

1999

## Book review of 'Tales of the Turquoise: A Pilgrimage in Dolpo' by Corneille Jest

Jonathan Nicholas

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

### Recommended Citation

Nicholas, Jonathan (1999) "Book review of 'Tales of the Turquoise: A Pilgrimage in Dolpo' by Corneille Jest," *Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 19: No. 1, Article 13.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol19/iss1/13>

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](mailto:scholarpub@macalester.edu).

502-505). Many of these materials are in Tibetan, though to locate the relevant entries one must know Chinese. Obviously, the exploration of such an enormous body of material would require research far beyond the scope of Nietupski's current publication, but we can be happy that he has set the stage for further research. Having setting forth the basic framework and issues in his valuable study of this important Tibetan polity in the modern period, Nietupski will no doubt continue to reveal more of the "iceberg" in future publications.

Gray Tuttle  
Harvard University

### **Tales of the Turquoise: A Pilgrimage in Dolpo**

Corneille Jest. Ithaca: Snow Lion: paper, 1999.

I once watched a man load 850 pounds of gear into a Ford Explorer in preparation to spend 48 hours in the woods.

Karma, a wise man of Dolpo, took a rather different approach to the task of readying himself for a walk on the wild side.

He gathered up a sack of tsampa, a ball of tea, a lump of butter sewn in goat skin, some salt, a handful of dried chilies, some freshly honed needles and some freshly printed prayer flags. This entire kit and kaboodle disappeared comfortably into the cavernous folds of his chuba.

Tibetans, you see, need no tips from Martha Stewart on the art of packing lite.

In 1961, Corneille Jest, Director of Research at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris, set out on a stroll around Dolpo. His companion, Karma, an elderly nomad from Western Tibet, turned out to be more than mere guide and mentor.

Karma was a window into an endangered species, the cultural heritage of one of the least understood corners of the Himalaya.

During his circumambulation, Jest, through the eyes, the ears, and—most eloquently—the stories of his companion, received an uncommon introduction to what he calls "the mental world of the Tibetan.

And what a world it was.

Cross-dressing transsexuals every bit as comfortable in 16th century Tibet as they might have been in 20th century San Francisco.

People who talk to the animals as efficaciously as any Dr. Doolittle.

Sons sliced in two by confused rulers. Who needs Jerry Springer?

And as for the regular doses of advice, heck, some of it might have come direct from Dear Abby in response to a plea from a troubled marriage.

A smoking fire can still give warmth.

A bone with a little meat is delicious.

Strange and enticing enough for you? And I didn't even get to the part about the purloined manuscripts that made their way home courtesy of some very determined, and very self-directed, yaks.

The meat of this book resides in the stories told along the route by Karma, one of those traveling companions who never met a tale he didn't like to retell. At every twist and turn, every monastery and morning, every bend and breeze, Karma find a prompt to launch himself into a yarn.

Some of the stories are dense, complex, non-linear. The reader at first risks the impression that there may be a lot less to these tales than meets the eye.

Then one remembers that in the Himalaya less is more.

And then the ride begins.

So much for the meat. But this volume also has a skeleton. One of the book's blessings is that, along the way, Jest intersperses these tales with his own observations, all related in simple, direct language,

mercifully free of any Gee-isn't this-neat? baggage. As a result, what we get here is a first-hand look at the complexly simple and simply complex rhythms of daily life in Dolpo.

The churning of tea.

The patching of boots.

The spinning of prayer wheels.

The constant weaving of both cloth and community.

The expert might recognize all this as a riotous cocktail of ancient Indian folklore and Bon traditions. But the lay reader may enjoy it for something else. Here offered is a 214-page cultural treasure, a peek into the heart of a 1,000 year-old tradition on the brink of being lost.

And if all that isn't enough, at least you got a great lesson in packing.

Jonathan Nicholas

*Jonathan Nicholas, a newspaper columnist in Oregon, worked in Nepal from 1972 to 1978. He, too, once fit all of his travel needs inside a chuba, but they included, he confesses, a Swiss Army knife the size of a hot dog.*

### **Nationalism and Ethnicity in a Hindu Kingdom: The Politics of Culture in Contemporary Nepal.**

Edited by David N. Gellner, Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka, and John Whelpton. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997. 623 pages. Hardcover, £ 45. Indian Edition (available in Kathmandu), 1998, £ 30.

Back in the mid-1970s, when a student began to learn about the history of Nepal's political development, it was essential to consult the cogent and comprehensive writings of Leo Rose. Once the Nepalese people succeeded in overthrowing the panchayat system in 1990, however, Rose's volumes were relegated (in many respects) to a bygone era. Only with the publication of **Nationalism and Ethnicity in a Hindu Kingdom** is there a resource of similar importance that treats the myriad changes in politics and culture underway in post-1990 Nepal. It is essential reading for anthropologists, political scientists, and others interested in understanding how the introduction of parliamentary democracy and a host of new political freedoms has transformed the Nepalese polity. The editors deserve praise for assembling such a compelling and high-quality anthology, one that had its origins in a Conference held at Oxford University in 1992. **Nationalism and Ethnicity in a Hindu Kingdom** is a landmark in the field, an indispensable work aptly dedicated to Richard Burghart. With the publication of a South Asian edition, it is hoped that the volume will receive the readership it deserves, both within the region and beyond.

The issues and dilemmas featured in many of the chapters provide much insight about Nepal in 1999, including the dysfunctional political system, the continuing relevance of the monarchy, and the rise of the Maoist movement. Case studies draw the reader into the "politics of culture" among most of Nepal's largest ethnic groups, and we learn how national laws have created strikingly different effects across the mountains where, as David Gellner notes, "Just what it means to live in a Hindu polity varies a great deal depending on who you are (pg. 3)." Among the many valuable trends reported on, we see how caste and ethnic sentiments remain a potent force, how a "victimization mentality" has arisen even among groups that have prospered and found parliamentary representation, and how globalization has drawn scholars and their work into ethnic politics.

The editors and contributors deserve high praise as every chapter in this volume is well-presented, accessible to the non-specialist (in style and with the inclusion of a glossary), and illustrated with fine photographs and maps. The specialist will appreciate the thorough index and an extensive bibliography. While it is not possible in this review to discuss adequately each of the 16 chapters only a summary of the most salient points that strike this reviewer can be mentioned here.

David Gellner's introduction effectively lays the historical foundations and introduces comparative themes. The contested cultural domains of language and religion are especially emphasized. Of special interest is the full translation of the text produced by one of the pivotal groups active in ethnic politics, the Nepal Janajati Mahasangh ("Nepal Federation of Nationalities"), a document that in 1993 defined who are, in its view, the "indigenous people" of Nepal (pgs. 20-21).