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Review of *Farewell to Yak and Yeti? The Sherpas of Rolwaling Facing A Globalised World* by Ruedi Baumgartner

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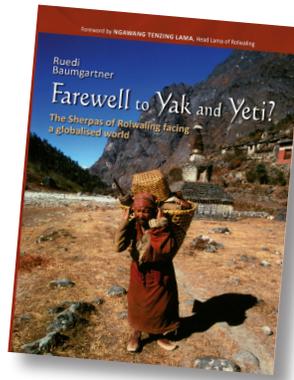
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Farewell to Yak and Yeti? The Sherpas of Rolwaling Facing A Globalised World.

Ruedi Baumgartner. Kathmandu: Vajra Books, 2015. 296 pages. ISBN 9789937623421.

Reviewed by Young Hoon Oh

It is no bold reckoning that in proportion to the global population, the Sherpa is one of the most studied groups of people in the world. From the early 1950s onward, a variety of historical, social-scientific, and physiological inquiries have been investigated on the dozens of thousand people famous for Himalayan guiding. In *Farewell to Yak and Yeti?* Swiss anthropologist Ruedi Baumgartner makes use of the wealth of research for what an ethnographic study can do at its best, namely, give an overview of memory, agony, destiny, and expectancy shared by a Sherpa community. Based on the author's lifelong fieldwork with multiple visits to the Rolwaling valley in northeastern Nepal as well as Kathmandu between 1974 and 2011, this book presents a comprehensive discussion on historical, social, religious, and political transformations that the relatively small Sherpa communities have gone through during the same period. Baumgartner persuasively employs a unique perspective guided by historical and cultural ecology

to navigate between culturalist, materialist representations popular in the pre-postmodern scholarship and more recent postcolonial criticisms on unequal relationships in and outside of the local communities.

Baumgartner's interesting longitudinal case that exhibits distinctively collective responses to global impacts is an outcome of close examination of three discrete contexts: Tibetan Buddhism, high-altitude ecology, and mountain tourism. Like the Khumbu region to the east, Rolwaling is another Beyul, a legendary valley of bliss in Tibetan Buddhism, for its community of about two hundred Sherpas. In contrast to the Sherpa homeland, however, the development of a local response to tourism demand in Rolwaling was postponed largely due to the governmental ban of foreigner access to the valley from 1964 to 1971 out of border disputes with China. In Rolwaling, Baumgartner maintains, tourism is in no way harmful to the tradition of Sherpa society, while having offered a new set of subsistence opportunities such as portering, guiding, and managing tea and equipment shops, availing the Sherpas to move, as the title of Chapter Two indicates, "from rags to riches."

Baumgartner's analysis vaults over an innocent discourse of developmental concern and instead takes the wave of tourism as one of newer contexts brought about by globalization. During trekking, for example, Sherpas meet marriage partners, seek an outlet from the mundane urban life, and learn of new, modern lives unseen in the valley. It was not just the introduction of tourism that caused a change to the community. In a tight, rigorous manner, Baumgartner shows how the small community has been transformed under factors such as the attraction

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of urban life, a growing imbalance between population and natural resources, the effect of temporary labor migration to foreign countries, and the impact of accelerated population growth and increased life expectancy.

In each of the book's seven chapters, readers are led to a careful analysis of each distinct aspect of the Sherpa lives born into Rolwaling communities. Topics include an overview of the historical transformation of the communities since the 1950s (Chapter One), empowerment of Sherpa women through the complex sociocultural transformation (Chapter Two), the transhumant lifestyle and its recent modification (Chapter Three), village governance associated with spiritual leadership (Chapter Four), the younger generation's perception of the tourism industry as well as urban life experience with a focus on education (Chapter Five), male and female experience in and around Himalayan mountaineering (Chapter Six), and the impact of global warming on the valley community (Epilogue).

Baumgartner's historical-cultural ecology frame proves to be squarely fitting for an elucidation of some enduring enigmas of cultural formations in such Himalayan Tibeto-Buddhist communities. Chapter Three, a comprehensive study on how the village community has sustained their living under the harsh mountainous environment, is outstanding in this regard. For

example, scholars have examined the rise of the number of newly built religious monuments in Sherpa communities (pp. 104-105). Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf (*The Sherpas Transformed: Social Change in a Buddhist Society of Nepal*. 1984. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers) explained it with an introduction of potato, while Stanley F. Stevens (*Claiming the High Ground: Sherpas, Subsistence, and Environmental Change in the Highest Himalaya, Indian edition*. 1996. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers) finds clues from a larger economic context such as the trans-Himalayan trade. Sherry B. Ortner (*High Religion: A Cultural and Political History of Sherpa Buddhism*. 1989. New Jersey: Princeton University Press) has emphasized the personal search for merit and legitimization of their immense wealth. Baumgartner rejects a mono-causal reasoning and instead shows how the semi-nomadic transhumant system has evolved in accordance to the changing patterns of crop cultivation, livestock herding, family formation, and religious festivals.

Faithful to ethnographic basics, Baumgartner rejects ahistoric functional assumptions implicated in both materialist and culturalist approaches. In Chapter Four on village governance, he compares Ortner's rather forceful emphasis on the competitive aspect of individuality as the principal behavioral code and von Fürer-Haimendorf's rather dissociated juxtaposition of religious and social lives in Sherpa society. Highlighting

the Sherpa virtue of compensation and relative status, Baumgartner argues, "peace is such a precious commodity that mediation is given preference over judgment" (p. 145) in Sherpa society. The shared emphasis on peace has been for decades derived from the spiritual leadership still firmly held by offices of the Beding Gompa for the entire Rolwaling community. This continues to be the case even in the era of substantial out-migration, when former villagers continue material support of the Gompa. This reaffirms the crucial role of the Buddhist institution and sustains its delocalized village identity.

Actual participation in Himalayan mountaineering has been an important life experience for most Rolwaling Sherpa men, the focus of Chapter Six. To me, this is the only part of the book where claims made seem speculative. For example, Baumgartner repeats the popular mistake of conflating "expedition" with "mountaineering." In this view (which has never been held by the Sherpa) the Sherpa-foreigner mutual dependency is systematically reproduced through now commercialized expeditions by allegedly sacrificing safety for money. However, interpersonal encounters with foreign clients, as well as spectacles of climbing, are relatively marginal in expedition ensembles that are constituted by bureaucracy, logistics, subcontracts, and domestic and international commercial chains, a complex riddle from any

participant's point of view that is irreducible to such evaluative terms of safety or money.

Readers might find fault with the book's occasional romanticizing tone, however light, such as innocent evidencing of early Western mountaineers' eulogistic accounts of Sherpa lives (and the book's title, too—can “yak and yeti” represent the bygone time for the Sherpa?). Also, an old version of environmental determinism seems uncritically accepted. For example, a Kathmandu-based outfitter claims that village Sherpas are more apt for climbing than town Sherpas are because both mountaineering and village life took place under harsh conditions (p. 239).

On the other hand, the book's boiled-down and often witty style of writing, agnatic to that of Sherpas' typically detailed-yet-terse speeches nicely rendered in the ample interviews throughout, may itself delightfully exhibit one of the Sherpas' most outstanding dispositional characteristics: joking and cheering. A number of full-color, telling photos spanning five decades vividly depict transformations in occupational, architectural, religious, sartorial aspects of the communities.

I strongly recommend this book to scholars and students of Sherpa culture, Himalayan tourism, Tibetan Buddhism, and Himalayan environment and development. Presenting highly original theoretical discussions, as well as rich demographic data and numerous detailed in-depth interviews, the book makes an important contribution to the scholarship of Nepal and Himalayan studies in general and of Sherpa studies in particular. As an ethnography, this book exquisitely exemplifies how holistic analysis and theorization can be best accomplished by ethnographic study itself.

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