

8-2013

**Toni Huber and Stuart Blackburn, editors, Origins and Migrations  
in the Extended Eastern Himalayas. Reviewed by Mélanie  
Vandenhelsken.**

Mélanie Vandenhelsken  
*Austrian Academy of Sciences*

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

**Recommended Citation**

Vandenhelsken, Mélanie. 2013. Toni Huber and Stuart Blackburn, editors, Origins and Migrations in the Extended Eastern Himalayas. Reviewed by Mélanie Vandenhelsken.. *HIMALAYA* 32(1). Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol32/iss1/21>

This 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).

puzzle” as she puts it (p. 338). This, coupled with a selection of beautiful photographs and a valuable bibliography of Western and Tibetan sources, makes this book a must-read for scholars of Tibetan history and anthropology as well as audiences interested in stories about Asian medicine(s) in an era of globalization and change.

#### REFERENCES

Adams, V., M. Schrepf and S. Craig, eds. 2010. *Medicine Between Science and Religion: Explorations on Tibetan Grounds*. Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books.

Saxer, M., 2013 (forthcoming). *Manufacturing Tibetan Medicine: The Creation of an Industry and the Moral Economy of Tibetanness*. Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books.

*Sienna Craig is a cultural anthropologist whose scholarship focuses on the cross-cultural study of health and illness, health-development interventions, Asian medicines and globalization, and experiences of migration and social change. She is the author of Healing Elements: Efficacy and the Social Ecologies of Tibetan Medicine and Horses Like Lightning: A Story of Passage through the Himalayas.*

## ORIGINS AND MIGRATIONS IN THE EXTENDED EASTERN HIMALAYAS

BY TONI HUBER AND STUART  
BLACKBURN, EDS.

Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012. 336 pp. \$136.00 (hardback).  
ISBN 9789004226913

REVIEWED BY MÉLANIE  
VANDENHELSKEN

Toni Huber and Stuart Blackburn’s edited book presents a multi-disciplinary study of both the historical and narrative aspects of origins and migrations. It explores people’s own origin narratives and their representations of their relation with the social and natural environment, as well as their role and transformations in relation to negotiations of identification with modern state policies. It also discusses the patterns of ancestral migrations that have shaped the settlement of the Eastern Himalayan area based on anthropological, historical, and linguistic analysis.

Origins and migrations have been an important area of focus in Nepal and northeast India studies since their beginning, particularly in relation to the study of settlement in the southern foothills of the Himalayan mountain range, as

well as to local cosmogonies<sup>1</sup>. An original aspect of this book is its focus on an area that the editors label the ‘Extended Eastern Himalayas’ – stretching from far western Nepal to northeast India and Burma – apprehended as “meaningful units of comparison” (p.2), and where “a substantial degree of similarity” (p.2) can be found, notably on cultural practices related to the question of origins. This concept also enables bringing together migratory spaces crossing national borders, some of which have only recently been closed, like northern Arunachal Pradesh.

The contributions demonstrate the heuristic value of the study area, and offer significant findings on the subject of origins and migrations. From an analysis of the settlement history of the village of Sama in Gorkha district, Nepal, Geoff Childs brings out a pattern of migrations in the Himalayan region as small-scale and interrelated processes. He highlights social networks and other factors organizing these migrations, both in past and present, which form “a cultural template for migration” (p. 28) that includes in particular the notion of hidden land, and the role of itinerant yogis.

Martin Gaenszle presents aspects of the indigenous notion of the place of origin among two groups of Rai in eastern Nepal through an analysis of (mainly) ritual speeches. Rai myths also account for ancestral migrations that Gaenszle analyses as a “spatialised model of descent” (p. 39) linking the group to a particular territory. Origin as a metaphor of genealogical derivation explains its dangerous aspect: it is a place from which one should escape to gain autonomy.

Robbins Burling shows us how a set of presumptions, partly connected to the Bible, shaped ethnographers’ view of origins and migrations among northeast Indian tribes during British colonisation. Notably, an understanding of migrations as recent large-scale movements of coherent groups was shaped by using the notion of ethnic continuity and by equating language with ethnicity. Burling argues that the colonial ethnographer had an important role in the present-day notion of the permanence of ethnic boundaries in northeast India.

Alexander Aisher highlights the patterns organizing migration narratives of the Nyishi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, and shows how these narratives serve as more than just a means for preserving the group’s history. Nyishi migration narratives actually offer guides for human conduct, for relations between humans and their natural environment, and preserve memory of clan warfare and allegiances.

Toni Huber proposes a “non-speculative approach to understanding migrations in the far eastern Himalayas” (p.

---

1. Most of the studies on specific Nepalese and Northeast Indian ethnic communities address the question of its origins. Other studies mainly focus on origins and migrations, such as (to mention only one monograph) Martin Gaenszle, *Origins and migrations: kinship, mythology and ethnic identity among the Mewahang Rai of East Nepal* (Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point, 2000). In recent years, researches have focused on migrations outside Nepal, for example, Hiroshi Ishii, David N. Gellner and Katsuo Nawa, *Nepalis Inside and Outside Nepal: Social Dynamics in Northern South Asia* Vol. 1 (Delhi: Manohar, 2007), and the work of Tristan Bruslé.

83) by assessing the claim that oral narratives can be historical records. He shows that a more accurate migration history can be drawn from other sources, a method that enables him to analyse human movements in northern Subansiri (Arunachal Pradesh) in terms of “micro-migrations” and challenges the claim that many highland tribes of Arunachal Pradesh originated from Tibet.

Analysing ritual texts and interviews, Stuart Blackburn shows that the Apatanis, an ethnic group living in upland Arunachal Pradesh, speak about origins in terms of cosmogony and genealogy rather than geography, and have no founding ancestor ideology. Apatani myths provide a framework for the formation of their identity and social relations.

Kerstin Grothmann analyses the narratives of origin of the Membas of Arunachal Pradesh as a “statement of superiority over the neighbouring non-Buddhist groups and of local rights in relation to outsiders” (p. 148). This local identity is challenged by their classification as Scheduled tribe by the Indian state, which implies backwardness. Grothmann explains how the liveliness of local narratives of origin is a response to this official tribal label.

Mark Post provides an assessment of the various plausible theories of the origin history of Tani speakers of central Arunachal Pradesh. In particular, he uses a linguistic analysis of Tani dialects to examine their migration claims. This analysis suggests that the Tani have a Tibeto-Burman ancestry followed by several population splits, despite which a long-term period of intra-Tani contact, communication, and exchange subsisted.

George van Driem discusses the prehistoric expansion of the main families of languages (including Tibeto-Burman, Indo-European, Austroasiatic and their subgroups) into northeast India. In particular, he examines the encounter between Austroasiatic and Tibeto-Burman speakers in the area, using an analysis of lexical terms to understand material culture. For example he connects the expansion of the Austro-Asiatic languages to rice cultivation. He also analyses the correlation between linguistic and genetic distributions.

Marion Wettstein discusses the use of origin and migration narratives in the construction of Naga collective identity, particularly in relation to their claims for an independent Naga nation. The Nagas prefer geographically vague tales of migration, which locate the group’s origin in Mongolia, to the more detailed origin myths. These help to support Naga claims of non-Indianness, independence, and statehood, as well as the oneness of the Naga people. The emphasis on the notion of ‘oneness’ is explained by Wettstein by referring to the colonial and post-colonial understanding of ‘tribe.’

F. K. L. Chit Hlaing discusses materials on the Chin, Kachin, and Kayah from the India-China-Burma meeting area. He explores the problem of defining ethnic identities according to a distinct language, pointing out that ethnic

identity is a function of complex historical and political developments. The author argues for intra-ethnic cultural diversity and inter-ethnic cultural exchanges, opposing a view of the group’s unity conveyed in local narratives.

Mandy Sadan’s contribution focuses on the significance of Tibeto-Burman ritual language practices of the Jinghpaw (or Kachin) of northern Burma in relation to internal relational identities, reconnecting origin and migration narratives to the Jinghpaw ritual idiom. Jinghpaw adapted their narratives partly as a response to the state and to help prove their historical ties to Burma.

Charles McKhann focuses on the Naxi of southwest China, and examines how their cosmology is expressed in ritual texts. He analyses the symbolic constituents of this cosmology – origin and division, return, and reunification – as well as its physical inscription in the regional landscape.

Koen Wellens’ writings, based on materials on several groups of southwest China, show the determining role of the dominant form of knowledge in China in shaping views of minorities’ origin and migration. He highlights some of the mechanisms at work in the process by which ethnic groups internalised the modern Chinese party-state’s versions of history.

The main interest of this book lies in the richness of the research data it offers. Exploring various Tibeto-Burman language groups of the Himalayan foothills, it includes areas only recently opened up to Western researchers. The book not only presents detailed examinations of the issues surrounding origin and migration in various societies – on their present and past forms, and on their roles and meanings for local societies and for researchers – it also makes a significant contribution to the understanding of the political and social roles of origin and migration narratives in the Himalayas. Finally, the generalisation and theorisation of the concept of “migration as process and not event” (p. 4) in the Himalayan region in several of the articles is another important contribution to the understanding of north-south migrations and settlement in the southern Himalayan foothills.

On a more critical note, some may regret the absence of a general conclusion, which could have synthesised the articles’ main findings on the relations between issues of migrations and origins, and helped to give overall sense to this newly framed study area.

*Mélanie Vandenhelsken is a researcher at the Institute for Social Anthropology (Austrian Academy of Sciences). Her current work is on the modes of construction of ethnicity in Sikkim (Eastern Himalayas, India), in particular the interactions between states, transnational networks, and various agencies within ethnic groups in making ethnic identities. She recently authored “The Enactment of Tribal Unity at the Periphery of India: The political role of a new form of the Panglhabso Buddhist ritual in Sikkim”, EBHR 38, 2011.*