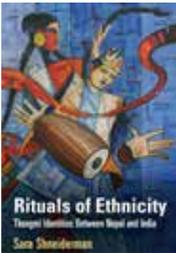


India



Sara Shneiderman, *Rituals of Ethnicity: Thangmi Identities Between Nepal and India*

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 Glossary, notes, bibliography, index, and acknowledgements.
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HOW DO ETHNIC groups define themselves in an increasingly mobile world? How do minority populations internalize and engage with rapidly changing local, national, and transnational discourses of indigeneity and belonging that increasingly structure the ways in which we inhabit the world? How do a society's or ethnic group's various social actors mobilize their resources to advocate on their group's behalf? These are just some of the questions underlying Sara Shneiderman's excellent new book *Rituals of Ethnicity* about a small ethnic group living primarily in India and Nepal called the Thangmi.

The Thangmi are native to Nepal, but have a substantial population residing permanently in India. The continued relations between both Nepali and Indian Thangmi populations, bolstered by seasonal labor migrations, the responses on both sides to national policies of one country or the other, and the formulation and reformulation of rituals at the center of these discourses all figure prominently into Shneiderman's ethnography. This ethnography examines Thangmi attempts to find belonging within both Indian and Nepali governmental frameworks, both

of which have marginalized them in different ways. To unpack this complex situation, Shneiderman proffers a theory of ethnicity-in-action. Ritual figures prominently in this theory, as it both structures the lifecycle, and becomes the framework for articulation of ethnic difference in interaction with governments.

Shneiderman opens *Rituals of Ethnicity* with a short preface describing the book's origin and providing a brief history of her fieldwork. She follows this with an opening chapter entitled "Of Rocks and Rivers—Being Both at Once." In this chapter, the author introduces the Thangmi people, their backgrounds, and their circular migrations between India, Nepal, and the Tibet Autonomous Region. As the chapter's title suggests, Thangmi ethnicity is simultaneously like rivers and rocks. In this metaphor, ethnicity is both object and flow; it is simultaneously immanent presence and dynamic force. Though she does not return to this metaphor, it becomes a useful heuristic for understanding the complex ways Thangmi actors view traditions and ethnicity. Recognizing the importance of Thangmi ritual specialists leads the author to postulate that ethnicity is "a result not only of the prerogatives of state control or market forces but also of a ritual process through which identity is produced as a sacred object that binds diverse people together" (7). The author focuses on how Thangmi ritual practitioners (*gurus*), participation in ritual (and the rituals themselves simultaneously) accomplish important spiritual work within the community, and become objectified metonyms for modern cultural agents to redeploy in engagements with state discourses.

Chapter 2, "Framing, Practice, and Performing Ethnicity," explores the importance of a simple but salient distinction the Thangmi make between two Nepali terms: *nakali* (glossed as "performance") and *sakali* (practice). *Sakali* practice is associated with the *gurus* who conduct rituals for internal consumption. *Nakali* performance objectifies and commodifies practice, often for the purposes of external consumption, and particularly for officials with the power to advocate on their behalf as they seek special recognition from their respective governments. Shneiderman suggests that performance and practice both remain important modes of contemporary cultural production.

The importance of this distinction between performance and practice, and the role of *gurus* and activists in navigating the two is at the center of the third chapter, "Origin Myths and Myths of Originality." Here, Shneiderman narrates the Thangmi *paloke* (the Thangmi term for the *gurus*' chants, the ritual contexts in which they are chanted, and the register in which they are recited), and discusses attempts by "activists" to textualize and scripturalize the *paloke*. The myth itself will interest *Asian Ethnology*'s readership both for its originality, and for its considerable parallels to surrounding groups (as with the motif of losing the ability to write because an early ancestor ate their texts). Much like BRIGGS and BAUMAN (1992), who note the social power derived from decontextualizing and recontextualizing a given form, Shneiderman views Thangmi ethnic activists' attempts to textualize and translate the *paloke* to access the social power embodied by the *gurus*. *Gurus*, for their part, resist the activist push for scripturalization. Despite these tensions, however, Shneiderman ends the chapter on a note of hope, pondering whether digital media might be able to bridge the divide and provide a textual practice that both *gurus* and activists can accept.

In chapter 4, entitled “Circular Economies of Migration, Belonging and Citizenship,” the author introduces the Thangmi practice of cross-border seasonal migration. For years, Thangmi have crossed the borders of Nepal and India and even into China’s Tibet Autonomous Region to engage in a variety of migrant labor work. The seasonal nature of this cross-border practice leads to a “circular citizenship” that “entails regular movement across nation-state borders in order to piece together the differentiated prospects for belonging that each national framework offers” (125). As James C. SCOTT (1985) observes, there is considerable agency in these types of practice for groups that are otherwise vulnerable.

This agency manifests itself in a variety of ways. The fifth chapter, “Developing Associations of Ethnicity and Class,” traces the important political influence this cross-border practice has exerted on both Indian and Nepali ethnic development. To do this, Shneiderman examines the histories of two Thangmi organizations: the Bhai Larke Thami Samaj (BLTS) and its successor the Bharatiya Thami Welfare Association (BTWA) in India, and the NTS (Nepal Thami Samaj) in Nepal, and the tactics they have used to work within the state, from Maoist separatism in Nepal to applications for recognition as indigenous peoples in India. The histories of each organization are relevant both in their historical context and relative to what we come to see of Thangmi ethnicity in the manuscript’s present. This is necessary, we are reminded, because the groups on either side of the border look to each other and influence each other. Their understandings of contemporaneous situations on one side of the border are influenced by policies and movements on the other. The acronyms, personal names, and party names employed in this chapter may confuse readers without a knowledge of recent Nepali and Indian history. Nevertheless, diachronically showing how cultural actors attempt to synthesize political and divine recognition into a coherent identity greatly advances the book’s overarching goal of showing ethnicity-in-action.

With the advent of the transnational discourse of indigeneity in the late 1990s, Thangmi populations are faced with hurdles in attempts to gain political recognition. As India began to provide particular benefits to officially recognized groups, Thangmi on both sides of the border began to ponder how a group that is not native to India can qualify for privileges reserved for indigenous groups. Ritual provided the answer, as shown in the sixth chapter, “Transcendent Territory, Portable Deities, and the Problem of Indigeneity.” Centered around the deity Bhume, Thangmi conceptions of place are rooted in a place-based deity who can be ritually deterritorialized and attached to the new territory wherever the Thangmi make their homes. Shneiderman looks specifically at the building of a temple complex around the location of Bhume in Suspa. A Thangmi activist had sought to seal this space off from Hindu encroachment. And yet, local Thangmi, and the deity itself, were not impressed. Within a few years, however, the local (and supernatural) discontent with this state of affairs had dissipated; the same once-contested structure had come to represent Thangmi identity to Thangmi in both Nepal and India.

With chapter 7, “The Work of Life-Cycle Rituals and the Power of Parallel Descent,” emphasis moves from policy to ethnicity in action at the level of individual action. Shneiderman discusses how being, or more appropriately, “doing” Thangmi

requires participation in rituals. This happens most notably in the practice of parallel descent and marriage and then again in funerary rituals. In marriage, each person is given a clan (which is not normally used in everyday life), including those who are not born Thangmi. Men are associated with their father's clan. Women enter their mother's clan. The clans themselves are strictly gendered, and there are an equal number of female and male clans. In life, Thangmi will participate in the funerary rites of family. In death, Thangmi who are ritually incorporated into the land become ancestors. In life cycle rituals, people become Thangmi through participation.

Shneiderman's own intellectual autobiography weaves in and out of the narrative of Thangmi ethnicity at various moments, and the greatest strength is the careful attention to her own positionality (and in some cases complicity) in many of the events described. The best example might be chapter 8, "Resisting the End of Ritual," in which Shneiderman looks back at the end of a ritual on which she had written an article at the request of the Thangmi community. In this particular multi-ethnic ritual, Thangmi were sent to drink the blood of a sacrificed cow. Spiritually degrading though this was, the drinkers derived significant power from the ritual's importance and their important role in it. Refusal to participate would jeopardize the ritual's success. When she began writing, the local community had emphatically argued that this ritual was central to the Thangmi identity. By the time she had completed and published the article, a variety of factors had conspired to lead the same Thangmi activists to boycott the ritual. The book ends with an epilogue briefly recapping her arguments, and expressing hope that this ethnography might some day be a resource for Thangmi people when they ask the question: What is Thangmi?

Overall this book seeks answers to questions of incredible importance in the increasingly mobile and complicated world around us. The first two chapters in particular dedicate significant time and effort to the development of this theory of ethnicity-in-action, while the remaining chapters show the theory in practice. Through an understanding of ethnicity as simultaneously being both rock and river, Shneiderman proposes a synthetic theory of ethnicity in action that recognizes the work of a variety of stakeholders, thereby resisting reductive narratives of ethnicity. The state, local practices (particularly ritual), and transnational discourses of heritage and indigeneity all play a role in this theory. These interventions ensure that *Rituals of Ethnicity* will be of particular benefit for scholars of Zomia, of the Himalayan region, of comparative ethnicity, and of any group where migration or transnationality plays an important role in identity frameworks. The manuscript is generally written in an accessible style and will make a useful contribution to graduate and upper-level undergraduate seminars on ethnicity, though it may be too advanced for introductory coursework.

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