

advances and returns. Furthermore, Cameron's entire rationale for arguing against symbolic interpretations of caste in favour of forms of control over people and resources, stressing transactions of material values between castes rather than ritual gifting denoting status hierarchy (p.49), contains at the very least an implicit theory of class.

This point of difference apart, I must strongly recommend *On the Edge of the Auspicious* as a perceptive treatment of gender that is pertinently located within regional scholarship and contemporary anthropological theory. There are some memorable passages of writing on *jakram* women's dances (p.215), on the sexual imagery of ploughing, on the wit deployed against exploitation, and on the effectiveness of stylized public insult (invoking a variety of possible incestuous relationships, and an eloquent wishing of death on an offending woman's male relatives (p.163)). Cameron creates a vivid sense of her own position and experience within the community of research, and does not hold back from mentioning the sometimes physically 'repulsive conditions' of fieldwork, and the 'loathsome' treatment by high castes of the women and men whose voices speak out from the pages of her book.

References

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The Thakali: A Himalayan ethnography by Michael Vinding. London: Serindia Publications, 1998. 512 pp., 51 colour plates, maps, glossary, bibliography, index. ISBN 0-90602650-4. £30

Reviewed by Mark Turin

The Thakali are one of very few ethnic groups autochthonous to the Nepali Himalaya who can boast that the academic bibliography pertaining to their culture runs to almost fifteen pages of small print. Michael Vinding's eagerly awaited monograph concludes a good five decades of intense anthropological debate on this famous Tibeto-Burman population of lower Mustang simply by having more information in one place than any previous study. Thankfully, although published in an era marked by navel-gazing anthropology, *The Thakali* shows no sign of having been caught up in such reflexive discussion. Whilst

critics may take issue with the lack of cutting-edge theory, Vinding's curiously traditional yet personal style has much to recommend it.

The structure of the book is pleasingly classic. Vinding writes of the flora, fauna, and topography of the Thak Khola valley, describes his first arrival in the area and offers an in-depth historical analysis of the whole of Mustang. Thereafter, in chapters 4 to 13, Vinding describes the economic strategies of a Thakali household, the kinship system, patrilineal descent groups, Thakali household structure, social stratification within the group and in the area as a whole, marriage, death, and other salient moments in the Thakali life cycle, the political systems of Thak Khola, the different religious influences on the Thakali and their own indigenous belief system, and finally a descriptive analysis of the major Thakali festivals. Chapter 14 deals with the history of Thakali emigration and Thakalis living outside Thak Khola, while chapter 15 offers a careful analysis of continuity and change among the Thakali. Appendix 1 is a collection of historically important documents relating to the Thakali, all culled from the invaluable Regmi Research Series, and Appendix 2 presents a few salient Thakali myths and fables, which are well chosen and thoughtfully translated.

In *The Thakali*, Vinding offers us more of a summary of his own previous writings on the ethnic group than an overview of the previous literature in general. As he writes in his Preface, his monograph was submitted for the degree of Doctor Philosophiae in May 1997, and "no major changes have been undertaken since then." Moreover, his dissertation, and thus also the book, is largely a synthesis of all his earlier articles. Of the fifteen chapters, eleven are based (at least in part) on his twelve previously published articles, many of which appeared in *Kailash* and *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, albeit "...revised and updated to take into account the findings of recent studies" (p.46, footnote 2). Whilst this is standard academic practice, two serious issues relating to content should be raised. The first is that for anyone who has read Vinding's articles, there is little new to learn from reading his 470-page monograph. Second, and perhaps more importantly, Vinding's descriptions of life in Thak Khola are noticeably dated. Chapter 4, for example, entitled 'Making A Living', reads more like a historical document than a contemporary description of Thakali economic strategies. Vinding is clearly aware of this, and takes care to warn us that, although updated, "the chapter presents a picture of mainly the early 1980s" (p.93, footnote 1). Notwithstanding these two issues, there is a lot to be said for having his thoughtfully written articles reworked into book form, thus making them accessible to a wider audience.

The greatest strength of Vinding's work lies in his unflinching attention to detail, which is supported by 25 years of accumulated experience. There are few other Himalayan anthropologists who have invested a quarter of a century in their first full ethnography. Vinding's monograph is both meticulously researched and satisfyingly comprehensive. Some of his asides make for the best reading: for instance, footnote 4 on p.11 reads, "The wind blowing from the south is called *nambar*, while the north wind is known as *phamar*." These details are the backbone of Vinding's monograph as a record of Thakali culture, language,

and society in the latter years of the 20th century. Moreover, it should be added that it is precisely because Vinding is not encumbered by proving or disproving any particular contemporary anthropological theory that he has the space to include such details.

There is, however, a more pedantic side to his thick description, which may not appeal to all readers. In his section on goods and products used by the Thakali, we learn that when it comes to cigarettes, "...most smokers use cheap brands, but some prefer more expensive filter cigarettes" (p.103). The inclusion of such details does make one feel rather as if no fact which Vinding has gathered can escape inclusion in the monograph. Other such comments, whilst being ethnographically valid, are at risk of coming across as rather platitudinous or, at worst, downright odd. In his discussion of what a Thakali man would find attractive in a woman, he informs us that "her bosom...should be neither too big, nor too small" (p.223). Although surprising, the inclusion of such details does have the advantage of livening up a sometimes plodding list of ethnographic facts.

The other high point of Vinding's work is Chapter 2, 'Living Among the Thakali'. Unlike the authors of many traditional ethnographies who are noticeably absent from their own monographs, Vinding quite overtly paints himself into the social fabric he is documenting. He shares with the reader his fears, doubts, and also his initial excitement in a most forthright, at points even disarming, manner: "There exist only general guidelines on how to conduct fieldwork, and in the field the anthropologist has to find his/her own way through trial and error" (p.28). Vinding's decision to describe his *rite de passage* will be of enormous value to students of anthropology. Moreover, his candour comes across as honest and sincere, a most refreshing kind of reflexivity in a climate in which such confessions either dominate a book or are relegated to the position of a disclaimer in a preface. Vinding effortlessly strikes the right balance between personal anecdote and serious ethnography—no small achievement. To my knowledge, there are no other published ethnographies of the Himalaya which deal with the trials and tribulations of fieldwork so candidly, and for this alone, if for no other reason, *The Thakali: A Himalayan Ethnography* should appear at the top of every South Asian anthropology syllabus.

Vinding's highly personal approach may have something to do with the fact that he is no career anthropologist with a tenure-track position to justify. Arriving in Nepal for the first time in 1972, at the age of 21, he has spent a great deal of time in the country since, and is presently based in Bhutan. Save a few related articles, Vinding has concentrated his focus on the Thakali for 27 years, and so it comes as no surprise that at times he comes across as a little possessive of the ethnic group as a whole: "...the Thakali came to be 'my' people" (p.29).

Vinding's explicit purpose is to "present a comprehensive ethnography on the Thakali" (p.4) and in this he succeeds masterfully. We can but hope that he will prepare a South Asian edition, since £30 is rather steep for Indian and Nepali scholars, not to mention the Thakali themselves for whom he hopes his book "may also be of use" (Preface). As minority languages and ethnic cultures are increasingly subsumed into the global whole,

there remains ever less time to document them. Vinding has described a rapidly-changing Himalayan society, and in so doing has made a lasting contribution to anthropology. *The Thakali* is at once refreshingly personal and pleasingly traditional, a truly rare combination in modern ethnography.

Kathmandu Valley Painting—The Jucker Collection by Hugo E. Kreijger. London: Serindia Publications, 1999. 128pp., 97 ills. (84 colour, 13 b&w). Glossary, bibliog., index. ISBN 0906026520.

Reviewed by Julia A.B. Hegewald

This publication is a descriptive and interpretative catalogue of the Newar paintings and drawings in the private ownership of the Swiss collectors Mischa and Angela Jucker. The catalogue contains 39 religious paintings on cloth (*paubhās*) (32 Buddhist, 7 Hindu), four works on paper, four bookcovers, and seven artists' sketchbooks. Most of the paintings have not been previously published. The main catalogue section is preceded by a short introduction to the geography and cultural history of Nepal, the artistic milieu of the painters, and a brief commentary on the stylistic development and religious context of the paintings in the collection.

Kreijger's book is an especially valuable contribution to our knowledge of the wealth, beauty and development of Newar painting and its relation to the painting traditions of India and Tibet. Despite the current proliferation of illustrated publications on the arts of Tibet and the Himalaya, it is rare for a study to focus on Nepal and in particular on the Newar paintings of the Kathmandu Valley. This publication provides a wide audience with access to an unpublished collection through high quality reproductions. It successfully portrays and describes individual items in the collection, but also provides a solid overview of the pattern of development and change which has taken place in the painting tradition of the Newars over eight centuries.

The paintings are arranged in chronological order with the earliest dating from circa 1200 and the latest from 1912. The individual *paubhās* are described in minute detail, and with every new picture the reader is invited to consider the paintings closely, following register by register and scene by scene, details which are easily identifiable on the photographs. Kreijger also provides useful and informative interpretations of certain colours, mudras, and symbols specific to the Newar painting repertoire, and narrates many of the stories depicted on the *paubhās*, thus drawing attention to the important narrative quality of the