The Ends of Kinship: Connecting Himalayan lives between Nepal and New York, by Sienna R Craig

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REFERENCES


The Ends of Kinship is an ambitious book about care and belonging in the context of transnational mobility and migration from the Himalayan region of Mustang to New York. Contrary to how the Himalayan region has long been exoticised in Western eyes as an untouched and static ‘Himalayan Shangri-la’, Craig offers a rich ethnographic account that shows connections, transformations, pragmatism, and pluralism in the lives and livelihoods of Mustangis in a transnational setting. Drawing on over two decades of fieldwork with the people of Mustang in multiple sites – Mustang, Kathmandu and New York – the author focuses on kinship relations and networks that are key to the mobile lives of Mustangis. Craig chooses not to frame her story in terms of transnationalism or the culture of migration. Instead, she invents a new concept called khora that offers the overall framing for this book about migration and mobility; she does this by merging the Tibetan concept of Kora, which means circumambulation, and khorwa, which refers to the cycle of life. This helps Craig achieve two objectives. First, using ethnographic evidence and analysis of circulation and kinship networks across space, Craig challenges the linear ways of talking about migration as a movement from the place of origin to the destination, which has remained a dominant model in migration studies. Second, Craig makes a strong political stance to take local worldviews more seriously. As an ethnographer and a researcher with long-term fieldwork among the people of Mustang and a female anthropologist teaching at an academic institution in the United States, Craig offers a solid justification for the use of
khora as follows: 'All too often in anthropology, we assign the term 'theory' to the ideas of (primarily) white, male Continental philosophers, and we discount or minimize theoretical work that gets done in other ways. Yet when stripped down, 'theory' is simply the creation and use of concepts that help to explain social phenomenon. Khora does that work' (p8-9). I very much agree with Craig’s constructive political take on the theory. It can give emerging scholars, particularly those who are from within the region, the confidence to theorise from below. Craig does not tell us in the book but it would have been useful to know how her interlocutors reacted to this merging of two concepts and the invention of the term khora, and whether Mustangis find this concept meaningful. Also, at what stage in her fieldwork or writing, did Craig decide to use the term khora and why would a well-known concept of mobility, transnationalism or culture of migration not do the same job.

2 Not only has Craig experimented by introducing a new concept called khora of migration but she has also offered a mixed genre of writing. The book’s narrative, based on a combination of short ethnographies and fictional stories, is based on more than two decades of fieldwork. It is an art of sensitive writing that Craig masters. Reading this book makes one reflect on whether there is (or should be) any difference between fictional stories and ethnographies when fictional writing is based on long-term fieldwork and ‘being there’. Ethnographies do not just contain descriptions of observations and interactions, they also contain interpretations and analyses. Though Craig makes a clear distinction between these two in her writing and offers the flavour of both in each of the six sections of the book, for me this simultaneously erases those distinctions and boundaries. The author chooses not to engage in the politics of citation, footnotes and extensive discussion with other work, although she does offer a detailed discussion on methods and endnotes. This is another reason why the book is an enjoyable read and has a smooth flow and engaging discussion with no interruptions from citations. Reading this book, I am reminded of MN Srinivasan’s ‘My Remembered Village’ (Stanford University Press, 1976), a classic ethnographic text on Indian village life with a particular focus on dominant caste and electoral politics. When a fire destroyed all copies of the author’s notes, Srinivasan re-wrote the manuscript using his memory and rough field notes, which had the qualities of fictional writing that took the reader into the South Indian village.

3 Informed by the Buddhist idea of the Wheel of Life, the book takes a life-course approach – a core theme in anthropology – and is structured into six parts, each containing a fictional short story and a chapter of narrative ethnography: pregnancy and childhood (Part I), migration in search of school education (Part II), subsistence and livelihoods (Part III), marriage (Part IV), land, lineage and belonging (Part V) and ageing (Part VI). Each of these six parts starts with a short one-page introduction preceded by a drawing by the Himalayan artist Tenzin Norbu, which gives an overall context in addition to briefly introducing a fictional story and ethnographic narrative. The conclusion deals with death.

4 The Ends of Kinship caters to different readers: general readers interested in anthropology, those interested in kinship or those interested in migration and mobility. For those interested in the Himalayan region and social change, it is a sensitive and nostalgic account of rapid ongoing social change in Mustang in the context of widespread migration and mobility to New York. While based on engagement with the Himalayan region and its people and their mobility, this book
addresses broader themes such as childbirth, maternal health, marriage, education, belonging, gender, care, loss, death, immigration and race.

While the King of Mustang is quoted as having said ‘Never migrate from the village and the district’ (the name of the newspaper should be My Republica, not Republica, as written in the book on page 5), migration remains a fact in Mustang and in other parts of the Himalayan region, which is shaped by the changing political economy of the region and an ‘irresistible love affair with cash’ (p123) and modernity. Craig clearly shows that Mustang is undergoing major social change, shaped by a particular type of out-migration from which people do not return but stay to care and belong. With migration, demographic transition and the expansion of health infrastructures, including the availability of transport and health services in once remote locations, Craig shows in part I that the very ideas associated with pregnancy and childbirth have undergone major transformations. Similarly, school education is a major part of social change in the region. Over the last few decades, the desire and aspirations for schooling have never been higher, and Craig shows in Part II how the future of young people is shaped by various education opportunities available to young people from Mustang.

Part III shows how the livelihoods of people of Tibetan culture have undergone significant change in Mustang: change that is shaped both by the Nepali Hindu state as well as by trade and migration which are key parts of livelihoods. She shows how the Nepali state has direct bearing on land documents and passports (p123). Part IV offers a discussion on love, marriage and sexuality and how they have been shaped through the khora of migration. Part V shows how a place is central to the narratives and experiences of migration and how Mustangis, though dislocated, work towards belonging. In part VI, the first section narrates the life of three women in their seventies, in Kathmandu, New York and Mustang, to address the challenges faced by elders, while the second ethnographic section discusses how Mustangis make sense of death and loss and how they care for their elders.

Filled with a nostalgic account of the past – both Craig’s and her interlocutors’ past –, this book offers an intimate account of social change in Mustang. Scholars of the region will enjoy Craig’s nuanced and thoughtful writing that illustrates ongoing social change in Nepal with ethnographic sensitivity and allows them to compare it with their work in different fieldwork sites. The perceptive ethnographic vignettes, such as the one below, are very powerful in Craig’s writing:

And so, I am surprised at his reaction when I open my backpack. The smells of home spill out. I hand him the packages from his mother: chili powder in a recycled Nestle Everyday milk bag, a red cotton sack sewn closed with thread and bulging with roasted barley flour like a plump persimmon. Dorje casts down his eyes. Tears well up. I have underestimated the power of the senses. A mother draws her son close, retying these loose ends of kinship through her act of care. They find connection, even in absence. (p109)

Reviewing this book took me back to my own work on migration and the political economy of social change and development in Nepal. Themes such as labour out-migration, migration for education, penetration of remote rural regions by roads and other aspects of the market and modernity, childbirth in remote regions and care for the elderly remain key themes of interest to readers familiar with the region.

While Craig touches on politics in Nepal and Tibet, or in the US, the volume refrains from discussing these issues. A reader with an interest in the region would have liked to know a little more about the issue of ethnicity and state in Nepal and how this may
have shaped the people of Mustang and the khora of migration. Similarly, the impact of Maoist insurgency on khora is mentioned only briefly. While chapters do mention development issues such as health, education and roads, we do not learn much about these and how they have shaped the khora of migration. We cannot expect a book to cover everything and to cater to all readers. Craig has done a very good job of offering a text that contributes to key anthropological themes of mobility and kinship while reserving ethnographic sensitivity for the place and people.

9 Given the comprehensive coverage of Himalayan lives, from birth to death, with mobility and kinship as core themes, there is something for everyone to relate to and to engage in conversation about Craig’s work. Anthropology as a discipline has much to learn from her stance on theory and ethnography combined with fictional short stories. Graduate students preparing for fieldwork or writing their ethnography and thesis will certainly benefit from The Ends of Kinship. Those teaching undergraduate students may wish to set this book in their introductory anthropology course on life course and kinship.

AUTHORS

JEEVAN R SHARMA

Jeevan R Sharma is senior lecturer in South Asia and International Development at the University of Edinburgh. He is the author of ‘Political Economy of Social Change and Development in Nepal’, Bloomsbury, 2021 and ‘Crossing the Border to India: Youth, Migration and Masculinities in Nepal’, Temple University Press, 2018. His work has focused on labour migration in the context of social, economic and political transformations in Nepal, the Himalayas and the South Asian region, especially the culture of migration; border crossing; gendered, classed and racialised mobility of labour; ill treatment; access to justice and citizenship in South Asia. He is co-editor of HIMALAYA and associate editor of South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies.