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Les Bergers du Fort Noir: Nomades du Ladakh (Himalaya Occidental)

By Pascale Dollfus. Nanterre, France: Société d'Ethnologie, 2012. 343 pp. € 25.00; outside Europe, contact publisher for price quote. ISBN 978-2-901161-99-8.

The title sets the scene. Where is the Fort Noir? Who are the nomads of Kharnak (*Kharnakpa*)? Nobody knows where they come from, and their territory has undefined boundaries… Reading this book is like entering an unknown country, trying to decipher what is still a mystery. Pascale Dollfus describes her many experiences among this nomadic community—she has been familiar with Ladakh for the last 30 years—and the reader is carried along by these tales from beneath the sky.

Page by page, the book recounts the history of nomadic herders who have not always been, and soon no longer will be, itinerant. Their way of life is described with precision, and the comparisons with other similar communities are welcome. The Kharnak community belongs to the Drukpa sect of Tibetan Buddhism. The Dat monastery is the center of their territory and hosts celebrations such as the winter solstice. The monastery has no monks or nuns: All members of the religious community live within their "household," a familial unit of settlement, production, and consumption; every household worships a single tutelary god. All Kharnak community members belong to the same social strata, and there are strong links of solidarity between them. The different community members' roles are clearly defined according to age and gender, and the throw of the dice is used to determine and assign duties and the property of men and heads of household, as observed in other Tibetan areas.

The main activity of *Kharnakpa* is to graze and keep livestock—sheep, goats, and yaks—on dry, high-altitude pastures. Their livelihoods depend on wool, milk, and meat from the animals. Although only 10% of the livestock are yaks, they are praised most and are the key element of a household's wealth. Households move from one place to another all year round. Winter in the upper Kharnak valley is long and harsh and full of dangers and threats—illness, lack of food, cold—while summer in the high pastures is the happy season, with the renewal of the vegetation. This is the time of marriages and visits from relatives living in the Indus valley. Nomadic travel, whether for a few hours or several days, requires changing campsites; hence, the *Kharnakpa* have movable homes, traditionally large tents made of yak hair, which, however, are increasingly being replaced by lighter, weaker cotton tents.

In this type of society, the question of location is crucial: Thoughts and comments on the sites and routes used by the Kharnak people are significant. As Dollfus writes, "The Kharnak country defends and reinvents itself. Far from being static, this territory with blurred outlines may at any time be moved, reconstructed, enlarged, or decreased depending on the water or forage resources, the increase or decrease of livestock, political crises, or various orders" (p 162). Yet, Kharnak does exist physically, and the small number of maps in the book (pp 29, 169, 207) is a constraint: Readers are left to wonder where the lakes Tso Moriri or Tsokar or the city of Ruthog are, and will have trouble positioning Kharnak in relation to the Western Himalayas and Tibet and in the context of new access roads. This holds particularly true when considering the Sino-Indian war of 1962 and its consequences—interruption of the *Kharnakpa*'s seasonal migrations to Tibet, and immigration of Tibetan shepherds—or the development of tourism, which led to conflicts that were eventually resolved through reallocation of rangelands and camp locations, especially with their neighbors from Rupshu. The contrasts between careful descriptions of a way of life that seems to last forever and the nearly imperceptible signs indicating the fragility of such a way of life and its imminent disappearance are what makes the book particularly significant and valuable.

The small Kharnak society is not static and unchanging. It lives and evolves, which is well summarized in the introduction and conclusion. In 15 years, it has lost more than 80% of its population, eager to enjoy the facilities of the modern world, who have settled down near the town of Leh. So this book appears, unwillingly, to be the testimony not only of a lifestyle, but also of knowledge and expertise that are progressively disappearing.

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