

Pascale Dollfus and Gisèle Krauskpoff. 2014. *Mascarades en Himalaya. Les vertus du rire* [Masquerades in the Himalayas: The Virtues of Laughter]. Suilly-la-Tour: Findakly Editions.

The starting point of the book is an inquiry into the discrepancy between the abundance of primitive “Himalayan” masks on the market and the scarcity of ethnographic descriptions involving masks in the Himalayan context. However, leaving aside this initial query, the book invites rather to a trip, here and there on the two sides of the vast Himalayan range, to the discovery of masquerades.

The general purpose of the book is to undertake an exploration of laughter, as the subtitle announces, and especially the laughter provoked by performances involving masks. It ambitions to address this emotion with its many variants: “light,” naive, obscene or frightened, and to fill a gap in the ethnography of the Himalayan area by focusing on this emotion which the authors consider that it has been neglected in the works dealing with the region. We may note here the absence of any reference to the works dealing

with the Central Himalayan epic tradition, which makes an important place to laughter and may include masquerades, such as the PhD dissertation of Rémi Bordes (2005) on the epics in Doti, or Claus Peter Zoller's (1999) contribution to an edited volume on humor in South Asian literatures, which would have offered a track already well advanced on the subject.

The book is organized into four parts, respectively entitled "The Masked Otherworld," "Obscenities and Exorcism," "Inversion and Mockery," and "The Comic at Theater." This division does not provide a strict guide to reading, with many elements crossing from one to the other of the parts, but proposes rather threads for an understanding of masquerades. The four parts include detailed and interesting descriptions of performances, some of which are observed by the authors, others are drawn from ethnography. Particularly noteworthy is the description of the festival of the dead, the *Gāī Jātrā*, in a locality called Panga in the Kathmandu Valley, which combines a wide variety of masks related to stylistic categories commonly treated separately. It also includes the meticulous relation of a ritual organized around the demon *Lākhey*, far from its original lands, in Jumla, in a "hybrid" context and the lively description of New Year rituals involving masked characters associated with old age, providers of fertility, in Tibetan language communities of Ladakh, Zaskar and Dolpo. The book also contains a description of Sherdukpen theatrical performances in Arunachal Pradesh in India. The richness of this ethnographic endeavor, even if it is somewhat disparate, is one of the strong points of the work.

It is regrettable, however, that this resolutely descriptive genre makes little room for the perception of the actors, raising the fundamental question as to how to approach emotions, here laughter, without going through local categories of analysis, or the way people may verbalize it. The methodological difficulties deal with basic questioning, such as: where in the performance can one draw a limit between naive and frightened laughter? Does the audience receive a performance with the same, uniform and unanimous laugh? On what criteria can one approach the manifestations of an emotion?

Without addressing these questions, the book however reveals that the mask, far from fixing an identity, depends entirely on the ritual context in which it is found and on the relations it maintains with other agents. The freedom and excess that the masked character often uses reflect that of the mask, whose identity can change during the same performance. The book also highlights some recurrent functions of the mask, such as of protection,

using various paths, from the armor mask to the grotesque mask, which horrifies the demons or disarms by laughter. The authors also draw a full account of the importance of parody, both in the grotesque masked characters who bring out the hero's splendor while mocking him, and in the grotesque evocation of the activities of everyday life. Yet, despite these recurrences, as the authors point out in the single final page that serves as a conclusion, the mask itself is an empty category, an object that takes life and meaning only through the uses that are made of it.

If we can only join them on this position, we regret that the original question has been neglected, while appreciating the beautiful journey through the universe of the Himalayan performances that is offered here. The most remarkable aspect of the work lies undoubtedly in its very rich and remarkable illustrations, which include photographs from archives and contemporary photographs. Its richness is such that one regrets the absence of a list of illustrations, just as an index would have made the book a better research tool.

By its general organization, "Masquerades in the Himalayas" is not meant to a targeted use, but it provides, by the threads that it traces in the chain of rituals, sometimes geographically distant, many fruitful tracks for further investigation.

References

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