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Review of 'Les Faiseurs d'Histoires: Politique de l'Origine et Écrits sur le Passé' by Gisèle Krauskopff

Ben Campbell
Durham University

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Les Faiseurs d'Histoires: Politique de l'Origine et Écrits sur le Passé

Gisèle Krauskopff. Recherches Thématiques 10. Nanterre: Société d'Ethnologie, 2009. Pp. 304. \$33.00. ISBN 978-2-901161-86-8.

Reviewed by Ben Campbell

This thought-provoking collection of studies makes a strong case for paying attention to the motivations, media and materials in the thought and practice of people who become archivers and narrators of the past. The chapters deal with the telling of history and the role of the past among communities who are marginal to the genre of Western historiography. The preponderance of evidence comes from the central Himalayan region, but outlying case studies enable comparative and general reflections to come into view. A significant difference emerges between the forms of history making from the margins of Indian and Chinese state influence. Broadly speaking the Indic forms involve an erasure of marginal presence in state accounts of the past, while the Chinese approach entails a raw/cooked transformation of minority nationalities within a state historical process of incorporation and progress.

Gisèle Krauskopff's introduction provides an excellent discussion of factors that shed light on the inspirations and styles of history making in Asia. These range from the on-going South Asian project of subaltern studies, recovering

perspectives from beyond the frames of European history writing, to covering the impact of globally circulating discourses on indigenous rights effected by the UN and other bodies. She proceeds in the quest for marginal voices by acknowledging the work of a number of historians and ethnologists in this field. Among these are MacDonald's discussion of the Sherpa lama's record of a British expedition to Mount Everest, and various studies that look at pre-colonial perspectives on the past, such as the figure of the bardic *karan* (also discussed by Rousseleau and Toffin). Krauskopff recommends that attention is paid to both the writers' own motivations and the audiences for whom they are intended, which now include diaspora influences. There are tellings of the past which, while striving to achieve distance from elite national accounts, find themselves validating complicit principles of privilege. A major dimension of contrast that she discusses within the volume as a whole is the emphasis on continuity and obsessive quest for origins in the Indian sphere of influence, while the Chinese sphere tends to generate narratives of "before and after."

Gérard Toffin takes up Hartog's concept of 'regimes of historicity' to discuss prevalent historiographic genres in Nepal. The traditions of *lok-gātha* ballads are still to be found among tailor-musician communities in western Nepal and Uttaranchal. The central focus is however, the *Gopālarāja vamsāvāli* written for Jayasthiti Malla, king of Bhaktapur in 1388-9 CE. Toffin ponders the date's significance in terms of coming a

generation after the destruction to sacred sites of the valley by the raid of the sultan of Bengal in 1349. No subsequent *vamsāvāli* was written till the early nineteenth century. Toffin argues the *vamsāvāli* held particular significance for Newars in the aftermath of conquest by the Gorkhali Shahs. *Vamsāvāli* mixed *puranic* narratives of mythical events with truncated versions of royal lines of succession, and became a crucial means for mobility into the Rana polity as exemplified by the commissioning of *vamsāvāli* for Ghale and Gurung Tibeto-Burman tribal elites. Toffin proposes that Nepal, Kashmir and Ceylon are exceptional locations for the historiography in the subcontinent.

Gregoire Schlemmer's chapter is a brilliantly argued and well-illustrated discussion of the history making of the Kirati people of eastern Nepal. The core tension is between the privileging of origins against the histories of invasion. It is ironic that it is in recognisably Brahmanical concerns for tracing indigenous royal genealogies that the Kirati proclaim distinction, and apply purifying techniques for telling their history as a decisive move away from Hindu influence. Schlemmer remarks on the urban, migrant, educated social context for the emergence of indigenous concerns for ethno-history, and traces the hybrid mixing of Scottish missionary influence from Bengal combining with sanskritisation to create a paradigm for ethnic distinction being envisaged through identification of one language, one race, and one specific history.

Raphaël Rousseleau presents contrasting perspectives on writings concerning Orissa's "people of the soil." This brings out effects that stress the local and particular, to enfold accounts of Oriyan tribals within the state and Hinduism. Imagery of a golden age of innocence combines missionary and Hindu themes in articulation of a utopian aspiration for a modern and moral society achieved through ethical development. The work of Laksmi Narayan Sahu, under the patronage of the Maharaja of Jeyepore, is shown to have had the intention of avoiding the seduction of tribals by encroaching Christianity. Attributes of the Sahibosum anthropomorphic statue on display at the state museum at Bhubaneswor are argued to be not a form of deity similar to Jagannâth but an image designed to keep away epidemics and corvée labour demands. While the past of Oriyan tribals is written through hybrid styles by Sahu mixing Indian and western missionary and evolutionary conceptions to attribute a condition of "good savage" to forest-dwelling tribals of Orissa, the novelist Gopinath Mohanty presents the people of Oriya as autochthonous sons of Mother Earth.

Moving to north India, Daniela Berti explores some tensions in the principle of "unity in diversity" that she sees expressed in folkloristic and military parades on Republic day celebrations in Delhi. Following a 'cultural' rather than religious Hinduism, she identifies the pursuit of local history methods and management of knowledge to find

in *bhartâ* "forgotten" sanskritic points of reference for stories of the valley gods of Kullu. She shows with great skill there is no simple correspondence between national political projects and those of telling local histories, and we thereby learn of the role of local deities, mediums and palanquins in conflicts between neighbouring communities. The concluding reflection concerns history being traced not to an Other place (of origin) but to a literary past.

Mukta Tamang addresses the piecing together of fragmentary narratives of the colonisation of the lands of central-northern Nepal now spoken of as Tamsaling. He identifies a widespread sense of dispossession that was combined with forced labour for the Gorkhali state across the lands and places (*sa, ling*) of Tamang communities. In a telling indirect revelation of this dispossession, he cites the 1815 CE state edict that compulsory labour was to be exempted and communal lands (*kipat*) returned if Murmi (the older term for many of those who came to be labelled "Tamang") and other ethnic groups were to join hostilities and guerrilla raids on invading British forces. He gives a very credible account of how circumstances of domination by the Gorkhali polity had the effect of bringing to recognition a broad coalescence across cultural and social features that turned into a political-territorial movement. Mukta Tamang traces how social and cultural programmes of ethno-historian Santabir Lama from the 1950s developed into territorial claims only in the years

after 1990 when the Tamang Ghedung could operate publicly. This chapter maps out and works around the silences in national histories of Nepal over the territories and political entities of ethnic groups like the Tamang that were not included among the state's recognition of Kirant, and conversely did not feature the state in their accounts of the past. Alternative indigenous history therefore reveals arbitrary and constructed characteristics of the established order. The territorial movement for Tamsaling is not 'just cultural politics', but one of self-determination for collective identity linked to undeniable historical conditions of political-economic exploitation.

In a fascinating cultural contrast that puts on the table a comparative framework for consideration of the hooks on which tellings of the past can be hung, Élodie Razy discusses the case of Malian diaspora former slaves, and their disincentive to maintain memory. Slaves have no ancestors (denying genealogical kinship). Descendants of slaves therefore are writing their histories in the spaces freed from the constraints of filiation.

Stéphane Gros takes us to the Drung, an ethnic group of Yunnan, where a transition is noticeable after the 1980s in accounts of national history that shift from class struggle to cultural difference as conferring identity. The time of myth and time of history are kept apart for the sake of the enhanced regime of truth concerning the future (pre- and post-deluge). Use of Chinese texts

is made to substantiate existing 'minority' groups, but advantage is thereby taken in terms of a Drung negative self image for formulating contemporary relations with neighbours and the state.

A contrast between the socio-temporal configurations of shamans and state intellectuals is brought up by Aurélie Névoit's chapter on the Nipa (Yunnan). She presents a fascinating discussion of the effect of releasing words by pig sacrifice that makes possible the separation of high and low, and the carrying of the sacrificers's intentions to the spirits. A strong undercurrent of the moiety society of shaman and chief is served up in bold Lévi-Straussian alternatives. The myth of Achema told by shamans was taken by 1950s nationalists to help integrate it into the story of national class struggle. A 1979 cinematic version followed feeding a romantic picturesque image for touristic portrayal of minority women.

In a detailed and compelling consideration of dynamic perspectives, Gisèle Krauskopff describes the paradox that Tharu ethnohistorians in Nepal have embraced reformist Theravada Buddhism – a philosophy that rejects the privilege of birth – as a means of advancing ethnic community interests. Two Tharu intellectuals' attempts to shift their locatedness from within the dominant regime of truth are highlighted. Ramananda Prasad Singh former Attorney General, wrote "the real history of the Tharus" in which the Buddha is claimed as a Tharu. This account

was first presented at a conference in India in 1988, and combines prestigious ancient origins with the contemporary status of indigeneity. In this case a forgotten origin is revealed, but Krauskopff effectively makes the contrast with other ethnic groups' embrace of Buddhism, such as the Newars who disavow their traditional forms of the religion. Modern Buddhism signifies rupture with social transmission for the Tharus, but the genealogical basis of ethnicity is an ideological crutch of the dominant value system. Krauskopff then admirably shows that origins were of little importance to Tharus during her fieldwork. It was shared ties of economic interdependence and worship between named houses that mattered, not origins. Rituals were a means of forgetting, and Tharus frequently displaced to new settlements to avoid taxes. Working on the impermanent relation to land, Krauskopff argues that texts such as those concerning the mythical Tharu figure of Gurubaba, who appeared as a pumpkin on the lake that was to become the homeland of Dang, are important for their marking of changed relations of time and space. This applies equally in the adoption of the Buddha as ancestor, separating a minority ethnic group from the influence of Brahmins.

The book's final chapter is by Nicola Schneider, who gives an account of the Tibetanising of Lake Rewalsar in Himachal Pradesh. She brings attention to the unique Tibetan form of *terma*, configuring the past and future through writings that are buried so as to be rediscovered in the

future. In the history of pilgrimage - making to the lake and the invocation of Padmasambhava, (Guru Rinpoche) as the territorial pacifier, and through the monks' dance, the Tibetans in exile are reintegrating contemporary place with past landscapes of Buddhism's historical journey.

Overall this volume achieves a high quality of individual contributions that have not been forced into a dominant analytical framework, but are allowed to exemplify the variety of forms and purposes of history telling across ethnic and territorial borders, and with relation to the character and relative power of state narratives. It is a pity there is no index for the book, but it is attractively laid out, well illustrated, and each chapter conclusion summarises well the central arguments. There is rich material indeed here for scholars to pursue comparative local projects or engage with broader theoretical approaches such as Pollock's on the vernacular in South Asia, and Scott's *Art of Not Being Governed*.

Ben Campbell is a lecturer in anthropology at Durham University. He has worked in Rasuwa District with Tamang-speaking communities since 1989. His book Living Between Juniper and Palm: Nature, Culture and Power in the Himalayas is published by Oxford University Press. In 2009 his film "The Way of the Road" was released, made with cameraman and brother Cosmo Campbell. His recent research interests include renewable energy technologies for sustainable mountain development.