

Jana Fortier. 2009. *Kings of the Forest: The Cultural Resilience of Himalayan Hunter-Gatherers*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

As the first full-length ethnography of western Nepal's Raute community, Jana Fortier's *Kings of the Forest* provides a rare insight into the livelihoods and cultural orientations of this often elusive group of hunter-gatherers. Framed primarily as a contribution to the cross-regional anthropological literature on foraging societies, Fortier's work tells us a great deal about the hunting, trade and consumption patterns of the band of 140 nomadic Rautes with whom she conducted research in Jajarkot over one "field season" in 1997. Although this work is clearly contextualized by a much longer relationship with neighboring agrarian communities, the relatively short-term nature of Fortier's fieldwork with the Raute themselves—which she acknowledges was also constrained by Raute taboos on outsider participation in key practices like monkey hunting—results in a tantalizing introduction to Raute lifeworlds, but leaves this reader wishing for more analytical depth. In particular, while Fortier provides convincing evidence that Raute foraging practices deserve to be recognized as a conscious ecological survival strategy that complements—rather than challenges—agrarian lifestyles in the region, her arguments about Raute identity and cultural resilience are less convincing, and seem to pose more questions than they answer.

The book is written in a clear, engaging narrative style that is apparently aimed at a non-specialist audience, comprised as much by undergraduates as indigenous rights activists and development workers. Fortier does an admirable job of making key anthropological concepts accessible to those unfamiliar with the field. Down-to-earth explanations of terms like "reciprocity," "political economy," "complementarity," "animism," "alterity," and "endogamy"/"exogamy" are a welcome relief from the over-wrought jargon of much contemporary anthropological writing. Unfortunately, however, the quest for clarity often seems to lead Fortier to uncomfortably simplistic representations of complex issues, such as her reliance upon the concept of "impression management" to theorize contemporary Raute identities as an oppositional struggle between the mutually exclusive futures of "cultural resilience" and "assimilation."

Kings of the Forest begins with an introduction that situates the Raute within international scholarly and developmental discourses about hunter-gatherers, with comparative references to the Raji and Banraji

communities resident on both sides of Nepal's western Himalayan border with India. The author makes explicit her own desire to influence debates over the futures of foraging people at the outset: "If there is one development strategy I advocate, it is to leave the Rautes alone. After reading this book, it is my hope that people will relinquish any idea of acculturating Rautes to an agrarian way of life. Rautes do not want to be the object of development, and they have no wish to become farmers" (p. 12). The second chapter, 'Encounters,' explains how Fortier gained access to the Raute camp, and also sets up for the first time the opposition between nomadic foragers and settled farmers as "contrary cultures" (p. 16). Chapter 3, 'Who are the Rautes?,' further embeds such dualistic thinking by asking, "are the Rautes a distinct ethnic group or a fringe of the larger society?" (p. 38) and "have some Raute communities already become Hindu caste villagers?" (p. 41) as the key questions that frame Fortier's attempts to explore issues of ethnic identity within the historico-political context of the modern Nepali nation-state. Chapter 4, 'Forests at Home,' is one of the highlights of the book, containing a thoughtful analysis of how the Raute as foragers conceptualize forests as "cultured space" in a manner that challenges Nepali agrarian oppositions between *prakriti* and *saṅskṛiti*—or "nature" and "culture," in Western anthropological terms. Chapter 5, 'Monkey's Thigh is the Shaman's Meat,' focuses on the pragmatics of monkey-hunting, as well as the fundamental role of the practice in shaping Raute cosmologies. Chapter 6, 'Let's Go to the Forest and Eat Fruit' complicates the image of Rautes as full-time hunters, or even full-time hunter-gatherers, by detailing first the non-meat forest products that make up substantial parts of the Raute diet, and then the importance of grain (gained through trade with farmers) in supplementing their caloric intake. Ultimately, suggests Fortier, the Raute are "locked in a relationship of mutual interdependence" (p. 107) with their agrarian trade partners. The next chapter, 'Economy and Society,' fleshes out this argument by detailing Raute strategies of both internal resource sharing and external trade, the latter based around the barter of hand-carved wood bowls for grain.

This is where the book's premise begins to falter. On the one hand, Fortier is keen to challenge other writers who perpetuate "the myth of the full-time hunter-gatherer" (p. 164) by ignoring the importance of foraging societies' relationality with their agrarian neighbors. Fortier deconstructs this myth by arguing in detail that grain consumption based on trade must be integrated into total assessments of hunter-gatherer caloric intake. This notion of complementarity with neighboring farmers is one of the most

intriguing elements in Fortier's ethnographic description of everyday Raute life, and is clearly enriched by Fortier's long-term engagement with those agrarian communities. Yet at the same time, in Chapter 9, 'Cultural Resilience: The Big Picture,' she seeks to represent the Rautes as "one of the last full-time foraging societies that has survived into the twenty-first century" (p. 159) by resisting the pressures of "assimilation." A more complex and flexible model for understanding cultural identity as a dynamic process would help here, perhaps saving the author from a pained set of attempts to distinguish "authentic" Raute beliefs and practices "borrowed" from those she often calls "Nepalese" (meaning caste Hindu) neighbors. (Strangely, Fortier's system of linguistic representation does not distinguish between Raute and Nepali terms, although she emphasizes the fact that the two speech forms belong to different language families—Tibeto-Burman and Indo-Aryan respectively).

Chapter 8, 'The Children of God' focuses on Raute cosmology, detailing the animistic deities to whom Raute relate as self-identified "children of god." Again, Fortier works hard to distinguish what she calls "borrowed gods" from "indigenous" Raute deities in a description that seems to rely more on interviews rather than observation. We are left wondering how Rautes give birth, marry, and dispatch their dead. In other words, while the beliefs that undergird Raute feelings of belonging in their environment are schematically sketched out, the presumably complex practices through which such feelings are expressed remain undescribed.

Overall, this is an eminently readable, important contribution to the ecological anthropology of foraging societies, but just the beginning of what we might call "Raute Studies." I would hope that Fortier herself would agree with this assessment, since if the Raute are indeed as culturally resilient as she suggests, there should be plenty of scope for future researchers to engage with them on their own terms.

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