

REVIEW

Gérard Toffin, *Les tambours de Kathmandou*. Paris: Payot & Rivages, 1996. ISBN 2-228-89030-8; 316 pages.

Gérard Toffin, a senior social anthropologist at the National Centre of Scientific Research (CNRS) in Paris, has been working on the Newars, the indigenous people of Kathmandu Valley, since 1971. He has spent more than a total of six years in the field studying various Newar communities. This has resulted in numerous publications which deal comprehensively with various aspects of Newar society and culture. They have brought Toffin the deserved fame of being one of the foremost authorities on things Newar.

The present book, with the evocative title 'The Drums of Kathmandu' is not an academic summary of Toffin's past research, but a roughly chronologically arranged account of his experiences in Nepal, and notably 'in the field'. To start with, Toffin relates how in 1970 he first came to Nepal by chance (instead of being drafted into the army he had the good fortune to be posted as acting cultural attaché at the French Embassy in Kathmandu!), and then became so enchanted by the place that he decided to stay on and make the Newars the object of his ethnographic quest (ch. 1). He then proceeds to describe in graphic detail the numerous difficulties he had to face when he started out in the small village of Pyangau, some 12 kilometres south of Kathmandu (ch. 2). In the next two chapters Toffin deals with his field work in Panauti, a small town at the eastern confines of the Kathmandu Valley. He describes the enviable conditions under which he was working and living there in 1976 (and during two subsequent stays in the following years); in the process the reader is introduced in some detail to Panauti and its inhabitants (chs. 3 and 4). Not without humour, Toffin recapitulates next his dreadful experience as an academic advisor for the French production of a film on the

Kumari of Patan (ch. 5). Then he turns to his research on the farmer castes of Jyapus (and Gathas) and to the festivals observed by them (and also by other Newar castes). First, he recounts his studies of the archaic Nava Durga dance of Thecho (a village just north of the aforementioned Pyangau) and relates it to the Nava Durga dance of Bhaktapur (ch. 6). Then he turns to the town of Kathmandu and its Jyapus (ch. 7 and 8). He draws an intimate picture of the old town and then deals with the Jyapus, showing (among other things) how their musical and ritual traditions reflect the old segmentation of the town into 32 quarters. The remaining part of the book is more reflective and less descriptive. Thus, in the ninth chapter, Toffin deals in a more general way with the Newars, their festivals, their history, the character of their society and their place in present-day Nepal. Finally, in the tenth and last chapter, he dwells upon the dramatic changes which have come about during the last 25 years (explosion of traffic, uncontrolled urbanisation, disastrous pollution, rise of consumerism, exposure to Western ideas and values) and how they threaten the cultural integrity of the Newars. The book is rounded off by an epilogue in which Toffin looks back at the Newars and his study of them.

Toffin relates his encounter with the Newars in a clear and simple, almost colloquial style, which is devoid of academic jargon. He describes the Newars he met and worked with; he describes their families, their work, their personal concerns and ambitions, their houses, the feasts they celebrate, the customs they observe, the streets and bazaars, the villages and towns, the countryside they inhabit. These descriptions are vivid and full of acutely observed details; they make for captivating reading in a way which at times is reminiscent of V.S. Naipaul's celebrated portrayal of India in the late eighties (*India, a Million Mutinies Now*). Despite the vividness of these descriptions, it might, in view of a wider readership, have been a good idea to supplement them with photos. There is only the cover picture of a Jyapu smoking a hookah (rather than playing a drum!).

It is not only the narrative part which makes Toffin's book worthwhile reading, but also what he has to say in more general terms on the field of inquiry, i.e. the Newars, and on the process of studying and the effects this process has on the researcher. Thus, he shares with the reader his basic understanding of Newar society and culture (settlement structure, caste system etc.) and deals with certain particular aspects more specifically. Festivals are, for instance, interpreted in some detail as re-enacting the socio-political conditions of the Malla period. By harkening back in this way to a

time prior to the conquest of the valley by the Gorkhas, they function as an assertion of Newar identity, which is the reason — so Toffin claims — why they subsist to the present day (p. 244). (This claim is not unproblematic. Long before the advent of Prithvi Narayan Shah, at a time when there was no apparent need to assert their cultural identity, the Newars had been diligently observing their feasts and customs year after year. So the survival of Newar feasts to the present day may have more to do with the extraordinary tenacity with which Newars are wont to cling to their traditions, and less to do with the conquest by the Gorkhas and the subsequent need to preserve their cultural identity.)

As for the process of studying, Toffin makes (among others) two important methodological points which are not only relevant for anthropologists working in Nepal. Firstly, he insists that in the case of a society with a literary heritage such as that of the Newars the anthropologist should make use of the written sources and documents in order to supplement the findings of his field work. Secondly, Toffin emphasises the need to re-visit the field as much as possible in order to become ever more intimately acquainted with it and hence to understand it better (pp. 291-93). (The other side of the coin, namely the exclusive reliance of the anthropologist upon one field, is not discussed.)

Beyond such methodological questions, Toffin also dwells on his own particular experiences, on the traumatic aspects of fieldwork and its initiatory character, on the insurmountable gap he ultimately feels between himself and the Newars regardless of all his passion for them, and on feelings of estrangement from his own culture. It is this estrangement resulting from the intensive occupation with a completely different culture which allows for a more distanced and in a certain sense more objective perspective when viewing one's own culture — a theme carefully developed by Toffin when pondering upon French culture and society in general and his own background in particular. Despite the personal character of these deliberations, they are of general interest and not self-indulgent, as they might well have become in a book of this kind.

The freedom from the restraints of academic discourse allows Toffin to draw an intimate and lively picture of Newar society and culture. It is the picture drawn by someone deeply moved by this culture, someone rejoicing in its richness and vibrancy, while, by the same token, grieving over the adverse

effects of the conquest of the Gorkhas and, more to the point, of the onslaught of modern Western mass culture. Not surprisingly, this passionate picture is not always devoid of partiality. The conquest by the Gorkhas is depicted in gruesome colour (p. 242), and no explicit mention is made of the disastrous inability of the last three Malla kings, notably of Jayaprakash Malla from Kathmandu, to overcome their differences in the face of a common enemy. (There is only an indirect allusion to this inability when referring to Prithvi Narayan Shah's successful fomenting of dissension among these kings — a formulation which veils the main reason for this dissension, namely centuries of chronic quarrelling between the kings of Bhaktapur, Patan and Kathmandu.) Similarly, feminism, democracy, increased literacy, the disintegration of the caste system etc. are viewed as a threat to the cultural integrity of the Newars (which of course they are) without taking into consideration that they also offer an opportunity for the Newars, most notably the underprivileged among them, to uplift their lot. Toffin's all too understandable anger and indignation at the onslaught of Western culture is also problematic, entailing as it does a certain inconsistency on his part. Toffin's research is driven by the urge to explore Newar society into its innermost recesses, including those which are deemed taboo for outsiders (cf. pp. 293f). This urge is clearly related to the penetration (so much lamented by Toffin) of modern Western culture into even the remotest corners of the globe. In other words, Toffin's own ethnographic quest cannot be divorced from the globalisation of Western culture; rather it is an aspect of it, a fact on which Toffin himself reflects.

Despite their personal character, Toffin's recollections are never idiosyncratic. By contrast, they reveal a very critical mind which ponders in an intelligent and interesting way not only upon the Newars but also upon the experience of studying them. The picture which Toffin draws in the process will introduce a wide audience beyond the confines of academia, in a very readable manner, to the fascinating world of the Newars. One would hope that this book, and for that matter many of the other as yet untranslated publications by Toffin, will one day be translated into English, not least because thus they would also become accessible to the (English-speaking) Nepalis.

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