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## Book review of 'Secrets of Manang: The Story Behind the Phenomenal Rise of Nepal's Famed Business Community' by Clint Rogers

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## SECRETS OF MANANG: THE STORY BEHIND THE PHENOMENAL RISE OF NEPAL'S FAMED BUSINESS COMMUNITY

CLINT ROGERS

REVIEWED BY WIM VAN SPENGEN

This concise, accessible, and well-written book tells the story of the extraordinary rise of the Nyishangte of Manang village in northwest-central Nepal as international entrepreneurs and their developing into a successful business community. But beyond the presentation of the factual story there is the express attempt by the author to summarize the explanations that have been offered for their rise and indeed to complement these with his point of view. In 1975 virtually nothing was known about this ethnic group living in its dramatically beautiful homeland of Nyishang beyond the Annapurna Himal at 3,500 meters altitude. The Nyishangte were recommended for research by anthropologists no less than Von Fürer-Haimendorf and Macdonald, and praised as an extraordinary research opportunity both for their relative obscurity and the nature of their economic pursuits. In the following two decades a number of anthropologists and human geographers slowly unraveled the workings of Nyishangte economy and society, research efforts that have now been complemented by *Secrets of Manang*. The stated purpose of the book is to tell the story of the Nyishangte's conspicuous entrepreneurial emergence in the 1960s and Manang's economic re-emergence in the 1990s. In doing so, Rogers hopes to provide more insight into 'the phenomenon of entrepreneurship and the means by which it might emerge widespread within a village population'.

What then is the story of the Nyishangte in their trans-Annapurna high valley? Broadly speaking it has been the struggle for survival by a particular ethnic group not larger than some 6000 souls in a marginal high-altitude environment that does not allow for a year-round agricultural subsistence. It seems highly likely that from the very beginning of settlement in

Nyishang there has been an extra-territorial component in the livelihood strategies of its inhabitants. The practice of traveling to the middle hills of Nepal during wintertime to trade local produce for food has allowed the Nyishangte to subsist in the high upper valley. Theirs was and still is a mixed agricultural economy based on the growing of buckwheat and barley under irrigation and the rearing of yak in their high mountain meadows. The strictly middle-hill orientation of their traditional trade ventures stems from the isolation on their northern frontier by the major mountain ranges bordering Tibet. Trans-Himalayan trade with Tibet has therefore hardly played a role in the Nyishangte economy. The southward-bound direction of their traditional trade ventures explains their later trade expeditions across Nepal's southern border into South and South-East Asia.

The intriguing question is why the Nyishangte were more successful in their trade endeavors than similar high-altitude dwelling groups along the northern border of Nepal. The answer partly lies in the written prerogatives the Nyishangte managed to obtain from the government of Nepal from an early date onwards. For more than two hundred years the Nyishangte were allowed to trade freely throughout Nepal, and later beyond its borders, to the exclusion of comparable groups. No taxes other than symbolic ones were required from them, a remarkable situation in a highly centralized kingdom historically known for the heavy taxation of its population. This state of affairs gave the Nyishangte a tremendous advantage over other groups, which they later translated into capital accumulation and incipient wealth, eventually allowing half of the upper valley population migrate to Kathmandu and a few other urban centers in the 1970s.

*Secrets of Manang:  
The Story Behind  
the Phenomenal  
Rise of Nepal's  
Famed Business  
Community*

Clint Rogers

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Chapters 1 and 2 of *Secrets of Manang* provide the above background to Nyishangte enterprise, with the remaining chapters concentrating on the mechanisms behind the phenomenal rise of the Nyishangte as international traders. One of these mechanisms was that the Nepalese government liberally granted passports to the Nyishangte after 1962, (again to the exclusion of other groups) a prerogative from which many Manangi profited as a group. Then in the 1980s when there were setbacks in international trade, a significant number of the mainly small- and medium-scale traders migrated back from Kathmandu to Manang where they had maintained their land rights. This made it possible for them to then aggressively initiate a tourist industry in their homeland. The growing numbers of tourists coupled with investments of money earned in trade, produced a hotel-building boom in the 1990s, which gave a boost to the local economy of Manang and the wider valley.

The final chapters of the book concentrate on the characteristics of an entrepreneurial Manangi culture, including group cohesiveness based on mutual trust, reciprocity, and enhanced feelings of local Nyishangte identity, all thought by the author to further social systems of economic cooperation in the community. In particular, the author extensively analyzes the use of rotating credit associations (*dhukuti*) as a means to give villagers access to the capital they need. The penultimate chapter discusses evolving forms of political administration and local taxation within the wider setting of the Nepalese state, but at the same time stresses the continued relative autonomy of the upper valley. The Conclusion reverts to the central question of the book: What is so special about the people of Manang that they were able to rise to prominence as one of Nepal's foremost entrepreneurial communities?

From an analytical point of view the author stole my heart when he wrote in the Introduction that the answer to the above question is not simple, and that it should become increasingly evident in proceeding through the book that the answer lies in the conjunction of a number of diverse but complementary factors. Such a multi-factorial explanatory scheme closely reflects a Weberian position in which it is left to the historical interplay of different factors to produce a specific result. And indeed it is possible to sum up a large number of factors that *do* contribute to an explanation of the entrepreneurial success of the Nyishangte of Manang: geographic, economic, geopolitical, social, and cultural. All these factors are duly treated or at least mentioned and are well grounded in the existing literature. Clearly the author has done his homework. But already in chapter 3 the basic discourse and line of argumentation is set for the rest of the book. The author contends that in focusing on the importance of structural opportunities in explaining the rise of

the Manangi, most of the explanations proffered so far have neglected the relevance of the supply side, in other words the role of Manangi culture, more specifically entrepreneurial culture, in the Nyishangte aggressively taking advantage of commercial opportunities offered to them. I must concede that this is a line of argument that has not received much attention from Nyishangte-watchers so far. It is therefore to be appreciated that the third part of the book takes a closer look at Manangi entrepreneurial culture, tries to account for its origin, explains the social systems behind forms of economic cooperation, and unlocks the secrets of the tendered form of rotating credit associations that help aspiring traders and tourist bosses gain access to the capital they need. Let us see to what extent we can follow the author in his analysis.

According to Rogers, there is an early ecological basis for cooperation in Manang: the absolute dependence on irrigation in a semi-arid environment, which has contributed to the development of systems of mutual cooperation and reciprocity, which have now carried over into the economic sphere. For a European geographer raised in the tradition of the *géographie humaine* such an argument is hard to swallow. This type of physical determinism has long been abandoned in human geography. It is like explaining Dutch national wealth through its history in dyke-building and communal water management. Nobody believes such a thing in the Netherlands. Other and much more multi-factorial forces are at work here. The extension of Roger's argument to other village-based societies throughout the world, especially to village communities inhabiting *challenging* ecological niches in highland areas is another instance of a now outdated physical determinism.

Rogers repeatedly mentions in his analysis the existing culture of mutual trust and reciprocity that has now carried over into the financial sphere. He also points to frequent cases of spontaneous voluntary generosity, whether helping an incipient trader to a private loan, or extending the terms of repayment in times of adverse economic weather. 'Doing friendship', according to one of his informants, is the social and economic lubricant *par excellence* of Manangi society and, by implication, economy. The question arises to what extent Rogers has been the victim of inter-cultural manipulation in painting the entrepreneurial culture of the Manangi in such positive terms. Traditionally, the Nyishangte have been skillful in the cultural manipulation of the group's collective image in order to suit circumstances. There is little reflection in Rogers' book as to his own role as a researcher and how this might have affected the answers given and impressions conveyed to him. Moreover, the external perception of the Manangi is notoriously negative (whether fully justified or not) which is hard to reconcile with the rosy picture presented. However, in-between the lines of Rogers'



book, we read about aggressive and opportunistic behavior, about illicit business, about smuggling, as well as the exploitation of black markets by the Manangi. Might it not be that the necessary capital for opportunistic enterprise has been at least partly generated beyond those nicely reciprocal rotating credit associations?

This brings me to a more fundamental critique of Rogers' work. As the book proceeds towards the final chapters the Weberian multi-factorial scheme from the Introduction, with its emphasis on historical contingency, is exchanged for a more functionalistic, a-historic explanatory framework, in which the aggressive entrepreneurial culture is held largely responsible for the phenomenal rise of the Manangi as a business community. This is more of an essentialist concept of culture than most anthropologists would find acceptable. Culture nowadays is seen as much more fluid, the result of complex processes of historical interaction and change. That is *not* to say that there is no history in this book. But the ultimate argument centered on entrepreneurial culture alone does not convince, partly because earlier attention to historical developments is neglected in the final analysis. This, in the opinion of this reviewer, has led to insufficient attention to original forms of capital accumulation in the community dating back to the 1920s. As a consequence, I have difficulty understanding the recurrent contention that all Manangi were poor before the 1960s. I don't think this was so straightforwardly the case. I also think that economic stratification certainly was and perhaps is more pronounced than Rogers would have us believe. Is this another instance of inter-cultural manipulation?

Rogers is undoubtedly right in pointing out that the great differences in wealth and income are not evident within the Manangi community of the upper valley, as well as between the rural-based community of the upper valley and the urban-based Nyishangte in

Kathmandu. With Rogers, I agree that the general granting of passports had a leveling effect in the 1960s, but I would still venture to say that any further investigation into the (historical) generation of Manangi wealth should include attention to family histories of capital accumulation and economic stratification, not only in the upper valley, but also in Kathmandu, where, after all, half of the Nyishangte population lives. Only then does it become possible to draw firmer conclusions about the role of entrepreneurial culture in a more open-minded Weberian scheme of interpretation.

I have great admiration for the book Clint Rogers has written, despite these reservations. As I said, the book is concise and shows the great gift of synthetic yet analytic writing. It takes into account the work of others who have gone before him. It also is very readable and accessible to many because of its relatively low price. But in all this mundane praise lies its danger: that the book will be taken for the ultimate account on the Nyishangte of Manang, both by the educated but unsuspecting tourists who think this is the truth and nothing but the truth, and by the Manangi themselves who may be tempted to use Rogers' story to bolster their self-image in their search for a distinct identity. Perhaps this review can be multiplied and squeezed into the back of the book to ward off these dangers?



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