

Book Reviews

Kathryn S. March. 2002. *"If Each Comes Halfway:” Meeting Tamang Women in Nepal*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

"If Each Comes Halfway:” Meeting Tamang Women in Nepal is a unique and significant contribution to both Nepali studies and cultural anthropology. In this book Kathryn S. March brings us directly to a western Tamang village called Stupahill in 1976-77, introduces to us several women living there, and allows us to listen to their life stories and songs, frequently inserting necessary background knowledge as well as her own comments and interpretations to help us understand their stories. This *paricaya* (introduction) is of course virtual but a little more real than the one in an ordinary ethnography, as each person is treated not as a “typical Tamang woman” but as an individual with her own name, character, and life experience. Moreover, we can identify each narrator’s face in photographs and hear their voices (as well as the author’s) on a CD included in the book.

In a brief introduction, Kathryn March explains her main theoretical-cum-ethnographical challenge in this book. She attempts to represent the stories of the Tamang women in the form of an enduring text readable and understandable to non-Tamang (Anglophone) readers, without tacitly replacing their voices with her own. Her practical solution is to produce “a text that is itself a conversation” (p. 2) by keeping the balance between distance and familiarity, between “us” and “them,” and between the open-ended and polyphonic nature of the original conversations and the fixed and closed nature of an academic ethnography organized and heavily commented upon by an inevitably authoritative cultural anthropologist. Chapter 1 provides us the general ethnographic background of the Tamang, the people of Stupahill, and the long and enduring process of recording, transcribing, and translating.

I strongly recommend that readers listen to at least the first part of the CD before reading chapter 2. After the author’s greetings in three languages and brief introductory remarks, we hear the voice of Mondzom, obviously an old woman, who confidently and gently speaks a language totally foreign to me, obviously different both from Nepali and Tibetan, though some Nepali loanwords can be heard. Her voice is surrounded by a soundscape containing not only voices of other villagers nodding,

commenting, and laughing, and of a baby babbling, but various sounds caused by ordinary Stupahill village life. This recording, together with other narratives, songs, and laments on the CD, constitutes an integral part of this ethnography. Personally it reminded me of the very first days of my own fieldwork among another Tibeto-Burman speaking people in 1993.

The core ethnographic sections of "*If Each Comes Halfway*" consist of five chapters, which present minimally edited and skillfully translated narratives of five Stupahill Tamang women, young and old, with long annotations and commentaries by March in which Tamang songs and fragments from narratives of nine other Stupahill women are frequently quoted. Each chapter contains a life story of one particular woman told on one occasion, and each narrative is carefully represented so as not to vitiate its integrity and contextuality, though some parts might be omitted as is specified in the footnotes. The text thus refuses a simple summation, but we can still find several *leitmotives* or themes frequently talked about in the life histories. In the concluding chapter the author lists the most important of them:

comfort and suffering, childbearing, singing at festivals, life in extended households, new problems of wage employment and outmigration, marriage with cousins, relations with other ethnic groups, mothers and mother love, weaving and work, brothers, compulsory labor, women's property and wealth, domestic intrigues, sisters and aunts, and the idea that women have two homes—one with their own parents and one with their husbands (p. 244).

"*If Each Comes Halfway*" is thus distinct. It is an experimental work different from any other ethnographies of Nepal. True, ethnographic studies on Nepali women have been flourishing, but as far as I know, none of them has been so keen on presenting both the socio-cultural peculiarity of a society and the singularity of the life of each woman, considering both the poetics of everyday life and rigorous academic debates. Certainly the book does not present the reconstructed "life cycle" of a particular people, nor is it the life history of a particular woman. It differs from annotated oral texts and their translations (notably by Andrés Höfer on the Tamang) not only in style but also in that it treats unfixed non-religious narratives. The book is also different from accounts written by Nepali people, as the whole book is the result of long negotiations and dialogue between the villagers and the anthropologist. Obviously, the life stories represented in this book constitute but a small part of the author's

ethnographic materials obtained through the series of fieldwork. And the author could write a brilliant conventional ethnography using the same data as are used in this book. But it is her choice. Consequently, March succeeds in a unique way in representing the “reality” of ordinary Stupahill villagers’ lives in English with all the nuances and details from female points of view, while carefully avoiding essentialization of those female points of view.

A book of such multi-faceted and complex nature is open to many different lines of reading. One can read it as an example of experimental ethnography that reflects the post-*Writing Culture* trends of American cultural anthropology; as an informative addition to Himalayan ethnography and Tamang studies; as a heart-warming account of women’s lives in a remote Himalayan village; and/or a self-reflexive record of the process of intercultural communication and understanding. The summary above, as well as the following comments, are inevitably partial, based on my reading as a non-Nepali socio-cultural anthropologist educated in Japan who carried out two years of fieldwork (1993-95) in Nepal.

Reading “*If Each Comes Halfway*” several times, I have become more and more uncertain about the treatment of time in the book. All these women’s narratives were recorded in the mid 1970’s. Yet the book is the result of a long learning process of about twenty-five years since then, in which the author’s understanding and interpretation of these narratives had been steadily updated. A sentence written in the back cover of the paperback edition, “For twenty-five years, Kathryn S. March has collected the life stories of the women of a Buddhist Tamang farming community in Nepal” is thus not necessarily wrong but is at least misleading. Further, the book surprisingly lacks the sense of time, switching back and forth between blurred ethnographic present and past. It is as if the villagers kept the same fixed concepts, ideas, and topics for many years while the anthropologist gradually learned them. Coevalness is denied, and the Tamang voices represented in the book sound overly static and closed. True, in many places March discusses rapid and drastic socio-cultural changes in the village. But these indications paradoxically illuminate the possibility that villagers’ comments and interpretations have also been changed considerably. On the contrary, if the women’s discourse has changed so little within twenty-five years despite all these socio-cultural transformations, this phenomenon is to be somehow explained.

I was also surprised to find that the book almost totally lacks texts in the Tamang language, even though the author had transcribed a tremendous amount of Tamang narratives in Devanagari script before translating them into English. Readers have access only to several fragments of narratives recorded in the CD, one page of a handwritten transcription and translation of Mondzom's words, and the edited final version of translated narratives in English. This means that readers are compelled to trust the author entirely on translation of these narratives. It is not that she transcribed and translated Tamang words carelessly (but I do not really understand why the antonyms transcribed as "du_kha" and "sukka" in her notebook finally turned to "dukka" and "sukha" in the book). On the contrary, those who do not know the Tamang language can still trace her earnest and assiduous efforts in several rather clumsy words and phrases used in the book, such as "sister-daughters-in-law," "girlhood friends," and "the father of my house." I also appreciate the author's endeavor to write an ethnography that is compact and easy to read. But the problem is that the lack of Tamang texts prevents any readers, Tamangs and non-Tamangs alike, from critically and creatively reinterpreting the original texts (here I am recalling Michael Silverstein's (1996) fascinating reinterpretation of a text transcribed by Edward Sapir) and superfluously fortifies the authority of the ethnographer/anthropologist. In this regard too, I am afraid that "*If Each Comes Halfway*" is a text more closed than the author intended.

Another related weakness of the book might be that the author tacitly relies too heavily on several English key words, without critically scrutinizing their meanings, let alone defining them. For instance, I totally disagree with her when she writes "we do not ask how exactly the love Nhanu sought is or is not like our own; we enjoy" (p. 96). Certainly I also enjoyed the popcorn song (p. 99) but I strongly felt simultaneously that I had to ask what the Tamang word translated as "love" really meant. March seems to confuse here the simple fact that some human universals exist with the very doubtful assumption that an English word fully corresponds to one of them. And love is a problematic concept even within the Western academic tradition. Similar criticism might be offered for the use of words like "history," "domestic," and even "women."

The points discussed above obviously relate to the problem of presupposed readership of the book. Indeed, I felt quite uneasy every time the author addressed the readers using the pronoun "you" as I was not quite certain whether I was included or excluded. For instance March writes, "My goal has always been to introduce some Tamang women and

their worlds to you” (p. 234). But who is you? It is symptomatic that she uses a western/ nonwestern dichotomy in the same paragraph. So possibly the book is written at least primarily for western Anglophone readers, especially Americans, not for non-Western anthropologists (Nepali or otherwise), or for Tamangs who read English. A similar problem appears in a broad but somewhat complicated manner in the dedication (p. v). The book is dedicated to seventy-seven children of fourteen Tamang females who recorded their narratives, of the author, and of one male who is obviously her husband. To be sure, the author here bridges the gap between an original “us” and “them.” But to do this she brings another more problematic dichotomy of western/non-western (or American/Tamang?) couples while neglecting the agency of male research assistants. I was almost startled to see it for the first time. Was it because I was not an expected reader of the book, someone who does not share the American or euro-western culture?

To overcome the barriers lying between “us” and “them” is indeed the central theme of the book, suggested also in its attractive and allegorical title taken from one Tamang song. Toward the very end of the book March writes, “I see the central task of ethnography to be to explore and celebrate human differences without exoticizing them to the point at which we lose sight of our shared humanity” (p. 247). I totally agree with this argument, and believe that she accomplishes the task very successfully. However, she seems to reduce this task theoretically to making a balance within another dichotomy, i.e. “our shared humanity” and “cultural peculiarity.” This scheme is banal as it diverts our eyes from the complex reality in which “us” and “them” are ever more deeply and intrinsically interconnected, directly or indirectly, due to ongoing multilateral processes of which so-called modernization and globalization constitute only a part. March herself has heavily benefited from the process, as she hired educated and literate Tamang assistants and used not only Tamang but Nepali in her research. The attention to this sort of interconnectedness, in which the differences between “us” and “them” are reproduced in ever changing ways, while being one of the main topics of cultural anthropology and Nepali studies for more than two decades, is virtually missing in this book. I would argue that it is for this reason, among others, that the book looks closed and static, though extremely lively.

I am afraid that the last five paragraphs may have presented an unjustifiably negative impression of the book. To be fair, all the points discussed above are ones I also confront, without having any clear

198 Studies in Nepali History and Society 11(1), 2006

answers. My criticisms above are just to demonstrate that a fascinating ethnography encourages further thinking. As I argued in the first six paragraphs, the book is both a unique and highly recommended academic accomplishment and very enjoyable literature even for a non-English native, sometimes humorous, sometimes thrilling, and very often evocative. “*If Each Comes Halfway*” will be widely read and discussed from various perspectives for many years to come.

Reference

Silverstein, Michael. 1996. The Secret Life of Texts. In *Natural Histories of Discourse*. Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban, eds., pp. 81-105. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

Katsuo Nawa
University of Tokyo