

Kings of the Forest: The cultural resilience of Himalayan hunter-gatherers

by Jana Fortier

University of Hawaii Press: Honolulu, 2009, pp. 215, ISBN 978-0-8248-3356-5

Reviewed by Andrea Nightingale

Kings of the Forest is an ethnography in the classic tradition that seeks to outline the everyday life and structure of a band of hunter-gatherers, the Raute, in the western hills of the Nepal. The book walks us through the author's journey with the Raute from her initial attempts to gain access to the group, to some of her encounters with them—not all of which were smooth. The outcome is the result of some very challenging field work and provides an interesting counter narrative to the prevailing view of the 'settled subsistence agriculturist' that is assumed by development projects operating in Nepal. Overall, the book paints a sympathetic picture of the Raute and presents some compelling arguments about their need and desire to remain 'outside' of settled agriculture and the global capitalist economy—and thus, development.

The book begins by situating the Rautes within Nepalese society and within what is known of hunter-gatherer groups across South Asia, in both the past and the present. This positioning lays the foundation for understanding the Raute as *outside* Nepalese society and as a group intent on maintaining their distinctive identity and way of life. The forest is central to their livelihoods, but more importantly, to their sense of self. The Raute often represent themselves as the 'kings of the forest', invoking their socio-ecological context in producing their distinctiveness and placing claims on their 'royal' ancestry.

The Rautes are a small band of hunter-gatherers who live in northwestern Nepal and migrate over large areas of the Karnali zone over the course of roughly 25 years. Their livelihood strategies are focused on forest foraging and hunting, and they are distinguished by their hunting of monkeys (exclusively), a species considered sacred to other Nepalis. They thus exist in contrast to many of the practices and values of 'settled' Nepalis and the Raute are keen to justify and maintain this distinctive way of life. Fortier does a comprehensive job of giving the reader a sense of

their current livelihood strategies and what is known of historical change in those strategies. We are left with a picture of a people who live very much in the present and seek to preserve their society and culture in the face of pressures to conform to the goals of development and state building.

Each chapter takes us through a different aspect of Raute life and, consistent with their livelihood strategies, many of them overlap. We learn early on about their spiritual and practical reasons for hunting monkeys and in the concluding chapter, it becomes clear that their foraging strategies are also an important part of 'cultural resilience' and of keeping conflicts with settled communities to a minimum. Similarly, the chapter on exchange highlights the importance of wooden bowls to subsistence requirements because the bowls are the main product exchanged for grain. In another chapter, we are told more about how bowl making fits within the larger gender division of labour and foraging strategies.

The book draws on some of the theoretical literature in anthropology and related fields to make sense of gift exchange (Chapter 5); forager communities and their integration into the larger political economy of their areas (Chapter 6); and cultural resilience (Chapter 9), among other issues. These forays into theory are very helpful where they appear, but they are still very much in the background compared to the telling of the tale of the author's encounter with the Raute. As such, the book appears to be targeted at an introductory undergraduate audience, rather than seeking to use the Raute case to make cogent interventions in current anthropological debates.

Egalitarianism emerges as an important theme in the book, although no single chapter is devoted to a discussion of inter-group dynamics based on gender, age or class. Rather, Fortier's insistence that the Raute are an egalitarian society appears to blind her to some rather major hints in the data that all may not be as egalitarian as it appears. At the beginning of the book, we are told that the Raute asked the author for shoes in exchange for information, but the man made it clear that only he and other male family members needed shoes, and that his wife was fine without them. In other places, we learn that few women are skilled bowl makers, meaning their ability to barter independently with other Nepalis is significantly less than that of men. A discussion of what 'egalitarian' means in this context and some justification for reiterating the claim that they are egalitarian when

women are clearly not considered equal with men would have nuanced and greatly enhanced the analysis.

Similarly, while there are some compelling spatial arguments for casting the Raute as outside 'dominant' Nepalese society, the binary presented in the book is not well substantiated by the empirical details of the ethnography. The book contains many examples of Raute encounters with 'settled' Nepalis, yet the ways in which location is key to people's identities is not well analysed, despite a chapter devoted to 'Forests as home' (Chapter 4). As both Rautes and other Nepalis move between villages and forests on an almost daily basis, quite how the forest is complicit in constructing Raute identity could have been more fully explored in the book. As it stands, this discussion is more implicit than explicit, and the notion that the Raute 'live' in the forest is taken for granted because that is what they say they do. Yet the ethnography seems to indicate more of a moving between and through different village and forest spaces. In some senses, one could argue that the Raute live in 'villages' in the forest, rather than in the 'camps' that Fortier suggests. How this is fundamentally different from the practices of other Nepalis who move between village and forest spaces, not to mention the larger migration circuits of many Nepalis moving around for work and education, needs to be addressed more acutely. Such an exploration would provide a more convincing argument about the 'uniqueness' of Raute life.

Finally, the book raises important questions about doing research among remote and marginalised groups. Fortier has clearly resolved some of the ethical and methodological tensions by presenting the Raute as they would like to represent themselves. Yet the book could have made a more significant contribution to debates on fieldwork and ethics if it had tackled head on the problems of simply repeating this image and the more complex problems of essentialising identities and natures, so that the Raute become 'naturalised in their place' of the forest. The issue of gender relations is one element of the complex problem of Raute identity, but it extends far beyond issues of subjectivity, and raises questions about how nature and place are implicated in the political construction of subjects and claims to 'separate' identities in a multi-cultural society like Nepal. Fortier's analysis thus leaves us hoping she will publish more journal articles from the material that engage with these intriguing questions.