Environmental Humanities in the New Himalayas: Symbiotic indigeneity, commoning, sustainability, edited by Dan Smyer Yü and Erik de Maaker

Karine Gagné

REFERENCES


What does the Anthropocene mean for the Himalayas? Published as part of the Routledge Series on environmental humanities, Environmental humanities in the new Himalayas: symbiotic indigeneity, commoning, sustainability sheds light on this question by showing both the vulnerability and the resilience of the region and its people during this critical era. With this book, the editors Dan Smyer Yü and Erik de Maaker have assembled a collection of papers written by scholars from 12 different countries and from a range of disciplinary backgrounds, including anthropology, history, earth science, environmental studies and others. The geographical coverage is also impressive. The editors approach their geographical object of study, the ‘Tibet-Himalayan water commons’ from the original perspective of ‘a terrestrial ocean as a water–land body’, which has undergone an artificial partition (p9) and is now ‘cartographically sliced by the human nations of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China (Tibet), India, Myanmar, Nepal, and Pakistan’ (p249). The discussion is framed within the environmental humanities and is organised into four parts: ‘Kindred of the earth, deities, humans and animals’, ‘Aqueous earth’, ‘Evolving cosmovisions, climate
change and community resilience’ and ‘Transboundary environmentality and indigenous commoning’.

2 This edited volume contributes to Himalayan studies and beyond in a myriad of ways. First, it reminds us of the geographical diversity of the Himalayas, which comprise not just the central Himalayan region or the Tibetan plateau, but also the surrounding foothills of the lower Himalayas. This is an important departure from common generalisations about the Himalayan environment. For instance, global scenarios about climate change often tend to subject the Himalayas to an artificial homogeneity. Yet the geographical diversity of the Himalayas has concrete implications for critical issues like climate change which can, in some areas, translate into an excess of water and in others, glacier recession (chapters 2 and 9). It is also a place where a variety of relationships with the environment have developed, from the lifeways of char dwellers in Assam (chapter 4) to the military production of the Indian state in the high-altitude region of Ladakh (chapter 13).

3 Most importantly, the book provides accounts of socioecological relations in places rarely discussed in the literature on the Himalayas. In their review of academic references focused on society and the environment in the Himalayas, Chakraborty et al (2021:45) point to a ‘data gap regarding Bhutan which reflects a relative lack of accessible critical scholarship from the region.’ This gap is well addressed by this book, which provides four chapters on Bhutan: chapter 1 focuses on interspecies relationship in the country’s highlands, chapter 3 examines the eco-spirituality that links earth, humans and deities in Haa District and chapter 8 examines the impact of the flourishing caterpillar fungus market. In addition, chapter 10 presents a fascinating study of indigenous practices of transboundary water management in the Bhutan-Assam borderlands and the technology used for flood alarms. The book also embraces the cultural diversity of the Himalayas beyond the narrow scope of Tibetan Buddhism that is common to studies that touch upon the nexus of society and the environment in the Himalayas. Thus, the chapters of the book engage, to different degrees, with local indigenous beliefs, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam. This constitutes a refreshing departure from the dominant cultural imaginary about the Himalayas which, despite important work that has centred on other traditions in the region (see, for example, Berreman 1972; Fewkes and Sijapi 2020; Govindrajan 2018) remains dominated by Tibetan Buddhist culture and religion.

4 This book also contributes to recent discussions on indigeneity as part of the decolonial turn in the humanities and the social sciences. There are common threads linking the accounts in this volume: the increasing commodification of natural resources, the pressure of new economic developments on traditional subsistence activities and the impact of colonialism, neo-colonialism and predatory development. As the authors demonstrate, these processes have detrimental effects on the indigenous communities of the Himalayas. Issues related to contemporary regimes of coloniality, their neoliberal contexts and the legacies of European colonisation recently highlighted by indigenous scholars are highly relevant to the Himalayan context. Few studies comprehensively engage with the indigenous question in the Himalayas, and the framing could not be timelier. By and large, the collection of chapters demonstrates that the Himalayas, as Lepcha and Lepcha put it, are a ‘contact zone of the local and the global, imbued with thicker meanings of humanity, indigenous as well as exogenous’ (p108). The difference compared with earlier accounts which sought to expose the
myth of Shangri-la is that here there is a obvious feeling that contemporary scenarios – from the building of infrastructures (chapters 6, 10, 11) to militarisation (chapter 12) and more generally to extractive development – promote feelings of marginalisation and impact relationships with the environment, sometimes along generational lines (chapters 3, 7, 9, 11). However, and in line with what contemporary indigenous studies demonstrate, indigenous communities are not just passive victims of these processes. For instance, young people are claiming their identity (chapter 4) and traditional systems of community (and inter-community) water management have survived, despite the postcolonial borderland context (chapters 10, 11).

Decoloniality is also a method, one that aims at a paradigm shift which entails, among other things, the restoration and elevation of the knowledge of indigenous peoples. This is approached through collaboration with authors from the Himalayas who have contributed chapters to this book and through engagement with local folklore, artwork, poetry and oral history. Several contributions also remind us that the Himalayas are not only the dwelling of humans and animals but also of divine beings who need to be acknowledged in interactions with the environment. But as Lepcha and Lepcha explain, against the backdrop of discourses that have depicted some Himalayan communities as indigenous environmentalists, foregrounding local perspectives presents its own set of challenges: ‘does this mean that in fear of falling into the romanticising trap, we should not recount our ancestral stories of our ethnic origin, our traditional environmental knowledge and engage with our protective spirits and the supernatural beings embodied in the mountains and rivers?’ (p109). The challenges of decoloniality are also linked to the very production of knowledge in academia, which tends to operate in disciplinary silos. Recent discussions on decolonising academia have emphasised not only the need to acknowledge and validate a multiplicity of lives and lived experiences but also to foster a more democratic and collaborative academia, a process which includes the decolonisation of disciplines. But the challenges encountered by the co-editors of this volume in framing their work within the environmental humanities is testimony to the challenges and obstacles that can be encountered in this endeavour (p5).

If ‘the advent of the Anthropocene challenges some established boundaries between nature and culture, between climate and politics, between natural sciences and the social sciences and humanities’ (Hamilton et al 2015:5), this book stands as an important example of how some of these boundaries can be reconsidered in the production of academic knowledge. Overall, this book will be of interest to students and scholars of environmental humanities, religion and ecology, indigenous studies, anthropology, cultural geography, environmental studies and sustainable development more generally. The concluding chapter by John Grim is particularly useful in locating the original contributions of this volume in broader discussions about indigeneity and sacred ecology. Some may find that one or more chapters contain an excess of neologisms and concepts. However, this should not discourage readers from engaging with this innovative and important contribution to Himalayan studies and beyond.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


AUTHORS

KARINE GAGNÉ

Karine Gagné is associate professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Guelph. Her research work is based in the Indian Himalayas, where she studies a range of issues, including climate change, ethics of care, human-animal relations, state production, citizenship, and climate knowledge. She is the author of *Caring for Glaciers: Land, Animals, and Humanity in the Himalayas*, published by University of Washington Press.