Shifting margins: Tibet as self and other among the Gurungs of Nepal

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Gurung identifications with Tibet, while strong, have long been ambivalent. Tibetans had been accorded a low status when the caste hierarchy was imposed by the Hindu state on the peoples of Nepal in the 19th century. In conducting research in a Gurung village in the southern foothills of the Himalayas during the 1970s, I discovered a complex set of beliefs and feelings about Tibet including ideas about real spiritual power, pretended spiritual power, moral laxity, and moral strength so on. Gurung beliefs and feelings about Tibetans bore an interesting relationship to the national culture of Nepal and to stereotypes of T'ibetans that been expressed in Nepali literature and codified in law, though Gurungs were believed (by themselves as well as others) to have migrated many centuries ago from Tibet, this connection tended to be downplayed.

As globalisation and revolution altered the political and economic landscape of Nepal, Gurung perceptions of Tibetans have altered profoundly. Over the past thirty years. There has been a firm shift from conceptualizing the Tibetans as sharply distinct to viewing them and publicly pronouncing them to be part of the Gurungs' historical line of descent. This is enacted in the sponsorship of rituals, change in patterns of worship, collective pilgrimages, and is confirmed from the Tibetan side in a variety of ways. As the Gurungs with whom I worked have become more urbanized and self-conscious about ethnic identity, and as the global media has recontextualized Gurung perceptions of Tibetans, the representation of Gurung-Tibetan history and relations has been dramatically recast. The juxtaposition of present discourses with those that existed earlier in the village setting reveals a great deal about how the definition and significance of Tibet has shifted among Gurungs, and about bow the value of being Tibetan has changed as the fundamental reference points for articulating identity have altered.