

BOOK REVIEW. *LANDSCAPE, RITUAL, AND IDENTITY
AMONG THE HYOLMO OF NEPAL: VITALITY OF
INDIGENOUS RELIGIONS*

Torri, Davide. 2020. *Landscape, Ritual, and Identity among the Hyolmo of Nepal: Vitality of Indigenous Religions*. London: Routledge. 232 pages.

There is no surprise in terms of scholarly engagement regarding topics that contextualise wider pan-Himalayan and Tibetan studies. An exhaustive amount of international research is already available on various facets. Many western scholars (such as Melvyn C. Goldstein, Graham E. Clark, Naomi H. Bishop, Robert Desjarlais, Seika Sato, Galina Sychenko, Franz-Karl Ehrhard, Andrew Quintman, Benjamin Bogin, Zsoka Gelle to name a few) have studied and documented the religious, socio-political, and economic life of the Hyolmo people in the Helambu region of Nepal. These studies cover sacred geography and talk about how it possesses special qualities or powers; for example, landscape as an expression of lived and earthbound experience; pilgrimage; mountain gods and hidden valleys; the relationship between myth, ritual practice, and territory (mainly in the forms of mountains and so-called *sbas yul/beyuls* or hidden lands). This increasing interest made me reflect upon what one of my friends from Kathmandu, Nepal, had annoyingly made about this research community: “Yet another monograph on the Himalayan community that has already been under scholarly surveillance. Such attention has even led to the local people taking advantage of it and enjoying the possibility of earning.” Therefore, when I discovered this book by Davide Torri, *Landscape, Ritual, and Identity among the Hyolmo of Nepal*, a similar thought occurred to me.

Spanning eight chapters inclusive of the appendix that lists the *Janajati Adi-*

vasi (or *janajāti ādivāsi*, the so-called indigenous minorities of Nepal) as reported in the National Foundation for Upliftment of Aadibasi/Janajati Act, 2058 (2002). I began reading with several questions in mind. What fresh view does Torri provide through yet another work on minority communities in the Himalaya? How does it stand out in terms of issues of identity, of ritual practice and vernacular lived religion? What modes of belonging and of evolving local communities does it showcase within the global influences in terms of landscape, ritual, and identity? What fresh perspective does it bring to light besides the contemporary changes and continuities which are a part of a field that is thriving? In what way does it contribute to the discourse on continuous interactions between secular nations and indigenous communities?

Torri’s books consist of interceptions and the interrelations of the marginalised communities and identity issues of the Hyolmo people in the Helambu. In recent decades he has analysed how Hyolmo identity is dictated upon the landscape, identity simultaneously arising in and from those places. He brings forth how the distinct Hyolmo identity is situated among the overly populated Hindu dominated nations with their own language, religion, culture, and territory. The dynamic nature of Hyolmo identity within the contemporary Nepalese state is a result of amalgamation and synthesis based on the institutionalised narratives that are spread across the Himalayan region. The notion of identity is created and maintained

through diversifying the notion of indigeneity, collective memory, religious culture, rituals, political and sacred landscape. It relates to and is maintained by community members “emerging in conjunction with an alleged particular relationship with the environment” (p. 11). Torri reasons that in order to comprehend such a complex relationship, which is ideal, metaphorical, practical, or symbolic, it is important to analyse the religious and cultural implications in which landscape, constitutive of the space where the human and non-human interact, plays a vital role. Therefore, the fact that there is an overlap between the landscape and narratives of identity – i.e., the rituals pertaining to and intended as ‘relational praxis’ – is the common link that allows us to decipher how these boundaries are displayed in his work.

The introduction along with chapter two, titled “Ethnicity and the State: Historical Introduction to Nepal’s Ethnic Revival Movements”, begins a chronological historical description of the Helambu people. Torri explores the evolution of ethnic revival that is ongoing in Nepal particularly among the Hyolmo community today. His brief overview brings together the short history of the Monarchy; the creation of the nation-state and the absorption and incorporation of indigenous minorities; the struggle for democracy and the importance of mass mobilisation and popular activism; the long history of communist influence and participation of the population (both the majority as well as the indigenous). He shows how the expansion of the Nepalese state encroached historically over territories once held by non-urban societies exerting variable degrees of control over the land. How the public display Buddhist behaviours played a pivotal role in the ethnic representation of the Hyolmo is emphasised in these sections.

In the third chapter, “Notes Towards a Theory of Landscape: From the Animist Landscape to the Buddhist Beyul”, Torri explores ideas and topics related to land-

scape as physical, visible environment and as a tangible manifestation of the invisible. He writes (p. 45):

Landscape appears as a primary source, or *Urquelle*, to which people are deeply linked through cosmogony, mythology, kinship, memory, and history. This sense of affection and intimacy is not severed by migration or relocation, and the link to a specific area appears to be a major identity-marker.

He presents a

discourse on nature, territory, and environment, belonging to multiple and diverse perspectives incorporating elements drawing simultaneously from notions of natural sciences, from ideas about spiritual qualities of the Buddhist sacred land, or referring to what we could call an animist approach to the land. (Ibid.)

The pre-Buddhist belief, which he calls animist in a pan-Himalayan ontological context, focuses on spreading the importance of Himalayan wild nature as the abode of spirits and non-human beings. He further outlines the idea that landscape comprises not only inanimate surroundings but is also the living abode of animate beings that live side-by-side with humans. The whole system is characterised as having “strong connections between the human and the non-human to be activated, deactivated, reciprocated or simply acknowledged” (Torri 2015: 253).

Chapter four “Secret and Sacred: Yolmo as a Beyul” is an extension of the *animated landscape* (Torri 2015), in which nature and non-human beings are understood as the main actors with agency and potency to influence the everyday life of humans. Torri examines this in the context of Tibetan Buddhism using Tibetan sources wherein he presents narratives of Guru Rinpoché subduing the landscape and later the people, which again can be considered part of the wider spectrum of pan-Himalayan ontologies and belief. Special attention has

been given to sections discussing integration and a comparison of the narratives of Guru Rinpoché as a pioneer of Tibetan Buddhism, and Bön (the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet) masters such as Sakya Zangpo, both of whom play a significant role in the establishment of fusion beliefs and practices among the Hyolmo people.

Chapter five is specially devoted to the shaman of the Helambu. While the majority of the Hyolmo people follow Buddhism as their main religious practice, a persistent shamanist tradition, the religious specialists of which, known locally as *bombo*, still perform rituals for the local deities and other benevolent, ambiguous, or noxious non-human entities. It is from the encounters with such entities, or owing to their capricious nature, that – according to local belief – illness, misfortune, and disaster unfold.

Chapter six, “Ritual Dynamic”, builds on the discussion of the *bombo*, who derives his power when he is called by the spirit of his ancestors to perform healing rituals, exorcism, and divinations to appease the local and family deities as well as the people involved. Torri discusses how the *gompa* or the Buddhist centre constructed in Kathmandu in the 1990s became a focus of the Hyolmo community and identity formation as well as the site of the Hyolmo Society Service Association. He also brings into focus the relevance of the integration and adaptation of the traditional and Bön religions to fit contemporary requirements resulting in transformations in ritual performances and practices. Hyolmo religious expression, in particular the emergence and relevance of new worship places in the urban context, helps create a new sense of identity and ethnic belonging.

Chapter seven, titled “Identity Matters”, and the Conclusion, provide some reconsiderations with regard to the discourse of identity in general and discusses the entanglements between landscape and ritual situated within the larger framework. The idea of today’s Hyolmo’s society is developed through the intersections of beliefs, narra-

tives, practices, and acculturation between Nepalese and Tibetan influences. Torri presents how the dimension of indigeneity in Nepal today is built out of multiple indigenous groups who remain in the periphery yet influence the dynamics of the Nepalese communities. The growing revival of indigeneity challenged the inherited views of a national identity that was created by the Hindu-state apparatus. Notions such as landscape help in identity formation and reflects how the physical space comes alive and responds to the people and any discourse relating to Hyolmo identity.

As a takeaway, Torri’s book is an enjoyable account which expands on ideas, such as identity and ethnicity, that are drawn from his ethnographic exploits of Hyolmo of the Helambu people. Some commendable perspectives that are evident in his work include a structuralist anthropological framework which infuses pre-existing analytical categories with ritual and identity, with solidly rooted extensive fieldwork positing the notion that landscapes are structurally ordered, and sometimes hierarchical. This serves as a great handbook for students and general readers to gain a rudimentary picture of the religious and everyday practices of the Hyolmo people as seen through a changing and evolving lens. In some sense, it is reiterating the discussion when it engages with the pre-existing discussions and theories that saturate research in this field. However, it is evident through the interviews and fresh empirical data that Torri forged a wholesome relationship with his informants by intercepting subtle, nuanced personal details rather than considering informants as mere modes of data-collection.

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References

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