

***Fluid Boundaries: Forming and transforming identity in Nepal* by William F. Fisher. New York, Columbia: University Press, 2001. ISBN 0-231-11086-3 (cloth), 0-231-11087-1 (paper), illustr., tables, bibliogr., 256 pp.**

Reviewed by Sara Shneiderman

Thakali identity is like the Kali Gandaki river that flows through the putative Thakali homeland of Thaksatsae: made up of several ever-changing, interlinked strands of various breadth and strength, which appear differently depending on the season and the subjective perspective of the observer. William Fisher's long-awaited monograph both begins and ends with this metaphor, which provides the conceptual framework for his richly-textured discussions of the cultural, religious, economic, and political strands that come together in the historical process of Thakali identity formation. Even the book's structure itself echoes Fisher's metaphor of choice, with each of nine chapters forming a current in the narrative river, better approached as a multi-faceted set of essays which complement and in some cases overlap (or even contradict each other), rather than a linear argument which builds to a unified crescendo. Each chapter engages in detail with a different aspect of Himalayan anthropology's history, taking an important step away from the single-village/single-culture approach to offer an incisive yet respectful critique of the sub-discipline's founding assumptions. As a whole, the book constitutes a valuable ethnographic contribution to the broader anthropological study of ethnicity, reaffirming Nepal's traditional image as a prime location for the study of such issues, but for new reasons.

Fisher's central propositions, as articulated in the introductory chapter, are that past scholarly approaches to the diverse array of peoples who call themselves 'Thakali' have overemphasized (1) the homogeneity of the group; (2) their economic success; and (3) their dramatic cultural metamorphosis. To counter these misrepresentations, he argues that the Thakali are actually a heterogeneous collection of people more divided than united by descent, residence and religion; belonging to several different class and social strata; and in touch with their past as much as they are transformed by the present. "My aim is to account for both change and continuity" (p. 7) Fisher writes, which he does by refocusing on ethnicity as process rather than product, or to put it more precisely, as a "social construction" forged by indigenous agents through historical processes. Fisher admits openly that this theoretical perspective was not always welcomed by his Thakali friends, and one of the most laudable aspects of the book is Fisher's honest

documentation of the tension between his own academic goals and his informants' political ones.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the different types of boundaries which both Thakalis and scholars have used to define the group. Geographically, the Thakali are usually described as inhabitants of the Thak Khola region of Mustang District along the Kali Gandaki river, but Fisher shows that neither the borders of this region nor the Thakali association with it are clearcut. The Thakali have always been a mobile group, and even during the early 1950s-1960s period during which definitive studies were conducted by Tucci, Kawakita, Snellgrove, and Fürer-Haimendorf, there were substantial and economically important migrant populations in parts of Myagdi and Baglung districts, as well as in the Terai. The criteria for Thakali membership are equally blurry, as demonstrated by Fisher's review of clan histories and the tension between culture and descent in establishing group membership. Finally, the author challenges the Hindu/Buddhist dichotomy which underlies the generally accepted image of the Thakali as shrewd manipulators of their own religious identity by showing how religious reforms made in theory were not necessarily implemented in practice.

Fisher's pedigree as a Nepal specialist is most evident in Chapter 3, where he situates Thakali narratives about their own history within the larger historical process of Nepali state formation. Drawing upon Tibetan and Nepali language materials (both filtered through secondary English sources), he describes Thaksatsae as a "true border area" (p. 54) which shifted from an earlier northwards orientation to a more southern one as the Gurkha [sic] dynasty established hegemonic rule through tools such as tax collection and the Legal Code Muluki Ain. Early scholars added their own preconceptions to the ethnic categories codified therein, becoming "coartificers with the people themselves" (p. 76) in the production of ethnic identities.

In Chapter 4, entitled "Separation and Integration", Fisher himself dons a more traditional anthropological hat. He describes three different levels of "social integration"—local, regional, and national—as represented by the three meanings of *samāj*, a Nepali term typically translated as both "community" and "association", but which the author defines as, "a circle of social intercourse, social identity, life in association with others, or a body of individuals" (p.84). We are then treated to an extremely detailed description of the Thakali *dhikur*, or rotating credit fund, as evidence of the constant "tension between internal competition and community solidarity" (p. 77) with which Fisher characterizes Thakali life. One wonders why much of this important information about the *dhikur* is relegated to two awkwardly boxed sections. Chapter 5 returns to the fundamental question of religion as a marker of Thakali cultural identity. Concluding that the Thakali practice an "eclectic religious pluralism" (p. 110), dependent on individual location,

beliefs and social status, Fisher hints at a more complex analytical framework that goes beyond the outmoded “syncretism” concept, but does not develop this enticing idea further.

The author then charts the sometimes parallel, sometimes divergent “codification of culture” by the Thakali themselves and by scholars. Tracing the development of the national Thakali *samāj* from its inception in 1983 to its affiliation with the Janajati Mahasangh in 1990 and beyond, Chapter 6 provides a rare insight into the inner workings of early *janajāti* politics. Chapter 7 revisits many themes introduced earlier to critically engage with past scholarly approaches to the Thakali in particular, and ethnicity in general. Fisher’s call to “distinguish between religious belief and religious practice” (p. 179) and to balance our observations of both continuity and change is well-heeded, but he appears rather too concerned with debunking Andrew Manzardo’s instrumentalist theories of Thakali “image management” and “recurrent adaptation”.

Each chapter begins with one or two provocative quotes from intellectual greats, often from beyond the anthropological sphere (such as Dostoyevsky, Derrida, Ortega y Gasset, Wittgenstein, and Cervantes). This device highlights the theoretical issues implicit in that chapter’s discussion, while keeping the text accessible and free of dense argumentation. However, one gets the feeling that the author is holding back his theoretical best, and the final two chapters drop the pretence to pile on several welcome analytical insights for area studies and anthropology as a whole. Fisher demonstrates how a series of parallel dichotomies—most notably caste/tribe and Hindu/Buddhist—continue to colour contemporary scholarship, and suggests a move from “fixed boundaries” to “vulnerable frontiers” (p. 195) as a focus of analysis. Alluding to the book’s title, Fisher explains that, “fluid boundaries emerge at the frontier of cultural nationalism, a frontier between mainstream and peripheral categorical units of the emerging imagined community”(p. 196), and asks scholars “to avoid making their conceptual boundaries more rigid than those of the people they study” (p. 195). Most importantly, the author seriously calls into question the “Sanskritization” model for cultural change in South Asia. For Fisher, a process-oriented approach that acknowledges Thakali hybridity challenges the “loose assumption of unilinear processes of cultural change” (p. 197) underlying assertions that Thakali history represents a textbook case of Sanskritization.

Despite his well-crafted critiques, Fisher respectfully acknowledges his own position within the lineages of Himalayan anthropology: “Building on the work of others, it has become increasingly possible to conduct ethnographic studies that foreground the ways in which individuals and groups have acted to forge their own histories and identities with the context set up by the processes of Nepali state formation” (p. 168). Leaving aside its somewhat uneven style, *Fluid Boundaries* itself contains several important

ethnographic and theoretical building blocks for future generations of Himalayan anthropologists.

***Ancestral Voices: Oral ritual texts and their social contexts among the Mewahang Rai of east Nepal* by Martin Gaenzle**, (Performanzen: Interkulturelle Studien zu Ritual, Spiel und Theater, Band 4). **Münster: LIT Verlag, 2002. ISBN 3-8258-5891-x, 12 figures, 13 photographs, index, 338 pp.**

Reviewed by Mark Turin

This important contribution to Himalayan anthropology and linguistics commences with a personal tale: during his first visit to the Mewahang Rai area of Eastern Nepal, Gaenzle witnessed a festive autumn season ritual. The author was so moved by this “strange expression of a different dimension” (p. 2) that he devotes over 300 pages to describing, analysing and understanding these particular speech acts. *Ancestral voices*, in the author’s own words, “explores the properties of the textual tradition as well as its role in Mewahang social life” (p. 2). In so doing, it embodies the best of European social science: applying rigorous analysis to a wealth of descriptive detail, and reaching careful but weighty conclusions.

Much of the material which informs the present study was collected in the village of Bala in Sankhuwa Sabha district, during the mid-1980s and early 1990s. In the course of his doctoral research on Mewahang Rai kinship and mythology along the western reaches of the Arun Valley, six days walk from the nearest road, the author was exposed to the “rich and living ritual tradition” (p. 21) of the *muddum* which he encountered almost daily. The *muddum*, variously translated by Gaenzle as a “living, entirely oral ‘tribal’ tradition which forms the basis of Mewahang cultural identity” (p. 3) and as a “tradition of speaking, consisting of different kinds of speech events” (p. 4), is performed in a ritual language. Already struggling with colloquial Mewahang, Gaenzle found this important ritual language to be “totally different, archaic and largely untranslatable” (p. 21). It is a credit to Gaenzle’s commitment to learning, analysing and finally disseminating these findings that this monograph should be published some fifteen years after the commencement of his initial research.

