

8-2013

**Ian Carlos Fitzpatrick, Cardamom and Class: A Limbu Village and
its Extensions in East Nepal. Reviewed by T. B. Subba**

T. B. Subba
Sikkim University, Gangtok

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

Recommended Citation

Subba, T. B.. 2013. Ian Carlos Fitzpatrick, Cardamom and Class: A Limbu Village and its Extensions in East Nepal. Reviewed by T. B. Subba. *HIMALAYA* 32(1).
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol32/iss1/26>

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.

artistic modernity, such influences are the dominant factor in only a few of these essays.

Though space does not allow me to review each of these eleven essays, the shape of the volume can be gleaned from a representative essay from each of the volume's three sections. Niels Gutschow, in the volume's first essay, "Architecture: The Quest for Nepaleseness," outlines the various ways that architecture displays the intertwining of nostalgia, politics, and technology. The construction of large-scale temples, coronation platforms, and domestic spaces in the Valley reflects not only changing aesthetic tastes but also a desire for a "Nepaleseness" that is free of British and Indian influences; construction and re-modeling projects often project a further "Newarization" that aims to connect contemporary buildings with the most traditional forms of Nepalese architecture in the Valley, those constructed by members of the local Newar ethnic group (23). The two subsequent essays in this section – by Weiler and Hegewald – respectively detail the use of neo-classical themes in architecture and the pools, baths and water-spouts that constitute the Valley's aquatic architecture.

Among the essays in the second section, Ani Kasten's "The Potters of Thimi: Village Ceramic Traditions in Flux" presents one of the volume's more unique perspective on Nepal's changing artistic traditions. A ceramics artist by trade, Kasten describes the adaptations made by the Prajapati potters of Thimi, the Valley's fourth-largest city, as they attempt to maintain their traditional artistic forms in a world increasingly attracted to mass-produced household items created on foreign assembly lines. Outlining the recent history of these changes, beginning with the German-initiated Ceramics Promotion Project of Nepal in the early 1980s, Kasten describes her own work in establishing the Thimi Ceramics Stoneware Project in 2001, whose main goal was "to create new, high-quality handmade wares using a combination of modern and traditional methods" (89). The other three essays in this section – by Alsop, Bangdel and Harper – hang together quite nicely as they focus on three different aspects of the use of traditional religious imagery in modern Nepalese art.

In the third section, Miranda Shaw's essay, "Tantric Buddhist Dance of Nepal: From the Temple to the Stage and Back," identifies the various strategies utilized by Nepalese performers of Charya Nritya to keep alive the struggling performative tradition of tantric dance. Until recently a private tradition requiring initiation, Buddhist tantric dance has expanded beyond its traditional geographical, caste-based, and religious boundaries. Similar to the architectural trends described by Gutschow, this Vajrayana Buddhist system of "offering, devotion, and celebration" has become transformed into an art form that is transcending its Newar origins and private contexts as it is performed by non-Newars at hotels and as part of tourist programmes throughout Kathmandu. (103). The volume concludes with three additional essays – by Rajamajhi, Ward and Shimkhada – on the changing roles of street theatre, of Shiva and his renunciate followers at the

burning grounds of Pashupati, and of the living goddess, Kumari.

This book is clearly not a traditional edited volume: the photographs lavishly detailing the many forms of Nepalese art and performance are just as important as the essays they accompany. After thumbing through the volume, one might assert that it is actually the essays that accompany the photographs, rather than the other way around! The book's visual emphasis allows for an expansive audience, including not just scholars of South Asia, but also undergraduate students and an interested general public.

Michael Baltutis is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh. His teaching and research focus on the classical and contemporary textual and performative traditions of South Asia.

CARDAMOM AND CLASS: A LIMBU VILLAGE AND ITS EXTENSIONS IN EAST NEPAL BY IAN CARLOS FITZPATRICK

Kathmandu: Vajra Publications, 2011. 321pp.
ISBN 978-9937506663.

REVIEWED BY T. B. SUBBA

This book has been hailed by Professor David Gellner of Oxford University, who was the principal supervisor of the author's doctoral research, as a major ethnographic work along the lines of Lionel Caplan's *Land and Social Change in East Nepal* (1970) and Philippe Sagant's *The Dozing Shaman* (1996). In his preface to the book, Professor Gellner writes that "The Limbus are lucky to have attracted an ethnographer with such linguistic skills" as Ian Fitzpatrick. While I agree with Professor Gellner on the first point, I find it a little difficult to agree with him about the linguistic skills of the author, which I explain a little later. If I were the author's supervisor, I would still feel equally proud of the work as his supervisor apparently is.

Cardamom and Class has six chapters excluding the introduction and conclusion. The first chapter sets the theoretical context of the study in what the author calls "anthropological political economy." I think this is a very well researched chapter that shows the depth of Fitzpatrick's understanding of the theories of political economy and modes of production. The second chapter provides the historical context of Limbus and the communal ownership of their lands called *kipat*. The third chapter is on Mamangkhe

village – the “core” village where Fitzpatrick conducted his fieldwork. He discusses the history of Limbu and non-Limbu settlements in this village. It is in this chapter that the author first writes about cardamom, which, according to him, is the principal driver of the ecological and socioeconomic changes in the village (p. 93). The fourth chapter gives details of the history and processes of cardamom production in Mamangkhe. The fifth deals with migration, both within the village and from the “core” to the “dispersed” village in Jhapa, located in the easternmost Tarai district bordering India. Finally, the sixth chapter describes the ecological and socioeconomic change in Mamangkhe village. There are four appendices, twenty-eight tables, forty figures, and three maps.

Although I did not terribly enjoy reading the book, which reads too much like a thesis (and is overburdened with ethnographic details provided for the evaluators of the thesis), I was certainly very much impressed by all the chapters, except one or two for the same reason. But instead of discussing the merits and demerits of each chapter, I will critique here what I consider as fundamental issues in the book.

First, let me consider the title of the book. There is no denying the fact that cardamom is one of the most important cash crops in eastern Nepal today. But downplaying, even at the village level, the role of horticultural crops that contributed 14 percent to the GDP of Nepal in 1996-97 and economic remittances, which contributed more than 10 percent of the GDP of Nepal in the 1990s, is perhaps not fair. Nor is it perhaps correct to expect, as one does from the title of the book, that “classes” have emerged, or have begun to emerge, due to the wealth generated from cardamom cultivation. In fact, in his “Conclusions,” Fitzpatrick mentions that “distinct classes with distinct roles in production have yet to emerge...” (p. 276). I also find it a little difficult to accept the author’s proposal to equate “economic differentiation” with “class formation,” as he does on page 14, whether we turn to Marx or Weber for conceptual closure. I would be happier if he had instead argued that “economic differentiation”, hastened due to cardamom, could lead to class formation in the village. However, this book clearly shows that this was postponed due to the migration of the wealthy villagers from the “core” village to the “dispersed” village in Jhapa. In fact, if cardamom is such an important driver of economic differentiation, such a process may actually be halted if this crop fails in Mamangkhe, as it did in many villages of North Sikkim during the last two decades.

Second, Fitzpatrick uses genealogical methods to reconstruct the Limbu and non-Limbu settlements in the village and accordingly estimates that Limbus arrived in the village between 15 and 16 generations ago (pp. 62-63). This means they settled 450 to 480 years ago, if we consider 30 years for one generation. However, according to him, before building permanent houses, they lived as hunters and gatherers in forests and built *yaksas* or temporary shelters (p.

63). He further writes that the first stone, wood, and thatch house was built in 1893 by a Limbu. Although a Chhetri had arrived in the village as early as 1825, he lived in a *goth* (cow shed) and the first house a Chhetri built in the village was in 1895 (p.63). These data contradict Fitzpatrick’s claim that Chhetris brought the technology of building stone, mud, and thatch houses to the village unless he demonstrates that the first Limbu stone, mud, and thatch house was actually built by Chhetris.

Third, the author also claims “most surely” that the Chhetris brought agricultural technologies and techniques to the village. While this may be true, it is difficult to believe that the Limbus in the village had no knowledge about the domestication of animals and crops. If they indeed led a nomadic life, as the author claims, there would be no basis to claim that they were living in Mamangkhe from 15 to 16 generations ago.

Finally, let me cite a few instances here about the author’s linguistic skills. He has transcribed *noon baarnu* (Nepali, “abstain from taking salt”) as *nun barnu* on pp. 43-44; Ram Krishna Bhattarai is mentioned as Chhetri (p. 64) whereas Bhattarai is a Bahun; Lakshmi Prasad Koraria is also mentioned as a Chhetri (p. 65) whereas the correct surname perhaps is Koirala, a Bahun, for he has also misspelt Kharel as Khorel on p. 65, *sheer* (Nepali, “head”) is transcribed as *sir*, and *sapok* as *sappok* (Limbu) on p. 126; translated *dherai dalli* literally as “very round” on p. 135 instead of translating it contextually as “very short”, the context being a woman, not an object like tomato; Damai is referred to as “Parbatiya tailor caste” whereas Damais are also a caste of musicians; and so on.

This book has the trappings of a thesis, albeit a very good thesis. One would otherwise not see the list of questions asked or used in survey as appendices. One would also not see some incomplete or incorrect references, as one often notices in theses. The use of italics, italics plus diacritical marks, and italics plus phonetic symbols rather indiscriminately for native words also creates confusion in the book, as seen in the examples above.

It is not difficult to list more of such weaknesses in the book but I wish to end this review by stating that it is an excellent doctoral thesis worthy of emulation by other doctoral students. I think most of the limitations of the book are due to the author’s obsession with the rather outdated and perhaps even inappropriate concept of “class” for understanding the Limbus of East Nepal, who are deeply ethnicized since the *janajati* movement in 1990s, if not since the political unification of Nepal in 1770s.

Professor T. B. Subba is the Vice-Chancellor of Sikkim University, Gangtok. His research covers various aspects of the Northeastern Himalayas, including issues of ethnicity and development, cultural adaptation, politics of culture and identity, health and disease, and the Nepali diaspora.