

2005

Book review of 'Histoire et Devenir des Paysages en Himalaya: Representations des Milieux et Gestion des Ressources au Nepal et au Ladakh' edited by Joelle Smadja

Ben Campbell
University of Durham, UK

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

Recommended Citation

Campbell, Ben. 2005. Book review of 'Histoire et Devenir des Paysages en Himalaya: Representations des Milieux et Gestion des Ressources au Nepal et au Ladakh' edited by Joelle Smadja. *HIMALAYA* 25(1). Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol25/iss1/16>

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.

HISTOIRE ET DEVENIR DES PAYSAGES EN HIMALAYA: REPRÉSENTATIONS DES MILIEUX ET GESTION DES RESSOURCES AU NÉPAL ET AU LADAKH

ED. JOËLLE SMADJA

REVIEWED BY BEN CAMPBELL

This important set of contributions on issues of environmental change and policy in the Himalayan region offers an array of distinct vantage points on processes of human-environmental interaction, that have been at the centre of academic and policy agendas for the last decades. With considerable modesty, and an admirable commitment to knowledge derived from detailed scholarly application, this collection avoids hyperbolic assertions, and instead calmly pulls apart many of the assumptions that have channelled internationally funded projects for change, presenting a number of inter-disciplinary empirical and analytical positions from which understandings of future developments can be comparatively assessed.

The underlying premise is that the alarmism and over-interpretation of crisis scenarios so prevalent from the 1970s, needs to be substituted by the value of in-depth, place-based studies to better appreciate the complexities of local processes of change. Combining archival and fieldwork research, this volume constitutes a substantial resource for rethinking both geophysical and socio-cultural aspects of environmental change. Smadja's introduction discusses the broad framework for taking a 'landscape' ('paysage') approach in the publication, and outlines the intellectual background to the project by a brief treatment of Ives and Messerli's 1989 turning-point book *The Himalayan Dilemma*. Already the reader is confronted with evidence for reconsidering the notion that Himalayan societies have inadequately understood their precarious ecology, by the inclusion of a traditional Nepali visual design of ascending contours of a deity-crowned mountain, perched on top of a wild boar, on top of a snake, on top of

a tortoise. In the following chapter Smadja demonstrates the paucity of historical information on rural Nepal prior to 1950, and then in chapter 2 proceeds to discuss inconsistencies of both local and scientific terminology relating to classifications of terrain.

Pascale Dollfus and Valérie Labbal shift the focus to Ladakh and note a greater homogeneity of local landscape terminology there, which is common to the Tibetan cultural region. They draw attention to how it is not so much the intrinsic properties of soils that is privileged in land classifications, so much as their development through use patterns, that structures the terminology. A chapter by Olivier Dollfus and Monique Fort provides a further, primarily geophysical overview of ongoing processes of mountain chain formation and human response. This contains comparative photographs from 1978 and 2000 from Benighat in west central Nepal, demonstrating local conservation measures, and box inserts on historical records of earthquakes by Mahesh Raj Pant. Dollfus and Fort conclude with a discussion of the different time-spans of nature and people, each with longer and shorter horizons, that are evidenced in contemporary landscapes.

To finish the framing for the studies to follow, Ramirez presents a series of tables derived from census and agricultural surveys, on different aspects of population and resources, dealing with settlement density, field holdings, irrigation, crops, forests, livestock, and foreign earnings. Little analysis is offered here (beyond a remark that the great valuation of rizi-culture by the Hindu high-caste population does not translate into their statistical distribution in areas of greater rice production), which is unfortunate, given that the information is so pertinent to

*Histoire et
Devenir des
Paysages en
Himalaya:
représentations
des milieux et
gestion des
ressources au
Népal et au
Ladakh*

Ed. Joëlle Smadja

CNRS Editions, Paris.
2003. pp646. ISBN
2-271-06000-1

competing theories of ecological demography, which is indeed recognised in the opening paragraphs.

The next five chapters concentrate more on the humanly meaningful relationships of perception and representation with the Himalayan environment. Marie Lecomte-Tilouine makes an important argument that the environment is rarely rendered in village cultural contexts in “plastic” arts. Instead a relation of immanence and of vision revealed to the chosen, is more characteristic of the ways people talk of the potential life attributes, or divine connection associated with objects (especially sacred stones), and landscape (which has no translation as such in Nepali) in animistic forms of folk religion. Correspondingly, greater interest is vested in evidence of divine actions than in human representations of the divine, and a certain visual vigilance is exercised to notice the presence of communicative events and also hidden traps, particularly of note for those who enter forests. The insert, by Nicolas Sihlé, at the end of this chapter makes some tanatalising suggestions about sacred space in lower Mustang, where, contrary to images about the “ordering” effects of mythical landscapes (sometimes held by local actors and observers), he argues that an irreducible diversity of place qualities resists this possibility.

Chapters by Joëlle Smadja, and Pascale Dollfus and Valérie Labbal discuss toponyms in the Tamang village of Salme (Nepal), and the two villages of Hémis-shukpa-chan and Sabu (Ladakh). Both explore the varied references, such as mythological, clanic-historical, or botanical, indicated by the names given to field sites, pastures etc. Smadja makes an argument that the individualised recognition of tree species in toponyms of human occupied space contrasts with a relative undifferentiation of forest spaces, in naming practices at least. In this she invokes Malamoud’s opposition of Brahmanic village/forest spaces, which I do not find convincing, given the highly mobile and intimate dwelling patterns of Tamangs in forested environments, which Hindus tend to find deeply ‘alien’. But her observation that field names do not reveal the crops grown on them is well made, especially as this allows a treatment of toponyms as a point of departure for understanding changing rather than fixed relations to the mountainside. A wonderful map provided at the end of the book offers a pictorial panorama of Salme’s place names, with a sophisticated set of codes to read clan histories and other references conveyed in them. Smadja’s comments about protector deities being associated with locations at the edges of village territory, especially the heights, provides an implicit continuity of analysis with Dollfus and Labbal’s work on Ladakhi toponyms. They find very little divine referencing in village place names, and it is the surrounding mountains that are the proper places of gods. As a comment on methodologies for accessing human-environmental relations, it appears that toponyms are an interesting starting point, and a substantial body of empirical material can be built up as a result, but perhaps the preoccupation with naming betrays a logo-centric, classificatory mind-set, that creates a domain

of knowledge for analysis, which does not necessarily convey the practices in which people occupy the places bearing these names. The fact that the Ladakh research revealed fifteen place names with no ‘meaning’ offered other than “it’s a name”, indicates that places do not necessarily need etymologies to be valued. Nevertheless it is a pity no explicit attempt was made to compare the findings from these two studies, either methodologically, or in terms of the linguistic overlaps and contrasts between them.

Lucile Viroulaud’s study of Magar Christians’ place locat- edness in relation to the Hindu landscape is an excellent view into the converts’ attempts to challenge fear and superstition by occupying an iconically dangerous site. It demonstrates a chosen strategy of differentiation, that nonetheless situates them within an ascribed condition of marginal power, for all that the Christians deny inherent linkages between human kind, nature, and divinity. This chapter deserves to be linked to Blandine Ripert’s superb analysis (in the last section of the book) of cultural change towards the environment in Salme. This looks at how the educated Tamang youth have taken on ‘environmental’ agendas to challenge the power of the elders in village social organisation. Rejecting the intimate ‘Tamang geosophy’ (as Smadja describes it), these modernisers, who have internalised the criticisms of ignorant village practice (familiar in the discourse of Himalayan environmental degradation), take it upon themselves to defend nature against thoughtless human actions of deforestation, and they also refuse to participate in agricultural labour, using their learning to set them apart from other villagers. They deploy their literacy to promote forest protection committees, and demonstrate their identification with wider Nepali society, its songs and values, thus shattering any idea of oral cultural unanimity that might be assumed to enfold the co-residents of the mountain village.

The third section of the book provides a set of historical perspectives on the management of environmental resources. Pascale Dollfus, Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, and Olivia Aubriot offer a sketch of agricultural history from Ladakh and Nepal, using limited archaeological materials, narratives on the origins of crops, and sources mentioning the spread of especially non-irrigated staples in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Some excellent information is provided on changes in the market value of the main crops from the nineteenth to twentieth centuries (p.306-7), showing the relative increase in price of maize in particular.

Ramirez’s analysis of eighteenth and nineteenth century documents concerning state interests in protecting rice ecologies is a tour de force. It effectively shows an historical genealogy for generalised alarmist scenarios for the environment, and the state’s assiduous self-presentation as defender of ecological integrity. From the mid-1800s connections were explicitly made between deforestation, desiccation, and soil fragility, in conventionalised narratives of menacing human activity. Ramirez notes the extent of protected areas made by sovereigns, and the severity of regulations made for their en-

forcement, amounting to what can be described as a “genuine politics of resource management” (p.329), intended to sustain a rice-growing Hindu society. Furthermore, he demonstrates contradictions in the centre’s attempts to keep people on their lands, while at the same time promoting colonisation of new areas for cultivation.

Bruno Muller’s chapter on resource conflicts in historical perspective deals with *kipat* tenure and economic change in Khimti (East Nepal). He too argues for the existence of apparently modern environmental concerns evident in texts issued by the state to regulate the multiple and competing interests of forest users, cultivators, herders, miners, and migrant communities. He draws attention to reforms in the first decade of the twentieth century that appear to have reduced the role of the centre as arbitrator in disputes between groups competing over the same resources, and that instead devolved responsibility for legal process to the villagers themselves, stipulating that they must regulate themselves under supervision of the village tax collector, and even he should reciprocally consult his subjects when he needs to take trees (p.357). This chapter therefore radically questions the novelty of the idea attached to recent forest protection measures taken for the benefit of ongoing human activity (i.e. ‘sustainability’).

Ramirez and Muller’s contributions are powerful challenges to paradigms of forest history in Nepal, but neither of them pose the question of influence from British India. The desiccationist model of environmental change exacerbated by human activity was widespread in the subcontinent by the beginning of the twentieth century (Grove 1993, Saberwal 1999), and the formalised devolution of forest responsibilities to local community management was an expedient response by the colonial presence to spread forest administration at the margins of effective control (Agrawal 2005). This is not to suggest a purely diffusionist reading of Nepali forest policy but perhaps the centre of forest science at Dehra Dun was ideologically influential in Kathmandu?

A jointly authored chapter by Blandine Ripert, Isabelle Sacareau, Thierry Boisseaux, and Stéphanie Tawa Lama presents an overview of changes in environmental law, institutions and approaches since 1950. If Ramirez and Muller are correct in their views of continuity in environmental concerns in Nepal, this chapter stresses the changes in administrative, conceptual and financial contexts that have characterised resource management policy since Nepal opened out to the world. They discuss forest nationalisation in the 1950s, the creation of the first national parks in the 1970s, and the later model of conservation areas from the 1980s, pointing especially to the strange “double mediation” now played by NGOs between the state and the international scene, and between the state and the village level. The authors explore with subtlety the tensions between environmental concerns and social equity. The box insert no. 19 gives a sobering account of how little import ecological matters receive in the programmes of political parties, while no. 20 reveals how the treatment of the environment in school texts simplistically

reproduces the old myth of population pressure being the cause of all ecological evil.

The fourth section of the book, on choices and constraints in local practice, starts with Satya Shrestha’s account of the effects of exclusion from the forests at Rara Lake National Park on the Matwali Chetri village of Botan. She notes how the intensification of subsistence pressure outside restricted areas of forest and pasture has contributed to impoverishment of livelihoods and the available resource base. Moreover, the government message on forest protection is made ambiguous by the permission devolved to the community to allocate timber permits that are generally exceeded by four times the stipulated amounts. Such practices were supposed to be avoided by the approach of participatory conservation advocated under the internationally celebrated Annapurna Conservation Area Project. Isabelle Sacareau’s chapter provides perhaps the most sustained critical analysis yet of the rhetoric and impact of ACAP. She shows how the model of community benefit from tourism, in exchange for restrictions on resource use, only appears to deliver for villages directly situated on trekking routes, and if tourism practice evolves, there is no apparent flexibility to modify how those currently advantaged villagers will continue to benefit. Indeed interviews in the area suggest if there are no tourists people cannot see a reason to participate in conservation schemes. Rather than appreciate local communities for the changing social realities they are, it seems ACAP holds to a very traditionalist notion of customary clothing, temples, and folklore to promote cultural integration with environmental objectives. The central point of Sacareau’s analysis is that ACAP’s institutional ideology rests on a Malthusian idea of people’s relations to local resources, whereas the long term economic profile of livelihoods in Modi Khola shows that the general shift towards replacing local resource dependence by external income sources had already been made well before ACAP was established. Thus, rather than being responsible for changing people’s relations to the environment, ACAP has ridden on an already existing wave.

Gérard Toffin contributes an ethnographic chapter on the social relations and economic activity of the Balami, a group of low caste Newar wood cutters and porters, distributed around the periphery of Kathmandu’s urban society. He uses their condition in the 1990s to comment on the very limited participation of such groups in the urban society’s economic prosperity, and to highlight the immediate proximity of the widening gulf between The Valley and the rest of the country.

The final case study by Tristan Bruslé, Monique Fort, and Joëlle Smadja presents initial findings from their study of change in Masyam in Palpa District. This was where the British officers Northey and Morris visited in the 1930s and took photographs of the landscape and reported on local conditions. A comparative perspective is thus possible, and the photographic contrasts enable the researchers to argue no massive deforestation has taken place over the interven-

ing decades, despite population growth. They draw attention to the distinctive practice of sloping fields (not terraced), interspersed with woodland and hedges. Restrictions on common forest access, and the effects of schooling on domestic labour, have intensified private tree ownership, (in the village of Kolang an average of 425 trees per holding is recorded). The authors suggest that there can be a positive relation between population growth and resource management, indeed for this reason emigration is feared, and the mosaic landscape of fields, pastures and trees demonstrates ever more complex working. The fact that certain groups of Blacksmiths and Magars in this area cannot be seen to benefit from this environmental management to the same extent pushes the authors to identify social cohesion as critical factor for the future.

Smadja's short conclusion describes the contributions of the volume as a resource of different pathways, and emphasises their exploratory qualities. She appeals for interventions in the Himalayan environment to take cognisance of symbolic dimensions of landscapes, and the precise knowledge people have of them. Of the possible common threads to many of the studies, she highlights the ways in which trees have become a new kind of capital in patterns of use and regulation, and compares the emerging 'artificial' landscapes of interspersed woodlands and hedgerows ('bocage') to the transformation previously performed by the spread of riziculture. A very serious thread she picks up relating to knowledge and power is the fact that the people in positions of environmental decision-making tend to be those least concerned with local realities, more focused on global agendas, and most removed from practical intimate connection to the landscapes whose future is in question.

This collection is a treasure box for anyone working in this problematic field, where all too often the vision of grand geophysical and socio-economic conjunctions have obviated the scrutiny of processes at work in distinctive places. The studies here mostly focus on more modest scales of relevance, and lay the ground for perspectives of greater time depth and comparative value to come. Indeed there is an apparent reflexive institutional humility at work in looking back at some of the pessimistic, crisis-orientated productions of CNRS connected researchers back in the 1980s, evidenced in Smadja's and Ripert's chapters. A consequence of concentrating at this more modest scale, and on producing empirical work of substance to reduce the uncertainty connected to over-easy generalisation has been occasionally to lose the theoretico-discursive panorama of other work relating to Himalayan debates. Guthman (1997) and Blaikie et al's (2002) revisit of their original 'crisis' study are for instance not referenced, and the connections to the burgeoning literature on Indian environmental history are not explored. Gender is a theme that hardly emerges in this collection, which is bizarre given its prominence in debates on environmental justice (Agarwal 2001), and the frequent discussions in this collection on exclusion. Despite these comments, as an entirety it

is hard to think of any book on Himalayan environmental studies of equal importance and originality to this one since the publication of Ives and Messerli (1989), and it must be hoped that the authors will continue to work on these themes even in these difficult times for research, when in Nepal the issue of who controls and can act in the rural environment has become a full-scale crisis of power.

REFERENCES:

- Agarwal, B. 2001. 'Participatory Exclusions, Community Forestry, and Gender: An Analysis for South Asia and a Conceptual Framework'. *World Development* 29(10): 1623-1648.
- Agrawal, A. 2005. 'Environmentality: Community, Intimate Government, and the Making of Environmental Subjects in Kumaon, India'. *Current Anthropology* 46(2): 161-190.
- Blaikie, P., J. Cameron, & D. Seddon. 2002. 'Understanding 20 years of change in West-Central Nepal: continuity and change in lives and ideas'. *World Development* 30(7): 1255-1270.
- Grove, R. 1993. *Green Imperialism*. Cambridge University Press.
- Guthman, J. 1997. 'Representing Crisis: the Theory of Himalayan Environmental Degradation and the Project of Development in Post-Rana Nepal'. *Development and Change* 28: 45-69.
- Ives, J. and B. Messerli 1989. *The Himalayan Dilemma: reconciling development and conservation*. London: Routledge.
- Saberwal, V. 1999. *Pastoral Politics*. Delhi: Oxford University Press

Ben Campbell is an anthropologist at the University of Durham in the U.K.