

Sara Shneiderman

Rituals of Ethnicity: Thangmi Identities Between Nepal and India. Philadelphia (PA): University of Pennsylvania Press. 2015. 328 pp., 24 illus., hardback or Ebook, \$75.00 / £49.00. ISBN: 978-0-8122-4683-4

Through an astute ethnography of the Thangmi's sense of belonging, Sara Shneiderman provides us with a timely discussion of the production of identity. Her book is also a transparent meditation on her own role as anthropologist in the production of Thangminess and the dilemmas associated with this process. An important contribution to the anthropology of the Himalayas, this book will also prove useful for scholars of migration, ritual practice and performance, identity formation and indigenous activism far beyond.

For at least 150 years, a substantial portion of the Thangmi (or Thami) have been involved in migration between Central Nepal, Darjeeling in India and (to a lesser extent) Southern Tibet. Up until recently, they remained classic 'Zomians' (van Schendel 2002) who skilfully evaded the gaze of the nation-states they lived in; until today, many people in Nepal had never heard of this community of approximately 40,000. Not surprisingly, then, this is also the first major work of sociocultural anthropology engaging with them. Shneiderman shows how the circulatory migration between Nepal and India and the different ways these two countries have dealt with issues of ethnicity have shaped the establishment of a transnational Thangmi ethnic identity.

From the outset, Shneiderman adopts a pragmatic approach and declares: despite all justified scholarly critique, ethnicity matters as an analytical construct because of the 'fundamental human desire to objectify one's identity' (p. 5). According to her, neither the Comaroffs' (2009) argument about the commodification of ethnicity nor Scott's (2009) claim that people make fully rational choices about how they represent their identity *vis-à-vis* the state explain why some among the Thangmi have recently decided to seek recognition from both the Indian and the Nepali state after generations have actively tried to go unnoticed. Moving beyond this dichotomy, she suggests that understanding ethnicity as construct does not contradict the 'recognition of the affective, deeply real nature of ethnic consciousness that leads to many collective rights claims but also transforms individual senses of self and agency' (p. 58).

Driven out of their villages in Central Nepal due to extreme poverty, encroachment upon their territory by Hindu settlers and increasingly exploitative debt relations with upper-caste moneylenders, the tea boom in British Darjeeling in the late 1800s provided Thangmi with an opportunity for short-term work migration. Similar to the experience they made during frequent trading trips to Tibet, in Darjeeling they faced less discrimination than at home. Still, while

other non-Hindu immigrant communities from Nepal soon settled permanently, Thangmi's smaller number and lack of easy access to lucrative army jobs (Thangmi were not allowed in the British Gurkha Regiment) encouraged a specific pattern of circular migration with relatively few Thangmi establishing themselves permanently in Darjeeling. This led to a strong trans-Himalayan sense of belonging that endured the independence of India and the Chinese annexation of Tibet. Moving back and forth between Nepal and newly independent India, Thangmi migrants soon learned that they could obtain at least some form of citizenship papers in both countries and, therefore, claims for recognition as a distinct ethnic group arose in both places.

Through the parallel tale of 'ethnic associations' and their struggle for recognition in both Nepal and India, Shneiderman recounts how over the last decades, a peculiar sense of Thangminess was produced in complex negotiations between ritual experts, activists, laypersons and Thangmi deities. She does this through impressive in-depth, multi-sited ethnography that spans more than a decade and highlights the stark differences between the two neighbouring countries: while India has a sophisticated system of affirmative action, but refuses to use the term 'indigenous', Nepal ratified ILO convention 169 on indigenous populations in 2007, but still lacks a consistent system of quotas for members of indigenous communities. Indigenous activism is a rather recent phenomenon and, until the 1990s, grassroots mobilization was mostly done by underground communist cadres through the idiom of class struggle. In Darjeeling, on the other hand, the Thangmi association has mainly been concerned with obtaining formal recognition from the Indian state. In order to do so, activists strongly rely on circular migrants from Nepal who seem to fit better the perceived state's expectation of a 'backward tribe' unsettling older patron-client relations between assimilated, middle-class Darjeeling Thangmi and poor Thangmi from Nepal.

The most important strategy for obtaining legal recognition is the presentation of ethnographic material to the Indian state. This becomes even more virulent for the Thangmi, who lack a distinct material culture. Therefore, Shneiderman argues, the production of Thangminess became the central 'sacred object' for activists. Throughout the book, she reflects on her role in this process and her difficult negotiations with ritual experts (gurus) and activists when recording the chants and videotaping rituals. The politics of this production become apparent in Shneiderman's discussion of the conflictual relations between gurus and activists. While activists seek to increase their importance and aim to secure their claims against the Indian state through the recording and reproduction of the gurus' mythological and ritual knowledge, gurus often refuse this 'scriptualization', not only in order to secure their powerful position