

Martino Nicoletti. 2006. *The Ancestral Forest: Memory, Space and Ritual Among the Kulunge Rai of Eastern Nepal*. Kathmandu: Vajra Publications & Ev-K²-CNR Publications.

This interesting if unusual book by Martino Nicoletti – his third single-authored title in English – is an ‘abridgement and adaptation’ of his doctoral dissertation submitted to the University of Siena in Italy in 1997. The topic of his research project, and also of this book, is the religious life of the Kulunge Rāi people of Solukhumbu in eastern Nepal, focussing particularly on the forest world and the ‘cynegetic ritual complex’ which they still practice. For those readers whose knowledge of ‘cynegetic ritual complexes’ is a little rusty, as I confess that mine is, a web search informs me that cynegetics is both ‘the art of hunting with dogs’ and ‘relating to the chase.’ This esoteric goal captures the essence of this eclectic book: Nicoletti is as much poet as anthropologist, in both writing style and content.

Yet paradox reigns and marks the rule, since this derelict and soon to be forgotten forest still spreads its wild aroma within the village and there – right there – deposits its fecund pollen, just as it did in the past (p. 18).

I cite this example of Nicoletti’s symbolic brocade to illustrate the point that this is emotional, figurative ethnography, at times even romantic, in

which the medium becomes the message. While it can be difficult to be dispassionately functional about shamanism, monkey spirits and clan mythologies, the injection of a little rationalism might help readers of *The Ancestral Forest* make sense of loquacity such as: “With the blows of the axe, a new form of civilisation opens a breach among the thick foliage of the ancient forest” (p.15).

In the anthropologist’s defence, however, since Nicoletti has set out to test an intangible hypothesis (as detailed below), his methodological arsenal needs to be equally conceptual. Part of the challenge may be the process of translation—not that the translation reads poorly, it is in fact very good—but that discourse strategies common to Italian appear flowery and obtuse when translated into English. For example, the hypothesis which the author aims to test is that:

...in the Kulunge Rāi mind, the forest, on the one hand, par excellence represents the dwelling of uncontrolled, antisocial and chaotic forces, on the other, it is interpreted as the active reservoir of infinite potential, capable of interacting positively with the social and organised world of which, at first sight, it would appear to be the antithesis (p. 17).

If one can make it past the verbiage, Nicoletti is making an interesting point, but his choice of language and tone remain an impediment to understanding.

The monograph is divided into six chapters book-ended by a short introduction and conclusion. Starting with cults of domestic deities, the text deals with Kulunge rituals that accompany the souls of the dead and village farming cults before analysing hunting cults and the secret paths taken by Kulunge Rāi shamans.

The first chapter locates the Kulung Rāi in the greater cultural complex of Kiranti groups and provides a brief historical overview of their interactions with the Nepali state. Chapter two is a heavily referenced and footnoted explication of Kulung cosmology and mythology, from the primaeval waters through to the present. This is a strong section, carefully researched and dexterous in its comparative reach, adding another important thread to our knowledge of the complex origin narratives of Kiranti peoples. Having elicited such narratives from the Thangmi community, I am aware of the difficulties involved in collecting and ‘verifying’ such tales, and Nicoletti has done a fine job.

In his third chapter, on the structure, functions and symbolic organisation of Kulunge dwellings, the author contends that the ‘dwelling’ provides us the “right angle to decipher the whole meaning of

Kulunge cultural life and, above all, to understand its specific implications of a religious and symbolic nature” (p. 81). This is in large part because in the Kulunge world, the dualism between ‘human’ and ‘non-human’ is configured as the opposition between domestic space and the surrounding woods. The village and its dwellings thus index human space which exists and is “founded and governed by laws promulgated exclusively by man” (p. 83).

When reading *The Ancestral Forest*, it helps to have a dictionary at one’s side. At times, however, even the most comprehensive dictionary fails us, as in my search for what an ‘ophidiomorphic’-ancestor-spirit might be, a term used in the title of Chapter four. Google offers only four hits, three of which link back to this book, and the complete *Oxford English Dictionary* is equally ignorant of the word. From context, the reader can deduce that it relates to serpents and snakes, but this level of obfuscation is as unnecessary as it is frustrating. Nicoletti’s use of such terminology is a reminder of the elite nature of much modern ethnographic production, accessible to only the most exclusive and classically-educated academic consumers, and remaining largely inaccessible to a non-specialist readership. For the initiated, however, this intriguing and substantial chapter deals with the anatomy and physiology of the *Dedam Mayam* ceremony (honouring the clan’s founding father-deities), arguably the most important ritual “among the periodic cultural activities occurring in the midst of Kulunge domestic realities” (p. 105).

The following chapter addresses the Kulunge symbolic organisation of death and its rich classificatory taxonomy which divides death into three basic kinds, and the nature of monkey-ancestor-spirits. The sixth and final chapter takes the reader deep into the jungle world, in the shadow of the forest, the realm of Kulung hunting, rites and shamanism. Having “lost its function as a means of subsistence, hunting survives exclusively within the ritual dimension,” we learn on page 198. For readers who may have hurried through the introduction, this declaration might come somewhat as a shock. The Kulung no longer hunt, yet this is in many ways a book about hunting. According to Nicoletti, the “shift from an economy based on hunting to one founded on agriculture and stock raising has transformed the methods, but not the purpose of religious activity” (p.16), but no historical anthropological or archaeological evidence is provided to underpin or date this assertion. Hunting, in other words, has become a metaphor with which the Kulunge Rāi think, remember and organise their cultural world, with the forest continuing to exercise considerable control over the formation and practice of rituals.

The four-page conclusion marks the end of this narrative and ritual journey through the oral memory and sacred territory of this Himalayan community, and also through the impressive vocabulary of this Italian anthropologist. In conclusion, Nicoletti reminds us that it is the forest that “founds civilisation and keeps it alive,” and that without recognising this “tacit alliance between the two worlds, no survival appears possible” (p. 233).

Nicoletti’s perspective on Kulunge ritual builds upon earlier studies by Nick Allen (on Thulung), Martin Gaenzle (on Mewahang), Charlotte Hardman (on Lohorung) and Philippe Sagant (on Limbu). With the addition of Nicoletti’s writings in English, the Rāi-Kirāti cultures of eastern Nepal can no longer be said to be under-documented, given this wealth of comparative data that is now in the public domain.

I have only two substantive criticisms of this otherwise significant ethnographic contribution to the cultural documentation of the eastern Himalayas. First, Nicoletti’s narrative can be termed neither holistic nor modern, but is rather an intense discussion of the ritual and symbolic world of this community. Ethnic claims and national politics are almost entirely absent, as are the most basic data that would help less expert readers get a handle on the salient cultural markers of the Kulunge Rāi. As a case in point, Nicoletti’s footnote on page 19 informs the reader that “from a numeral point of view, the Kulunge Rāi only represent an extremely marginal element within the ethnic mosaic of the Rāi... who number slightly fewer than 636,000 persons,” but nowhere in his book could I find even a rough population estimate (according to the readily-accessible 2001 Census of Nepal, 18,686 people speak Kulunge as a mother tongue). It is unsatisfying to read a whole monograph and still not know the most basic of social facts about a people, particularly when primary data is not difficult to source. While Nicoletti is linguistically sophisticated, he is not always precise, leading to some inconsistent transcriptions and important typos, such as “‘Lr’ stands for the Nepali language”, on page 12, which is surely an error.

Second, I remain troubled by idealised invocations of a perfectly sequestered autochthony found in the promotional text which accompanies the book on the publisher’s website: “Lost among the high hills of Eastern Nepal, which has meant centuries of cultural isolation, the Kulunge Rāi ethnic group have tenaciously maintained their religious tradition ever since their ancient origins. Bearing witness to a far-off past of hunting and nomadic life, their myths and legends form a plot and scenario that comprise a multitude of invisible entities.” Lost to whom,

one might ask? Certainly not to themselves, as I am confident that the Kulunge Rāi have long known that they have existed, nor to anthropologists (Charles McDougal conducted intensive research on Kulunge kinship and marriage customs in the 1970s and published widely) or linguists (Gerard Tolsma wrote a grammar of the Kulung language, strangely not referenced in the bibliography). Romantic prose on primal absence may help sell books, but it does not withstand even the most cursory analysis, and misrepresents the complex patterns of contemporary livelihoods.

I end with a few words about the publishers. Cinnabaris - Series of Oriental Studies was established in the summer 2006, as an initiative of Ev-K²-CNR Publications. Cinnabaris is a scientific collaboration between the Ev-K²-CNR Committee and the Italian Institute for Africa and Asia (IsIAO) in Rome. The objective of this new publishing initiative is to publicize studies and research in the fields of anthropology, ethnography, visual anthropology, archaeology, history of religions, philology and art history of Himalayan civilizations in central, southern and south-eastern Asia. Cinnabaris is published in English by Vajra Publications of Kathmandu. Martino Nicoletti is coordinator of the series on behalf of Ev-K²-CNR and directs the anthropological section. To date, three works have been published in the Cinnabaris series, two authored by Martino Nicoletti and a third by Gabriele Tautscher.

References

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