

Book Review

Nepali Aama: Portrait of a Nepalese Hill Women. 1982. Broughton Coburn. 165 pages. Ross Erikson, Inc. Santa Barbara. Price US \$ 9.95.

In spite of the anthropologist's claim to enjoy a special intimacy with the people of distant societies, it is often not they who produce the most sensitive and revealing personal portraits which can contribute so much to intercultural understanding. Film-makers, poets, novelists, historians, and now development officers are in the forefront in bringing individuals of distant cultures into direct contact with our public: lay-people as well as students and scholars. The work of Camerini in films such as Dadi's Family, of journalist Critchfield in The Golden Bowl Be Broken, as well as novels by R.K. Narayan and short stories by Lu Xun are widely known. Striking images by photographers or vibrant dialogue from a skilled writer can often produce a more refined, convincing cultural portrait than we anthropologists can with our extensive ethnographies or histories. Rather than being apart from academy, these creative enterprises may be seen as instructive models for our work.

The book under review here, Nepali Aama, Portrait of a Nepalese Hill Woman, was authored neither by a writer nor a scholar. Yet, it is an attempt at a humanistic portrayal of an individual which may be an effective and legitimate way of interpreting Asian culture. A collection of some 64 B/W, informal but not very revealing photographs of the lady Vishnu Maya, are interspersed with her own statements to create a sort of vignette of her life. The author Broughton Coburn adds an 11 page epilogue with some general observations on her Gurung culture, but it remains a slight book in every respect, which may be what Coburn intended. As such, Nepali Aama may not justify a serious review. But my interest in this photographic essay lies in its style and its goals. It can be a starting point for more substantial work of this kind and for comparisons with similar presentations.

If one of the best ways to project an image of foreign life is through biography, I believe this effort by Mr. Coburn is worth our attention. Unfortunately I know of no book yet produced on Asia by anthropologists which matches the biographies by our colleagues working in the Americas and in Africa, so I turn to their writing for a model study against which to compare Nepali Aama. This is Nisa, a recent contribution by M. Shostak (Harvard U. Press, 1981). Nisa is also a portrait of a woman, illustrated with a few select photographs. It too is based on the author's intimate contact with her subject. However, similarities with the Nepalese study end here.

Whereas Vishnu Maya belongs to an agricultural society with extensive ties to the wider economy, Nisa is a !Kung woman living in a gathering and hunting culture in southern Africa. Nisa's life seems simpler

than the Nepali woman's yet her biography is much more sophisticated and she seems a more complex individual. The richness of Nisa's statements, her contributions to our knowledge of human growth, her interpretation of !Kung culture and the people around her, as well as the account of the friendship between her and her writer, are of immense value. Part of the strength of Nisa is quantitative; extensive passages on the !Kung woman's memories are supplemented with solid ethnography. Writer Shostak is also an important part of the story. Moreover, much of the force of the Africa study seems to lie in its careful organization of persona and culture. There is a powerful introductory birth scene narrated by Nisa, followed by Shostak's own account of her fieldwork and her history with Nisa. It is a detailed and useful chronicle into which a great deal of thought has gone. Each of the next 15 chapters of Nisa is divided into two sections: first we have the ethnographic review; that is followed by a first person account by Nisa on the same subject (i.e. life in the bush, or man and woman). All this is extremely well written to the point of being absorbing even though Nisa's stories in some ways repeat the ethnography. Nisa's memories of her life include vivid dialogue conveying extraordinary detail of her past, told with candor and conviction. She talks mainly about what happened to her and the people she lives with, impressing on us the issues and the quality of !Kung culture as well as the person, Nisa. One feels nothing is kept from the writer or from us, her readers.

Only when we see the art and teamwork of Shostak and Nisa at work can we imagine the potential of the Nepalese study where Vishnu Maya's life, theoretically offers greater cultural variety and historical depth. Nepali Aama has contact with a number of different castes besides her own Gurung people. She visits a distant holy place in India and another en route towards Tibet. These and many other situations provide ample opportunity for the inclusion of wider cultural influences as well as regional Nepali history and poetry. Nothing is made of the extensive cultural fabric into which this Nepalese life is inextricably woven. According to author Coburn's interpretation here, Vishnu Maya appears as a one-dimensional character: a voice but not a personality, a life but not a culture. Her remarks would be considered fatuous if attributed to one of us. Is a statement meant to become magical when issuing from the mouth of an old Gurung woman? When Aama claims ... "big people have big problems and little people have little problems..." is this meant to be Nepali wisdom or female perspicacity?

From what Coburn portrays of this lady, she is certainly talkative and appears to have considerable experience. She may even be wise. I would venture, moreover, that this is too shallow a portrayal and therefore quite unjust to the woman; certainly it is unfair to her culture. Her excessive references to the magical properties of certain local potions lack insight and fail to enhance our knowledge of indigenous medicine. Nor does it even hint at the important wider belief system of which her ideas are part. The absence of this cultural context leaves us with highly simplistic phrases; Vishnu Maya claims for example that if a woman does not pierce her ears, she will become deaf!. It makes one wonder how far beyond colonial anecdotes we have progressed.

To move to a more relevant matter, a real issue in Aama's life is her work. Her capacity for heavy work and the pressures on her obviously impressed Mr. Coburn who, to his credit, does not romanticize the labours of hill life. Many of his photos show Vishnu Maya at work, and her own remarks repeatedly bespeak her deep concern with her livelihood. Also, in the epilogue, the author elaborates a little on Gurung economy, providing some contextual basis for Vishnu Maya's activity. This theme remains undeveloped however, and we have no feeling of what it is like to be a woman and a labourer in this society. This is unfortunate since today more than ever, these are matters of special concern. Any book which is meant to address an educated lay reader, --tourist or developer or student -- can make a valuable, strong impact. In particular the personal portrait can become an effective means of illustrating and supplementing the more scientific or specialized studies on woman as well as Himalayan economy. For readers who know nothing about Nepal, the simplistic portrayal of a "peasant lady" is further weakened by an absence of reference to any of several excellent monographs on this region. There is no indication that the author knew of important background readings such as Pokhara Valley (Harka B. Gurung, 1965), Les Gurungs (Pignède, 1966), Resources and Population (Macfarlane, 1978), or The Gurungs of Nepal (Messerschmidt, 1978). In addition to these there is an important critical study of economic aid, Nepal in Crisis (Blaikie et al, 1980) which is based on the very region where Vishnu Maya lives. If none of these could be woven into the portrait, at least the publisher should list them as further reading. Nepali Aama can only be recommended along with any of those supplements.

At this point we cannot of course ask Coburn to rewrite his book. But we can acknowledge the potential of its appeal and the general need for more substantial personal portraits. If a Peacecorpsman like Coburn can produce Nepali Aama, then a Nepalese writer or a trained anthropologist ought to be able to provide us with something on the scale of Nisa. With so many more resources available to us, combined with our rich personal experience, scholars ought to take Nepali Aama as a starting point. In Asian Studies, even with books like Shinohata, A Daughter of Han, or The Twice Born, we have a long way to go to produce something of the quality of Nisa, to show how the reality of an individual's day-to-day life can have scientific merit, great teaching potential, and also reach a wide readership.

- Barbara Nimri Aziz