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**Book review of 'Les dieux du pouvoir: Les Magar et l'hindouisme au Nepal central [The Gods of Power: Magars and Hinduism in Central Nepal]' by Marie Lecomte-Tilouine**

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## Book Reviews

Marie Lecomte-Tilouine. *Les dieux du pouvoir: Les Magars et l'hindouisme au Nepal central* [*The Gods of Power: Magars and Hinduism in Central Nepal*]. Paris: CNRS Editions, 1993. Pp. 396, 36 plates, 9 maps, 4 tables, 23 figures.

Tracing the intersections between politics and religion among Magars in Nepal's Gulmi District, Marie Lecomte-Tilouine's important ethnography, *Les dieux du pouvoir: Les Magars et l'hindouisme au Nepal central*, deserves to be read not only by anthropologists who work among the Magars but also by scholars interested in the complex processes of social change and Hinduization taking place in many locations throughout the Himalayas. As Lecomte-Tilouine herself notes in a foreword written after a brief return to Nepal following the revolution of 1990, dramatic political upheavals can cause equally precipitous religious and social transformations; it is therefore essential that scholars interested in social change attend to the interpenetrations among all these different forces.

The book's central thesis is that the Magars of Gulmi District (in particular, the male elders of the village of Darling) have strategically adopted certain aspects of Hinduism in order to preserve their own political power. Drawing on her sixteen months of fieldwork in Darling from 1986-1988, Lecomte-Tilouine attempts to reconstruct the religious and political history of the village, paying special attention to the period of the early 1960's, when the *panchayat* system of government was introduced. She writes, ". . . changer le politique c'est transformer le religieux dans ce pays où les chefs traditionnels étaient investis de la fonction royale divine" [". . . to change the political is to transform the religious in this country where traditional leaders have been invested with a royal and divine function"] (1993:14). Using the realignments of the 1960's as a case study, Lecomte-Tilouine suggests in her conclusion a more general model for understanding the Hinduization of the Magars, from their first contact with Hinduizing Thakuri kings in the seventeenth century to the present day. Throughout the book, Lecomte-Tilouine emphasizes that the Magars' selective adoption of Hindu practices must be understood as active political strategies and conscious symbolic identification.

In her analysis of the social and religious ramifications in Darling of the political upheaval of 1961, Lecomte-Tilouine states that the new *panchayat* system created a religious void when it secularized power. Whereas in the past, the *mukhiya*, or village chief, had been the religious *and* secular leader, with the advent of the *panchayat* system of government, no person was officially designated to fill the role of religious leader. The *pradhan panch* was designated as the secular leader, usurping part of the *mukhiya's* power and causing a crisis in both political and secular legitimacy. In Darling, Lecomte-Tilouine argues, the village elders came up with an "ingenious solution": when the *mukhiya* became the *pradhan panch* (thereby reinforcing existing power relations -- a move that occurred in many villages in Nepal at this time), he turned what had been private, domestic calendric rituals into public religious events under his own political control. Lecomte-Tilouine describes how the new *pradhan panch* in Darling strategically prevented the two other claimants of religious power, the Brahman priest and the *dhami* medium, from officiating at rituals such as the full moon of Baisakh (a central event in the Magar ritual calendar) and the Hindu festival of Dasain. The end result in Darling, Lecomte-Tilouine writes, was a concentration of religious and political power in the hands of the *pradhan panch* from 1961 until the revolution of 1990.

*Les dieux du pouvoir* is divided into three parts. In the first, entitled "The Context," Lecomte-Tilouine geographically, ethnographically, and historically situates the Magars, the most numerous of Nepal's Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups. The first two chapters of this section, "What is known about the Magars?" and "Some problems in the social anthropology of Nepal," should be read by anyone considering conducting research on a Tibeto-Burman ethnic group, particularly Magars. Drawing on available ethnographic and historical sources as well as on oral histories by Darling villagers, Lecomte-Tilouine discusses the question of Magar ethnicity in a nuanced and productive manner. She not only addresses the relationship of Kham Magars to other types of Magars but also sums up what was known as of 1993 about their numbers, their geographical distribution across Nepal, their ethnic identity/ies, and their history.

In the second part of her book, "The Religious Universe of the Village," Lecomte-Tilouine examines calendric and life cycle rituals in detail, then analyzes how shamanism has been integrated into Hinduism in the village. The three chapters of this section provide precise information on the religious practices of the Magar, Brahman, and Kami (lower-caste) inhabitants of Darling. In this section, as in the rest of the work, Lecomte-Tilouine treats the Magars not as an isolated ethnic group but as people who interact daily with Brahmans, Kamis, and members of other castes and ethnic groups.

In the third and final section of *Les dieux du pouvoir*, "The Regional Pantheon," Lecomte-Tilouine argues that the Magars of Darling share to a large degree the pantheon of other residents of Gulmi District. Dividing the pantheon into three categories, she discusses the divinities of the inhabited world (the house and village), the divinities of the forest, and the divinities of the mountain ridges. A regional approach is necessary, Lecomte-Tilouine maintains, in order to distinguish between commonalities deriving from geographical proximity and those resulting from a shared ethnic background.

*Les dieux du pouvoir* is an important ethnography for Himalayan scholars to read for many reasons. In addition to situating Magar religious and political practices historically, Lecomte-Tilouine pays careful attention to the fluidity of ethnicity, providing rich detail on specific ceremonies as conducted by Magars, Brahmans, and Kamis. Building on the work of other scholars of the Magars, such as John Hitchcock, Augusta Molnar, Anne de Sales, and Gary Shepherd (whose books are listed in a comprehensive bibliography on the Magars), Lecomte-Tilouine's monograph contributes to our understanding of the history and ethnicity of the Magars. By not treating the Magars' political and religious practices as static and unchanging, Lecomte-Tilouine takes a similar approach to that of Sherry Ortner (1989), whose work on the history of Sherpa religious practices is curiously absent from Lecomte-Tilouine's general bibliography.

Several works on Magars have come out since the publication of Lecomte-Tilouine's monograph: two dissertations on Magars in Palpa District (Adhikary 1993; Ahearn 1994), and a history of the Magars in Nepal, written by the political leader and scholar M.S. Thapa (1993). The different perspectives offered by these works complicate Lecomte-Tilouine's analysis by adding sometimes contradictory information from Palpa, the district in Nepal most heavily populated by Magars, and by providing a glimpse into the important new political movement that seeks to unite all Tibeto-Burmese peoples in Nepal under one umbrella party called the Rastriya Janamukti Party. Any future attempts to trace the links between religious and political practices among Magars will have to take into account the exhortations of Magar leaders such as M.S. Thapa and Gore Bahadur Khapangi, who travel throughout Nepal urging Magars to fight the political, social, and religious oppression of Hinduism by "reconverting" to Buddhism, which, they claim, used to be the religion of the Magars before high-caste Hindus arrived in Nepal centuries ago.

Although it should be clear by now that I view *Les dieux du pouvoir* as essential reading for scholars of the Himalayas, I do have a few criticisms of the work. First, Lecomte-Tilouine gives little, if any, attention to gender in her discussions on the dynamics of power relationships. This is especially unfortunate given the differing conceptions of gender and sexuality embodied in Hinduism and other religious traditions. Second, there are many generalizations but few actual people or events in Lecomte-Tilouine's narrative, creating a more frozen, essentializing ethnography than Lecomte-Tilouine sets out to produce. Furthermore, some of the generalizations she makes do not hold for Junigau, the Magar village in Palpa District in which I did my dissertation research (a district for which Lecomte-Tilouine admits she has little information). For example, Lecomte-Tilouine states, "Chez les Magar et les Kami, il n'y a de mariage que consentement mutuel des époux" ["Among Magars and Kamis, there is only marriage by mutual consent of the spouses"] (1993:169). For the Magars of Gulmi and elsewhere, this may be the case, but for the Magars of Junigau, almost two-thirds of all first marriages in this century were arranged, celebrated by extravagant Hindu *kanyadan* ceremonies. Of the remaining first marriages, approximately half were elopements of the kind Lecomte-Tilouine describes, while the rest were actual capture marriages, a form of marriage Lecomte-Tilouine does not mention. During the past dozen years, however, there has been a trend among Junigau Magars toward elopement and away from arranged or capture marriage. Matrilateral cross-cousin marriage is also becoming less common in the village. I explore some of the implications of these changes for gender, kinship, and power relations in my dissertation (Ahearn 1994). When Lecomte-Tilouine states, therefore, that Gulmi Magars do not

consider marriage to be a major social or religious event (1993:202), there are some interesting comparisons that can be made with other groups of Magars among whom Hinduization has proceeded along different lines.

These are minor points, however. *Les dieux du pouvoir* offers many new insights into the interconnections between religion and politics. Moreover, it is well organized and clearly written. It merits a wide readership.

Adhikary, Kamal Raj. *The Participation of the Magars in Nepalese Development*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Texas, 1993.

Ahearn, Laura M. *Consent and Coercion: Changing Marriage Practices among Magars in Nepal*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Michigan, 1994.

Ortner, Sherry. *High Religion: A Cultural and Political History of Sherpa Buddhism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.

Thapa, M.S. *Prachin magar ra akkha lipi*. Kathmandu, Nepal: Vriji Prakashan, 1993.

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**Susi Dunsmore. *Nepalese Textiles***. London: British Museum Press, 1993. Pp. 204, 100 color and 80 Black and White Illustrations. £16.95.

In her lavishly illustrated work *Nepalese Textiles*, Susi Dunsmore catalogues the rich varieties of traditional textiles found among the equally varied ethnic groups of Nepal. Dunsmore begins this long overdue exploration of textiles in Nepal with a description of textiles in Nepalese history, legend, and art. Through her examination of sculpture, early depictions of Nepalese daily life, and illustrations of Hindu and Buddhist legends, for example, Dunsmore traces the history of textiles. She also notes mentions of textile in early colonial and scholarly literature on Nepalese society and culture.

The main body of Dunsmore's book details and chronicles raw materials, production techniques, and uses of textiles in several of Nepal's ethnic groups. With a background in both art and museum work, Dunsmore approaches textiles and textile production with an eye to collection, description, and cataloguing. Chapter two, for example, examines both the usage and processing of raw materials including extensive photographs of the processing of wool (especially yak and pashmina), nettle (*allo*) and cotton, among others. The following chapter, Chapter 3, investigates dyes and dyeing techniques. What both of these chapters demonstrate is the extensive use of local natural resources, contributing to a greater appreciation for environmental conservation in Nepal.

Chapters 4-6 contain a survey of the weaving techniques and textile designs associated with several of Nepal's ethnic groups. Dunsmore pays particular attention to the Rai and Limbu of Eastern Nepal where both she and her husband lived for several years. Dunsmore gives a detailed step by step description of the production of Dhaka cloth by Limbu weavers including intricate diagrams, illustrations, and photographs. Her in-depth examination of dhaka patterns, for example, emphasizes the beauty, complexity, and artistic quality of this textile. Dunsmore also includes more superficial descriptions of the weaving and embroidery of Athparia Rai shawls and nettle fabrics, Newar cotton saris and printed fabrics, and Gurung woolen blankets. Chapter 5 examines what Dunsmore calls the "Himalayan North," including the woolen textiles of the Sherpas (most especially the colorful aprons of Sherpa women), and the tents, blankets, and carpets of Tibetan-speaking groups in Dolpo and Manang. She also emphasizes the different techniques (including looms) of these groups. Finally, Dunsmore gives a brief account of the textiles of Southern Nepal, including the Tharu and Rajbansi ethnic groups.

Finally, Dunsmore concludes by examining the role that development has played in altering traditional textile production techniques and distribution. Most particularly, she explores the possibilities for weavers in income generation projects supported by both development and the tourist industry.