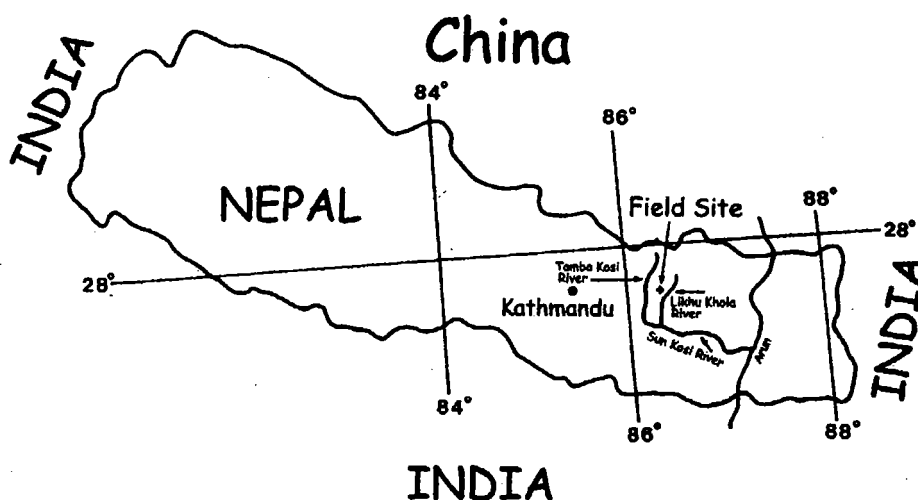


THE JIRELS OF EASTERN NEPAL: AN INTRODUCTION

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This issue of *Contributions to Nepalese Studies* is dedicated to the Jirel people who inhabit the Jiri Valley in the Dolakha District of the Eastern Nepal (see Map). Jirel culture features many elements that sets it apart from the cultures of other Nepali ethnic groups. They practice a form of Buddhism, which varies significantly from the Buddhist practices of their Sherpa neighbors. The Jirels also worship Hindu gods and celebrate all the Hindu rituals with great enthusiasm. Additionally, each Jirel clan has its own god or goddess, neither Buddhist nor Hindu, and these clans also engage



in ancestral spirit worship. The Jirels practice their own form of shamanism, which is centered on practitioners known as *Phombos*. These healers and spirit masters, who in some ways resemble the Nepali *Jhankris* (cf. Miller 1997), utilize unique rituals in their curing ceremonies. Jirel funeral rites also possess elements that are unique to them. Finally, it might be noted that each clan has various food taboos that again are neither Buddhist nor Hindu in derivation. For these reasons, it is important to

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document in the ethnographic record *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, The Jirel Issue (January 2000), an analysis of Jirel culture.

The Jiri Valley Ethnographic Project was a multidisciplinary cooperative effort involving a biological, cultural, ecological, linguistic anthropologist, as well as a medical sociologist and a political scientist. The research project was designed to record an ethnographic description of the Jirel people that emphasized their socioeconomic and political organization, kinship patterns, life-cycle rituals, language, ethnoenvironment, and indigenous healthcare practices. It also paid special attention to the impact of "modernization" efforts on the Jirel culture.

Previous Research

Although scholars, both foreign and Nepali, have conducted research in Nepal over the last several decades and have greatly expanded our knowledge of the peoples and cultures of the estimated 75 ethnic groups living there, ethnographic literature specifically focused on the Jirels is virtually non-existent. The first scholarly research among the Jirels was conducted by two American physical anthropologists, Dr. John Blangero and Dr. Sarah Williams-Blangero, of the Southwest Foundation for Biomedical Research, San Antonio, Texas, USA. Their main focus was on population genetics. While this work was significant and shed light on some aspects of the Jirel culture, e.g., mating patterns and inter-village migrations, much still remained unknown. Eventually, their studies led them to an interest in the genetics of susceptibility to helminthic infections among the Jirels. In a collaborative effort with Dr. Janardan Subedi, a medical sociologist/anthropologist, from Miami University, USA, they were able to secure grant funding from the National Institute of Health, USA. This funding enabled these researchers to establish the Jiri Helminth Project and Clinic in August of 1995. It has been in operation ever since.

While the main focus of the research has remained on population genetics, Dr. Subedi conducted an extensive survey in which he gathered statistical data on demographics, general health, health care utilization, mental health, and other disabilities among the Jirels. It became obvious that an in-depth understanding of Jirel culture was very desirable. It was at this point that the project reported in this present volume was conceived.

The Present Project

The Jiri Valley Ethnographic Project as conceived as an attempt to collect basic ethnographic information on the under-reported Jirel ethnic group. In order to achieve this end, the project recruited two additional field

research members, Dr. H. Sidky, an ecological anthropologist, with an interest in the anthropology of religion, and Dr. James Hamill, a linguistic and cognitive anthropologist, both affiliated with Miami University. The Philip and Elaina Hampton Fund for Faculty International Initiatives, Miami University and the Continental Trading Social Science Research Award, Kathmandu, Nepal funded their research. After data collection, several other anthropologists and sociologists contributed to the analysis of the information gathered. These included: Dr. Ronald H. Spielbauer, Dr. Sree Subedi, both of Miami University, Dr. Mark Tausig, Dr. James Ross, C. L. Broughton, all of the University of Akron, and Robin Singh of Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal.

The cultural anthropologists sought to achieve their research goals through the systematic gathering of quantitative and qualitative ethnographical data through standard field methodologies. These included on-site formal and informal interviews, participant observation, as well as the collection of quantitative data on land use, productive technologies, economic output, and labor allocation and organization in various villages. Detailed information on household incomes, the number of wage laborers, changes in agricultural patterns, as well as data on family, lineage, and clan membership were also obtained. Information was also collected on the interrelationships and interactions between descent groups and how these interactions have changed over the last several decades. Finally, ethnosemantic data were collected on certain aspects of the Jirel language.

In summation, the ultimate objectives of this project were threefold: (1) to provide a detailed ethnographic description of traditional Jirel society, essentially a baseline ethnography; (2) to demonstrate how development efforts have transformed this community, which at one time had been a cohesive ethnic group of self-sufficient subsistence farmers; and (3) to assess whether the cost of this transformation outweighed its benefits as far as the Jirels are concerned, and what the positive and negative effects of these changes have been.

Given the main objectives of the project, ethnographic descriptions have been emphasized. Ethnographic data make ethnological or comparative research possible into such areas as poverty, famine, social inequality, political unrest, ethnic cleansing, corruption, terrorism, armed conflict, and environmental deterioration. Without a comparative approach, an understanding of such significant social problems cannot be fully explored. As has been said many times, the significance of social science research, especially anthropology, is its cross-cultural and comparative approach. Such an approach can help in the conceptualization of many of these issues in new ways.

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In addition to the unique characteristics of the Jirel culture, Jirel society exists as an example of an ethnic group, which has been subjugated, oppressed, and exploited by rich and powerful elites who have monopolized economic and political power. In recent times this has occurred under the guise of both "democracy" and "communism." The Jirels are not alone in having been the victims of such phenomena and the same forces have impinged upon and have kept many other Nepali ethnic groups impoverished and in subordinate social and political positions (Shrestha 1997; Subedi 1995). Thus, the study of social change and its impact has received attention in several of the papers found in this volume. The authors have tried to devote considerable attention to the hegemonic forces that are counterproductive to the well being of indigenous peoples, such as the Jirels. These forces have consistently perpetuated social injustice and inequality.

While the papers in this volume present a general overview of certain aspects of the Jirel culture, a broader and much more detailed account of this ethnic group will be provided in a forthcoming monograph.

References

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