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## Book Reviews

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## VIII. BOOK REVIEWS

Fisher, James F.

1986

Trans-Himalayan Traders: Economy, Society, and Culture in Northwest Nepal. Berkeley, Los Angeles, New York, & London: University of California Press. xiv + 232 pp. (US \$35.00. For further information contact University of California Press, 2120 Berkeley Way, Berkeley, CA 94720)

Reviewed by:

Sarah E. Miller

James Fisher's Trans-Himalayan Traders addresses the complex economic and cultural transactions engaged in by the people of Tarangpur, in the Dolpo District of Nepal. Although the community is unusually isolated, in fact, Fisher argues, they act as a hinge between diverse ethnic communities, functionally and culturally marginal to traditions ranging from India to Tibet. Fisher writes, "they exchange their way out of isolation" (p. 3). He argues that the economic and cultural ties with alternative perspectives on the world are more important in the trilingual community of Tarangpur than its isolation.

After presenting a historical overview of the area based on painstaking archival research, Fisher discusses two economic premises for his analysis: that economic transactions require surplus, and that the system works according to a sexual division of labour. Using data collected over a year of fieldwork, Fisher calculates the extent of surplus produced by agricultural and commercial undertakings. He argues that the surplus is essential to the complex networks of exchange that are carried on outside the village. Fisher also demonstrates that the Tarangpurian men spend a large portion of their time travelling and handling commercial ventures. The women largely remain in the village, which is inaccessible for much of the winter. They complete the domestic tasks and most of the agricultural labor. The focus of the study is mostly on trade.

Fisher pinpoints two essential trade circuits, the grain-salt-rice (goods-goods-goods) circuit, and the increasingly preferred commodities circuit (goods-cash-goods). The second, although riskier, leads to the acquisition of such luxury items as cigarettes and cotton cloth, and the accumulation of wealth through cash. The men engaging in trade return with desired items of exchange and sale, and absorb other world-views in their annual expeditions. Both types of items--goods and ideas--are brought back to the village and shared with the women and others who stayed in the village that year.

Fisher argues that the Tarangpurians engage in "impression management" (Goffman 1959); that is, they maintain and adjust different roles to fit into different settings appropriately. They are "brokers of goods...blockers of ideas" (p. 96) i.e., exchanging goods through different communities, absorbing alternative cultural views but only showing the parts of their social identity that fit the situation. Thus, while dealing with Hindus, a Tarangpurian suppresses certain status indicators"(p. 95), using a Hindu name, speaking correct Nepali and presenting greater Hindu sophistication in his attitudes than he would at home. In Tibet, on the other hand, he emphasizes the "good Buddhist" aspect of his life-style, and speaks Tibetan. At home he speaks Kaike, a language spoken only in Tarangpur and two other villages, and nowhere else in the world.

Within the village, social status, according to Fisher, is calculated by an ideology of equality, the practices of equalizing, unbalanced reciprocity and a disguised hierarchy. The ideal of equalizing, unbalanced reciprocity hides certain significant strains of inequality: marriage classes and their idiom of purity and pollution (based on strict proscriptions concerning intermarrying and interdining), the particularly masculine struggle for respect through shrewd trading, political success, and the accumulation of wealth. Recently, the commodities circuit has begun to overshadow the grain-salt-rice circuit because of the desirability of

cash wealth. Most recently, politics, fed by cash wealth, has increasingly become the motive that draws Tarangpur towards innovation and progress.

Through economic exchange, accompanying cultural exchange and lately political aspirations, the isolated community of Tarangpur maintains ties and networks of exchange over a huge geographic area, building its world-view out of complex transactional activity. Fisher combines careful statistical analysis and observation with the useful models of impression management and Sahlin's theories of reciprocity to create an interesting and suggestive work.

### Justice, Judith

1986                    Policies, Plans, and People: Culture and Health Development in Nepal.  
Berkeley, Los Angeles, New York & London: University of California Press.  
154 pp. (No price. For further information contact University of California  
Press, 2120 Berkeley Way, Berkeley, CA 94720)

Reviewed by:            Katharine Coon  
                                  Tufts University

Judith Justice's study of health development in Nepal was motivated by a concern with the apparent failure of health planners to incorporate culturally relevant information when designing programs for health care delivery. The research on which the monograph is based was conducted between 1978 and 1979. Ms. Justice focused on the planning processes which led to the development of Integrated Community Health Program (ICHP), being implemented around the country at the time. She interviewed members of health organizations in the U.S. and Europe who had been involved in the policy shift from vertical to integrated approaches, members of relevant foreign agencies in Kathmandu, and members of HMG's Ministry of Health (MOH) in order to document the translation stages from policy to program. Finally, Ms. Justice visited 25 health posts in different parts of Nepal, to gain a sense of how the ICHP was actually working.

What she found was that the program was not working the way it was supposed to. Furthermore, planners in Kathmandu were unwilling to acknowledge the fact. For example, untrained health post peons, who were supposed to run errands and make tea, actually provided the bulk of the client care, while trained health assistants were busy with administrative detail or absent from post. When Ms. Justice reported this finding, many of the foreign advisors responsible for designing the ICHP structure simply refused to believe her.

Through a wealth of anecdotal detail, the monograph builds a picture of fragmented and competing development agencies obsessed with internal bureaucratic procedure and the need to look good with the bosses back home. The picture of the MOH isn't much better, with a passive attitude towards responsibility and initiative sapping willingness to deal directly or critically with foreign advisors. Both groups place their own bureaucratic imperatives ahead of client needs. The result is an elaboration of paper endeavors which have more to do with promoting careers and justifying expenditures than meeting the health needs of the average Nepali.

Ms. Justice repeatedly asks if planners just don't have access to information about what is happening outside of their bureaucracies, or if they have it but can't use it. Yet she never disengages herself far enough from concrete description to answer the question directly. Instead, she concludes the study by suggesting that planners try to pay more attention to common sense qualitative feedback from the field which brings her back to her starting point.

Nonetheless, the richness of the subject matter and its presentation are thought provoking. Under what conditions are bureaucracies even capable of engaging client populations directly? If bureaucratic planning procedures did incorporate qualitative, cultural knowledge, would program outcomes necessarily be any

more predictable or appropriate, and is this necessarily bad? Are unexpected program outcomes evidence of bureaucratic failure, or should they be seen as evidence of Nepali society's ability to absorb and allocate foreign influences and resources based on principles of minimizing outside interference while maximizing local socioeconomic rationality?

Since the late 1970's, there has been a significant expansion of private sector health services in rural areas, and there is evidence that MOH training programs and health posts helped stimulate the demand on which it has been based. Although this expansion has not been the espoused purpose of any health sector development activity, it may be one of its more important and long lasting contributions.

In conclusion, Ms. Justice's study is well worth reading. Although she falls short of answering her own questions, her monograph provides such a wealth of illuminating detail on the behaviors and beliefs of development bureaucrats that it permits one to judge the evidence for oneself, while raising new theoretical issues for contemplation.

### **Rinpochay, Lati & Jeffrey Hopkins**

1985                      Death, Intermediate State and Rebirth in Tibetan Buddhism. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications. 75 pp. (\$ 6.95. For further information contact Snow Lion Publications, P.O. Box 6483, Ithaca, NY 14851)

Reviewed by:              Bruce Owens  
   Columbia University

This slim volume elegantly explains the Tibetan Buddhist concept of death and its relevance to the path of enlightenment as described in the Highest Yoga Tantra of the Guhyasamaja cycle. It is a translation of a text entitled "Lamp Thoroughly Illuminating the Presentation of the Three Basic Bodies -- Death, Intermediate State and Rebirth," written in the eighteenth century by Yang-gen-ga-way-lo-dro, a yogi of the Ge-luk-ba sect. The editors have inserted clarificatory notes in the body of the text which amplify rather than intrude on the integrity of the work. Extensive endnotes provide references to related works and precise definitions of the more difficult terminology in the text.

This text concisely describes the stages of death, the intermediate state which follows, and rebirth. The Buddhist notion of desire as condemning one to rebirth is central to the complex process outlined in these pages. The many transitions involved in the passage from death to rebirth are described both in terms of the experience of the being undergoing the process and, where applicable, the evidence of these states as witnessed by the bereaved.

The process of death, for example, is marked by a series of eight "Dissolutions," the third of which involves the dissolution of the "five phenomena on the level of the aggregate of discrimination." This third dissolution is characterized by one being "no longer mindful of the affairs of close persons such as one's parents," and is internally signified by "...the arising of an appearance called 'like fireflies'...like burning red sparks seen within puffs of smoke rising from a chimney..."

Many of these transitions constitute profound experiences which are potentially enlightening for those properly prepared to appreciate them. The text points to the apparent paradox that if "emptiness were realized during death, everyone would, absurdly, be effortlessly freed (from cyclic existence)." Though the eighth and last Dissolution entails the coming of "the clear light of death" and the "all-empty," the text explains that "Ordinary beings experience the clear light of death in the manner of its appearing without being ascertained, not with a mind of ascertainment." The editors further clarify this point by pointing out that at the time of clear light, "the ordinary being generates the fright that he will be annihilated." These passages illustrate how an understanding of the process of death and rebirth can serve as a guide for the ordinary being on the path to enlightenment and warn of the challenges to be overcome.

In his "Preface," Jeffrey Hopkins aptly points out that this work "... presents in remarkable clarity the psychological basis of Buddhist practice." Though this "Anuttara-yoga tantra" is esoteric even by Tibetan Buddhist standards, several passages are strikingly familiar to the westerner by virtue of their foundation in psychological erudition, particularly in so far as they pertain to desire. The following passage about rebirth from the intermediate state, uncannily reminiscent of Freud, provides a final example of why this volume is compelling reading by virtue of its familiarity as well as its profound esoterism.

"A smell-eater (intermediate being)...sees in an illusory manner the father and mother lying together. Due to wanting to copulate, if it is to be reborn as a male, it desires the mother and wishes to separate from the father; whereas, if it is to be reborn as a female, it desires the father and wishes to separate from the mother. Then, when it begins to embrace the one that is desired, through the force of previous actions it does not perceive any part of the body except the person's sexual organ, whereby anger is generated. This desire and hatred act as the cause of death, and the intermediate being enters the womb."

**Shrestha, Padma Prakesh, Editor**

1986                    Nepal Rediscovered: Photographs from the Archives of the Nepal Kingdom Foundation. London: Serindia Publications. (£15.00.)

Reviewed by:            David Rahmo Sassoon

The century of Rana rule of Nepal (1846-1951) remains an emotional and controversial historical period that meets with little public discussion. Though Rana rule brought a strengthening of the central administration of a relatively new Asian polity and succeeded in maintaining independence from British colonial hegemony, when Nepal emerged from the yoke of its autocratic control, marked by intra-familial intrigue and political violence, it remained economically under-developed and heir to a host of ecological and social problems that continue to plague the Kingdom.

Although the political fortunes of the Ranas declined following the restoration of the monarchy in 1951-52, because of generations of inter-marriage with the royal family, the Ranas remain a part of the Nepalese elite and still occupy high positions in government service and the army. Modern Nepal is now suffused with an ethic of economic and social development aimed at improving the lives of its primarily rural inhabitants, an ethic that was almost wholly absent from the world view of the Rana era. Hence, any current consideration of the period of their historical fortune is bound to be critical, and so has generally been avoided. The Ranas naturally are loathe to confront potential embarrassment, and independent minds are equally circumspect to engage in discourse that might offend the wielders of power.

This is why Nepal Rediscovered is a welcome publication. It presents a balanced introduction to the Rana era, invites further investigation of this important period of Nepalese history, and shows how intelligence and sensitivity can conquer the dangers posed by an uncomfortable topic. An excellent and concise political history by John Whelpton (which articulates some of the controversial issues) places the selection of court photographs (which make up the bulk of the book) into a meaningful context that welcomes interpretation by dissolving the mesmerizing veneer of these exotic period pictures. In addition, the photographs themselves are very revealing of the character of the Rana oligarchy. The sight of these one-time rulers, arrayed in family groupings, adorned in uniforms and costumes, occupying grand palaces of European design and engaging in elaborate tiger hunts, affords a direct, emotional form of knowledge. Through these self-willed portraits, the viewer can see what the Ranas thought of themselves, and how they wished to be regarded by posterity.

Unfortunately, as a graphic product, Nepal Rediscovered is unimaginative and sorely lacking in quality. The selection of photographs suffers from repetitiveness; although every prime minister is represented, they

assume such similar poses individually and with their families that the images begin to lose photographic interest. The sequencing of the pictures is equally problematical; they follow a categorical rather than a graphic plan, with photographs related to the various prime ministers of the hunt and ending, curiously, with a single image of Maharaja Bir Shamsheer's white palace.

What is most mournful, however, is the quality of the reproductions. They are too grey and pasty and do not do justice to the magnificent quality that so many of these period photographs attained through the use of large glass negatives and the subtleties of printing-out paper. More attention should have been paid to transmitting the excellence of photographic craftsmanship, as after all, this is primarily a book of photographs.

There are certain omissions, too, that leave the reader suspended in a state of unfulfilled expectation. Why is the wife of Jang Bahadur, the founder of the Rana régime, dressed so much like Queen Victoria? Where did Maharaja Juddha Shamsheer acquire the robes of the Order of the Bath? What inspired the bewildering array of uniforms, costumes, medals, crowns, hairstyles and fashions that clothe these people from a remote chain of hills in the Himalaya? What of the mores and manners of the court, and the role of the pampered, overdressed women? These photographs beg social questions, for which no answers are forthcoming.

A bibliography would have been a welcome addition to the book, as well as some indication of what the Nepal Kingdom Foundation, from whose archives these pictures emerge, precisely is.

Nevertheless, Nepal Rediscovered is a worthwhile effort that excites the imagination, preserves valuable historical evidence, and arouses a curiosity that demands further work on a most interesting time in the history of Nepal.