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Kings of the Forest: The Cultural Resilience of Himalayan Hunter–Gatherers

By Jana Fortier. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009. xii + 215 pp. US$ 24.00. ISBN 978-0-8248-3356-5.

Several months ago, my colleagues at Utah State University began discussing how anthropology could better contribute to the popular discourse on climate change, particularly in mountain areas of the world. So much of the climate science, it seemed to us, focuses on fairly technical measures of irregular weather patterns or isotopic variation in polar ice. We wanted to research the human face of the topic. Mountain areas seemed appropriate because of the place of mountains in the general human imagination. By investigating the human stories of the mountainous areas of the world, we hoped to find examples of cultural adaptations to climate change that might resonate with general audiences in ways that other climate science did not. Having agreed upon this general approach, each of us set out to learn a little more about mountain peoples and their landscapes. Because of my own prior research in China, I decided to read more about peoples in the Himalayas. So it was with eagerness that I read Jana Fortier's book on the Rautes of Western Nepal.

The book's 9 chapters represent a comprehensive ethnographic account of 4 months of fieldwork in 1997 with a group of about 140 Rautes. Besides hosting the author, this nomadic group hunted monkeys, gathered fruits and yams, and carved wooden objects for trade with local villagers. After introducing her research agenda in the first chapter, Fortier spends the next 3 chapters investigating historical and cross-cultural perspectives on the Rautes and possible relatives. Chapter 2 focuses on her initial encounters with the Rautes as a people outside the accepted Hindu social order of their neighbors. Chapter 3 pushes the idea of kinship across time and space with other groups to its logical end. Chapter 4 explores the idea of forest living, noting how the process of finding and setting up camp involves toponyms, unique to the Rautes, that encapsulate the landscape for their own use.

In identifying her subject matter, Fortier examines the Raute society from multiple points of view, including through the exoteric lenses of local villagers, development officers, and her own reactions as an American researcher. Recognizing how little prior research had been done on this group, she supplements her own experiences with logical comparisons from the anthropological literature on other hunter–gatherer societies. However, in these chapters, and throughout her book, Fortier presents the Rautes as individuals with unique voices, talents, and perspectives on what it means to be Raute. Epithets such as "kings of the forest" and "children of God" are employed at strategic moments in conversations with outsiders to establish expectations, but they also represent genuine feelings of connectedness to their place in the forest.

The next 3 chapters move away from kinship and cosmology to focus more specifically on Raute economic adaptations to living in the forest. Chapter 5 focuses on monkey hunting, a cultural practice religiously prohibited among the neighboring Hindu villagers. For the Rautes, in contrast, refusing to consume the results of a monkey hunt is seen as disrespectful to the God who gave them monkeys to eat. Chapter 6 shows how the gathering of wild fruits, greens, and yams complements the Rautes' monkey diet. Fortier supplements the narrative of both chapters with detailed appendices that clearly show resource specialization among the Rautes and their neighbors. The message is fairly clear—if the Rautes did not hunt monkeys, who would? In Chapter 7, Fortier returns to her earlier subject of cultural encounters between Rautes and villagers to document trading practices between the 2 groups. Rather than seeing these encounters as somehow culturally polluting an otherwise pristine hunting and gathering way of life, Fortier argues that the Rautes, like other hunter–gatherers, have always subsisted through interactions with more sedentary peoples.

The last 2 chapters complete the theme of cultural resilience. Chapter 8 returns to the cosmology of the Rautes to discuss their ability to resist the dominant Hindu ideologies of their neighbors. Chapter 9 is the most political of the book. Having made such a comprehensive report of her experiences, Fortier concludes this final chapter with a blessing of thanksgiving and the observation that Raute society can adapt to living in the subtropical forests of Nepal without any need for outside intervention. Just as the world is coming to value biodiversity for its long-term benefits to the human world, so too must we as a global readership come to value cultural diversity as a source of real benefit.

In addressing the style and tone of Fortier's writing, I concur with Arjun Guneratne's assessment on the back cover, "Fortier's prose is lucid, engaging and accessible, and this book will be an ideal text for undergraduate classes." I encountered quite a lot of redundancy in Fortier's descriptions of people and events, but this would not be a problem if the work were encountered as individual chapters, many of which could stand on their own as part of an introductory anthropological curriculum.

I was somewhat disappointed that, although Raute dancing is mentioned often, the book contains no general description of the dances. With so much detail on hunting and trading, I had hoped to find

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something equally descriptive about this cultural practice. Perhaps Fortier was unable to witness a dance herself, or perhaps she agreed not to include this practice in deference to the group's wishes. Fortier also alludes to government interventions in the forests, particularly in hunting out Maoist political insurgents. Presenting more about the degree of political unrest in the area might seem tangential to the central argument, but it might also highlight more clearly the fragility of Raute society.

Having read to the end of the book, I returned to the front cover to look at the picture of Man Bahadur, a man who told the author, "Go and tell your American students about us" (p 12). His wishes to be a Raute, a monkey hunter, and child of God in the mountain forests of Western Nepal are clearly presented in this book. Fortier has put a human face on the topic of cultural resilience in the face of rapid cultural and environmental change.

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