

essential reading for scholars and students of feminist theory, anthropology, Bangladesh, and South Asia studies.

ELORA HALIM CHOWDHURY
University of Massachusetts, Boston
elora.chowdhury@umb.edu

Rituals of Ethnicity: Thangmi Identities Between Nepal and India. By SARA SHNEIDERMAN. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. xviii, 305 pp. ISBN: 9780812246834 (cloth, also available as e-book).
 doi:10.1017/S0021911816001947

Sara Shneiderman's *Rituals of Ethnicity* is a compassionate, intricate, and insightful account of how the Thangmis of Nepal and India produce ethnic identity by means of a variety of rituals. The account is an outcome of an intense internal dialogue over her "initial scholarly impulse" to demonstrate the processual constructedness of Thangmi ethnic identity and a later one that "could not ignore" the insistent request that the marginalized Thangmis made to Shneiderman, in a stunning—if not unprecedented—reversal of roles, to "provide an essentializing ethnographic portrait of 'the Thangmi' as a unified, unique, and historically unchanging group" (p. 16). The request, in part, was a response to the call by the Nepali and Indian states to produce an "original and authentic" account of Thangmi-hood in return for the recognition of Thangmi identity. The demand was so insistent that "on numerous occasions" the Thangmis told Shneiderman, "You are our God," or "You are our Sunari Ama, the mythical ancestress of all Thangmi" (p. 29).

While Shneiderman continued to remain queasy over these divine attributions and to wonder "if Thangmi culture was transformed by my presence," she ultimately decided to stand on the side of the subaltern and to "produce this ethnographic portrait, presented in an authoritative academic voice that many Thangmi desire, as an instrument both of psychological and political recognition" (p. 16). In addition, Shneiderman also believes in a "moral contract of research" that requires that the ethnographer "investigate potential avenues for contributing to the agendas of those with whom we work" (p. 15) in return for information.

For Shneiderman, ethnic identity is more a matter of agency, practice, and performance rather than of structure and history. "Practice" is ritualized action that is authentic, traditionally legitimate, and internally directed. It is performed for expressive purposes. "Performance," which is a staged event, on the other hand, is ritualized action that is often directed to the "Other." Performance objectivizes and essentializes ethnic identity. Performance does not honor the traditional lore and is often "fake." What counts in performance is instrumental effectiveness, for example, in eliciting identity recognition and resources from significant outside power holders such as the state.

Shneiderman generates her data principally by eliciting responses to a series of photographs and video footage of ritualized and stylized Thangmi ethnic practice and performance. She notes: "My own role ... in 'producing' Thangmi identity through such [viewing] events is a central theme of the book" (p. xii). She reasons that even as the constructivist version may be intellectually warranted, it does not empower a marginalized ethnic group in its identity negotiation with the wider society and state. An ethnographer who does not help an ethnic group in this negotiation by producing an essentialized account of identity, in turn, fails to honor the "moral contract" of research.

Rituals of Ethnicity comes with several interrelated problematic facets, of which I wish to briefly discuss two. The first is the idea and practice of “production” of ethnic identity by an ethnographer. To the extent that an author cannot ever be excised from a text, a text necessarily bears an author’s imprint. In addition, some authors may wish to respond to a broader moral and democratic call and therefore adopt a partisan stance in favor of the subaltern instead of remaining within the confines of an explanatory or interpretative investigation. While such a stance may be morally and politically enlightened, as is the case with *Rituals of Ethnicity*, it creates hurdles in narrating lived ethnic identity in all its complexity and in sketching the articulation of ethnic identity with encompassing political and economic institutions that produce the marginalized status of some ethnic groups in the first place. Indeed, the stance often fails even to expose the oppression and subordination of one ethnic group by another. Claims based on essentialism often explicitly foreground distinctiveness, exclusiveness, discreteness, and “indigenity” rather than equity, equality, democracy, and so forth. In essence, an essentialist vision negates the relational vision, under which ethnic identities are framed and under which ethnic oppression and subordination take hold and persist. One could argue that an exclusive emphasis in *Rituals* on practice and performance related to the production of Thangmi identity—together with an erasure of the nature of relations with non-Thangmi groups and institutions, such as the Nepali state—has led to a hyper-ethnicized narrative that does not quite serve the Thangmi cause. The “Other,” without which a “Self” cannot exist, is almost completely absent from the book.

Second, *Rituals of Ethnicity* is not only partial to agency but rarely implicates the structural and historical context. Shneiderman does note that “[t]he Thangmi story unfolds against the backdrop of large scale political transformation” (p. 22). But the backdrop is merely invoked; it is not threaded through in the reshaping of ethnic identity. Precisely because of this inordinate emphasis on agency, there is a tendency in *Rituals of Ethnicity* to psychologize, “humanize,” and even to “biologize” what are essentially historical and structural processes of identity formation and change. “Desire,” “feeling,” “aspiration,” and “fundamentally human” are expressions that recur through the book. *Rituals of Ethnicity* speaks of a “fundamental human desire to objectify one’s identity in terms that are recognizable to others” (p. 5). It seeks to further an agenda that will “refocus attention on the objectification of identity as a fundamental human process that persists ... regardless of the contingencies of state formation or economic paradigm” (p. 7). Further, it also speaks of “[r]ecognition as a deep-seated subjective desire that drives much human communicative interaction” (p. 13). These generalizations conjure up a false image of presocial or asocial and ahistorical “human beings” who come into this world equipped with specific desires, feelings, knowledge, consciousness, aspiration, and so forth, and devoid of other desires. That, I submit, goes a long way to delegitimize both social science and social policy, including those related to a reframing of interethnic relations.

CHAITANYA MISHRA
Tribhuvan University
mishrachaitanya@gmail.com