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## Book review of 'Bubriski'

John Mock  
*University of California, Berkeley*

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Bubriski, Kevin 1992. *Portrait of Nepal*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books. Introduction by Arthur Ollman. 84 b. & w. plates. \$24.95/Paper; \$40.00/Cloth.**

Kevin Bubriski's luminous portraits of Nepali people have appeared over the years in diverse publications; from the cover of the American Airlines in-flight magazine to a series of covers for Himal magazine. His sensitive and emotionally engaging black and white photography has developed a growing audience through major exhibitions throughout the United States as well as in Nepal. So it is a distinct pleasure to see a broad range of his large format, black and white work appear in the exquisitely produced book *Portrait of Nepal*. Readers of the *Himalayan Research Bulletin* will appreciate these detailed studies of Nepali citizens in their daily circumstances.



Gorkha, Central Nepal: Kevin Bubriski, 1984

Kevin Bubriski first went to Nepal with the Peace Corps in 1975 and remained there for four years. In 1984 he returned with a 4 x 5 inch view camera and the intention of making a collective portrait of the people he'd met. From 1985-1988 he worked under the auspices of the Harvard Film Center's Nepal Photography Project. In 1988 he was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship to continue his work in Nepal, and during 1989-1990 he photographed in Kathmandu as a Fulbright Fellow.

**Portrait of Nepal** is composed in four chapters. The first chapter, "Kathmandu Valley", presents images of Newar Bahals, Pashupatinath temple precincts, and daily life in Kathmandu. The second chapter, "The Middle Hills", presents Tamang people of Gatlang village in Rasuwa District, Gurungs from the upper Buri Gandaki valley in Gorkha District and the rarely visited areas of Kutang and Nupri in Gorkha, along with information on material culture, jati, effects of modernization, migration, and gender roles. The third chapter, "The Far Northwest", presents images from Humla, Limi, and Mugu areas in Jumla District with information about religious practice and the trans-Himalayan salt and wool trade. The fourth chapter, "The Tarai", presents images of Rana Tharu women, and of Janakpurdham, with information about the Rana Tharu history, distinctive gender roles, and information about village relocation for National Park expansion in Sukla Phanta.

The powerful images and the extended captions work together to provide more insight into specific cultural contexts than one typically encounters in a photography book. As an example of how the captions contextualize the images and represent the people pictured as individuals with their own identity and personal history, Plate 8 shows a man propitiating a large lingam on Kailash Hill at Pashupatinath. The caption reads; "Hindu civil servant Guna Prasad Pundhshani performs his daily morning worship of the great Shiva lingam at Kailash Hill on the ground of Pashupatinath temple before going to work at the government office of Publications and Letters." These are ethnographic recordings with context: names, dates, places, circumstances. Although the book is marketed as a fine art book, it is also a fine piece of visual anthropology. As such, it complements and extends more standard academic ethnographic studies, and goes well beyond the many "coffee table" books that have appeared in recent years.

The role of the photographer is never disguised or hidden in any of the pictures: we see the relationship between the photographer and the people who have come to sit or stand to be photographed. This frank depiction of the intimate relationship between Bubriski as ethnographer/photographer and the people with whom he works asks us to consider our role as academicians, scholars, and observers, and how we participate in the shaping of meaning in our own interactions with people in Nepal.

I do find the placement of the captions at the end of the book cumbersome, necessitating constantly flipping back and forth between photograph and caption, which for me function as a synergistic, indivisible whole. This inconvenient arrangement is a conscious response to the market for fine art books. I might wish that in the future, Bubriski will publish a book which narrates more fully the personal histories of the people he photographs and the depth of relationship which he so clearly has with them.

**John Mock**  
**Department of South and Southeast Asian Studies**  
**University of California, Berkeley**

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Todd Lewis  
Department of Religios Studies  
College of the Holy Cross  
Worcester, MA 01610-2395  
508 793-3436, FAX 508 793-3030