

## **Living Between Juniper and Palm: Nature, Culture, and Power in the Himalayas**

by Ben Campbell. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, India, 2013, 390 pp., 17 black and white photos, ISBN 978-0-19-807852-4, £ 32.50

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Ben Campbell's *Living Between Juniper and Palm. Nature, Culture, and Power in the Himalayas* is a highly innovative study in conservation and environmental anthropology. The book makes a major contribution to ecology-based, political and reflexive anthropology that is succinctly expressed by the statement that 'what matters to a given set of people' is more important 'than to suggest that the kinds of literate and verbalized knowledge that comparative scholarship depends on are inherently superior' (p. 30). Rethinking the grand assumptions of Western Anthropology regarding the polarized conceptualizations of subjectivity versus objectivity and the binarism supposedly underlying nature and culture, Campbell employs the relational epistemology of 'perspectivism'. First developed by anthropologists of the Amerindian world (de Castro 2009, Descola 2005), this approach helps him think about and defend the shared perspectives of the marginalized Tamang populations that inhabit the forested and mountainous areas of Central Nepal. Formerly agropastoralists, Tamang communities in the western part of the Kathmandu Valley are now compelled to survive at the core of national parks and 'natural reserved areas' that are managed by the Hindu State (research for the book, it may be recalled, took place in monarchic Nepal), which forces them to conform to strict law-regulation systems which rob them of their livelihood and of their ancient shifting locales.

Campbell aims to unsettle the ecological pretext used to divest Tamangs of their rights, according to which 'barbarian indigenous populations' were threatening nature and forests since they are incapable of evaluating their ecological heritage. Starting with a strong rejection of a dichotomy between physical and social realities, in other terms, of ideas on 'cultures' that were remodelled through the legacy of two hundred years of colonialism and globalization (the very effect of Modernity, according to Bruno Latour), the author presents the results of extensive

fieldwork through both analytical and empathic methods of enquiry that are based on several lengthy investigations conducted between 1989 and 1998. The work also appears as a plea to convince administrators and ecologists who count these 'natural resources' to take native conceptions of local sovereignty and relations between human and non-human worlds seriously. The richly documented argumentation is developed in a text replete with brilliant anthropological and literary qualities that captivate the reader from start to finish. The author criticizes perceptions of 'Environmentalism' and Scientific Ecology as unitary concepts. From its origins in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Scientific Ecology raised the problem of whether human beings should be included in the ebb and flow of the living world conceived as a whole (Deléage 1991). Environmental Anthropology today has expanded this question to ask whether we should not also include the 'non-human' in the living world thought up by man. Campbell claims it is necessary to go further and oppose both Environmentalism *and* the scientific protocols of sustainable development. He does not, however, adhere to the various ways of reasoning defined by the anthropological school of Descola because he considers that 'animistic and analogical modes of reasoning' are in fact joined in Tamang conceptions. More than a manifesto for 'perspectivism', the work is an innovative criticism that opens new points of view for 'research-action' in anthropology, which is understood as a complete interaction with the observable worlds, including non-human agents.

In the mountains surrounding the small village of Tengu in the northern part of the Park of Langtang, the fundamental question during the first period of fieldwork was: 'how should one translate the term "environment" to local populations?' Campbell addresses this in a delicious mixture of anecdotes and critical reflexive questions on the pseudo-naivety of the ethnologist. The author displays a fine anthropological rhetoric about the position of the ethnologist, who is foreign to the world he approaches. He reaches the conclusion that while people do not understand what the ethnologist wants them to say, they do provide him with a perfect demonstration of their own understanding of the world they inhabit. Having integrated the regulations of the Park of Langtang, which forbids them to cut wood and to stock up as they previously had, it is through breaches, activities hidden from sight that they demonstrate little by little the strategies of survival in- and local understandings of their biotope.

Through three parts and nine perfectly ordered chapters, the author draws from the most varied registers – colonial narratives, botanical descriptions, impromptu meetings, mythologies, tales, pilgrimages and administrative documents – to produce an ethnographical description devoid of stereotypes and the customary reifications peculiar to ‘cultural’ descriptions and categories exogenous to local forms of knowledge. He thus delivers, to the great happiness of the reader, through the hazards of his transhumant travels with the agro-pastoralists he accompanied from mountain tops to low-lying valleys their ideas of enchanted bestiaries, their ways to speak and to act in the Tamang language, and their evocations of the exploits of shamans and ancestors. Small paintings or vignettes follow one another, the author recounting impromptu meetings or the fantastic adventures of hunting between men and animals, without ever abandoning the principles that he had decided on at first. He thus avoids ‘enculturation’ (Strathern 1980), the simplifications and the arbitrary descriptions that result from the distance between the observer and the observed, as well as the pitfalls of Functionalism and Utilitarianism, in order to persuasively call for a radical reorientation of environmental policies enacted through ‘nature conservation’ and ‘sustainable development’. In this case, the empathy is as much a spontaneous position of the author as an argued theoretical principle. Campbell’s mastery of local languages and close unravelling of traditional paths facilitates his untangling of the complex hank of ‘networks of knowledge and shared lives’ of the Tamang of Rasuwa District.

Campbell opens his study with a characterisation of the lifestyle of the Tamang, who still practised pastoral and agrarian transhumance (rotations of cultures) in an ecosystem qualified as ‘vertical’ in the 1990s. Rather than going through geographical definitions and agronomic points of view, Campbell starts with a radical ‘shift’, a ‘delinearisation’ (Ingold 2007) of the inhabited and domesticated space, through an anthropology that is itself conceived as a radical movement of ‘decentralisation’ from one’s own ideas and behaviours. The biodiversity met with in this environment is described from the stage where subtropical palm trees grow to the pastures where reigns the juniper. It consists of all human and non-human beings (animals, plant worlds, cosmic and telluric forces, visible and invisible presences of all kinds) that share a common ontology and that are of the same biotope. Just as the genesis of the Tamang clans can only be understood through

the sharing of meat-based or vegetable substances and their transmission within asymmetric kinship lineages, so the unity between domestic worlds and worlds of the forest must be reconstructed and negotiated ritually with the powers which inhabit the place. Campbell explains 'power' as a mediatory term between 'Nature' and 'Culture', a force that should be restored to the people who live in interaction with plants, animals and their own invisible worlds, rather than a reference to the political power of local statesmen (p. 99-103). The *mukhiyas*, upholders of the former political system of Panchayat, saw these powers disappearing as they were delegated to a foreign and absent urban bureaucracy. In this political microcosm, which includes human and non-human beings, *mukhiyas* helped people stand their own in face of the State. Campbell considers that these former chieftainships constituted in a way the middle terms of this revisited set of 'nature-culture', with the shamans acting as direct intermediaries in the strategies of alliance between the powers of the soil and those of the heavens. It is here that one of the weaknesses of this analysis of Tamang social reality lies, since the Buddhist priests are nearly absent from it (except as translators for the ethnologist in elucidating archaic elements of the Tamang language). As the guardians of the oldest forms of Tamang Buddhism and the upholders of scriptural and religious laws, *lamas* had long participated in caring for the laws of the visible and invisible worlds, and would have thus also wielded 'power' over the population and a certain amount of leverage in dealings with peripheral administrations. Through his cognitive approach of the field, it is not in terms of a reproduction of power based on conflicts of class and caste that Campbell bases his argumentation; he should have rather explained better how Buddhist *lamas* (at least in the eastern regions of Tamang territory), participated more than once in the imposition of administrative control by the State. One could also reproach Campbell with his implicit belief in Tamang society as more in harmony with non-human reality than any other. The author might have explained better, from a strictly ecological point of view, how humankind cannot escape the laws of a global ecosystem (J. Lovelock 2007). For anthropologists like Descola, depending on V. de Castro, there remains a fundamental ambiguity about the definition of 'non-human'. On one side, there is the invisible and unimaginable world reconstructed by Physics, on the other, the unlimited fantasies of all societies, which never cease to be primitive (Latour 1991). Campbell concentrates rather on the arrival of

scientific ecological politics, with the creation of zones of experimentation for new forms of management through experimental cultures and projects of micro-sustainable development, which sounded the knell for local Tamang autonomy as well as for many other indigenous populations.

In his conclusion, the author notes the endangerment and the degradation of life of these Himalayan populations dominated by the world of Indo-Nepalese castes and the Hindu codes of law, which, following the revolution of the political parties of opposition in the 1990s and the rise in claims for identity and territorial federalism, have joined the cohort of indigenous populations (*janjati*) that are today caught between the will to invent their own modernity and the temptation to adopt Hindu governmental policies. The Nepalese politics of sustainable development succeed, according to Campbell, in the neglect and in the marginalization of communities that presented the most original forms of life, the most deserving of appearing in a new 'anthropocene' (Crutzen 2006) freed from alienating and depreciating classifications. We can no longer afford to dither on the question of the durability of the resources in the world, from hypothetical arrangements of the last plots of land to inhabited forest spaces today, without appealing to the knowledge of the populations which still have some powers of coexistence and exchange with the non-human, which is a fundamental condition for the survival of the people and of the planet at large. The global ecological crisis must be urgently thought of in political terms: 'The answer is not to create enclaves of nature, but to nurture a more thoroughgoing reflexive environmental culture: one that already understands humanity as flexibly adapted to the circumstances for living in ecologies of difference' (p. 357).

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