



Negotiating identity across the border: comparative concepts of ethnicity in Nepal and Tibet

Sara Shneiderman

Historically, 'ethnicity' has been a key concept for anthropological studies in Nepal, yet the term is rarely used in the parallel scholarly literature on Tibet. Given the shared border between the two national entities and the presence of numerous 'ethnic groups' that straddle it, a closer examination of the ways in 'ethnicity' has or has not been deployed in each context by scholars, governments, and indigenous people themselves poses questions about the construction of the ethnicity concept itself in cross-border situations. Furthermore, a detailed inquiry into the construction of 'peripheral' Himalayan ethnic identities sheds light on concepts of otherness emanating from the 'center', whether that be Lhasa, Kathmandu, Thimphu or Gangtok.

This paper explores these broad issues through a detailed ethnographic discussion of the construction of ethnicity among the Thangmi, a Tibeto-Burman speaking ethnic group who reside primarily in the Dolakha and Sindhupalchok districts of Nepal, but who also have communities immediately across the border in Tibet. I will discuss how the Thangmi, who have remained absent from most ethnographic and national discourses, negotiate their cross-border position between the Nepali and Tibetan/Chinese state apparatuses, as well as between Hindu and Buddhist religious ideologies. At the same time, Tibetan attitudes towards the Thangmi, as well as other borderland groups such as the Mon pa and Lho pa, all of whom have names meaning 'barbarian' or 'border people' in Tibetan, offer a key insight into Tibetan notions of 'otherness'. Each of these complex subjective perspectives illuminate the constructed nature of ethnicity in Nepal and Tibet, and suggest new ways of reworking the concept for truly cross-border studies.