

***“If each comes halfway”*: Meeting Tamang women in Nepal** by Kathryn S. March. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002. ISBN 0-8014-8827-3. xvi. index, illus., 271 pp.

Les Enfants du Singe et de la Démone: Mémoires des Tamang récits himalayens by Brigitte Steinmann. Nanterre: Société d’ethnologie, 2001. ISBN 2-901161-63-4, index, illus., 501 pp.

Reviewed by Ben Campbell, Manchester

The publication of these two books represents a very significant threshold in the study of Tamang society, and in the quality of ethnographic approaches to the understanding of rural Nepalese society more generally. Both works are distillations of the authors’ long-term acquaintance with their subjects and communities of research. They share a rare intellectual commitment to carrying forward and experimenting with practices of ethnographic writing in order to convey and analyse the lived worlds of Tamang women and men.

The two books complement each other in that March’s concerns a community of “Western” Tamang in Nuwakot District, while Steinmann’s deals with a core “Eastern” branch of Tamang in the Temal area of Khabre Palanchok. Both works are particularly oriented to the narrative and lyrical resources of the people whose lives are discussed. March explains aspects of socio-cultural practice through the perspectives of women’s life histories revealed in expansive interviews, while Steinmann seeks to forefront the way that experiences of fieldwork fundamentally affect how the ethnologist comes to understand ritual, belief, and kinship.

The styles of the authors differ substantially. March writes in a way that will be easily accessible to undergraduates, and presents the reader with characters whose lives give shape to possibilities for contextual elaboration of domestic sociality, economic activity, and the transformations in social relationships experienced through crises of births, marriages and deaths. Steinmann by contrast writes in a somewhat peregrinatory, non-linear manner, and her accounts of fieldwork relationships extend into reflections on the limits to presumed cultural coherence among communities linked by traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. A certain indulgence of Tibetological scholarship and specialist regional knowledge is a prerequisite for the reader in her case.

Taking the works now separately, March's offering is centered on the personal accounts of fourteen women. She explains the idea of *If each comes halfway* as a combination of her own agenda to rectify androcentric anthropological representation, and the desire of the Tamang women themselves to have their lives recorded for the sake of their progeny. She takes us into the worlds of these people with great sensitivity and insightful commentary, managing to convey the uniqueness of each individual's story and the relational complexity of their domestic and inter-domestic connectedness, while drawing into the picture commonalities and structures of more general applicability. In this way, cross-cousin marriage, clan solidarities, agro-pastoralism, and histories of corvée labour service to the state are introduced as interactional practices involving very particular effects on the rhythms of life, and possibilities for agency the women contend with. Starting from such personally relevant everyday textures, rather than from abstract principles of form, function, and status, endows the approach with a commendable accessibility for newcomers to the study of rural life in Nepal, while resounding with ideas that scholars of comparative Himalayan ethnography will want to engage with.

The title of the book refers not only to the meeting of prospective spouses, but also to the coming together of participants in the production of anthropological knowledge. For this reason, and due to the evident seriousness with which the author considers her joint endeavour with the women and her fieldwork assistants, the book is not driven primarily by a theoretical framework. The major general theme is the writing of person-based anthropology, and March takes issue with examples that have not effectively questioned the shape of coherent, singular, chronological life narratives familiar to Euro-American understandings of personal biography (with Shostak and Abu-Lughod in mind, but also decrying the exoticised two-dimensionality of more popular representations of Nepali lives by Western writers). Where March offers her greatest contributions to thinking about lives and words, is in her attendance to anthropologically distinctive lyrical practices. She makes this clear in a passage (p. 39) in the first biographical chapter, on the grandmother Mondzom, who cuts and weaves her personal account with song and proverbial sayings. This leads March to reflect on mirror-rhyme structures, and on the acoustic physicality of song in the mountains, telling of her realisation that a man she came across was singing in pace with the rhythm of his echo. It is, though, to be lamented that her plea for the women's voices to be heard "down to the roundest vowel" (p. 13) is hard to meet through the text, as it tends to be only the most difficult to translate words that are left in Tamang for the reader. Luckily, a CD-Rom accompanies the book, and so the vowels can be heard in all their glory. An appendix of selected transcriptions would have been most valuable.

At its best this work informs, provokes, and genuinely moves the reader into listening to the subject positions of her characters. An exceptionally well written passage occurs between pages 181 to 189. Purngi, married into her father's sister's household takes part in the last hours of her dying aunt/mother-in-law, but is torn between her duties to the day's work group and meeting the sick, old woman's wishes to be helped out of the house to relieve herself. She protests to no avail, only to be told after having carried the larger-bodied woman outside, she just wanted to sit and look, except that everything had become all yellow in her failing vision. Calling on Purngi to look for lice in her hair the younger woman is shocked at the wandering herds of the pests. When finally returned inside and after some of the work party had passed by, the old woman dies, with her breath and her lice leaving her body. The intensity of the scene, the sequence of exchanges between the women over the day, and the capturing of Purngi's complex responses to the death through her images and phrasings are admirably worked through.

By casting light on persons and their dilemmas of deciding how to deal with the relationships they find themselves in, March provides examples of how collective social practice can exist in paradoxical relationships with women's independent-minded possibilities for not doing what is expected of them. Indeed, though March does not choose to take this particular line of analysis, it emerges that the notion of individual autonomy is far from a simple opposition to conformity. In the case of Sukumaya, discussed in the last biographical chapter, her drawn-out resistance and cumulative reluctance to go along with her parents' choice of a spouse, turns out to be far from a purely voluntaristic inclination, but instead comes to be revealed as a response to the isolation the young woman experienced in a new hamlet where she had no other clan sisters to interact with as a counter to her affinal identity. Other examples evoke the dread of loneliness built up by women married off to high-altitude livestock keepers, and their sequential marital careers though spoken of in terms of fate, give insights to understandings of life-agency that defy the explanatory constraints of voluntaristic choice or conformity.

In *Les Enfants du Singe et de la Démone*, Brigitte Steinmann takes the reader through an exploration of Tamang ritual practice and the relationship to contemporary lifeworlds of mythological understanding of origins and being. Rather than assume that Tamang evocations of Tibetan ancestry or adherence to Buddhism mean that their cultural life can be reduced to, or be explained as degenerations of, Tibetan models, she brings our attention to the ways in which mythical strands, institutions and social roles have been appropriated and fashioned to the social and geo-historical circumstances in which this society of intermarrying clans has moulded itself within a locatedness in Nepal. Crucial to this task is her explicit strategy of not privileging textual authority over the irreplaceable

understandings derived from ethnographic observation of contested knowledges and the processual qualities of ritual and symbolic life.

Steinmann's account very effectively bears witness to the problems ethnographers face when attempting to access and communicate across systems of knowledge and authority that are challenged by other members of the same society. She introduces the Tamang as an ethnic group in which the channels of respect towards the mother's brother and sacred knowledge are being superseded by new skills and powers connected with secular writing, the tourist industry and the command of English. She compares the difficulties of rendering Tamang song and lyrical tradition in French with those she encountered in translating letters sent by tourists to their porters evoking concepts such as romanticised landscape.

Steinmann's strategy is to locate the cosmological in practices of social difference and symbol-linked associations of usage. She does this through tracing for example the significance of men's and women's particularised relationships to foods and beverages. Gendered habits of beer and soup consumption are pursued into a discussion of the symbolic potency of nettles, women's collection and preparation of them, and the male shamans' horror of them. She finds how, in the round, such associations produce an ensemble of distinctions that confer relational identities and complementarities, while making it appear that women "embody a particular form of resistance to law and civilisation" (p. 154).

In parts two and three of the book, most chapters deal with specific rituals as Steinmann has encountered them, giving lively accounts of event sequences, characterisations of the protagonists, and reflections on the possibilities for interpretation afforded by textual sources. She does not though encourage a view of these rituals as taking place according to fixed scripted templates, and most effectively conveys the loose, interactive qualities of their unfolding. The position of Tamba, specific to the Eastern Tamang, a spokesperson for the social order and heir to the state sanctioned authority conferred in the Rana era on headmen, is discussed in the context of marriage that provides occasion for recalling the rock demoness and Boddhisattva monkey, whose union is said to have resulted in the ancestors of contemporary clans. This coupling of different sources of belonging and being for Steinmann encapsulates the central image of the Tamangs' enigma of identity. Narratives of the demoness and monkey recur in various chapters, none perhaps more striking than the account of a celebration (literally a 'making') of clan gods, *la sopa*. In this wonderfully written passage a human hostage is taken scapegoat, initially an old, poor Bahun, later replaced by a Magar and dressed as a woman, to act as revealer of the terrible secret symbolised in the showing of brewing yeast, that represents the scandal of incest committed by the offspring of demoness and monkey. Steinmann applies her technique of making symbolic association in drawing comparisons between blood and yeast, both operating in veils of taboo and

in shadows and containers of liquid (p.343). Her descriptions of the atmosphere of erotic enthusiasm, notably expressed by sons-in-law of the sponsoring clan exhorting the propitiating head clan lama to have sex, are brilliantly constructed.

Elsewhere, in a chapter focusing on death rites and the mourning feast, *kewa*, Steinmann manages to bring the similarly ritualised shamelessness of sons-in-law into the overall consideration of how life, body and soul are conceived. Rather than privileging a purely metaphysical interpretation of reincarnation, she presents the reader with a view of how the participants adopt specific roles, from the lamas' actions which are necessary to make the distinctions between humanity, animality, and the demonic, to the sons-in-laws' explicit claims to fulfil their desire for meat and the living 'flesh' of clan daughters, while providing all the demanding menial services to their wife-givers. Her analysis of this issue resonates entirely with my own field experiences among "Western" Tamang where the expression *shya klangba* ('playing/hunting flesh') is heard in this regard. My only reservation would be that Steinmann states the wife-takers' saturnalian exuberance is a concession for their ritual hard labour (p. 241). I would suggest a greater participation in the mood of erotically celebratory behaviour, even though it may be the affines whose performative role is to be outrageous.

It is in Steinmann's account of shamanic initiation and pilgrimage that some of the most telling analytical points on the ethnography of narrative resources are made. She warns against treating oral narrations as if they are linearly structured or hold singular frames of meaning. In the "permanent recomposition" of oral memory, narrations are punctuated with gestures and oratorical moments, such that "it is only possible to grasp them in their extreme diversity, lability and fragmentation. Meaning is given ...by the plurality of their officiants who all take their turn to invest in the story their own particular sense..." (p. 376, my translation). Yet she is taken aback by responses from her women friends to her enthusiastic account of the pilgrimage and its enchanted encounters. Their incredulity and mocking of Steinmann's immersion in shamanic imaginings brings her abruptly down to earth, in the realisation she had falsely attributed a non-provisional quality of "belief" to her companions talk of supernatural events. Similar cautions against presumptions of unproblematically shared cultural values come when a woman friend castigates Steinmann for thinking of giving money to a lama who would end up compelling all villagers to participate for no reward (other than merit) in a religious building project (p. 287).

Steinmann's book is immensely rich ethnographically and thought-provoking on many levels. Its terrain is moreover multi-sited, incorporating her fieldwork further to the east. Her description of celebrating Dasain in Limbu territory with appropriately copious imbibations (pp. 173-183) is a truly excellent piece of writing. There is a melancholic thread to the book which speaks reflexively of the "sad fate" of the ethnologist. She argues for

instance, that the professional “neutrality” of the researcher is ultimately a neutralisation by others of the harmful effects of her voluntary non-engagement (p. 289). Her dedication to the task of learning serially from the mutually competitive claimants to authentic knowledge (Tamba, lama and shaman), and her honesty in portraying the relational contexts, furtive cigarettes and culinary endurances entailed in the whole process deserve strong congratulations. If the strengths of the book are in its ethnographic locatedness, a weakness is the lack of an explicit discussion of alternative approaches. Steinmann says the danger of naming demons is to bring them alive. In terms of demonstrating the value of her contribution in relation to other scholarship, this could have been a risk worth taking as important debates remain implicit.

As a pair these publications raise the quality of ethnographic knowledge of the Tamang to a new plateau. They are works that deserve repeat visiting, as they contain innumerable levels of relevance and insight commensurate with the complexity of the lives they describe. As a fictive younger brother of these scholarly sisters I pay respect. *Nanama ta shyu laji, ale tse.*

Das Königreich Mang yul Gung thang, Königtum und Herrschaftsgewalt im Tibet des 13.- 17. Jahrhunderts [The kingdom of Mang yul Gung thang, kingship and political power in 13th to 17th century Tibet], vols. 1 and 2, by Karl-Heinz Everding. Bonn: VGH Wissenschaftsverlag 2000. Series Monumenta Tibetica Historica, Abteilung I, Band 6 (1,2). ISBN 3-88280-062-3, diagrams, sketch-maps, facsimile of Tibetan texts (8 pages), pp. 748.

Reviewed by Hildegard Diemberger, Cambridge

Karl-Heinz Everding has presented us with an impressive study of the kingdom of Mang yul Gung thang. This important and still little-explored polity between Central and Western Tibet shaped the history of the Himalayan regions from the 13th to the 17th century. Located at the gateway between Tibet and Nepal, this kingdom, founded by the descendants of the