

Christoph von Furer Haimendorf, **Himalayan Traders: Life in Highland Nepal**, John Murray, London, 1975. (Reviewed in **Man, Journal of the RAI**)

This book makes little contribution to current anthropological theory but will be of inestimable value to future anthropologists. It is in the best tradition of ethnographic recording, a nostalgic journey through an area where very little has been recorded and much is disappearing rapidly. The peoples studied are all of Tibetan origin and live on the northern border of Nepal. Four chapters describe change in the Khumbu region since the period studied in the author's earlier **Sherpas of Nepal**. Three further chapters provide a brief description of other Bhotia groups, one near the Sherpas and two in western Nepal.

The central paradox to which Professor Haimendorf seeks an answer is that the inhabitants of the high, stony, inhospitable mountains are conspicuously richer than the peoples living in the agriculturally more prosperous regions. The reason for this is trade, particularly the movement of Tibetan salt from the north to be exchanged for Nepalese grains from the south. Fieldwork over the period 1953 to 1971 enables the author to see the way in which the closing of the Tibetan frontier by the Chinese in 1959 effected a people so heavily dependent on trade. He suggests that the Sherpas turned their surplus manpower towards exploiting the growing mountaineering and tourism business. Some of the other Bhotia peoples, who were less accessible and less well known as guides, were unable to survive as well and there has been a drop in living standards and population. Although in the short-term the situation is not desperate and the author constantly stresses the resourcefulness and adaptability of these peoples, there are long-term dangers. As Professor Haimendorf notes, if the current population growth in central Nepal continues there will be no grains to export. Furthermore, improved communications from India will make Tibetan salt totally superfluous. The last vestiges of the trade will fade away. Meanwhile, the one major asset of Nepal, her forests, are shrinking very rapidly in these high regions, as elsewhere. Fuel shortage and erosion lie ahead. On the whole, however, the tone of the book is optimistic and there is little sentimental attachment to the old order.

The presentation is well suited to the theme and to the publishing of useful ethnographic data. The case studies of trading and agriculture, as well as the statistics on economics and demography, are most helpful. The maps and photographs are excellent and, combined with certain descriptive passages, really do convey a vivid feeling of what the region is like. The only criticism here is that a curious system of randomly indenting many paragraphs is irritating.

Negatively, as the author admits, brief acquaintance with some of the areas makes it impossible for him to discuss social structure, religion, cosmology and a number of other dimensions represented in the **Sherpas**. Nor is there any real attempt to draw wide conclusions or to place the study within any wider theoretical framework. There are interesting speculations on the reasons why these peoples are such avid traders. Some of the effects of trading patterns on social mobility

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and hierarchy are explored tentatively. Yet there is very little reference to wider theoretical discussions. This is a book almost devoid of explicit theory. Given the nature of the fieldwork and scarcity of even elementary information on the area surveyed this is both understandable and justifiable. Once again Professor Haimendorf has been to regions hitherto largely uncharted and given us a fascinating preliminary description.