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Book review of 'Selves in Time and Place: Identities, Experience, and History in Nepal' by Debra Skinner, Alfred Pach III and Dorothy Holland (eds.)

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BOOK REVIEWS

Selves in Time and Place: Identities, Experience, and History in Nepal.

Edited by Debra Skinner, Alfred Pach III, and Dorothy Holland. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998. Pp. xii + 342.

This book serves to elucidate the relational positioning, in both time and space, of socially differentiated (in terms of gender, caste, ethnicity, religion, etc.) individuals in Nepal. We see, for example in Mary Des Chene's piece on the "living personal trajectory" of a Gurung woman, how the constraints on and choices of women in Nepal are shaped not only by gender relations, but also changing family position and rural-urban differentiation. In Steven Parish's article, caste constraints on and subversions by individuals within the Newar community are explored. Several chapters explore the religious context of defining and constructing "selves" in various communities: Ortner's chapter queries the relation between shamanism and Buddhism among Sherpas; Lewis explores the relation between religion and ethnicity among a particular group, Newari Buddhists; Mumford compares a particular religious tradition, Tibetan Buddhism, among groups (Tibetans and Gurungs). Other contributors focus on agency, often subversive, as enacted through seemingly thoroughly circumscribed activities, such as women's songs and stories (chapters by Skinner & Holland, by March, and by Enslin), or marriage rituals (articles by McHugh and Ghimire). Less circumscribed pursuits, such as discourses madness or trade, are explored by Pach III and Liechty repectively, to deconstruct changing constructions of "selves." Of course, my brief descriptors of the various chapters does not do justice to the ethnographic richness of each contribution.

In the "Afterword" to this collection of articles, Robert Levy cogently addresses the current preoccupation by scholars with self and agency. Anthropology, it seems to me, was one of the first of the social sciences to demand of its practitioners an explicit reckoning of their own position vis-a-vis their subject matter. A prime example of this is the preface of Parish's recent book, *Hierarchy and Its Discontents* (Philadephia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996). In my own discipline, political science, the usually training, as Sanjib Baruah puts it in his new book on Assam (*India Against Itself*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999, pp. xiii-xiv), is "more in Max Weber's ideal of objectivity in the social sciences than in the post-modern notion of an author spelling out his 'positionality'." I therefore feel that it is particularly necessary to point out *my* positionality in this review: I am a political scientist reviewing work written by anthropologists. Of course my purpose in positioning myself is to subversively suggest a disclaimer for any errors or misinterpretations I may make! I do think however that anthropology has much to offer other social sciences, in particular my own discipline, by reminding us all of our own subjectivity. On the downside, some suggest that anthropology has become the navel-gazing discipline—perhaps we have all heard the joke about what the post-modern anthropologist said to his informant: "Enough about you; let's talk about me." What I found particularly refreshing about the volume under review here is that it moves beyond the scholar's self-discovery into a far more illuminating post-modern turn, or what Levy in his Afterword refers to as "post-englightenment" gaze, back to the informant.

Yet this turn of focus, welcome as it is, raises other problems. Perhaps these are problems that only a political scientist would conjure up and therefore aren't germane to the subject matter of the volume. Nevertheless, I am uneasy with certain assumptions about the universals and particularlisms of the self and agency in the volume. Clearly the authors of the volume would agree with S.P. Mohanty's claim that we need to conceptualize "agency as a basic capacity shared by all humans across cultures" ("Us and Them: On the Philosphical Bases of Political Criticism," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 2 (1989), p. 20). No longer are women, or untouchables, or marginalized ethnic groups to be viewed as passive victims, unchanging over time and place. Indeed, this seems to be the very poignant point of this volume and well addrssed in the editors' introductory chapter. But is the *recognition* of agency, the *knowledge* of self as active agent, the capacity for *self-reflection* on agency (i.e., not agency itself) universal or culture-specific? Obviously it is a trait of Western culture, otherwise the Western anthropologists, i.e., the majority of contributors to this volume, would not be able to even identify as the topic of their investigation agency, self, and capacity to act. The contributors, however, seem equivocal about whether self-reflection on agency is universal. In his article, Parish (p. 56) strongly implies that indeed it is. A political theorist might conclude that Parish is a liberal—the belief that self-reflection is universal is a liberal one, or what Levy would term an "Enlightenment" one. Levy himself rejects this. In his Afterword, he argues for the particularism of self-reflection in his comparison of Nepalis and Tahitians, suggesting that the Nepalis, unlike Tahitians, are more like "us" in the West. But at this point, one feels that Levy should perhaps return to navel-gazing. Is Tahitian society really different from Nepali (or Newari to be more specific in Levy's case) in regard to self-reflection and notions of the self? Or did Levy's questions change over an obviously productive career in the field? Of course the same could be asked of Parish: are Parish's informants' interpretations of narratives consistently subversive or only when they are talking to Parish? More broadly, are our interpretations self-reflective of ourselves?

Most of the contributors to the volume probably fall somewhere between these two positions of Parish and Levy on the issue of self-reflection as universal or particular. I would have liked however a more explicit treatment in some of the other chapters, particularly of the relation between ritual and self-reflection on agency. For example, when women construct their selves through subtle subversions in traditional singing, is this "agency" self-reflective? Or better yet, is it pre-meditated? Is the "self" making a life choice or is the self spontaneously responding to unanticipated consequences of changing cultural practices? Des Chene (pp. 39-40) does indeed raise these questions in a slightly different format—interestingly, she concludes that anthropologists should turn away from focussing on rituals and toward the mundane. The danger in her prescription is that we unwittingly replace cultural rituals with political and economic structures as the totalizing constraints on agency. Compelling work done by anthropologists on the *bikas* or development mantra suggests that everyday survival and subsistence in Nepal is contextualized by this discourse. Nowadays, the development debate is updated with discourses on global capitalism and neo-liberalism. We do not however want to revert back to the "old" anthropology, where the anthropologist imposes a external framework to structure the data she collects. We must be careful not to render the "forces of global modernity", to use Liechty's phrase (p. 132), as totalizing, structuring subjects' needs, wants and preferences. Trade is not synonymous with capitalism; we should not interpret every transaction as indicative of global capitalism, every interaction in urban Kathmandu as manifest of materialist anxiety (especially if your "N" is only two, as in Liechty's case). To be fair, Liechty does characterize transactions and interactions as "negotiated," but one fears the loss of agency to the universality of capitalist culture in his analysis.

Again, perhaps these questions I'm raising are merely the ramblings of a political scientist, as irrelevant to anthropologists as I am sure they are to the contributors' informants. But these are the questions that puzzle the political scientist in reading this volume. For me at least, they are provocative questions—and I admire and recommend a book that provokes them. Perhaps the cover photo (by Todd Lewis) sums up the paradoxes raised the best: a small boy, cozy on an oversized rigid chair, sits below three pictures: one of Buddha, one of Marx, and one of the King of Nepal.

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Tibet and The British Raj: The Frontier Cadre 1904-1907.

By Alex McKay. Richmond, UK: Curzon Press, 1997. Pp.xxvi + 293, 9 Plates. $35.00.

Tibet, colonized in a period in which nations around the world were asserting their independence from imperial rule, presents an interesting case study for scholars of the history and anthropology of colonization and anti-colonial struggle. The academic study of Tibet has, until recently, been almost exclusively focused on the study of Tibetan religion. One of many gaping holes in the scholarship on Tibetan culture and history has been in the study of Tibetan political culture in the period preceding China's "liberation" of Tibet in the 1950's. Alex McKay's informative and well-researched account fills a gap in the scholarship on 20th century