a very brief chapter on the environment of brgya-tsho, that is to say, the country, village and house.

"Dominance and Dependency" is the theme of Chapter III, which attempts to trace the distribution of power out to the village level. Three categories of subjects are described: gzhung-rgyud-khral-pa (of the central government); chos-gzhi'i mi-ser (of the state monasteries); and sger-ba'i mi-ser (of noble families). None of these, says Dargyay, was superior to any other. There follows a valuable discussion of structural relations among members in a single subject level, and the mechanism of dependency and obligations controlling people's movements in relation to their landlord's domain. According to this study, the release of subjects from one lord to another was effected on an individual basis, never by family. We also learn that running away from a job was not uncommon in Tibet, in spite of its illegality. Dargyay's detailed discussion of the inherited status of a subject carrying heavy tax obligations provides indisputable evidence of the serf status of the Tibetan peasantry.

An important point emerges in regards to village organization, namely its heterogeneity. Some families in one locality could and did belong to different landlords, and people had a degree of choice in the location of their homes. In examining village composition here, Dargyay distinguishes between subjects of monastic estates who are bound to it as individuals and those of noble estates bound to their landlord as families.

In Chapter IV, Dargyay points out further distinctions between the social (or economic) status of different subject families. These are essentially different degrees of land rights. But we are never sure how those status differences work in reality, what behavioral ramifications and legal implications were, and what beliefs people at various ranks held.

Chapter V, on the family, is well rounded. There is no new information here, however, and the author herself cites several earlier books on family customs which apply to the people of this brgya-tsho. In a brief discussion of marriage stability, the author observes that among Tibetans in exile, marriages are now more stable. It is not possible to judge these comments on the basis of the information provided, but casual observations among the exiled populations I know suggest that by 1983, divorces among Tibetans settled abroad were on the rise. One has to be very careful, though, in comparing old Tibet with newly settled communities in exile and measure new patterns more precisely before making broader comparisons. Marriage stability, like marriage customs, also vary from one social class to another. A useful part of Chapter V is the discussion of the economics of marriage negotiations.

A fairly lengthy chapter on economy (VII) provides still further details on economic relations of village people. The various taxes, inheritance laws, assessments on herds, loans, and the leasing system as well as economic management of the different types of estates is provided. Here Dargyay seems to depend more on her informants from brgya-tsho, and less on earlier writings. This chapter, twice as long as any other in the book, is certainly the best.

The political structure of the county is the subject of the next chapter. It is only two pages long and is so thin that one wonders why it merits a separate heading.

Throughout the book, there are occasional references to Old Tibet and the practices of Tibetans in exile. But they are presented almost as afterthought and there is no systematic attempt to examine comparable data. This is a certain weakness in the study, since the author never really decides how detailed a comparison she wants to make. There is no attempt made to gather parallel data on the two historical periods. We are therefore surprised to find a final chapter devoted to an assessment of changes made in the traditional social structure under the Chinese communists. This is a subject which needs more attention. (If any assessment is to be made I would have expected it to be on the life of Tibetans in exile, since Dargyay, in the course of her oral history work, had the opportunity to see people in their contemporary situation abroad.) The assessment begins with a review of communist reforms and draws mainly on various secondary sources to evaluate changes in general. This section is not without value, however. Especially in light of the preceding sociological data, the socio-economic organization of Tibet up to 1972 has some parallel frame of reference even though it is not as precise as one would wish. It should be noted that Dargyay's data on contemporary Tibet comes not from a recent visit or from scientific research carried out there. She draws largely on the earlier

observations of Peter Aufschneider and Kunsang Paljor. I understand that today socio-historical studies are now being carried out in Tibet to ascertain the changes over the last 24 years. Soon, I hope, recent foreign visitors who have observed Tibetan village life at close hand will supply detailed data which we can compare against what we know of Tibet's community structure in the past.

There are several photos of interest illustrating this book. Most seem to have been taken in Tibet itself, perhaps before 1959. However there is no indication about their source and the captions are not at all informative. As in most cases with this publisher, the text is not typeset, nor are right margins justified. The graphics also leave much to be desired and there are many places where the English could easily have been rendered more fluent.