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## Review of 'Hindu Kingship, Ethnic Revival, and Maoist Rebellion in Nepal Marie' by Lecomte-Tilouine

Susan Hangen  
*Ramapo College, NJ*

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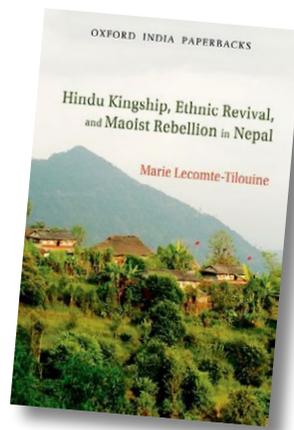
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### ***Hindu Kingship, Ethnic Revival, and Maoist Rebellion in Nepal***

**Marie Lecomte-Tilouine.** New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009. Pp. 294. \$39.95. ISBN: 9780198072256.

#### **Reviewed by Susan Hangen**

Marie Lecomte-Tilouine's book, *Hindu Kingship, Ethnic Revival and Maoist Rebellion in Nepal*, is a collection of essays on the history of, and recent changes in, Nepali society and politics. Although these essays were originally published elsewhere, with the exception of the introduction and the postscript, this compilation is welcome. Many of the themes in the chapters overlap and the essays build on one another in rewarding ways. The organization of the volume also works well, as it begins with more historical essays and shifts to primarily more contemporary concerns (with exception of the historically focused Chapter Six on the transgressive nature of Hindu kingship in Nepal). This publication makes these essays more accessible as well, as some appear in English for the first time, and others were previously published in journals with a limited circulation.

As much a historian as an ethnographer, Lecomte-Tilouine presents innovative analyses of Nepali politics and society from the pre-conquest era to the present. Her main interests are the connections between power and religion and the complex relationships between "tribal groups" – specifically, the

Magars – and the ruling groups. Throughout these essays, Lecomte-Tilouine demonstrates the relevance of history for understanding contemporary politics, in particular what the author terms the "ethnic revival" movement (more commonly called the indigenous nationalities or *adivasi janajati* movement) and "the Maoist rebellion," also known as the People's War. She convincingly demonstrates that even in times of revolution and social upheaval, there are significant continuities with the past, as people draw on older symbolic systems to produce meaning and long standing political patterns to produce legitimacy.

Scholars who critique anthropologists of Nepal for relying too heavily on participant observation as a source of data and failing to engage with written materials in the Nepali language will welcome this book for providing a model of a different kind of anthropology. Lecomte-Tilouine makes extensive use of a wide range of written materials, including poetry, novels, edicts, inscriptions, and political tracts, in her diachronic analysis of Nepali society. The author also analyzes myths and rituals for clues to the history of Hindu and "tribal" relationships. Her ethnographic observations play a supporting rather than primary role in forming her arguments.

In the introduction, the author offers a conceptual framework for understanding the relational nature of identity in Nepal. She argues that

in their interactions with others, individuals in Nepal primarily employed alterocentrism, the ability to view oneself from someone else's perspective. Alterocentrism emerged as the primary way of perceiving the identity of the self due to the prevalence of the caste system, which formed a holistic society and thus fostered attitudes of relativism and reflectivism, she argues. She suggests that there has been a shift away from alterocentrism towards "alterization," a more dualistic way of viewing others that is evident in the conception of society in both Maoist ideology and in the ethnic revival movement. Given the currency of these dualistic concepts of society in scholarly and popular accounts in contemporary Nepal, Lecomte-Tilouine's argument about the prevalence of alterocentrism in Nepal is likely to be read as overlooking the hierarchical dimensions of identity within the caste system. However, her approach to thinking about intergroup relations highlights the complex, nuanced and fluid reality of group identity in Nepal that has long existed.

In Chapter One, the author engages in the kind of literary analysis that is rare for anthropologists. She analyzes the first novel written in the Nepali language as a way of exploring models of the social world and the relational dimensions of identity construction in Nepal. To greatly simplify this novel's complex plot, the high-caste protagonists take a journey during which they encounter

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and conquer or form alliances a variety of spirit Others. Some of the spirits are represented as tribal peoples or as foreigners, while some are spirits that are part of the Hindu world, such as the divine snakes (*naga*). Lecomte-Tilouine argues that relationships between human and spirit worlds serve as a model for the relationships between selves and Others in the Nepali context, and that all forms of Otherness are assigned to the spirit world. She suggests that the novel can be read as “an allegory of the conquest of Nepal’s tribal territories and their subsequent Hinduization,” since spirits that represent tribal others are subdued while the harmful Hindu spirits are turned into allies (p. 48).

Chapters Two and Three trace the entanglements of Magar and Hindu ritual practice and symbolic worlds, from different perspectives. Chapter Two focuses on Magar incorporations of Hindu symbolic elements into their ritual world, while Chapter Three explores Hindu uses of Magar ritual specialists and symbolic elements in some rituals. In Chapter Two, Lecomte-Tilouine examines the incorporation of the Hindu earth goddess into Magar ritual practices. Her analysis reveals the relational dimensions of the Magar symbolic world, which is formed in conversation with Hindu symbols and concepts. She argues that the Magar earth goddess Bhume was modeled on a Hindu deity and constructed in response to the Hindu conquest, as part of Magar effort to maintain

claims to their territory. She shows how myths and rituals about Bhume in one Magar locality incorporate symbolic elements of Hinduism and thus while the Bhume worship served to shore up Magar claims to power, it also furthered their Hinduization.

In Chapter Three, the author asks why some Magar elements were adopted in the state religion set up by the Shah rulers. These elements include roles for Magar priests and the sacrifice of a pig, an animal Hindus view as impure. The author argues that these rituals indicate the complex and contradictory place that tribal peoples held within the new polity. The conquering Hindu kings forced Magars and other tribal peoples to conform to high caste Hindu principles such as at sacredness of the cow and their kinship rules. However, they simultaneously pursued a strategy of integration, and granted some Magars important ritual roles. This strategy formed one of the rulers’ main sources of power, as it led the conquered population to identify with the royal rituals, she argues (p. 119).

Chapter Four examines changes in Magar identity that have accompanied their participation in the “ethnic revival” movement. The author argues that the efforts of the Magars to identify and enact an authentic pre-conquest identity is particularly challenging because of their extensive acculturation to high-caste Hindu culture, from at least the period of the 15th century

onwards (p. 126). She reviews key ideas of the ethnic revival movement, based on her interpretation of writings by some Magar authors, and presents an ethnohistory of Magar interactions with the ruling groups. While Magars pursued sanskritization until 1990, they are now engaged in desanskritization, which involves the rejection of high-caste Hindu culture as an aspirational model for cultural practice and the creation of ostensibly old but actually new cultural practices. Overall, the author presents a critical perspective on this movement, arguing that it fails to acknowledge the existence of hierarchy within “tribal” communities and in fact perpetuates hierarchy within these groups. She suggests that it is the “dominant fringe of Magar society” that is most concerned with desanskritization, just as was the case with the process of sanskritization, and that the ethnic revival movement has created a “new elitism” (p. 153). The author proposes the awkward term “para-sanskritization” to refer to the latest Magar efforts to define their identity because they use similar tools to those that high-caste Hindus used to claim their superior status, such as an archaic language, ritual texts and great heroes. She concludes the essay by asking what will happen to those individuals who are unable or unwilling to conform their cultural practices to this new model.

Chapter Five explores representations of Lakhan Thapa, “the messianic and rebel king,” who has become

revered as a martyr by Magars in the indigenous nationalities movement and in the Maoist movement. Lakhan Thapa was a Magar captain in the Nepal army and in 1869 he organized a rebellion against Jang Bahadur Rana. He established a fort in Gorkha district, where he tried to create a utopian kingdom, and established himself as a ruler and a religious leader. Lakhan Thapa was executed, and viewed as a martyr because of his opposition to Rana rule. Lecomte-Tilouine examines accounts of Lakhan Thapa's life and the rebellion he led, comparing older histories with newer versions written by Magar authors. She argues the recent Magar depictions of Lakhan Thapa assert that Lakhan Thapa was in conflict with local high caste communities rather than with the Ranas, and thus reframe his rebellion as an example of an ethnic rebellion.

Chapter Six provides a historical analysis of royal rituals that addresses the paradoxical position of the king in the caste system. The king is more powerful than all even while not occupying the Brahmin caste, and he becomes separate from the entire social order when he achieves divine status with coronation. Lecomte-Tilouine argues that the king maintains his power and eliminates the impurities inherent in mundane life through rituals that produce a "monstrous double" of him (p. 194). She analyzes myths of the origins of the Malla and Shah Dynasties and the rituals surrounding their coronation and death to demonstrate that

transgression is a common feature of royalty in the region.

In Chapters Seven and Eight, Lecomte-Tilouine demonstrates how symbolic dimensions of the Maoist People's War are linked to older concepts. In Chapter Seven, the author examines the relationship between the 2001 regicide and the growth of the Maoist People's War. In the wake of the regicide, the Maoists were increasingly vocal in their opposition to the monarchy. However, they also employed symbols used by Nepal's monarchs to position their forces as the legitimate successors to the monarchy, for example, by presenting the People's War as replicating Prithvi Narayan Shah's unification of Nepal. The author suggests that the Maoists are reviving the medieval concept of warfare as a means of gaining power and status, war as a form of ritual sacrifice, and patterns of warfare from the medieval era in Nepal.

In Chapter Eight, the author analyzes Maoist poetry as a way of understanding the central role of the concept of martyrdom in Maoist ideology. By sacrificing their lives, these martyrs help to generate the new world and inspire other soldiers to join the fight. Lecomte-Tilouine argues that by using the concepts of sacrifice, asceticism, and the destruction of demons, the Maoists have adopted "the most potent sources of power in the Hindu world..." (p. 264). She suggests that the idea of martyrdom played a key role in convincing many people to

willingly join the ranks of the Maoist People's Liberation Army. This essay thus contributes to scholarly efforts to understand the Maoist success in recruitment, moving beyond reductive arguments about how people joined because they were naïve, forced to join, or responding to pervasive issues like poverty. While it is important to look at these poems as a key vehicle of this ideology of martyrdom, her argument would be more persuasive if she supplemented textual analysis with ethnographic accounts of how these texts were used or how individuals responded to them.

Although the author makes few forays into broader scholarly debates in these essays, this book is based on careful interdisciplinary scholarship and makes significant contributions to the field of Nepal and Himalayan studies. The insightful analyses and the wealth of data presented in these chapters make this book required reading for scholars of anthropology, history, political science and religious studies who are specialists in the Himalayan region.

*Susan Hangen is Professor of Anthropology and International Studies at Ramapo College, NJ. Her research interests are ethnic politics and social movements in Nepal and the Nepali diaspora. Her publications include The Rise of Ethnic Politics in Nepal: Democracy in the Margins (Routledge, 2010) and Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Nepal, co-edited with Mahendra Lawoti (Routledge, 2013).*