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Review of *Nepal: 1975-2011* by Kevin Bubriski

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Reviews



Nepal: 1975–2011

Kevin Bubriski. Cambridge, MA: Radius Books/Peabody Museum Press, 2014. 303 pages. ISBN 9781934435724.

Reviewed by Jim Fisher

Photography in Nepal has tended to be, with the rarest of exceptions, of the glossy, gorgeous sort. Pictures are designed to take one's breath away, National Geographic style, but rarely do they reveal much about what is being photographed. Anthropologists often include photographs to flesh out visually what they attempt to describe verbally, but such photos usually are not meant to stand on their own, because they mostly rely on the written page to describe what they show.

Kevin Bubriski doesn't fit easily into either of these categories. His interest, both personal and professional, is in visual representation, but not in the giant coffee table book style. His book follows his travels in Nepal going

back to his Peace Corps days in the mid-1970s up to the beginning of the present decade. His terrain runs from Mugu, Humla, and Dolpo in the northwest to Solukhumbu in the east, and from the Tarai to Kathmandu—and many places in between. (A map of Nepal would have been very useful to readers who are not as conversant with all these place names as the author.) Charles Ramble introduces the book with a graceful and insightful essay that gives some historical and cultural context to the pictures that follow.

A striking feature of the book is the variable technology that Bubriski used to produce it. He started out with a standard Leica 35 millimeter camera in common use in the 1970s, and later spent three years lugging around a 4x5 large format camera of the sort rarely seen today, before changing to a hand-held Rollei. His use of black and white film lends the photos a sense of the times and places which they depict—bare, austere landscape backgrounds for the people in the foreground engaged in the normal activities which define their lives—tending fields, herding animals, repairing tools, celebrating social or religious occasions, even just hanging out with each other. Since I spent a year in this part of the country (Dolpo, specifically), I can attest to the authenticity of his shots. It comes as something of a shock, therefore, to find the more contemporaneous photos all in color, which makes them

seem all the more recent, which they are. The fact that I have spent much time in Solukhumbu makes Bubriski's selection of photos there—barbed wire and military fortifications from the Maoist period, rather than the ambience of Shangri La given by the towering snow peaks—inspired and something of a relief. Dazzling photos of the Himalayas can be seen almost anywhere, unlike the gripping, quotidian detail that Bubriski provides.

His description of the piles of rocks marking mountain passes as chortens (Skt., *stupa*) does not seem right; I would have called them *rdo phung* (rock-piles). The author notes in one of his eight unillustrated section introductions (p. 267) that in the 1980s and 1990s a motorcycle gang called Shiva's Slaves celebrated the annual festival of Shiva Ratri (Shiva's night) by staging a large rally on the Ring Road. I think including a photo of such a rally would have added to the verve of the book, but that may be only because I used to ride with the Slaves.

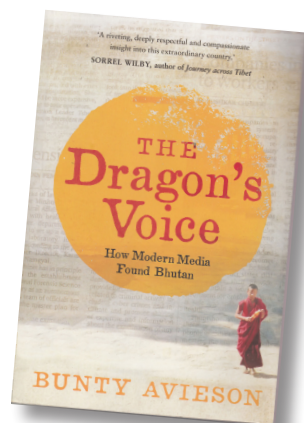
The book concludes with the author's observation that his pictures are “pieces of a continuum that existed with or without the photographer observing it. The photographs document only one person's experience, not a culture, historical period, ethnographic group, or complex social or economic condition. They are selected moments within the edge of a

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Jim Fisher on *Nepal: 1975-2011*

framed world” (p. 299). And finally, and with a light sense of irony, he notes that new technology today has shrunk the longstanding chasm between photographer and subject, as “cameras that make phone calls are found throughout the country. Nepalis have countless photos of events large and small documenting their individual lives, and thousands of Nepalis have very active social media pages. The foreign visitor now meets village youth with cameras of their own. Nepalis are shooting back, taking back, sharing images among each other, and sending photographs to friends and relations in Kathmandu, Delhi, Dubai, or Jackson Heights” (ibid.).

Jim Fisher served in the first Peace Corps group to Nepal in 1962, and later conducted research in Dolpo (Trans-Himalayan Traders), Solu-Khumbu (Sherpas) and a person-centered ethnography on Tanka Prasad Acharya (Living Martyrs). He is presently finishing a ‘44 Years Later’ book (Trans-Himalayan Traders Transformed), an updated edition of Living Martyrs, and is beginning a large-scale collaborative project on Sherpas with Pasang Yangjee Sherpa.



The Dragon's Voice: How Modern Media Found Bhutan.

Bunty Avieson. St. Lucia, Queensland, Australia: University of Queensland Press, 2015. 240 pages. ISBN 9780702253577.

Reviewed by Michael Givel

In a number of recent news stories by foreign media and promotions by tourist agencies, Bhutan is commonly framed in the social construct narrative as a modern-day far away and happy Shangri-La. The actual Shangri-La is a mystical place that was first described in 1933 in the fictional novel *Lost Horizon* by James Hilton (James Hilton. *Lost Horizon*. Pleasantville, NY: Reader's Digest, 1933). Shangri-La in the novel is an earthly paradise governed by benevolent Buddhist lamas blissfully isolated from the rest of the world. Bunty Avieson's 2015 book, *The Dragon's Voice: How Modern Media Found Bhutan*, documents the

important role of Bhutanese media reporting since 2008 on why Bhutan is not equivalent to a modern-day Shangri-La. That said, the story of Shangri-La strikingly parallels Bhutan's past historic isolation, impetus to seek collective happiness and well-being based on Mahayana Buddhist tenets, and influence or guidance by Buddhist religious figures. Nevertheless, Bhutanese media has documented in a more realistic fashion, versus the ideal of Shangri-La, that Bhutan has problems like the rest of the world, such as poverty, health issues, corruption, and domestic violence. This book analyzes, describes, and incorporates in crisp and clear fashion these differing narratives of Bhutan as Shangri-La or as a society with the same types of problems found around the rest of the planet. As the book aptly points out and describes in a series of interesting examples, both narratives carry grains of truth, but both overreach. This can result in non-nuanced or skewed understandings of actual trends influencing and shaping modern Bhutan.

The era of modern journalistic reporting began on July 18, 2008 when a newly written Constitution of Bhutan was approved, creating a Constitutional Monarchy that provided democratic elections and freedom of expression and the press. With the adoption of the first written Bhutanese Constitution (Constitution