

## Book Reviews

Sara Shneiderman. 2015. *Rituals of Ethnicity: Thangmi Identities between Nepal and India*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

At a time of resurgence in the salience of ethnic identity – especially in Nepal, where the major political question of the day revolves around a constitution that recognizes ethnic claims on the state, and where ethnic identities are sometimes validated by being enshrined in ethnographies written by foreign scholars – Shneiderman’s book is a significant contribution to scholarship on the subject. It says something new about a topic which had started to become a little stale in academic discourse: how ethnic identities come into existence and take form, and how that process is related to the wider social and political forms in which they are embedded. Since the publication of a seminal paper by Nancy Levine in 1987, which first laid out the parameters for rethinking the nature of ethnic identity in Nepal, scholars have focused on the malleability and plasticity of such identities, and have argued against the kind of primordialist thinking characteristic of theorists of an earlier generation. Shneiderman engages those debates from a different angle, to make an argument that ethnicity (at least among the Thangmi, the people she writes about) is both enduring and malleable. Although she takes an instrumentalist approach to the nature of ethnic identity formation, she is also deeply cognizant of the cultural ‘stuff’ that is the bedrock of such identities. Her analysis probes the relation between processual aspects, where elite members of the ethnic community and their organizations respond to the imperatives of state policies in two different countries – Nepal and India – that shape identity, and the enduring aspects of cultural life, especially ritual, which is of central importance to the Thangmi sense of themselves. Added to this theoretical appeal is that this is the first book-length description of the Thangmi, an ethnic group that has been largely invisible both in the ethnography of Nepal, and to Nepalis more generally.

The Thangmi have been moving between Nepal and India for over 150 years. The ethnonym is not widely known, so other ethnic populations among whom they live do not know who they really are, and Thangmi themselves have often, in a manner familiar in Nepal, represented themselves as belonging to other, more prestigious ethnic categories. Under the old

regime in Nepal, their distinctiveness as a particular group carried no special privileges, but has significance today in both Nepal and India. In the context of a modern political system where one's ethnic identity can bring political and material rewards, Thangmi elites in both countries have sought to make their distinctive 'Thangminess' visible to make claims on the state. What is malleable is the way this identity responds to state policies in Nepal and India, to shape elements of culture into identities that respond to state understandings of what ethnic identity should mean. The author thus returns to a focus on the cultural stuff contained within the ethnic boundary. In a departure from much of the work on identity in Nepal and elsewhere, which, since the influence of Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner in the early 1980s, has focused on identity as process, Shneiderman makes process speak to structure, demonstrating that we cannot understand the one without knowing something of the other.

What Thangmi find enduring about their identity is its location in ritual practice; it is through performing mainly life-cycle rituals that Thangmi define the boundaries of Thangminess. As the author observes, Thangmi recognize themselves by what they do in ritual action, rather than through metaphors of blood. She writes, "actors are conscious of and make choices between various forms of action that articulate different aspects of their relationship with the sacred to different but equally important audiences" (p. 53). It is not so much what the life cycle rites do for the individual, but how they enable the community (or society) to persist as a particular sort of ethnic group, that is significant to her analysis.

My reading of her account of Thangmi political action in India suggests that Thangmi there are engaging in the kinds of identity making that have been described by other ethnographers for Nepal – to use her metaphor, what is going on in India is more like a river than it is like a rock, and is more in tune with other analyses of ethnicity in the Himalaya. This also suggests that when the river flows, at least in modern societies (to keep the metaphor apt), people are shaping the flow with dams and weirs and channels, just as process itself is shaped by human agency. That identity as object is achieved through identity as process is a characteristic of many ethnic movements in Nepal. Shneiderman's account differs in that she focuses on Thangmi process as ritual action devoted to propitiating deities, and not so much on ritual as performance of identity (although that happens too), which is what is usually seen in these situations.

The author's discussion of the contradictory understanding (by Newar and Thangmi) of the role of the Thangmi ritual practitioners – known as *nari* – in the Devikot-Khadga Jatra is an implicit critique of many influential representations of 'caste' relations in South Asia (see for example Raheja's *Poison in the Gift*, Parry's *Death in Banaras*, and of course the work of Louis Dumont and his followers). The *nari* obviously neither see nor care about "the poison in the gift" and this concluding section of the book reminds us that 'caste' relations and ideology are constituted very differently from different vantage points.

The book is one of the best examples I have read of a multi-sited ethnography, and a model for others of how the challenge of writing such a text might be approached. Even so, in the best traditions of anthropology, it stays grounded in the details of village lives. The book is comprehensive in its ethnographic scope; the author demonstrates how various aspects of Thangmi life that is the fodder of traditional ethnographic accounts – myth, ritual, life cycle rites, kinship, economy, politics – is directly relevant to any understanding of how Thangmi identity is shaped and understood. At the same time, she demonstrates trans-locality and trans-nationality in the shaping of identity: how locally grounded practices are shaped and rethought as they circulate between two different national spheres of action, and how India's Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe provisions have shaped ethnic activism in both India and Nepal. I found the discussion of how Thangmi assert territorial claims (Chapter 6) to be strikingly novel, successfully complicating one-dimensional understandings of the relationship between ethnicity and territory. Although the link between identity and territory is a commonplace, the existence of the territory is usually taken for granted and not made into a problem to be analyzed. In this book, Shneiderman shows us how the territory comes to be creatively imagined and configured by those who claim special ties to it.

Her book also explores the relation between ethnographer and subject in a new way, because this was a book the Thangmi themselves wanted written. No other ethnographer of Nepal (or anywhere else for that matter, at least in South Asia, that I am aware of) has responded as Shneiderman has to this creative tension, even though the work that ethnographers do has come to be invoked by ethnic activists in Nepal as they put forward claims based on identity. Ethnographies sometimes validate identity, at least in Nepal, and the Thangmi, lacking both a recognized identity and an ethnography of

their own, had a stake in the author's project. The author discusses this at various points in the book; she writes, "I and social science as a whole were useful mediators between divine and political forms of recognition" (p. 31). How she negotiates this relationship – a project of ongoing collaboration with Thangmi – is of interest to anthropologists and others far beyond the bounds of Nepal Studies.

The book, unfortunately, is available only in hardback, and is priced at a prohibitive US\$ 80, almost ensuring that it will be little read where it matters most, in Nepal. One hopes that an affordable South Asia edition will be published after the sales of the hardback have had time to run their course.

To sum up, this book provides stuff to think with for students of caste, of ethnicity, of power, and of self-reflexive writing, including the very important question of how the process of fieldwork impacts the society being studied. Last but not least, the book is lucidly, even elegantly, written. It is the product of 15 years of research among the Thangmi and of a myriad enduring relationships created among them – and this bedrock of knowledge is reflected in the subtlety and depth of the analysis.

## Reference

Levine, Nancy. 1987. Caste, State and Ethnic Boundaries in Nepal. *Journal of Asian Studies* 46(1): 71–88.

**Arjun Guneratne**  
Macalester College