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Review of *Trans-Himalayan Traders Transformed: Return to Tarang* by James F. Fisher

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In Kathmandu but originate from the
businessmen and women. They reside
he presents the life histories of five
independent sections. In the first,
Fisher's book is organized into four
sections. Instead of trading in salt or
grain, these individuals have carpet
manufacturing businesses or trade
yarsagumba (Ophiocordyceps sinensis),
a parasitic fungus highly valued as
an herbal remedy in international
markets that garnered nearly $4,000
a kilogram in 2011 (p. 52). Fisher
illustrates the ways they punctuate
the urban landscape of their lives by
engaging in the unique, place-based
cultural traditions of the Tichurong
Valley. There is a two-month
period of worship, for example, for
a deity (Choputa) who resides in a
glacier above the Tichurong Valley,
and individuals from Tichurong
residing in Kathmandu and Dolpa
alike concurrently observe rituals
honoring this deity (p. 36). Fisher
contextualizes those aspects of the
religious, business, and social lives of
individuals in Kathmandu within a
socio-historical framework connected
to the Tichurong Valley.

Importantly, his detailed life histories
draw connections across space but
also across time. The individuals
he profiles are the literal children
of community members among
whom he lived for a year as well as
figurative representations of how
the “new generation of traders has
expanded the traditional notion of
transactions” (p. 34). He links the
trajectory of individuals he profiles in
Trans-Himalayan Traders Transformed
with the enduring capacity of those
from Tarang to engage in trade
“between contrasting cultural,
linguistic, and ecological zones” (p.
26). Their lives are also influenced
by access to education, the ability to
take advantage of economic resources
and opportunities, and kinship ties to
influential people in the community.

In the second section, Fisher
evocatively describes his return to
Tarang in 2011 after forty-four years
to find some aspects of village life
seemingly unchanged and others
considerably different. Fisher
describes encounters with people
in the Tichurong Valley who had
mythologized the anthropologist,
believing that he spoke fluent
Kaike (an Indigenous language in
the Tichurong Valley) or that he
had lived in Tarang for six years
instead of one. Fisher writes, “It
was enough to make me question
the reliability and legitimacy of
ethnohistory as a legitimate field of
inquiry” (p. 61). The way in which
Fisher reflects about this experience
is emblematic of the way that Fisher
situates himself in his own narrative
throughout this book, not only as a
participant but as an anthropologist
critically examining his own growth
and methodological assumptions.

This propensity for introspection is
most apparent in the third section
of the book, in Fisher’s preface to
Chapter 9. This chapter comprises
a captivating first-person narrative
of Chandra Man Rokaya, a man born
into poverty and hardship in Tarang,
improbably educated in Kathmandu,
India, and Australia, and employed
in the agricultural development
sector in Nepal. Rokaya’s lifepath
defies the cultural and economic
narratives exemplified by the other
individuals profiled by Fisher and
lacks “the structural, kin, vocational,
educational, or transactional
advantages” they enjoyed (p. 173).
Fisher muses on the unique value of
a first-person narrative in describing
the complexity of culture as well as
the “idiosyncrasies of an individual
case” (p. 102). Citing Rokaya’s
unconventional pathway to achieving
a higher education and professional
James F. Fisher sets out to determine the veracity of his perception of impending change among a society of traders from Dolpa, the premise of his 1986 book Trans-Himalayan Traders.

Dauro on Trans-Himalayan Traders Transformed: Return to Tarang.

employment, he presents Rokaya’s story as a “refutation of the analysis I’ve been promoting thus far” (p. 102). It is through these kinds of reflections that Fisher weaves his own transformation as an anthropologist over many decades—and specifically within the context of his methodological approaches to researching cultural and economic systems in Tarang—with the transformational ways individuals have both reshaped and circumvented their traditional socio-economic pathways over time and space.

Finally, Fisher concludes with an interview of himself conducted by the anthropologist Gaurab KC in 2013, which Fisher offers as an exchange for the life histories of other individuals presented in his book. “Any account of individual lives should, for simple reasons of fairness, include an account of my own life, without which my account of their lives is one-sided” (p. 178). The interview provides an extensive overview of Fisher’s tenure in Nepal (he was among the first group of Peace Corps volunteers to Nepal in 1962), his background in anthropological thought, and his experiences as a researcher in the Tichurong Valley in the late 1960s. The interview serves to contextualize the different methodological approaches of Fisher’s two books about Tarang within the framework of his own development as an anthropologist.

Readers interested in the history of anthropological research in Nepal will find much to appreciate about Trans-Himalayan Traders Transformed, a fascinating, interweaving narrative that follows in the steps of the anthropologist James F. Fisher as he re-examines the methodological underpinnings of his work over many decades in Nepal and provides a temporal ethnography of Tarang community members in Dolpa and Kathmandu.

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