

Ben Campbell. 2013. *Living between Juniper and Palm: Nature, Culture and Power in the Himalayas*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

It is perhaps best to begin the review of *Living between Juniper and Palm* by taking note of the alluring concluding lines in the monograph. “The answer is not to create enclaves of nature, but to nurture a more thorough going reflexive environmental culture: one that already understands humanity as flexibly adapted to the circumstances for living in ecologies of difference” (p. 357).

By the term “enclaves of nature,” the author Ben Campbell is underlining what he considers to be a primarily “modern” approach to save nature – the creation of exclusive ecological zones in the form of parks, sanctuaries, protected areas and reserves. Such a strategy, also widely referred to as “fortress conservation,” is overwhelmingly held together by the belief that guns and fences are the best bet to protect nature from the local rabble of “squatters, poachers and thieves.”

But does the quest to have a wilderness untainted by humans make nature more pristine and authentic? Has conservation science gone too far in trying to entirely hive off society in order to rescue the natural world? Or, more

pointedly, how conceptually meaningful and necessary is the need to maintain a divide between “objective nature” and the cultural worlds of the human. In *Living between Juniper and Palm*, Campbell weighs in on the debate by arguing the reverse: that efforts to enable people to relate productively and sustainably with their natural environments does not necessarily depend on a “split between a physical reality and an overlay of cultural meaning” (p. 2).

To explain how and why treating the “environment as a totality that is independent of human presence” (p. 4) is ideologically fraught, both in the realm of politics and ecological practice, Campbell walks us through a rather detailed anthropological study of the Tamang-speaking communities of Rasuwa district, in central north Nepal.

The Tamang, we are told, are a transhumant pastoral community who are marked by the fact that they do not have a surplus-generating subsistence base. What they grow as crops – corn, millet, wheat, barley, and potatoes – are essentially good to last for only a few months of the year. That too, the harvest critically dependent on the yields they can squeeze out of their fragmented rain-fed terraces. The rest of their livelihood spectrum is made up of manual labor through portering, offering trekking services and moving their flocks extensively up and down between the palm covered valleys and the juniper dotted mountain ranges. The subtropical to alpine forests that shadow these routes of mobility and the community villages, not unsurprisingly therefore, are critical to the Tamang subsistence strategies and livelihood means.

In 1976, the government of Nepal decided to cordon off and sequester a chunk of Rasuwa district’s forests and declare it as part of the Langtang National Park. In a single administrative stroke, the Tamang suddenly found themselves dealing with a new and unprecedented reality in which the National Park loomed over their lives as a “distanced object.” A type of nature, as Campbell observes, in which natural scientists, institutional conservation science and the forest bureaucracy through “authoritative knowledges” were able to establish and define forests as being fragile and threatened. At heart, however, was not merely the sudden exclusion of the Tamang community from their customary access to natural resources which they depended on but the deeper complications brought on by an intense loss of cultural intimacy with their surrounding forests. A loss, we are told, that has been suffered and profoundly experienced because the Tamang do not “straightforwardly have ‘a’ cultural construction of the environment” (p. 3). Put differently, culture and nature for them plays out in a continuum;

where representation and reality have so closed in on themselves that the “environment as a totality, independent of human presence” (p. 4) simply does not exist.

To side step and go beyond the nature-culture divide, *Living between Juniper and Palm* adopts, as its chief methodological orientation, the style of “thick description” and “ethnographic analysis.” The belief here is that recovering views from the ground will require close and careful attention to not only tracking the Tamang-speaking communities’ ecological practices, political actions, narratives of the everyday, world views, subsistence strategies, oral histories but importantly as well the textured imaginaries with which the Himalayas are grasped and acted upon.

Part two of the monograph, in fact, under the capacious sub-title “People and Non-humans in Process and Place” (pp. 81–274) offers us in sumptuous detail an exhaustive record of the Tamang’s everyday world of how they “live in, use, relate to, reflect upon, and derive meaning from their ecological interactions” (p. 8). In Chapters 6 and 7, for example, the author lists and discusses the many layered moral and social implications that are derived from stories about animals – pheasants, monkeys, jackals, foxes, bears, leopards and so on. In Chapter 3 and 4, there is a long disquisition on how the Tamang relate to plants, craft a sense of dwelling for themselves from the varied ecological niches and notably, as well, define a sense of space and time from pathways and the routines of mobility. All fascinating stuff but too substantial and voluminous to be rehearsed at the level of details in this word-constrained review. What, nonetheless, can be rounded up as the concluding take-home message is that Campbell wishes for us to understand the Tamang’s environmental worlds as not being a “single scheme of established and coherently ordered principles, but a lived world where multiple threads of knowledge, use, and power present variegated and mutually unresolved encounters and interpretative possibilities” (p. 122). Stated more bluntly, the Tamang’s cultural-ecological world is constantly in the making and tenuous rather than definable as a frozen set of routines and formulas by a group of “noble indigenous forest dwellers living in cosy harmony with nature” (p. 16).

The third and final part is made up of two somewhat polemical chapters (8 and 9), which engage with several frameworks that define and debate ideas on conservation, sustainability and resource governance. Campbell here, in my opinion, is keen to underline that by conceptually upsetting the

standard nature-culture divide, the Tamang-speaking communities offer potentially three instructive lessons. First, an ethnographic analysis suggests that the global environmental agenda to “protect” nature by recasting it as being chiefly a human free wilderness that is above all else a place for leisure consumption and tourism is not tenable as a conservation strategy. The Tamang in their daily interactions and livelihood dependence on the forests, in fact, tell us otherwise. That nature can be integral to livelihood based cultural production, a site for intense social and symbolic relations. Secondly, nature protection is not and can never be culturally neutral and finally, it follows that culture does not rest as some sort of passive lifeless object lying on one side of the natural environment.

In all, *Living between Juniper and Palm* is a welcome addition to the exciting field of environmental anthropology. Some cautions, however, do apply. The length of the monograph, in my opinion, could have been trimmed. The core arguments are constantly repeated and many a time we are taken along tiring detours in the form of polemical engagements that move us far away from the main narrative. And lastly, I wonder how the plea for going beyond the nature-culture divide is different from the now much rehearsed writings in critical geography that fall under the rubric of socio-natures.

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