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Book Reviews: The Past in the Present: Horizons of Remembering in the Pakistan Himalaya and Perspectives on History and Change in the Karakorum, Hindu-Kush, and Himalaya

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The Past in the Present: Horizons of Remembering in the Pakistan Himalaya.

Edited by Irmtraud Stellrecht, Culture Area Karakorum Scientific Studies Vol 2, Rüdiger Koppe Verlag, Köln, 1997. xxiv + 240 pp. DM 48.00. ISBN 3-89645-152-9.

Perspectives on History and Change in the Karakorum, Hindu-Kush, and Himalaya.

Edited by Irmtraud Stellrecht and Matthias Winiger, Culture Area Karakorum Scientific Studies Vol 3, Rüdiger Koppe Verlag, Köln, 1997. xii + 509 pp. DM 68.00. ISBN 3-89645-153-7.

These 2 volumes are obviously not for those interested in light reading but are for the serious scholar of high mountains, especially those with strong social science and historical leanings. As the 2 earliest substantive volumes (Vol 1 was a bibliography) published in a planned series of at least 8 publications in the "Culture Area Karakorum Scientific Studies" series of the Pakistan–German Research Project, they present the findings of in-depth, basic research involving both the cultural and environmental sciences. The purpose of the Culture Area Karakorum (CAK) project is to examine the processes of change not only in the Karakorum but in the wider high Karakorum–Hindu Kush–Himalaya region in order to achieve a deeper understanding of the relationship between the region's high mountain people and their environment and culture. These 2 volumes are quite different in nature, although they are thematically tied through their geographical focus and an emphasis on the processes of change. Volume 2 is tightly focused around the single

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theme of cultural memory and history in northern areas of Pakistan, while Volume 3 is the product of a 1995 symposium co-organized between CAK and another German project, the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (DFG) Project "Settlement Processes and State Formation in the Tibetan Himalaya."

As the title implies, *The Past in the Present* is not a conventional social science or orientalist approach to the human subject matter. The authors, many of whom carried out their PhD research in the CAK project, asked old questions of culture history in the new light of actor-oriented research. The focus is on the little histories of ordinary lives instead of "Great Men" acting out "Great Events." Through a series of papers, all based on original field research, they examine how local people—as opposed to elites or outsiders—still remember, recount, and act upon both epochal and common historical events through which they or their ancestors lived. In subject matter as diverse as common citizens' participation in the events of 1947 and the significance of genealogical knowledge for local villages, they show how the past holds great significance for the way contemporary people deal with conflicts and problems.

The field sites for this innovative research are concentrated mainly within areas around Gilgit and relatively nearby valleys of Bagrot, Yasin, Astor, and the valleys of Baltisan. Instead of seeing the location as the place where historical geopolitical forces work in some deterministic way, the authors argue—often from a self-reflexive view—that local people are constantly interpreting and reinventing their past and bringing it into their cultural present. They use a multitude of sources—old reports, colonial files, field research, oral traditions—to focus on remembering and the dynamics linking the past and the present. This region has long been a major part of an elaborate political chessboard involving the Russians, Indians, Pakistanis, British, Sikhs, local rajas, and numerous religion visionaries (all made famous in the *Gilgit Game* by John Keay). In more recent memories, the 1947 Partition and the 1978 construction of the Karakorum Highway are two events that shaped the valleys and communities of the region. Changes reflect right down to the household with a shift to money economy, migration downhill, and introduction of new goods and services. In this context, the authors argue that the "remembered past becomes a source of legitimacy" and "rights claimed in the present are based on historical interpretation or authentication." The central theme is how memory has shaped our interpretation of history and history has shaped our memories; hence, the title "past in the present."

Perspectives on History and Change in the Karakorum, Hindu-Kush, and Himalaya is the proceedings of a large conference held in autumn 1995, in which most of the participants were German researchers in either the DFG Project on the Tibetan Himalayas or the CAK Northern Areas research. Therefore, the geographical spread and the nature of the topics in this book are far more diverse than in *The Past in the Present*. Although participants from CAK and the DFG Project presented research from different perspectives, some common themes stand out. Both deal with issues of method, the meaning of data, and cooperation between natural and human sciences as related to the processes of change in these high mountains. The book, which contains 27 substantial chapters, begins with a focus on how changes in the highland/lowland interaction system have altered other parts of the environment and culture. The most salient forces are changes in the historic network of trade routes, interdependence of trading villages, and multiple effects of highway and road building. These changes are, in the subsequent chapters, linked with alterations in cultural identity, environmental resource use, development strategies, and transformation of Himalayan "life worlds." While many chapters were slow reading, I found in others some real gems relevant to my own interests (and any reader will find their own gems, I am sure). The chapter on Tharus and Pahariyas in the Chitwan, for example, answered many questions I have carried around since I lived there in the 1960s. On another occasion in 1992, when I spent several weeks with the Aga Khan Foundation in Gilgit assessing their projects, I would have benefited immensely from these 2 books for background if nothing else.

There were a few qualities of the books I found wanting. I was never sure who the intended audience is—heavy academics (but each discipline will have to dig for its own interest), development practitioners, or donors? I suspect the answer is all of these, which is a bit much for each book. Despite the noble attempt in the editors' introductions, there is no solidly comparative statement that pulls together the issue of history and change for this large ecoregion. Although the editors say that one purpose is interdisciplinarity, I find mainly a collection of fine independent research by individual scholars. There is nothing really interdisciplinary here, not even a coauthored chapter or evidence that different disciplines worked together in the field. The image I get is of individual German scholarship where the only interchange is the conference itself. Finally, I find it unusual in this day and time that there is but one single chapter authored by a scholar from the region.

These criticisms are minor, however. The strength of the books for me is that they point to a global phenomenon, not just an Asian case. The same approach would be fruitfully applied to the northern

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Andes, where I currently work with the indigenous peoples. The editors argue that new scientific questions are needed to analyze the indigenous understanding of history, in a strategy of drawing on the past to meet present needs. They point not to history as "one damn thing after another" but toward a new kind of analysis that starts in the present in order to understand how people participate in and influence mountains. In other words, they are "actors," not "passive participants." No matter if you work in mountain development or engage in pure basic research, this is a powerful message.

REFERENCE

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