

Book Review

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Fisher, W. F. (2001). *Fluid Boundaries: Forming and Transforming Identity in Nepal*. Columbia University Press. USA

Thakali culture, I said in part, is like the Kali Gandaki River. It flows in a wide riverbed that allows it to break up into several meandering streams that merge again downstream. These separations and mergings vary unpredictably over time, but the separated channels always rejoin further downstream....I could tell you which stream was the strongest one today, but I could not tell you which channel was the original or true channel of the river. The flow of the river changes from one season to the next, from one year to the next. We can describe it as we encounter it at a particular moment....Sometimes it flows peacefully and at other times with great turbulence. At any specific time it may be deeper, shallower, stronger, or weaker than at others. It may run in one channel or in five. But it is nevertheless the same river (pp.19-20).

Ethnicity is a social construction, not simply a cultural given based on primordial markers like language, dress, religion etc. Members of a group have multiple dimensions of identity based on class, kinship, locality, or religion, some of which become more important than others at certain times. The process of constructing ethnic boundaries is fluid and ongoing that moves in response to economic and political opportunities and constraints and varies within the community depending on age, gender, locale, occupation, education etc.

Early studies in Nepalese context tended to analytically isolate ethnic groups leading to the perception of them as bounded and timeless entities, but more recent studies have recognized that ethnic boundaries emerged with the development of the Nepali state and that these boundaries were and remain fluid.

Thakali culture (or culture in general) is not composed of static structures of rigid institutional and cognitive pieces; it is instead, continually reinvented and modified without being totally transformed. They are formed and reformed as individuals and groups confront their world and create their own histories, which is usually characterized by various social, political, economic, and cultural processes. Firstly, they remarkably raised their economic and political standing through a series of constraints and opportunities during the Gorkha state formation process by means of control over salt trade. Second, the Thakali attempted to shape the historical narratives about themselves as a part of their strategy of adaptation in the changing sociopolitical environment. Thakali identity is necessarily defended by various kinds of boundaries, boundaries that must be flexible enough to adapt to a variety of changing contexts.

Thakali, comprised of four clans (Sherchan, Gauchan, Tulachan, Bhattachan), have been searching for a Thakali identity and seeking to clarify their culture and history. After 1982, Thakali ethnic self-consciousness was raised by the formation of nationwide Thakali association, which significantly affected the interrelationships of the Thakali communities, at both local and national levels. The attempts to revitalize Thakali culture have taken many forms including;

- advocating Hinduized practices,
- promotion of Tibetan Buddhist practices,
- revival of Thakali *dhoms* and shamanic practices.

Simply, being Thakali is to be a member of one of the four clans but there are many internal divisions within Thaksatsae Thakali society which have a bearing on an individual's status. For every designated social boundary among the Thakali, lines are drawn based on generally accepted markers like;

- Descent,
- Residence,
- Cultural practices, and
- Ritual purity.

These 'boundary markers' operate within Thaksatsae Thakali society, but, no boundaries hold under all conditions for all purposes. Some boundary markers become more relevant at certain times, which, otherwise are not generally discussed, however, this relevance too is less frequent in Khani Khuwa than they do in Thak Khola, Bhairawa and Pokhara, for example;

- when arranging marriages,
- at the time of placing the bone fragment of the deceased in the ossuary, and
- during the performance of some rituals.

Among the people who call themselves Thakalis, three distinct clan-based groups make significant efforts to mark their exclusivity. They are Thaksatsae Thakalis or Chan Thakalis who argue that they are not a type of Thakali but the Thakali and the so-called Thakali are Panchgaonle. For the Panchgaonle, the claim to be Thakalis is a claim to a social status operative within the context of Nepalese society, while for the Thaksatsae Thakalis, it is an assertion of identity, a claim of membership to a bounded group. This ongoing construction, crossing and disputing of boundaries leads neither to resolution nor to the clarification or fixing of the

boundary but to creative adaptations to contemporary problems.

This book reviewed is, as author puts it, an attempt to understand the Thakalis attempt to understand what it means to be Thakalis, based on almost twenty years of experiences among Thakalis communities in Nepal and abroad, which concludes that, Thakalis' attempt to define their identity and to return to tradition they must first re-create it, i.e. in a way, to become Thakali for the very first time.