

Introduction: Representing Local Histories in the Himalayas¹

Martin Gaenzle

Professional writers of history in the Himalayan region have been predominantly concerned with larger social units, dealing with issues such as the formation of states, colonial rule and, above all, nation-building. This applies both to traditional chronologists, who are in charge of an official, often “dynastic”, history, and to academic historians who are interested in the genesis of the modern political order. Yet, the memory of the past is not the privilege of professional (or semi-professional) historians, and there is a broad field of more localized “indigenous” genres of history-making that exists alongside the dominant discourse, complementing, ignoring, (creatively) misunderstanding, and – often – countering the latter. Many ethnic groups, for example, defying the homogenizing attempts of national history-writing, have recourse to traditional representations of their own past, often rewriting previous accounts and trying out new forms of depicting historical events.

The papers in this volume deal with such cases of history-making, which might be labelled “ethnic”, “tribal”, “regional” or “local”, even though all these terms are in some way problematic (see below). The primary focus is on the construction of pastness as an ethnographic phenomenon. Therefore the notion of history is taken in its broadest sense, as cultural representations and imaginings of the past, as practices of remembering previous times. Contrary to what early anthropologists claimed, there is no “people without history”. Even today there is a tendency to regard only the genre of academic history-writing as “true” history and everything else as fiction. Of course, no one denies that history as science has a different methodology and different standards of verification. Nevertheless, in an ethnographic perspective, academic history is also a genre of narratives about the past, governed by certain generic conventions, and ultimately a cultural construction.

The local histories presented here belong to a broad range of genres. They include various kinds of oral accounts: legends or oral histories (Blackburn, Schmidt), folk narratives or myths (Sutherland, Schlemmer, Berg), but also written discourse: newspaper articles and booklets

¹ The articles of this volume are revised versions of papers presented during the 17th European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies in Heidelberg (2002) at the panel convened by Gisèle Krauskopff and myself. I am grateful to all the participants for their contributions. As the editor of the present collection I am also grateful to András Höfer and Bo Sax for their support in the preparation of this volume.

(Schlemmer), as well as an “official” text (Steinmann). History may be represented in many forms or media: material objects like beads, (Blackburn), images (Schlemmer), or ritual performances (Sutherland, Schlemmer, Steinmann, Berg), though narrative forms clearly predominate. Often such representation is “plurimedial”, i.e. employing various media at the same time. Yet there is a strong tendency to value the written word as more prestigious and authoritative, to regard it as intrinsically more authentic.

The view that histories are basically cultural constructions raises a number of broader issues. Whereas a conventional approach asks how the past led to the present, this question is here turned around: How does the present create the past (see Chapman et al. 1989: 1)? In other words: in this perspective historical memory is seen as primarily linked to concerns of the “here and now” and leads to the question of self-definition and identity. One can go so far as to claim that there is no past outside the present. The past only matters as long as it is made use of – otherwise it is forgotten (cf. Peel 1984, Bloch 1977). Yet, though this might be a truism, such presentism tends to obscure the fact that the past is generally experienced as different. “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.” This initial phrase of a novel by L.P. Hartley, which was taken up by David Lowenthal and made the object of an interesting “key debate in anthropology” (see Ingold 1996), captures this experience in a metaphoric manner. But it is precisely because the past tends to escape understanding and familiarity, that people continually strive to re-connect it to the present. The work of memory and the process of construction is never finished.

Imaginations of the past thus have to be examined as part of a social arena in which meanings are continuously under construction, and at the same time may always be contested. As Appadurai has pointed out, this process is subject to certain constraints: the past is not simply “a limitless and plastic symbolic resource, infinitely susceptible to the whims of contemporary interest and the distortions of contemporary ideology” (1981: 201); rather, it is a “scarce resource”, bound by cultural values and rules. Narratives about the past require authority (or legitimacy in a Weberian terminology), continuity, i.e. a credible link with the source of authority, and a certain time-depth in order to be accepted. All these features can be observed in the examples of this volume. In some cases the authority resides in the genre itself (the legends, and myths), in other cases it resides in the person of the author (educated activists, chronologists). Continuity is either simply assumed, or else may be constantly emphasized. And the relevant time-depth ranges from “times immemorial” to specifically dated events. In all cases it is clear that a claim to truth is fundamental and it is validated by rather similar means.

The making of history, depicting the past, is bound up in the politics of re-presentation (in the true sense of the word of “making present again”).

Much has been written on this in recent years, and it is not necessary to recapitulate the debate. What is important is an awareness of the power relations involved and a focus on the following questions: Who are the authors of historical accounts, the makers of history? Who is the audience, the consumers and users of these accounts? And how are these different actors related in terms of interest, status and power? The characterization as “elite history” or “history from below” (Fabian 1990) is not always unproblematic. Even a “subaltern” group (such as the Rai) may have elite versions of history as well as “ordinary” ones (Schlemmer). And what presents itself as an “official” chronology can be a “history from below” – or from the margins – when seen in the context of a broader nationalism (Steinmann).

Representation is a cultural practice and as such is embedded in other cultural practices. The telling of past events may be formalized, for example when a bard gives a performance in a ritual context, or it may be restricted to non-ritual, everyday communication (Blackburn). It may be closely linked to the political order, for example when validating claims to property ownership and preserving a memory of feuds (Schmidt, Sutherland), or when redefining a political identity under the changing conditions of a modern nation state by taking recourse to mythic traditions (Schlemmer). Tellings may be concerned with establishing a religious order, e.g. divine agency, rain-making and the provision of fertility (Sutherland), and they may be accompanied by religious ceremonies, e.g. tribal dances or Buddhist festivals (Steinmann, Berg). In all cases, representations of history are construed by means of cultural practices, and thus they crucially contribute to the formation of identity.

In what sense then are these histories local histories? In recent years we have seen a return of the local as a counterpoint to the global, but what exactly this “local” means is rather indefinite and dependent on context (see the discussion in Harneit-Sievers 2002: 12-17). Often, it is more or less circumscribed by ethnic attributes, and of course, anthropologists have always been experts on this kind of small-scale social unit. But today neither the local nor “the ethnic” are necessarily constituted as territorial spaces: both can have a distributed (diasporic) and virtual existence, e.g. through print or electronic media (see Schlemmer). Locality is not simply there, it is constantly “produced” (Appadurai) through forms of communication, ordinary discourse, ritual action, and the imagination. The spatio-temporal production of locality is a complex affair: it is not only the conceptual demarcation of a life-world, a space and its history, but a “structure of feeling”, i.e. it implies an emotional tie and thus affects experience.

The papers

In his contribution on legends of migration among the Apa Tani in Arunachal Pradesh, **Stuart Blackburn** looks at the migration routes in the narratives and confronts them with scholarly discussions on the “real” origin of these peoples. Though most scholars argue that the Apa Tani first came from the east, i.e. Burma or Southern China, the Apa Tani themselves (and some recent studies) claim that their ethnic origin lies in the north – in Tibet. This claim is underlined in social practice by the ceremonial use of beads which also have their origin in Tibet and which are a frequent topic in Apa Tani stories. Blackburn shows that both the migration legends, i.e. the narratives about beads, and the social practice of wearing beads all contribute to the construction of a social memory which marks the Apa Tani off from their “non-tribal” neighbours. The making of history is not only a verbal practice, it is linked to cultural practices such as trade, ceremonial display of wealth, female inheritance etc. It is difficult to say much about the time-depth of this memory, and the question of historical “truth” must remain open. Yet, the interesting thing is how the imagination of the past clearly shapes the formation and negotiation of identities in the present.

The next paper, from the other end of the Himalayan range, also deals with oral narratives about a tribal past whose time-depth is vague. **Ruth Laila Schmidt** examines the legends of Shina speakers in Kohistan that describe a kind of “tribal revolt” by the ancestors of the Darṃá lineage in which former autocratic rulers in the locality were killed. This dramatic political event, which also marked the victory over pre-Islamic religion, is vividly remembered by the elders as the foundational moment of local rule. Schmidt carefully reconstructs the historical context in which these narratives have been transmitted. According to her interpretation the events can be set in the early nineteenth century, but detailed analysis suggests that the stories retain the memory of an ancient kingdom dating back about a thousand years. It becomes evident that oral history, though not easily linked to a precise time-axis, is a storehouse of transmuted memories which are kept alive even in periods of fundamental change.

Quarrels over local control in the past are equally prominent in the paper by **Peter Sutherland**, but here the narratives focus on the actions of deities. As the kings of the former Shimla hill states (Himachal Pradesh) are the earthly re-presentatives of the gods, political agency is conceived in terms of divine agency. Mythic stories recount the events of migration and (what the author calls a “prelocal”) searching for land, which is followed by the eventual division of the land. The moment of localisation is one of violence: Sovereignty is established through a sacrificial killing. And such violence continues to be an important element of local politics. Sutherland examines the contested accounts of a feud between two localities that happened in 1934. Two versions of the historical narrative tell two different stories: one about magical agency, the other about a legal quarrel. The

difference of views is not only due to the partiality of the two narrators from the opposite sides, it is also due to different concepts of historical time – different “timescapes”. Thus the paper describes alternative histories which compete and whose competition is not only narrated but also eristically performed in processions.

Whereas the former cases all are histories transmitted orally, the case study on the Kirant of eastern Nepal presented by **Grégoire Schlemmer** discusses the (re)writing of history in the literal sense: the writing of historical books and booklets, which are locally printed and disseminated. The agents of this recent production of new histories are what Schlemmer calls “indigenist” intellectuals, i.e. educated, usually middle-class representatives of the ethnic group who adopt an academic style and claim scientific truth for their depictions of the past. Here too we have an alternative history, one that regards the standard, national version as wrong and biased in favour of the high caste Hindus. While in the common view the Kirant are tribals who were brought into the civilising orbit of Hindu kingship about two hundred years ago, Kirant intellectuals turn things upside down (yet retaining the rhetorical style): they argue that the Kirant had a highly developed civilisation, or nation, long ago, in ancient times, but this was destroyed through Hindu military expansion. As Schlemmer shows, the lively debate on history is accompanied by an active “revitalisation” – or reinvention - of ritual tradition. It is clear that these discussions on history are not merely scholarly exercises, but underline political demands and agendas as well.

A bit further to the east, in Sikkim, a nationalist history was already written a hundred years ago. **Brigitte Steinmann** examines the official history of the ruling Buddhist dynasty (written in 1906) which carves out a specific Sikkimese identity in contrast to the political “others”, the Hindu neighbours and the British colonial power. Steinmann interprets this text in light of the country’s social history and contemporary ethnography and shows how it links the present order in a foundational past of first ancestors and a sacred geography of mountains and territorial deities. The text creates not only a demarcated place, by defining the mythical boundaries of the kingdom, but also the image of a peacefully integrated multi-ethnic society, which lives in unity despite the fact that access to land is highly contested. Besides being represented in a royal written and printed text which today is also used in schoolbooks, the history of Sikkim is likewise performed in the form of ritual dances, which today are in a process of revitalisation and often used in the context of election rallies and other political events.

Such ritual dance performances with masked actors who reenact the foundational episodes of local history are the special focus of **Eberhard Berg**’s contribution. In his description and analysis of the Sherpa Dumji festival celebrated in Solu (Nepal), Berg reads this local clan ritual of the Lamaserwa as a “ritual of unity and identity” that is of particular topicality

in the present situation of rapid social change, political turmoil and civil war. The Sherpa have a long tradition of written histories, but these are made accessible through the tradition of ritual dances which was established in the mid-19th century in order to celebrate the coming of the founding lama, Dorje Zangbu, and the taming of local divinities. Here, then, the commemoration of local history is embedded in a religious festival which at the same time ensures prosperity and well-being of the people. The “return” to the past, one might say, is the most powerful guarantee of a good future.

Conclusion: Ethnographies of competing histories

In a time of extreme acceleration of change, frequent tensions, and sometimes violence, a shared memory of the past is apparently of crucial significance for social stability. In individual psychology the refusal to remember is seen as a likely indication of a former trauma. The experience of rupture and violence may lead to an erasure of memory. Similarly, a social group may have such traumatic blanks in its collective past. Seen in this perspective, the construction of a cultural memory (cf. Assmann 1997) can be an attempt to heal old wounds. As a mimetic tradition it codifies and reconstitutes through performance the proper way of action. In any case, it is a strategy to maintain or regain agency.

The Himalayan local histories in this collection remind us of the fact that the making of history is always a contested ground and that there are several alternative histories which counter dominant representations of the past. Of course, this is not restricted to the Himalayas. Yet what is perhaps unique to this area is the highly variable and localised character of the social forces: tribal polities interacted with little mountain kingdoms, and Buddhist, Hindu and Islamic rulers lived in close proximity, while the British colonists appear to have maintained a vigilant though often remote presence. The localities we encounter here are often small and inward-looking, separated by ridges which could be used as natural boundaries, though this rarely prevented mobility and the creation of larger networks. The Himalayan polities described in the papers were generally on the margins of Empires, and yet they often define themselves in reference to a largely imagined centre (such as Benares or Lhasa).

In all the case studies we can observe the construction of histories in dialogue with other representations of the past. Many different media can be used, and it becomes clear that the written word is only one of them. Likewise the authorship of these histories varies considerably. In oral histories the author is usually unknown, or at best an imagined ancestor, whereas in written histories the author takes on a prominent role. And the locality in question can be of many kinds: one or two valleys with a small number of villages, or a whole region, or an imagined “nation” with mythic boundaries. Yet in all these ethnographies of history there is a strong

emphasis on the competitive nature of history making. The local histories are foundational for an identity linked to the landscape and they generally imply political claims (e.g. land rights). As such they tend to be contested by rival groups, they are sometimes hotly debated, and, especially if there is a lively public sphere, they are constantly recreated in discourse as well as action.

It is no coincidence that in recent times there has been a considerable increase in the interest in and the production of such local histories. And one may expect this trend to continue. The modern nation state, exerting its homogenizing force, leaves little room for distinct local identities, and so it is no surprise that in some regions in the Himalayas demands for political and cultural autonomy have been voiced that are reminiscent of earlier nascent nationalisms worldwide. Today such movements can make use of modern technologies, and disseminate their ideas through a great variety of media. Publication, especially through electronic media (such as websites), has become easier and cheaper – but also more short-lived. Many printed or web-based local histories never reach the archives, and their existence may be even more fleeting than that of oral accounts. Thus it is an important task to document the practice of making histories as broadly as possible. Nothing more and nothing less than this is the aim of this volume.

References

- Appadurai, A. 1981. The past as a scarce resource. *Man (N.S.)* 16 : 201-219.
- Appadurai, A. 1995. The production of locality. In: *Counterworks: Managing the Diversity of Knowledge*, edited by Richard Fardon, pp. 204-225. London: Routledge.
- Assmann, J. 1997. *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*. München: C.H. Beck. (2. Auflage).
- Bloch, M. 1977. The past and the present in the present. *Man (N. S.)* 12 : 278-292.
- Chapman, M., McDonald, M. & Tonkin, E. 1989. Introduction. In: *History and Ethnicity*, edited by M. McDonald, E. Tonkin, M. Chapman, pp. 1-21. London: Routledge.
- Fabian, J. 1990. *History from Below: The 'Vocabulary of Elisabethville' by André Yav*. Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publ. Co.
- Harneit-Sievers, A. (ed.) 2002. *A Place in the World: New local historiographies from Africa and South-Asia*. Leiden, Boston, Köln: Brill.

- Ingold, T. (ed.) 1996. *Key Debates in Anthropology*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Peel, J.D.Y. 1984. Making history: the past in the Ijesha present. *Man (N.S.)* 19 : 111-132.