Le Chemin des humbles. Chroniques d’un ethnologue au Népal, by Rémi Bordes

Gisèle Krauskopff
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Le Chemin des humbles (‘The path of the humble’1) is a book about travelling, about a go-between journeying between different world views. It is also a book about what underlies ethnological knowledge: the intersubjective encounter, which is the basis of ethnographic practice. Bordes reminds us of this from the outset: ‘the ethnologist draws his legitimacy from longterm personal experience, yet it is agreed that he must keep silent about it’ (p. 16).

Prior to embarking on an in-depth field investigation, Rémi Bordes first made his way, step by step, across India to the western Nepalese border, as attested to in the opening chapter, on a journey evoking the spirit of the 1960s–70s that would ultimately lead him to ‘the path of the humble’ and to the villages of far western Nepal. For ‘[t]he ethnologist in distant lands... is a traveller... perhaps in his own way one of the most tenacious’ (p. 22), even if ‘travelling writers and ethnologists are wonderfully ignorant of each other’ (p. 23). He relates the encounters, the discoveries and the questions arising from a backward glance at the world he has left behind. He lays bare the emotional strain between this lived experience and the scientific project that will lead him to the final object of his research.

In a book entitled L’Adieu au voyage that traces the relationship between ethnology and literature, Vincent Debaene (2010) highlights a pattern that is particularly noticeable in France: the ethnologist’s desire, once their scientific investigations are complete, to publish a ‘second’ book that recounts their personal experience. Published in a collection (Terre Humaine) that has long been dedicated to the ‘ethnologist’s second book’, as Debaene calls it, The Path of the Humble is in fact the author’s first

1 All quotes from R. Bordes’ book are translated from the French by G. Krauskopff.
work. It was written several years after an unpublished doctoral thesis on the oral literature of the bards of western Nepal and thus reveals the author’s priority: to bear witness not only to his own experiences and those of ‘the humble’ but also to the founding complexity of ethnographic practice, ie an ‘in-between’ where the construction of ethnological knowledge is the issue at stake.

The book unfolds, shifting between nostalgia for another world and disillusionment. The first half recounts the vicissitudes that led the author, in 1998, to experience his first contact with ‘the facilitators’, a ‘faltering moment’ (p. 57) that heralded his settling in a Brahmin village in the district of Doti in far western Nepal. These ‘facilitators’ – a small local businessman who speaks English and a young man torn between two worlds and with dreams of going to America – took the foreigner home, to a village where a local teacher took him ‘under his wing’. This reminds me of similar characters caught between two worlds that accompanied my own first steps in the field twenty-five years earlier. These encounters, which seem to be the fruit of chance, suggest a pattern of contact that depends perhaps on the places and fieldwork, which deserve not only to be revealed but to be analysed. The ethnologist’s quest is confronted with local people’s attraction to the foreigner. Bordes aptly describes this dual quest: his wish to record the lived experience that inhabits every ethnologist and the villagers’ mirror-like desire, which is of just as much value.

A second journey, three years later, marks a rupture midway through the book: a difficult moment, in which, ‘once the feeling of being in a brand new place had subsided’, the true nature of the relationships and the violence of conflict seem to leap out at him (p. 335). Has the veil been lifted on this enchanting change of scenery? (‘le mal-en-peine’ [plight], p. 375–400). After renouncing his status as the adopted son of his Brahmin family hosts, the author settles in a house of his own in a multi-caste village and discovers the ‘disharmonic chaos’ of the music of Dholi untouchables. This plummets the author from the top rung of the social hierarchy down to the very bottom and, while the first part of the book describes the mutual quest for friendship, the second part reveals opaque relationships and resistance to scientific inquiry. Nevertheless, swept up by the Dholis’ pleasure in telling stories, Bordes finds his subject of research: the oral poetry these ‘humble talents’ (p. 510–511)
singing during collective rituals that characterise the oracular religion of western Nepal. He finds his method: learning the local language, forming a work team and immersing himself in these texts – ‘veritable flows of humanity’, ‘vestiges of courtly romance’ (p. 518).

Bordes evokes his regret at not having been prepared for fieldwork while unravelling the threads of personal and intersubjective ventures: the ethnologist’s ordeal. The doubts that assail him and the experiences he undergoes are all anchored in a long stay in a distant (exotic) land. The practice of field anthropology in our globalised world has changed considerably in recent years and with it the discipline itself. Do we embark on fieldwork today with such nostalgia? What intermediaries do we encounter in today’s global and connected world? The author evokes these changes in the last chapter... with a certain form of nostalgia.

While the questions about conducting fieldwork in an ‘exotic environment’ which run through this book may be somewhat dated, the exploration of ethnological practice and its disclosures are plainly relevant, touching on the very core of the transactions between investigator and informant, and between theory and practice. The path of the humble is a milestone on this crucial path towards the relational but hidden complexity at the basis of ethnological analysis, which goes beyond the question of the links between literature and ethnology, between the poetic and the academic approach (p. 23).

The book, which is aimed at a wide audience, is a beautiful introduction to Nepal. Though some of the author’s notes may seem like digressions, they are very suggestive such as: the omnipresence of mutual eye contact in relationships; the role of celebrations in integrating foreigners who ‘have to create links’; doings which are not valued, whereas relationships are, whether with humans or with gods (p. 106), and so on. These openings onto knowledge about this complex country also represent ethnological propositions. Such is, for example, the role of the laity in cults that address social conflicts through rituals to secure good health for everybody, these rituals being a sort of ‘group therapy’, ‘since it is often necessary to go back through the generations to find the original offence’ (p. 480). The story is punctuated by proverbs, epics and songs that introduce us to the role and creations of these untouchable poets, which will perhaps be the subject of a ‘second book’.

The experiences of the author and the villagers between 1998 and
2006 coincide with the ‘People’s War’, a time of rupture in the history of Nepal that put an end to monarchic rule. Bordes’ book, which is some way between a nostalgic quest and disillusionment, alludes to the history of ethnology and its practice in this region which was late opening its borders to research and where the collective imaginary around the Himalayas as a Shangrila weighed in the choice of fieldwork. This vivid account can be read on several levels. It is the first of its kind in the ethnology of the Himalayas and a translation into English is highly recommended.

Reference

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